

Offering/Sacrificing Like Jesus
Re-Catechism 1
Dr. M-F Polidoulis Kapsalis

Before I begin today's topic of Offering Like Jesus, or Sacrificing (which is the more traditional term) like Jesus, I want to clarify what we mean by the words offering and sacrifice. And I need to do this because our modern 2009 going to 2010 world, understands the word "sacrifice" in a very material way. For the average person on the street, a sacrifice is when something of value is being given up or destroyed in order that something of greater value can be gained. A simple example is that of people giving up food and going on a diet in order to gain a healthier and more attractive body. Another example would be gambling. I buy a lottery ticket and give up my toonie in the hopes of gaining millions. Investing in property can also be seen as a modern form of sacrifice.¹

So in the modern world, a sacrifice is done to benefit the self. And it is seen as a negative thing because we give up something, or lose something, even if we succeed in obtaining our goal. So ideally the sacrifice should be as small as possible, and the return as great as possible. There is risk involved, and if the greater good is not achieved, then the sacrifice was a totally negative experience. So this is the attitude of people today when we talk about offering or sacrificing.²

However, when we read the Old Testament we see that sacrifice has a *totally* different meaning. The word is *never* used in a material way, like it is in our times. In the Bible, sacrifices were *not* done for

¹ Robert J. Daly, S.J., The Origins of the Christian Doctrine of Sacrifice, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p. 1.

² Ibid., p. 2.

self-gain, but were performed gladly as expressions of the positive attitudes of people to their God, and the larger the sacrifice, the better. To offer a sacrifice was only seen as a positive thing. It was done full of joy, with celebration, or thanksgiving. The emphasis was on the giving, never on the giving up.³

So why did people in the past make offerings to God, for what purpose? For the same reason that we offer gifts to our parents on Mother's Day and Father's Day. For the same reason that we invite our boss out for dinner. For the same reason we invite friends over after a misunderstanding. Making an offering whether it is to another human being or to God is a way to strengthen relationships and bond ties between us.

So no different, in the Old Testament these were the many reasons for offering sacrifice to God, and they were so interconnected that they cannot be separated. So humans sacrificed to God in order to offer a *gift* to their deity; they sacrificed in order to offer *respect* to their Lord; they offered sacrifice as a form of *apology* for sins and offences (it was their way to say I'm sorry); their offerings were a form of *communication* (sharing a meal with God); and finally they offered a sacrifice as an act to receive *life*. In the past it was believed that by releasing the life from the offering, it was transmitted back to the giver of life and then it was granted upon the worshipers. These are the many reason why humans made sacrificial offerings to God in the Old Testament, yet even more important than the *why* these offerings were made, is the *how* these offerings were expected to be given.⁴

The earliest biblical account of an offering to God is found right at the beginning of human history, in the book of Genesis chapter 4. Here, two brothers, Cain and Abel, the first two sons of Adam and

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 3-4.

Eve, bring to the Lord their offerings. The oldest one, Cain, is a tiller of the land and he represents all agricultural people who come after him, and the younger one, Abel, is a herder, he tends flocks, and he represents all nomadic people who come after him. So on a very basic level, the two brothers are here presenting the two types of offerings that were to later be given by following generations to God. However, the emphasis in the story of Cain and Abel is not in *what* was offered, but as I said above in the *how*, in the *way* with which the offering was given. As we read in Psalm 50, “The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.”

Cain’s offering was not acceptable to God, because he was selfish and arrogant, putting himself above God, keeping the best of his crops for himself, not realizing that they were given to him by God in the first place and so truly belonged to God anyway. Genesis 4:3 says that Cain just “brought an offering”. Abel on the other hand gave the best of his flock, knowing his dependence upon God, and his place in the great scheme of things. Abel’s spirit was broken, and humbled, and his heart was contrite/apologetic and truly repentant. Of Abel, Genesis 4:4 says that he “brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions.”

And we know what resulted; God accepted Abel’s offering, but He had no regard for Cain’s offering. Genesis continues to tell us Cain’s reaction. In chapter 4:5b-7 we read: “So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. The Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is couching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.”

So, Cain lost his countenance, his self-control, and he did not listen to God’s voice to master himself. Rather he gave in to his sin, and Cain’s ego gave rise to jealousy, and hatred, which then led him

to kill his brother. Cain's heart was full of hatred. Abel's heart was full of love. Cain's offering was rejected. Abel's offering was accepted.

