

The Solemn Vigil of Easter
April 4, 2015
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Mark 16:1-7

A few years ago I read about a priest from Mexico who came regularly to southern California to sell the sacraments. For about \$175 he would offer expedited baptisms, confirmation and First Holy Communion. He didn't actually have faculties to minister in the United States, so while the sacraments he celebrated were valid, they were illicit. The practice is actually far too common, but this particular man's offense was so great that the Cardinal Archbishop of Los Angeles warned his priests about him, and the renegade priest was able to build a church in Mexico with all the money he coaxed from his victims.

Why would so many people go to him? Some were just lazy, but others didn't want a paper trail by which the Immigration and Naturalization Service could find them. They worried that if they registered with their local parish they might be reported, as most of his customers were illegal immigrants. So not only was this man guilty of simony, the selling of graces inherent to the sacraments, but he also preyed upon the vulnerable in the name of Christ and then justified his behavior by spending a portion of the money to aid the poor close to his home. He was removed from the clerical state by Pope Benedict in 2012.

Our Old Testament lessons prefigure the gift of the sacraments and how the graces that are offered through them come to the faithful without price. Isaiah says, "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." In this one verse we see prefigured both the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion, the promise that God will provide the faithful with what they need the most, and that the most important thing they can acquire is free.

The prophet Ezekiel tells us what these gifts will confer upon those who seek them: "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances." The sacraments that come without price, we learn more than five hundred years before the birth of Jesus Christ, will give us the power to do what the Lord commands, will give us the power to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

We know that the sacraments are not the only means of grace. After all, many of us felt God's call to come into the Church before we were even baptized. But the sacraments are the same means of grace, gifts instituted and offered by Jesus Himself to help us offer ourselves for the benefit of others just as He offered Himself for the redemption of the world.

In Christ's resurrection from the dead, which we celebrate tonight and which we heard about in our Gospel from St. Mark, we receive the promise of new life—not only in the world to come, but in our lives here and now. New life certainly means that we will have life after death if we die in a state of grace, but new life also means what Ezekiel made reference to—that our hearts of stone will be softened

by the grace of God, that we will repent of our sin and begin to desire for ourselves and our neighbors the virtue to which the Lord calls all of us. Christ's victory over sin and death means we can triumph also.

We see, then, why the Sacraments of the Church should never be sold. Indeed, they cannot be sold. The Holy Spirit, which we receive in each of them, is God Himself, the third person of the Blessed Trinity. Can we trade God? Can we reduce the Sacred to the status of a commodity? God gives of Himself freely. How can we, who are subject to Him, then charge for what He intends to give without price? This is why no fee is ever associated with the reception of any of the sacraments. Any money that is given to the Church is a thank offering, a sacrifice in gratitude for blessings bestowed upon us.

There is no price associated with any of the sacraments because they are priceless. Because they impart the grace of God, because they give life, because they lead us to heaven, there can be no price associated with them. For our entire life they are the most valuable thing, the most valuable gift we will ever receive.

This does not mean, of course, that there is no cost associated with receiving the sacraments. If the first paradox about the sacraments is that these priceless gifts come to us without price, the second paradox is that the sacraments that cost nothing may well cost us everything. That is, to enter into the sacramental life of the Church is to die to self, it is to die to our old way of life focused on acquisition and to adopt a new way of life in which we give all away, perhaps even our very lives, as we follow Jesus on the path to Calvary.

Joey Huston and I were together this morning since she was one of the volunteers who came out to clean and decorate the church. We had had a short rehearsal earlier this week, and she had thought a lot about it. She asked me, "Father, why are you going to slap me after you confirm me?" It's a good question, and it points to the cost associated with the sacraments that are given to us without cost. The slap is the Church's reminder to the newly confirmed that she has just been made a soldier of Christ for Christ, and she will need henceforth to adopt the discipline associated with being at war. Tonight you are entering into a spiritual battle against the forces of wickedness, and it's not going to be easy. Let the slap remind you that you will often have to take it on the chin for Jesus, you may even find yourself crucified, but the fruit of your sacrifices is life with Him forever.

This sounds scary at first. But we know from our catechism classes that the sacraments are not something we consume for their own sake. Rather, they are gifts that are meant to be given away, gifts that give us the strength we need to give ourselves away. The truth is, we cannot make the sacrifices required of us all on our own. We are simply too weak to look death in the face and not flinch. Yet with the help of Jesus given to us tonight in baptism, confirmation, and First Holy Communion, we can be certain, we can trust in the light of faith, that Jesus will give us Himself to help us make the sacrifice He made. The power of His resurrection is our power, the power to serve and thus participate with Him in the redemption of the world.