

Homily for May 7, 2006
4th Sunday of Easter (B)

By Father Charles Bowes

Acts 4:8-12
Psalm 118:1, 8-9, 21-23, 26, 28, 29
1 John 3:1-2
John 10:11-18

Like Jesus the Good Shepherd, we lay down our lives; we sacrifice for what is important.

“A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep,” says Jesus in John chapter 10.

Every Good Friday I relearn the meaning of these words of Jesus – to lay down one’s life – because every Good Friday the altar servers and I literally lie down on the floor here in church as part of the Good Friday liturgy.

That’s how we begin. The altar servers love it. “You mean we lie down on the floor?” they ask. “You sure do,” I answer. You don’t go to sleep, of course, I tell them. It’s a prayer, I tell them. It’s called prostration, like making the sign of the cross or genuflecting. You don’t need words; the gesture says more than words can say. You can do this at home, I tell them. Just make sure your folks know you’re praying so they don’t call the cops or sign you up for extended counseling, I tell them. As a young altar server, I loved that Good Friday service. And when I was ordained a priest, I lay down on the floor during the chanting of the litany of the saints, and it reminded me again of the Good Shepherd – to lay down my life for others.

It can mean humility, submission and willingness to share in the surrender, the sacrifice of Jesus – to give our lives as Jesus gives his.

Most Catholics are familiar with our tradition of calling the Mass a sacrifice. It is less clear whether

most Catholics understand how the Mass is a sacrifice, and what it means for us to make that claim.

Let’s begin with Christ’s own sacrifice. His sacrifice has both historical and eternal aspects. The core of his sacrifice was expressed in his prayer in the garden of Gethsemane: “Not my will but yours be done.” His sacrifice was his surrender to the Father’s will in all things, no matter what that might cost. This commitment led to his death and resurrection, historical events that are not repeated. But his surrender to the Father’s will is eternal, and it is that aspect of his sacrifice that we are invited to share.

The Eucharistic Prayer is based on Jewish prayer forms. It begins with praise of God and then recalls many reasons we have to be thankful to God. Then it asks God to continue to work wonders in our own time, and concludes with a final acclamation of praise. In the Christian versions of this prayer, what God has done for us culminates in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We recall what Jesus did so that we might unite ourselves with his sacrifice. The First Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation prays: “Father, look with love on those you have called to share in the one sacrifice of Christ.”

To do that means to surrender our wills to the Father’s will just as he did. It means being willing to give ourselves for others as he did. It means laying

down one's life for what is important. It means being willing to accept whatever comes as a result of our faithfulness to the Father's will. For Jesus, that meant death on the cross and resurrection to new life. Most of us will not hang from a wooden cross, but all of us are called to embrace the crosses that life brings us. We share in Christ's sacrifice to the extent that we embrace his attitude, his act of will, his being a good shepherd, his relationship with the Father.

In this process, we become one with Christ and are caught up in his offering of himself to the Father. Listen to the words of the Second Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation: "We celebrate the memory of his death and resurrection and bring you the gift you have given us, the sacrifice of reconciliation. Therefore, we ask you, Father, to accept us, together with your Son." There is only one acceptable sacrifice in the New Covenant, but by uniting ourselves to Christ, we become part of that one sacrifice.

Of course, sharing in Christ's sacrificial act here at Mass is not enough. Living as the good shepherd means tending sheep. If we join Christ in his surrender to the Father's will here at Mass, then we live that out all through the week. We are to live as members of Christ, giving constant praise to God by our daily lives. That is the way that we truly share Christ's sacrifice, and it is that kind of faithful living that makes what we do here true and authentic worship. I think that is what comes home to me every Good Friday as I lie down on the floor to begin the service – I go through the motion here of the self-surrender this faith calls for. As Saint Augustine wrote, "the liturgy (the prayer of the Church) makes the play actor into the true believer."

And that's what our First Communicants commit themselves to as well, under our tutelage, of course – to

lay down their lives as bread that is broken; as blood that is outpoured as Jesus did and lives forever, never growing any older but ever caught in the moment of his passing from this world into the world to come – a journey, a passage, a surrender we enter each time we gather here.

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