

Giving to God

October 15, 2017

I love NPR. It is the selection for my car radio 90% of the time. But several times a year NPR does pledge drives, which I detest. They deprive me of my beloved programs, and I hate to hear the announcers beg. So one day I was driving with a family member when the begging started. I switched the station, telling my companion, "I hate to hear them beg." The response was this: "What do you think that you sound like, doing stewardship talks?"

As I said, I love NPR and support it financially, but I think there is a difference between the two. Giving to the one is a civically minded good deed; giving to the other is an act of worship. How so?

At every baptism, there is a ritual offering from the newly baptized to God. It is an offering of a few clips of hair, a gift without monetary value but very symbolic. We give to God a piece of ourselves. This is what God wants. St. Paul succinctly states, "I do not seek yours, but you" (2 Cor 12:14). In other words, I want you, not your stuff.

But the other side of the coin is that if we belong to God, then all that we own does too. In our services, we commend ourselves, one another and our whole life to Christ.

We read in Genesis the story of the first children of Adam and Eve. Though the Bible has not to this point mentioned a commandment to do so, we read that both Cain and Abel make offerings to God, Cain from his produce and Abel from his animals. Genesis 4 says, "The Lord respected Abel and his offering, but He did not respect Cain and his sacrifices." It is not clearly stated why the Lord preferred one over the other, but the common explanation is that Abel offered the best of his sheep, while Cain offered poor quality produce. God wants us to offer our best, not our scraps.

Giving to God goes against basic human nature. Our primary instinct is survival. We are wired to fight for life. Why should we or why do we offer something that we need to an invisible God? It is an act of faith and of gratitude.

Permit me to illustrate why it is an act of faith. Years ago we had as parishioners a married couple, both of whom were converts. He was a student at the medical school; she was a part-time teacher. In relation to their considerable expenses and their meager income, they were giving a lot to this parish, more than all but a few others. They lived very modestly and struggled with bills. So one day I told them that I thought they were giving a lot. "Oh no," came the response, "tithing to God expresses our faith that He takes care of us, and we have nothing to fear." That is why I say that tithing is an act of faith.

It is an act of gratitude, because it recognizes that whatever we have comes from the benevolence of God. Yes, we work hard; yes, we studied hard in school, but to get where we are depends on many factors outside of our control, such as health, where we were born and to what family environment, and more.

When I give to NPR or a museum or the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, I am giving because I appreciate what they offer to society and to me personally. What I give to God, that's a religious expression. I am saying thank You for all You have given me and I trust You to be my first, most important protector and provider.

As far as I can tell, there are two ways to give to God- through a poor person or through His Church. The Church is the body of Christ, in the words of St. Paul. It is where the gospel is proclaimed. At the start of the Divine Liturgy, we say, "Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," reminding us that when we celebrate the Liturgy, we enjoy a small taste of God's Kingdom. The poor person takes the place of Christ, as he himself said: "if you have done it to the least of my brethren, you have done it to Me." Or as the book of Proverbs says, "He who is kind to a poor man is lending to God."

After the story of Cain and Abel, the Bible presents a number of detailed rules regarding what was to be sacrificed to God. The details are not important, but the spirit of these rules is this, that the sacrifices offered to God were to come from the best animals, the healthiest, the unblemished, the most valuable. We give to God our best, not our scraps. One recurring theme in the Old Testament was that at times they were not offering to God the best, but rather the sick ones, the ones with least value. And this angered God.

With this in mind we can revisit St. Paul's words, "I do not seek yours, but you" (2 Cor 12:14). People thought that they could purchase God's benevolence on the cheap, or that they could earn it by means of an offering by means of a sacrifice. It does not work that way. Our gifts express our gratitude and our trust. They must be given from loving, faithful hearts.

I encourage you to give to NPR, give to the museums, give to the wonderful charities around us. But first of all, give to God.

One prayer from the Liturgy asks God, "Forsake us not who have set our hope in You." When we offer to God, we express our hope in Him. This is our prayer for every day that we breathe.

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