

Order of Malta “Mercy not Sacrifice”

15th Friday of Ordinary Time

Bishop Frank Schuster

Peace be with you. Again, it is a joy to be with you this evening. As I prayed with the readings for this fifteenth Friday of Ordinary Time, several thoughts came to mind that speak to our ministry in the Order of Malta. And so, bear with me, as I look to my notes. I don’t want to miss anything.

First, the power of prayer to heal sickness. Isaiah informs Hezekiah that he will not recover and to put his affairs in order. Hezekiah prays for healing, and God answers. Moral to the story: prayer matters. Prayer matters, and to have faith that God always answers our prayers in the way he knows we need it most. As members of the Order of Malta, we give witness to the power of prayer. Prayer matters.

Second, how does God go about healing Hezekiah? He tells Hezekiah to go to the temple, yes, but to also be mindful of his steps. How he walks toward and into the temple matters. In my mind, God is basically telling Hezekiah to go on a pilgrimage to a holy place as part of his healing journey. See it? As members of the Order of Malta, we too give witness to the power of pilgrimage. Visiting holy places is important, but so is how we do it, mindful of our steps. I went to Lourdes twice now with the Order of Malta in less the year. The first one with a high school youth group out of Phoenix and was absolutely amazed by how dialed in these kids were with the faith. I am working with one of the young men right now who is applying for seminary for his diocese. Amazing. Of course, happily my calendar opened up in May at the last minute, and Archbishop Etienne gave me permission to go to Lourdes for half of the pilgrimage. I was especially blessed to be there on May 3rd on the anniversary of my father’s passing who was a malade in 2019, thanks to all of you.

Let me tell you, even if you have been to Lourdes...you have not been to Lourdes unless you have gone with the Order. It is that special. Just my plug, this coming year is special because our own Boyd Sharp will be a malade and how wonderful would it be if we had a good contingent there to support him, wouldn’t you say? Just an invitation.

Back to my homily, the third thought I had when praying with our readings is from our Gospel reading. Jesus and his disciples are accused of working on a Sabbath. It always makes me smile because Sundays are often the busiest days of the week for priests, and often the same for laity who are “all in” collaborators in our ministry. Sunday Mass doesn’t happen without an army of the faithful making sure the Church is open, clean, that the liturgy is beautiful and well prepared, hospitality attended to, music, faith formation and outreach ministries staffed and marked by excellence, and so forth. The sick and homebound in our communities don’t receive a visit unless there are a platoon of Eucharistic ministers out there visiting. In the Church, there is always a tension of the importance of being a Mary at the feet of the Lord and Martha who

preparing dinner. In the Order of Malta, we are of course called to be both Marys and Marthas, both are important. However, in my mind we are at heart as an order an army of professional Marthas. Wouldn't you say? And so, this is also an encouragement, if you are blessed to do so, to consider helping out with one or more of our local services we provide locally. Visibility matters.

However, the fourth thing that came forth from prayer, and I think this gets to the heart of our charism, Jesus reminds his critics that his heavenly father prefers mercy over sacrifice. Which for me underscores the importance of not reducing our Catholic faith to a "me and Jesus" show. A lot of us can fall prey to it.

It usually manifests itself in Catholics who are tempted to skip Sunday mass because, "I don't feel like I need to go today" when the point of Mass is to give God his due praise and to support the community of believers by both our prayers, our love and again, putting our faith into practice. Life isn't about me. It is about we. As Pope Leo said in his exhortation *Delixit Te*, drawing from the wisdom of St. John Chryostom, "Charity is not optional but a requirement for true worship." That's powerful and provocative. "Charity is not optional but a requirement for true worship". Another way of saying that is from Jesus himself in today's Gospel, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Again, the Order of Malta gives witness to what that looks like in our ministry to the poor, the marginalized, and especially our care for the sick...and having been on two pilgrimages to Lourdes now, I am very pleased by what we do and honored to have my application submitted to become an official chaplain of the order.

And so, friends, prayer matters, pilgrimage matters, Mary Matters, Martha Matters, visibility matters, presence matters, Mercy Matters. We can find all of this in our readings today. We can find all of that in this room today, thanks be to God. And we find this at our altar today as we encounter our Lord Jesus who loved us first and in the offering of his Body and Blood models for his divine mercy.