

Dearly beloved: Christ is among us!

Indeed, Christ is among us. On the altar, in each other, in us as baptized into Him who have Him living in us. Jesus emphasizes His presence among us in the parable of the Last Judgment we hear today, as we get closer to Lent. The Son of Man, that is Jesus Christ, will be seated on the throne of glory and He will separate everyone like sheep are separated from goats. But the judgment, in reality, is not His judgment. Rather, if we listen closely, Jesus separates the good from the bad based on how they treated the outcasts: the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned. He rewards those who had compassion on the lowly but returns the judgment to those who rejected the lowly because by refusing service to those in need they have rejected Christ and have judged themselves as unworthy of the Kingdom of Heaven. Christ is present to us every day, particularly in the person in need.

One of the marks of Great Lent and any time of fasting is giving alms to the poor, to those in need which includes giving food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothing to the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned. If we cannot physically do these things because of health, etc. then we can help to do them by taking from our own substance, our own money, to help those in need. This act of mercy proceeds from the proper understanding of the money and possessions we have. What we have in terms of any material goods comes to us on loan from God. He blesses us with abundance so that we may be sustained and out of His blessings to us we may sustain those who are in need. We, in turn, are to loan these gifts back to God in this life for God speaks to us in the Scriptures saying “The person who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and the Lord will repay that person for their deed.” (Proverbs 19:17)

Saint John Chrysostom uses this imagery in seeing money given to charity as an investment the Christian makes in this world. An investment that is collected back with interest in the Kingdom of God. Chrysostom famously said to give to the poor is to put God in debt to you for it is God who will pay you back all money you gave to the poor – with the warning that the repayment occurs not in this age but in the age to come. The more you give with love to the poor in this world, the more that awaits you in the Kingdom; you are thus providing for your own eternity.

God relies on the Christian people to be His bankers for the poor – to provide for their needs through charity which in reality is for you to make a loan to God which God repays in the Kingdom of Heaven. Charity is thus not giving away anything but rather lending to God; God will repay the loan with interest as a reward in His Kingdom. Giving to charity puts God in your debt – not a bad position to be in according to St. John when Judgment Day comes around, the Judgment Day we have heard about only moments ago.

But, some do say, what about the person who pretends to be poor, asking for money? The person who is deceiving us? What about them? Should we give to them? Is Christ present in them? This is a perennial question that the Fathers of the Church did address. Here is one eloquent example: “It is easy, of course, to understand that we must give alms and a helping hand to the needy, because Christ receives it in them... We can understand that we have to give alms and that we must not really pick and choose to whom we give them, because we are unable to sift through people’s hearts. When you do this [i.e., give alms] to all, then you also reach to the few who deserve them. Let in the unworthy, so that the worthy might not be excluded. You cannot be a judge and sifter of hearts.” (St. Augustine, Sermon 359A.11)

Saint Augustine, who lived over sixteen hundred years ago, focuses on three things. First, we must give alms because it is not the person who receives our gift, but Christ Himself. (Mt 25:31-46). Second, we must give to all, worthy and unworthy, because, given that we

cannot possibly know people's hearts, we only would exclude the few worthy with the unworthy. Now, the saint does even say "few", so he still makes his case of giving to all even if the vast majority were unworthy. Third, the more powerful argument, "We do not know people's hearts." Worthiness and unworthiness is an issue of the heart. As such then it is only for one to judge, the sole "judge and sifter of hearts": God. It cannot be determined based on human, objective criteria. Some poor may appear unworthy by all means, because they refuse work opportunities that they DO have, refuse help that IS being offered to them, turn down long-lasting solutions that ARE set in front of them. Yet, only their hearts know why they do so. By this we know that because a perfect knowledge of the human heart inevitably escapes us, it seems that we are to err always on the side of giving to the unworthy, even if the worthy are a small minority of the poor. There is only one way for us to approach the poor: in Christ. In Christ we don't collaborate with any worldly power or vision, we cannot possibly be satisfied by any party, any political system, any government, but we rather challenge all to the reality of the Cross.

We make sacrifice to help those who are in need, our brothers and sisters in Christ, the unworthy together with the worthy who are known by God. By this we serve Christ here and now so that what we give is placed in heaven and returned to us with interest, not in money, but in life with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit in the glorious kingdom which is to come.