

St. Lawrence famously gives away the Church's possessions for the sake of the poor and when challenged to return this treasure by the civil authorities returns with 'the destitute, the orphans the blind and the lame' – the Church's true treasure. But the sacrifice he has also made is himself, on their behalf, and this self-sacrifice brings him to heaven, too, by making him holy. We had a marvellous passage from Augustine in our Office of Readings for Friday from the City of God; worth quoting in full, or nearly so:

A true sacrifice is any deed whereby we cling to God in holy friendship: that is to say, a deed according to that virtuous purpose that can render us truly blessed. Hence, even an act of mercy, of benefit to men, is no sacrifice unless it be performed for God's sake. For though it may be offered by man, a sacrifice is nevertheless something divine, in the sense that the ancient Latins gave it the name of sacrifice, meaning 'made sacred' or 'sacred deed'. Hence man himself, when consecrated to God's name and vowed to God, is himself a sacrifice, to the extent that he dies to the world so as to live to God.

What struck me about this was the necessity of surrendering our giving to God so that God is, in effect, being made present to the world and in us through this self-giving, and later Augustine will make this clear by saying

This can only come from that source of goodness of which it was said that 'the Good for me is to cling to God.'

And lest we hesitate because we may fear, for example, that we are manipulating God by trying to buy our way into heaven, he also says

Moreover, it is a vital part of mercy that each of us should practise the virtue towards himself..

So rather than beat ourselves up about what our true motivations might be, we can accept the good of it as a duty, commanded by God and ultimately carried out by God, in God's name. This is the poverty we all share.

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