



OFFERING OUR BODIES AS A LIVING SACRIFICE TO GOD - A REFLECTION ON TODAYS SECOND READING, ROMANS 12:1-2

Fr. Robert Barron, a professor of theology in Mundelein Seminary, Chicago, is recognized as one of the sharpest theologians in our church today. One of his books which I recently finished reading is called *The Word on Fire*, is a book of homilies or reflections on miscellaneous texts from mostly the New Testament. The following is his reflection on today's second reading from Romans. Unfortunately Fr. Barron does not use subtitles for his chapters, so I have taken the liberty of doing so. In case you have forgotten what today's second reading was about. Here it is:

I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.

Fr. Barron writes:

The closing chapters of Paul's letter to the Romans constitute one of the first moral theologies in the Christian tradition—the Apostle instructing the little Christian community at Rome how to live in accord with the spirit of Jesus. Though Martin Luther drove a wedge between faith and good works—and claimed Paul as his principle inspiration—there is little in the letter to the Romans to justify such a division. The same Paul who, in the opening chapters of Romans, spoke so passionately of justification through grace, spoke just as insistently of the ethical demand in the final section of that same letter.

I would like to focus on a line from the twelfth chapter of Romans that succinctly articulates the Christian approach to ethics in general; this one line has particular relevance to the matter of sexual morality. Paul says, "I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship."

Paul was not a dualist

Paul was not a dualist. He did not believe, in the manner of Plato and his disciples, that spirit and matter belong to two utterly distinct metaphysical arenas. And he certainly didn't think that the purpose of the spiritual life is to facilitate the escape of the soul from the body. No, Paul was a Jew and, as such, he used the term "body" to designate the whole of the self; muscles, bones, and sexuality, but also mind and emotions. What he tells the Christians at Rome is that this entire self should be offered to God as a sacrifice.

It's been said that if we traveled to the ancient world in a time machine, we would be most surprised by the prevalence of religious sacrifice in that milieu. In Paul's time, people would regularly slaughter animals and offer their flesh to God or the gods as a sign of life, thanksgiving, or propitiation. So Paul is suggesting that we should think about the moral life, not so much legalistically as liturgically, not primarily as the fulfilling of regulations but rather as the sending up of a prayer. The whole of our existence, from day to day, should be a sustained act of honoring God with our bodies.

An ancient person would bring to sacrifice a pure lamb, an unblemished dove, or the first fruits of the harvest—something expressive of the quality of his devotion and worthy of the god he was honoring. To bring to sacrifice a third-rate offering would be liturgically inappropriate—insulting to God and denigrating to the self. Thus Paul's exhortation implies a question: What is the quality of the body that we place as a living sacrifice on the altar of God? Is it a body that has performed works of hatred and violence, said hurtful things, reached out to attack, or walked away from the poor and needy? If so, it is hardly a fit vehicle for the proper worship of God.

How young people's attitudes towards sexuality have changed.

Not so long ago, I was at a friend's house and was surfing my way through his wide selection of cable channels, when I stumbled across MTV's program on spring break. Now, I don't think I'm remarkably prudish in matters sexual, but I have to confess that

what I saw disturbed me. It wasn't so much the amount of flesh and explicit sexual behavior (though that was excessive enough); it was the attitude. It was clear that for the young people on that program, sex is purely recreational, something one does for entertainment. Sexual contact seemed to be in the same genre of harmless self-indulgent fun as drinking, smoking, or lying in the sun. My strong impression was that anyone suggesting a link between sex and committed love would have been promptly laughed off the stage.

Just a few weeks after my MTV experience, I read a book by the psychologist and physician Leonard Sax called *HY Gender Matters*. It's a fascinating study of the physical and psychological differences between the genders and how those should affect the way we think about the education of children. But what particularly caught my attention in Sax's book was the chapter on sexual behavior among young men and women. Sax observed that in the past twenty-five or thirty years there has been a remarkable shift in this area.

Thirty years ago, most of those who engaged in extramarital sex still had some sense of a connection between personal commitment and physical expression: young people of that time would justify even their relatively irresponsible sex through some appeal to love. But now, Sax argues, young people increasingly engage in sex of the most casual and impersonal kind, and they do so with an attitude of indifference and impunity. In particular, the resistance that young women would have shown, just thirty years ago, has now disappeared, females having surrendered to the more impulsive sexuality of males. Sax comments that this casualness in regard to sex has led to myriad psychological problems in the young men and women who crowded his and his colleagues' offices for consultation. And he concludes that the solution is to place sexual contact within the context of loving, committed relationships.

Well, in saying so, he joins an impressive chorus of voices—Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Paul, to name just a few - from the great biblical tradition.

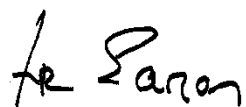
Presenting One's Sexuality to God

Part of what it means to offer one's body as a living sacrifice of praise is to present one's sexuality to God as something pure, excellent, and unsullied, something like unto God himself. But God is love, therefore, the sexuality that we place on the altar should be a vehicle

and expression of love, a gift of self. When sex devolves into a crude means to self-gratification, it becomes a sacrifice unworthy of God and denigrating to the self. Don't think of God, by the way, as a prim, school-marmish moralist, making arbitrary demands upon us. God has no need of our sacrifices or our moral excellence, for God needs nothing at all. But God wants something—namely, our joy and our fullness of life - and this comes when we freely offer ourselves in love as a living sacrifice, for in that act, we become like God.

Paul concludes this section of his letter to the Romans with these words: "Do not conform yourselves to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind." He was talking about the pagan culture of ancient Rome, so marked by self-indulgence and violence; but he could just as well have been speaking of our own culture, marred by secularism, subjectivism, and hedonism. How tragic if Christians simply mimic the self-regarding mores of the age in which they find themselves. How wonderful if they find a way to place their bodies as living sacrifices on the altar of God.

Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Le Saran". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.