

Biblical Theological Reflections

The third aspect of ministry in the Church comprises its social mission: works of mercy (called *diaconia*), and the promotion of social justice. This aspect of ministry in the church is as the royal ministry. Associated with this ministry is also the charisma of leadership, and the conscientious administration of various spiritual, personal, and material gifts. This second aspect of the royal ministry will be treated in the next chapter (fourth) “Leadership – stewardship of gifts”).

In order to understand the biblical symbolism to that which we are called, we again need to examine (review) the Old Testament and recall such kings as Saul, David, Solomon, and Josiah. In the ancient world, the king was responsible for administration of material goods, and the welfare of the people. A good king protected his subjects from every danger, insured the peace, promoted justice, and saved the people from the attacks of their enemies, he would also care for the weakest members of the community, the widows, orphans, and strangers. The king also maintained and supported the cult of worship, and the religious life of the nation.

The Biblical tradition specifically held that The Lord God was the ONLY TRUE KING of Israel, and the kings were His representatives and were successful only when they did not forget this fact. Unfortunately, often the reality did not conform to the ideal. Over time in Israel, there arose the expectation of a New King – a New Anointed-Messiah, who would rule over Israel in the spirit of God, with zeal, wisdom, justice, peace and in the fear of God.

There is an interesting incident when the disciples of John the Baptist came to Jesus and asked him: “Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?” Jesus said to them in reply, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear; the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them” (Mt. 11: 2-6). John the Baptist who know the scripture well, would be able to immediately realize that these words of Jesus Christ were a quote from the book of the prophet Isaiah, concerning the Messiah – the Anointed One of the Lord (see: Is. 35: 5; 42: 7). In other words, when Jesus spoke about the blind, the lame, the lepers, and the deaf, he was as if saying: “I am the one about whom Isaiah wrote!” The very title “Christ” indicates this is true, as the Greek translation of the word “Messiah” (Hebrew – *mashiach*), the Anointed of God.

What is the main topic of Jesus’ preaching? It is about the Kingdom of God. He explains by means of various parables what the Kingdom of God is: it is like a banquet of the Lord, it is like a treasure buried in a field, and when a man finds it he rejoices; it is like a mustard seed – so very small, yet it grows into a large bush, where the birds make their nests.

The Royal Dignity of every Christian

When Jesus spoke about the Kingdom of God, he touches upon two aspects. First – that the Kingdom is yet to come. Second – the Kingdom of God is already here. The Kingdom of God will be revealed in its fullness at the proper time, the time appointed by the Lord (in the Lord’s Prayer, the Our Father, we pray: “Thy kingdom come”). The Church however is the Kingdom of God on earth. In the Christian Church we are already experience a part of the Kingdom, and not as subjects, but rather as the children of the Great King, we are of royal lineage! How can we understand this? Rich or poor, learned or simple, man or

woman, young or old – all of us possess a royal dignity through the grace of Holy Baptism. This royal dignity means that we also have a regal responsibility, both in the Church and in the world.

Recall those words spoken by the priest at our baptism when given the lit candle: “Take this lighted candle, and strive through your entire lifetime to shine brightly with the light of faith and good deeds, so that when the Lord will come, you may go forth in radiance to meet Him together with all the Saints, and may enter unhindered into the court of His heavenly glory and reign with Him throughout eternity. Amen” (on the basis of Mt. 5: 16).

Service to One’s Neighbor in the Parish Community

In the life of the parish, our royal ministry is manifest in various forms of “*Diaconia*” whether in the parish community itself, or outside “in the world”. Every good pastor will ensure that in his community that the sick will be visited, assistance given to the poor, food available for the hungry, care for orphans, support given to those who suffer injustice, peace is promoted, comfort offered for those grieving, and the unborn protected, etc. Our royal ministry is often performed in our community (parish, village, city), where we live and work, as the needy were we ourselves live and work is our primary responsibility. Then, the extent possible, we should promote the charitable work of the Church in our eparchy, and also internationally. When we perform a work of charity, we enable others to know Christ, the King of Peace, Love, and the Physician of body and soul.

We need to live in order that the word of God applies to us as well: “Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me ... what you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.” (Mt. 25: 34-36. 40).

PERSONAL EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

1. Do I support, and personally take part in the charitable activities of the Church?
2. How do I react when a person in need comes to my door at home, or when I encounter such a person on the street?
3. In so far as I am called to be an icon of Christ, the Prince of Peace and love, the Physician of souls and bodies, do I give others the opportunity to meet Him through my behavior?
4. Do I encourage the other members of my family, especially my children (if I have any), through by my example, and my speech, to perform acts of charity?
5. Do I observe the periods of fasting throughout the liturgical year, and make a special effort to help those in need?

EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE FOR THE PARISH COMMUNITY

1. Does our parish actively promote social welfare, or charitable assistance?
2. Is there any organized assistance in our parish to care for the elderly, sick, orphans, and the disabled?
3. Do the laity take part in charitable endeavors, or is everything done by the priest-pastor?

4. Does our parish community do anything to assist the needy, especially those in our village, town, or city?
5. Is our parish person-orientated, that is do we manifest the ideal that Christ is the Way the Truth, and the Live of every person?

Themes of Homilies (Sermon Notes)

WHAT DO WE NEED TO REMEMBER?

- We believe in God, the Creator, the Almighty. Out of the vast universe, the Lord created the planet earth, and placed us here in this world and provided us with everything necessary for live and salvation. However, not everyone has received the same amount of gifts. To some our Lord entrusted great wealth and health, knowledge and various talents. And to others come into this world, no so richly endowed, but in poverty and weakness. It appears that some have all the “luck”, while other endure constant suffering and misfortune. Where is God’s justice?
- The teaching of the bible has always maintained that the good, honest person usually leaves something “let it be for the resident alien, the orphan, the widow” (Deut. 24: 19-22), “as the Lord, you God, has blessed you, so you shall give to him” (Deut. 15:14).
- At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus Christ immediately began to cure every “disease and every ailment among the people” (Mt 4: 23). Jesus also taught the importance of charity in parables such as the “Good Samaritan”, “Lazarus and the rich man”, and he mentioned how every good deed done for “the least of the brethren” would be considered as if done from Him: “For I was hungry and you have me to eat, thirsty, and you gave me to drink” (Mt. 25: 35)
- His Beatitude Sviatoslav reminds us to pay attention to “acts of charity:, that is the responsibility of every parish and every Christian to be involved in what is called “*diaconia*”, that is showing mercy, performing acts of charity. He reminds us that “faith without works is dead”. (James 2: 26). It is not strange how in those countries were Communist government came into power, every charitable organization of the church was shut down. That is why it is important to show the “maternal face of the Church.”
- If we are truly called to be a vibrant parish, then we can never neglect diaconia, especially for those whom the Lord sends to our doors. Thus, when we hear that someone in need calls for assistance, we should support to the charitable initiatives of our eparchy and Church. When we respond with charity to the needs of our neighbor, people will realize that truly, God is love.

Sermon

The Obligation of Christian Charity

Is Christian charity simply recommended? Or is Christian charity our obligation? This is what Christ has to say: “Give to everyone who asks of you, and from the one who takes what is yours do not demand it back.... Give and gifts will be given to you; a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap. For the

measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you." (Lk. 6: 30-38). Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give." (Mt.10:8)

To be charitable to one's neighbor is a vocation, a responsibility of every Christian without exception. Only a faith which is manifest by acts of charity leads to salvation (see: Gal. 5: 6). However, faith without deeds is dead (see: James 2: 26). "Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me." (Mt. 25: 40). – says our Lord Jesus.

If we believe in Christ, then through the eyes of faith, we will be able to see Him in our neighbor, and thus we will be encouraged to do something. For a believer, this is a personal blessing: by helping those in need, we have the opportunity to encounter Christ. We search for ways to meet God, and here Christ clearly tells us: you cannot meet me if you do not perform acts of charity.

St. John Chrysostom, speaking of charity, gives it the highest praise: "Charity is a kingly virtue, it quickly transports a person to the heavenly heights. The holy apostle Paul reminds us how all material things are not ours but God's: "For we brought nothing into the world, just as we shall not be able to take anything out of it." (1 Tim. 6: 7).

Look around! How many people there in the world who are destitute, poor, alone and sad, sick and suffering! Everything like this is our invitation to respond charitably. Charity is a manifestation of a living faith. The Lord wishes to open our eyes to the misery in the world, in order that we may learn to love in truth and show our neighbor the love of God – pay attention to others, extend our sympathy, support them with a word of consolation and encouragement, but most of all with acts of charity. Only then can we be considered as Christians who live their faith.

Diaconia, service in love, or acts of charity, also show the degree to which our parish or any parish is alive. Only when our parishes are places which care for orphans, defend widows, assist the poor and share in the suffering of the sick, only then do we manifest to the world the maternal face of the Church and become a living sign of God's presence in the world, worthy of the words of St. Augustine: "If you see love, you see the Blessed Trinity."