So the lesson we learn right from the beginning of human history, with regards to our relationship with God and others is that in order to approach God we must first be masters over our desires, we must be repentant, with fear and awe of God. The lesson here is that we are to approach God with not only the best that we have, but also with the best of who we are. And we are at our best when we love. As God himself said, "If we do well, will we not be accepted?"

The practice of offering burnt sacrifice continued through the Old Testament. For our purposes this evening I will mention just one more Old Testament sacrificial offering. Again in the book of Genesis, we are told of another story of a righteous man named Abraham. As you will remember, Abraham and his wife Sarah were childless, and in their old age, God fulfilled His promise to the righteous couple and granted them a son, whom was named Isaac. When Isaac was a young lad, God decided to test Abraham. He said, "Take your son, our only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." (Gen. 22:2) One can only imagine the horror that Abraham must have felt. Isaac, as God said, was his only son, and he loved his son dearly. However there was no indication in Genesis that Abraham hesitated in his obedience to God. The very next day, early in the morning, Abraham rose up and prepared to journey to the mountains to offer his son as a sacrifice to God. Isaac questioned his father, pointing out that they had no lamb for the burnt offering, and Abraham replied that God would provide. They prepared the altar, and laid the wood in order, and then Abraham bound his son, and laid him on the altar, upon the wood.

And as he raised his knife to offer his son to God, an Angel stopped him and so rescued the boy, saying, “Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” (Gen. 22: 12) God then provided a ram for the sacrifice.

What is the lesson here? There are many themes in this story, but the one at its heart, is the *depth* of Abraham’s love for God, and the faith he had in God. God tested Abraham’s faith, and Abraham proved his faith through his obedience. And so God gave Abraham and to all of his descendant His blessing as the people from whom the Messiah will come. (Gen 22:18)

The custom to offer to God burnt sacrifices ended with the New Testament because with Jesus, all was made new. So how did Jesus teach us to now offer to God? How are we now to offer a *gift* to our God, to offer *respect* to our Lord? How are we now to offer our *apology* or penance for our sins and offences? How are we now to share a meal with God in *communion*? And finally, how are we now to have *life* conferred upon us, if not through burnt sacrifice?⁵

It must first be said that Jesus’ sacrifice, his innocent death on the cross for the salvation of the world, was perfect. It was the greatest gift of love to the world. As God had provided Abraham with a ram for his offering, He later provided Jesus to pay the price for our iniquities. The Word of God became a human being to face the greatest test of obedience to the will of God the Father. On the cross, Jesus paid the price for all human sin and offence from Adam until the end of time. Jesus’ sacrifice even cleansed us who were not yet born of our sins. And by participating, and partaking of this sacrifice, of this offering through the sacrament of Holy Communion, we share not only a meal with God in fellowship, but

⁵ Ibid., p. 4.

actually unite with our Creator. It is through this unity, that we have life conferred upon us.

Jesus taught us that the best offering to God is our untainted life. This does not mean that God wants us to die for Him, but rather the opposite, God wants us to live for Him. Jesus lived his whole life in total obedience to God the Father. This is why the Pharisees hated him. He did everything right and his righteousness condemned them. That is why they wanted to get rid of Him. In every word spoken, in every act and in every thought Jesus did the will of God. And He taught others to pray, “Thy will be done.” But the will of God is not the will of the fallen world, and you cannot last long in this world by not playing by its rules. And Jesus refused to play by this world’s rules even knowing that it will lead him to death. And on the Garden of Gethsemane, we see Him agonizing over this and asking God to remove this cup from Him. But only if it was God’s will. So you know what the outcome will be. And the world sought His life and Jesus gave it doing the will of God right to the end. And if Jesus’ story ended there it would truly be tragic, but it doesn’t. His resurrection showed us that death is overcome and life is truly eternal when we do God’s will.

In the beginning, God created human beings to live with Him forever. But this relationship was tested and God told Adam that if He disobeyed Him he would die. The same is true for all of us. If you break the bond, ruin the relationship, lose the trust, you will die. Separation from God is sin. Separation from God is death. Uniting with Christ brings forgiveness. Uniting with Christ brings life.

Jesus taught us that true life is one where we live for God. And how do we do this? Where do we even start to do this? Jesus was fully human, but he was also fully God. We are just fully human, and flawed at that. So on our own, we can’t live for God, but with Christ, we can. Christ was the final and perfect offering for our

reconciliation. And to live a life in Christ means to live life truly, the way we were meant to live it. And the good news is that many of us are making strides without even realizing, because to live for God means to live for others.

