

A Time of Sacrifice

For those of us who grew up Catholic, sacrifice has certainly been a central part of our spirituality. Sacrifice was not only strongly suggested as the appropriate response to the suffering of others, as in appeals for the missions or the poor; it was also taught as a good in its own right, as an important part of the process of following Jesus Christ. We were encouraged to venerate those who sacrificed for others, including fathers, who sacrificed in their jobs to provide for children, and mothers, who sacrificed their time and energy to care for children. Our own particular sacrifices unite us to the sufferings of Christ.

In more recent times there seems to be an aversion to the notion of sacrifice in our society and even in our spirituality. People ask why they should make sacrifices. Our culture teaches us that our every desire should be met and that having more possessions, more experiences and more things of this world will make us happy.

However, in this present moment, we find ourselves asked to make extraordinary sacrifices, many of these sacrifices are not of our choosing. We have sacrificed our freedom to move about as we choose. We are asked to sacrifice spending time with loved ones so that we do not bring the virus to them. We have to sacrifice not going to our favorite restaurant, coffee shop, movie theatre or mall. We are even asked to sacrifice worshipping together as a community of faith.

It is important to remember that there is no Christian life without some degree of sacrifice. In fact, there can be no human life without sacrifice. Sacrifice is the cost of being human, for to be human is to be social. The qualities that make us human – our ability to communicate, to reason, to love – are all qualities that we learn in community. But to live with others requires sacrifice in the interests of our relationship with them. Christians are often asked to make personal sacrifices for the common good. And this present moment is certainly one of those times.

It is true that the meaningfulness of a sacrifice depends upon the greater value of that which the sacrifice procures. We need to be able to see the worth or value of our sacrifices. If our sacrifices are to have moral and spiritual worth, they must first be made for good ends. In this moment in time, we need the ability to recognize the fruits of the sacrifices we are making.

Sacrifice in any given situation can be a rational and loving choice. Frequently in our lives we choose to sacrifice one good for the sake of some other good that is either a higher good or one more necessary in our particular situation. Couples sacrifice a great deal of personal freedom when they choose to have children – little freedoms, like travelling without diaper bags, car seats, and strollers; and big freedoms like sleep, leisure time for lovemaking, and conversation with adults. Most of us feel that this exchange is prudent, that the good obtained in parenthood outweighs the costs.

Sacrifice is not something that we should seek in our lives. Jesus did not come to earth seeking a way to suffer and die, and neither should we. God did not send Jesus to suffer and to die. Jesus is not a masochist; God is not a sadist. Martyrs do not seek martyrdom; they accept it when all the

alternatives are morally deficient. Christians are called to seek actions that are loving and just, prudent, honest, and truthful. Like Jesus, our choices will involve sacrifice of one kind or another.

To be worthwhile, sacrifice must have some degree of voluntariness, but freely chosen sacrifices are the exception, not the rule. Sometimes sacrifices seem to choose us. Sometimes we seem to have no choices about sacrifices. And yet choice is not truly absent. Most of our personal sacrifices occur within relationships we have repeatedly chosen to make and maintain, such as marriages, parent-child and sibling relationships, and friendships. We feel obliged to accept sacrifices in these relationships because we have chosen to be the kind of people who are faithful to those with whom we have established loving relationships.

Often when we hear people say they have no choice but to take on some sacrificial burden, they do not mean they are physically coerced upon pain of death to make the sacrifice; they really mean they feel internally obliged, as by conscience, or externally obliged by the opinion of those whom they respect. We need to claim these feelings of obligation, to acknowledge them as part of us, and reject the implication that our true selves only impel us toward what is either easy or enjoyable.

Obligations to others are necessary in human society. It is the obligations that parents have to children, that adult children have to elderly parents, and that all adults have to the weak and helpless, that provide the security humans need in order to form communities, to grow and mature as persons. When we feel overburdened by obligations that are not fairly shared in our families or society, we are easily seduced by secular notions of human persons as autonomous, free beings endowed with a variety of rights and no responsibilities. Much of modernity urges us to act as if there could be rights without corresponding responsibilities, as if humans were not always bound by finitude, as if the material riches and abundance of developed societies had eliminated all forms of scarcity, need, and obligation between persons. That attitude of self-centeredness leaves no room for sacrifice.

But as Christians, we have the example of Jesus who sacrificed his life out of love for us. This same Jesus taught, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:13) Our acts of sacrifice are made out of love.

That is what we are called to do in our present situation. As Christians and as members of the larger human family, we are now asked to make sacrifices that may strike us as a burden or just an inconvenience. We freely embrace these sacrifices as an act of love. We recognize these sacrifices not only as a present burden that must be endured, but as a free gesture which puts aside personal desires or conveniences for a greater good: the health and well being of our entire world.

(Portions of this reflection are taken from “Why Sacrifice?” by Christine Gudorf which appeared in *US Catholic* magazine, July 24, 2008)