

Offer Your Bodies
22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Rm 12:1-2; Mt 16:21-27)

In the second reading, St. Paul reiterates and deepens what Jesus says in the Gospel. Jesus rebuked Peter for “thinking as man thinks, not as God” (Mt 16:22); St. Paul says not to “conform to [the thinking of] this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Rm 12:2). Jesus said his disciple must “lose his life for my sake” since it is worth more than the whole world (Mt 16:25-26); St. Paul says to “offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God” (Rm 12:1).

This brief exhortatory passage from St. Paul is very important, because it helps us understand the purpose of the Christian moral life, which is to worship God. “The moral life is spiritual worship” (*Catechism* 2031). We don’t keep laws and observe morality simply to avoid punishment or look good on the outside. We do so as an act of love, in order to be able to offer ourselves to God worthily.

In order to properly participate in the Mass, which is fundamentally the offering of Christ’s Body to the Father – his spiritual worship – we must be “in a state of grace,” i.e., living a moral life in Christ. In order to join the offering of our body to his, we must be free of sin. By means of the sacramental life, especially Baptism and Penance, Christ makes us worthy to enter into the Eucharist. Thus the goal of the moral life is worship, and worship is found in the Eucharist, where Christ takes our offering into his, in praise of the Father.

Romans 12:1 is the main reason we go to Mass, to “offer our bodies (lives) as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God” in union with the offering of Christ on Calvary.

Romans 12:2 is the second reason we go to Mass, because in order to be a Christian and live the difficult demands of the Christian life, we need the weekly lessons of the Gospel to transform and renew our thinking. Instead of conforming ourselves to the world, we must be formed into the mature manhood of Christ (Eph 4:13), putting on the “mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16) and living by his Spirit (Gal 5:25). Just as Peter had to learn God’s wisdom, which requires the Cross, every Christian has to learn that Christian discipleship requires a life of renunciation and purity which the world neither understands nor accepts.

Jesus explains that our life is a treasure from God worth more than the entire world, and therefore not to be squandered on the world: “*what does it profit a man to gain the whole world if he forfeits his life*” (Mt 16:26). And even though this treasure is found primarily in the soul, it is lived in and through the body. Christianity, while emphasizing the soul, nevertheless fosters a great respect for the body as the particular instrument by which worship of God is expressed.

Morality is not just for the soul, it extends to the body, which is made holy in Baptism, and which becomes the particular locus of worship: it is particularly *the body* that we ultimately offer to God as the expression of our sacrifice. This follows the pattern of Christ, who offered his *Body* on the Cross for the salvation of the world.

Thus, while St. Paul in Romans 12:1 does mean in a general sense that we need to offer our whole *lives* to God, there is a reason he says specifically to “*offer your bodies*” to God.

Christian morality preaches a great respect for the dignity of the body. It is why, for instance, we have a great aversion to acts of violence against the body. We do not deliberately mutilate the body, ever. We try to maintain our bodies in good form and health, encourage athletics, dress appropriately,¹ and avoid excessive “decoration.”²

It is also why we take great care of the corpse when someone has died, and venerate the physical relics of saints. After death we clean and preserve the body, dressing it in the person’s best clothes, *in order that the body may be brought triumphantly to the altar, to become the living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.* Our funeral Mass fulfills St. Paul’s exhortation in Romans 12:1 like no other Mass during our lifetime. In our funeral Mass, we are *literally* and finally and fully able to say to God, in perfect imitation of Christ at the Last Supper: this is my body, given for you.

The body is the instrument of our soul, it is the great way the soul has to be able to worship God. By uniting our death with the death of Christ, we transform death from a curse into a redemptive act. Moreover, our death becomes the “cap” of our entire life, lived as a sacrifice for God. Even if we choose to have our body cremated after death, which the Church now permits, this should still take place only *after* the funeral Mass. So don’t look at the “cremation option” as a way to save money or avoid hassle! Do not conform to the world. There is a profound reason Christians bring *the body* to Mass after death. It completes and fully expresses the sacrifice of that person’s life to the Father in union with Christ!

The third way Christian morality proclaims a great reverence for the body, radically different from the pagans who practice worldly immorality, is with regard to sexual purity. In a different letter, St. Paul defines sexual sins as those which are committed specifically against the body: “*Every other sin which a man commits is outside the body; but the [sexually] immoral man sins against his own body*” (1 Cor 6:18).

¹ i.e., modestly, in accord with the dignity of the body as expression of the person

² i.e., excessive tattooing, body piercing, etc.

And he immediately adds the reason why sexual sins are so problematic to Christians: “*Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you?*” (1 Cor 6:19). What is the purpose of a temple, if not to worship and glorify God? To commit a sexual sin is to “give” the body in a way that is inappropriate, to someone to whom it does not belong; or to violate God by “taking” another’s body in a way we do not have a right to. This is the meaning of lust. Thus, whether it is adultery which violates a marriage vow, fornication prior to marriage, the viewing of pornography, or even impure thoughts – all of this is repugnant to Christian morality, because it violates the baptismal covenant by which “we belong to God, having been purchased at a great price” (1 Cor 6:19b-20), and it compromises our ability to participate in the Eucharist with a pure conscience.

There are three ways in which we therefore offer our bodies in sexual purity to God, living out our baptismal covenant: the single life, the married life, and the consecrated life.

When single, Christians practice a great strictness with regard to sexual morality, and the boundaries observed with people. This is not because Christians view sexuality negatively, like the Puritans who are false Christians, but because we view the body positively, as the fundamental gift which is offered to God in worship.

When married, Christians likewise use the body to glorify God, through the raising of a family. Marriage requires the blessing of God, through the Church, to be valid. I.E., marriage itself is one of the Sacraments by which God is worshipped. Sexual intimacy is integral to marriage, whose purpose is to worship God through the body, fulfilling His blessing to bring forth new life. Thus marriage too, requires of Christians a purity of intention, and sacrificial spirit. Sexual activity can never be selfish for the Christian – a mere gratification or “taking.” It must always be, on some level, a “giving of self” that ties in to worship.

Finally, in the Church the Holy Spirit gives a special charism to those called to a consecrated life, whereby the body in its sexual aspect is offered to God through a liturgical act. The consecrated life is a special expression of St. Paul’s exhortation in Romans 12:1, and one which absolutely requires the spiritual way of thinking he exhorts in Romans 12:2.

Our human life is worth more than the whole world, and therefore not to be squandered on the world through a life of moral dissipation. It is God’s precious gift to us, which we are able to freely offer back to Him in sacrifice, by means of our vocational calling, and finally, at the end, by means of a holy death.