On the most basic level, we still offer to God in a way similar to that in the Old Testament. And our offerings are still seen as gestures of our allegiance with God, of our reaching to Him: so we light our candle, and our kandilia at home, we incense, we bring artoclasia, prosforo, oil and wine, Fanouropita, and koliva to church. We make tamata to saints to pray on our behalf to God. These types of offerings are good and needed. They are like the birthday cards, or the phone calls, and the little gifts. But if my friendships were only based on these gestures of kindness, they would not be very strong friendships. Good and lasting friendships require more of us.

The good friendships are those where we give wholly of ourselves to others. We give of our valuable time, and make our friends an important part of our lives. We build stronger relationship, beyond the greeting card or the odd phone call. We run when they are in trouble. Bail them out of jail without judging, take them to the hospital and wait for hours by their side. This is how we offer real friendship, real love, and real commitment. This is closer to the type of offering God wants of us.

We live for God, we offer our life to God, when we not only say we love our neighbours, but also when we actually put into practice what we Christians preach. Those people who give up income and personal dreams for others live a greater life of offering. The first step is love of family. Parents who change jobs or quit jobs in order to raise their children; children who do the same to nurse sick parents; spouses who stay together through sickness, and poverty, and suffer various trials and tribulations together make an offering of love. It is tragic when we hear of neglected children, abandoned

elderly and battered wives. It is tragic because it is expected that all people have within them the instinct to love their family. As Jesus said even non-believers love their family, and those who love them back. Yet there are countless examples in our society of people whose hearts are so hardened that even this first level of offering love to others is difficult for them to achieve.

Can we love the stranger with the same depth of love that we should be giving to our family? People who put their life at risk on a daily basis in order to help strangers whether they be doctors or nurses, or firefighters, or policemen make an offering of love. People who give of their time to improve the quality of life for other, teachers, youth workers and councilors; priests and those in religious orders; missionaries and those who work for relief agencies do what they do out of love. And even if your work is not a service, do you do it honourably, without attempting to cheat anyone, or do you do it joyfully with the understanding that you are in fact contributing to society in a positive way. Is your relationship with your coworkers positive? Are you an example of Christian living to them? Any gesture of reaching out to others, of putting our own wants and desires second before the needs and wants of others becomes an even greater offering of love and so is even more acceptable to God. But these people whom we serve, and work with more likely than not have done us no harm, and so it should not be that difficult to reach out and love them.

Can we take our offering of love even further, and love the way Jesus loved on the Cross when he cried out, "Forgive them Father, they know not what they do?" Could we forgive those who wrongfully dismiss us? Who slander us and take our self-esteem and confidence away? Who take our spouses away? Who torture, molest and kill our children? Could we say, "I forgive and love these people and offer ourselves for these people then?" Now this is

a difficult question. And this type of love for our society becomes a stumbling block. Yet, this is how Christians are called to love and offer themselves to God.

I am still in awe of an elderly missionary couple that was beaten brutally and left for dead several years ago. The wife was raped repeatedly. And then when the husband and wife were recovering in the hospital, they truly forgave their attackers, and told the authorities to let them go. I was amazed at these people, because they did not only offer their lives for others, but truly gave themselves in love for other. This news story touched me deeply, because it showed me that this level of loving could be reached. And it became clear to me that this is what it means to love your enemies. To love like Jesus loved, and to offer you life to God, like Jesus offered it. This is what it means to pick up your cross and follow him.

A life that is offered to God and is acceptable to God is a life that lives in the love of God for others: joyfully, with celebration and thanksgiving. It is a life where the ego, the “me”, the pride, the I are overcome. Our society constantly tells us to put ourselves first. Where has this led us, but to a society with wars and famines and social injustices? Our God tells us to put Him first, and we put Him first when we love others the way he loves us. Where will our obedience to Him and love for Him lead us? Has God not promised us eternal life? In the words of our God from the beginning of time, “If we do well, will we not be accepted?” Amen.

Bibliographical Texts

Daly, Robert J. (S.J.). *The Origins of the Christian Doctrine of Sacrifice*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978.

Masure, Eugene. *The Christian Sacrifice*. New York: P. J. Kenedy
& Sons, 1943.