

Seventh Sunday of Easter
May 29, 2022
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
116 Theodore Street
Scranton, PA 18508
John 17:20-26

We just heard about the martyrdom of St. Stephen, the first Christian to die violently for the faith. So there is certainly a price to be paid for Christian discipleship. Yet we heard in our lesson from Revelation, “*And let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price.*” We may pay a price for being a Christian, but to become one is free, and we cannot purchase the grace of God any more than we can buy our way into heaven. If it’s free, why do we have to pay?

To resolve this paradox we need only look to today’s Gospel, where Jesus says to God the Father, “*...you have sent me and have loved them [us] even as you have loved me.*” Precisely because God is Love, we understand that He gave us everything we possess—the earth on which we live, the air we breathe, our very lives. So before we have received anything in terms of the sacraments, the sure means of grace, we have already been given countless blessings, blessings for which we paid no price, for which there was no exchange, God simply raining down His bounty upon us.

We run into problems though, through the abuse of the very things we’ve been given. There is an emphasis today, for example, upon environmental issues, the buildup of greenhouse gases and climate change, which many scientists assert are the result of the abuse rather than the simple use of creation. But the abuse of God’s gifts is even more personal, for we abuse our bodies, and we sadly abuse each other. So having received all these gifts freely, we show no gratitude for them or appreciation for what is meant to sustain our lives.

So when death entered into the world because of our own choices, God did not demand our blood. Out of His great love for us He again gave freely. But this time He gave Himself upon the altar of the cross for the forgiveness of our sins, whereby life might be restored. And not just our life on earth; our Lord desires to give freely life with Him for all eternity.

It is because God has given so freely that grace cannot be bought and sold. We have to pay for the upkeep of the Church and her clergy, but we don’t pay them for the sacraments, as if grace were an item to be bought. Nor is it legal for a clergyman to buy a parish or a diocese to advance himself, because the standard is Jesus: we clergy don’t advance at the expense of the faithful, but the faithful advance at our expense, pouring ourselves out completely.

This reality was the reason for St. Paul’s refusal to take any money at all in compensation for his work as a bishop in Christ’s Church. He worked as a tent maker alongside his work as an apostle, so that he would not burden the disciples of Jesus in the least way, so that he could better communicate the truth that the grace of God comes freely and eternal salvation cannot be bought.

Yet, at the same time, St. Paul also insisted that all the churches contribute to the needs of the faithful in Jerusalem. He spent much time in his missionary journeys and much ink in his letters appealing for monetary gifts that would relieve the suffering of those who were afflicted by famine. He emphasized that our giving was a response to God's giving; as God has given us so much to live, we too must give in order that others may also live.

So we don't give to receive grace; we give because we've received grace. Not only that, neither do we do good works to receive eternal life. We do good works because we've received the promise of eternal life already. God initiates, and we respond. God loves, and we show love in return, the ultimate demonstration of that love being to give our lives as Jesus gave His, to follow the example of the protomartyr, St. Stephen. Not only did he give as Jesus gave, but we also see today in the book of Acts that he forgave his killers, just as Jesus had forgiven those who nailed Him to the tree.

We should understand the price we have to pay, therefore, as an oblation, a free offering in thanksgiving for what is so valuable it could never be bought. Our offerings are the same at church: we aren't paying the priest for services rendered, as if he were a mechanic or a pediatrician. To do so would actually devalue the sacraments and turn him who is most closely linked to Christ into someone looking to profit from his closeness to God. That is absurd. We give what we're able sacrificially to show our gratitude for the sacrifice of Christ and that of those who on the altar stand in His place. If we're grateful for the graces we've received, we'll make sure to keep the channels open and the conduits of grace—priests—healthy by ensuring food, clothing, and shelter for the minister of those graces, in order to keep our thirst quenched, and so that he may share them with even more thirsty people.

So Bob and Gabriella, you'll soon assume the duty of communicating this generosity to your daughter, whom I'll soon baptize. It is communicated best by example. In the world give large tips; in the Church give large donations. Do so quietly in the presence of others, but before your children, the fruit of your womb, be very conspicuous. Give so much and so often that your children ask, "Why are you so generous?" So that you may answer, "Only because God has been so generous to us." As the father of a twenty-year-old and a son who will be nineteen next week, I can attest that the time goes by really quickly. Before very long, our children will be doing the same thing.