The value of mercy

God blesses the merciful and rewards them even here on earth. In Sacred Scripture we read in the Book of Sirach: "Give to the Most High as he has given to you, generously, according to your means. For the LORD is one who always repays, and he will give back to you sevenfold.... In generous spirit pay homage to the LORD, be not sparing of freewill gifts. Till he defends the cause of his people, and gladdens them by his mercy. (Sirach 35: 9-10, 7, 23). In the book of Proverbs we read: "He who has compassion on the poor lends to the LORD, and he will repay him for his good deed." (Prov. 19: 17).

Through our charitable works, we also manifest to God sorrow for our sin. In the book of Tobit we hear: "Prayer and fasting are good, but better than either is almsgiving accompanied by righteousness. A little with righteousness is better than abundance with wickedness. It is better to give alms than to store up gold; for almsgiving saves one from death and expiates every sin. Those who regularly give alms shall enjoy a full life..." (Tobit 12: 8-9). Christ says: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." (Mt. 5:7). St. John Chrysostom concerning the power of mercy teaches: "There is no sin which cannot

be forgiven, by showing mercy. Every sin is destroyed by it. Mercy is a suitable medicine for illness ”.

The verses from vespers during the Great Lent explain: “Mercy is a great deed. Let us love it. There is nothing to compare to it. It will cleanse sins and defend us from judgment. You are silent, and mercy defends you. Even more, if you are silent, thousands will thank you.”

Jesus Christ assures us: “For the Son of Man will come with his angels in his Father's glory, and then he will repay everyone according to his conduct.” (Mt. 16: 27). To those who have shown mercy and good deeds in their lives, He will say at the Last Judgment: “Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.' (Mt. 25: 34-36).

Our service to the needy is a means by which we can encounter God, who promised his presence with them and us. The needy are a place of God's manifestation. The needy according to the words of John the merciful – are the treasure of the Church, a like every treasure, this treasure of God's presence, needs to be found, cleansed, and embraced. This requires our effort and assistance, but the reward is great. St. Maximus the Confessor says: “Service, this is the way to divinization.”

How are we to perform acts of charity?

Every person who wants to fulfill one's purpose in life needs to fulfill three obligations: one's obligation to God, to one's self, and to one's neighbor. From this we conclude that all material things should serve us to fulfilling these three obligations. Jesus Christ says: “Much will be required of the person entrusted with much, and still more will be demanded of the person entrusted with more.” (Lk. 12: 48)

The works of mercy are two fold: caring for the needs of the body and those of the soul. The Catechism following Sacred Scripture lists the corporal works of mercy: feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to harbor the homeless, to visit the sick, to visit the imprisoned, and to bury the dead. In addition to the corporal works of mercy, there are also the spiritual works of mercy. They are to convert the sinner, to instruct the ignorant, to counsel the doubtful, to comfort the sorrowful, to bear wrongs patiently, to forgive injuries, and to pray for the living and the dead.

In regard to charity there is one question which is frequently raised: “Is it right to give to everyone who asks?” There are several answers to this question. One can give when asked, and Our Lord will judge you whether or not you have responded to the needs of your neighbor. On the other hand, making using our reason, we can decide whether or not to perform a certain act of charity. What we need to know is whether or not our charitable act will truly be beneficial. Unfortunately, it may happen that what we give does not really benefit the one asking for assistance. One suggestion is not to give money. However there may be particular occasion when someone needs financial assistance, for example to get an operation. Someone may ask for a ticket, but instead of giving money, we can buy the ticket for them, rather than simply give them the money. To aid another through service is the best means to be charitable.

If we can help by donating money, as there are many charitable organizations which provide assistance for the needy. In the Church there are charitable organizations like Caritas. In almost every community there are social service organizations to assist the poor. We can help these organizations through our donations, and they may provide assistance for various needs. We should never forget the importance of personal contact with the needy. For example someone could volunteer to work at a charitable institution like Caritas and be of service to the needy. Personal involvement in works of charity should truly be important for a Christian, as it provides us with an opportunity to encounter Christ Himself.

The range of possibilities in respect to charitable service is broad, and every person who wishes to become involved can find a way to be of service to others. Is not the greater obligation of every person to understand the genuine needs of our neighbor? There is no person who is so destitute so as not to be able to offer a kind word, or express sympathy, or even give someone a smile.