MARCH 12, 2023: 3RD SUNDAY OF LENT

One of the great mythical writers in American history was Horatio Alger. He wrote stories about the American Dream. His position was that a person with enough determination has the ability to rise above any situation or circumstance to achieve their goals—*whatever* they may be. The person simply needs to put in the work and effort to make his or her dreams come true, and the only thing preventing them from success is the person. His writings were immensely popular and had a huge impact on the American psyche and how Americans came to view what was possible. The idea of the person being self-made, working hard, and 'pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps' is at the heart of how Americans have come to view themselves and how our society should work. People should not need any help moving forward in their lives if they simply have the right motivation.

From a Christian perspective, especially a Catholic one, this is a bunch of hooey. The idea of the rugged individual overcoming all odds, based on their own abilities, leads to one of the biggest issues we have in society today: the autonomous individual. This idea has morphed into the person self-determining who they are, and the idea that personal freedom means no one has the right to tell them that what they believe is right or wrong because truth is subjective.

One of the true antidotes for this kind of thinking is almsgiving. Almsgiving helps us to look at the world and our place in it very differently. To truly understand Christian almsgiving we have to begin at the beginning. What is the beginning? It is acknowledging that God is the source of all that we have. As Christians we need to understand that all good things, from their very inception, come from God. And God endows them with a meaning, an end, and an order. And, as Christians, we have a responsibility to use that which God has given us as God intends. When God chooses to create a human being, He endows that person with their own unique gifts, talents, and abilities, to greater serve the Kingdom of God.

It is imperative then that each person recognizes that the good they perceive in their life does not originate from them. Rather, it is through using the gifts that God has given them that they can accomplish whatever they do in life. We cannot accomplish anything that has meaning or value to it apart from the grace of God. We cannot earn, merit, or deserve the good that we receive in our lives: it is always a free gift from God. Furthermore, God gives us the good that He does *not* simply for our own good, but to enable us to be his instruments in furthering his plans for the world. The goods that we have been gifted by God are intended to be used to help in his work of salvation.

Almsgiving is one of the gifts of Lent that help us remember this. As one of the great Saints, John Chrysostom, said, "Not to share our own wealth with the poor is stealing from the poor and depriving them of their means of life; we do not possess our own wealth, but theirs." Almsgiving forces us to reflect on where our goods come from. When we choose to give to a charity, we have to confront the truth that we are not giving to them from our *own* treasure but from what God has chosen to share with us from *his* treasure. The good that we do in almsgiving is really about recognizing that we are nothing more in this situation than instruments of the Lord.

Christian life is ultimately nothing more than cooperating with the Lord. Almsgiving, therefore, reminds us of this fundamental Christian truth. Our lives are wholly dependent upon cooperating with God's grace. But, so often we fall into the trap of thinking that we have accomplished so many things on our own. So often we buy into the myth of Horatio Alger that we could be self-made. When we start thinking along these lines, we stop acting from a Christian perspective: we may be performing acts of charity but it becomes about what *we* are doing as opposed to how God is using us.

Almsgiving, then, is an essential act in the season of Lent that helps us regain a proper perspective of how we are called to truly live out a Christian life. It is not simply about charity for charity's sake. Rather, as we act in a charitable way, we begin to understand our relationship with God and our dependence upon Him. We are *not* self-made and we never can be.

May we use this Lent to reorder our relationship with God by using the generous gifts He has given us in a way that furthers his Kingdom on earth.

If you have any questions about anything, please do not hesitate to ask me directly, or send your questions to me at fr.brian@theholyrood.org , or if easier please call or text me at (978) 254-0560.

Please keep me in your prayers.

In Christ,

Fr. Brian