

# The Treasury of the Saints

By Greg Witherow

In the gospels Christ exhorted Christians to store up treasure in heaven<sup>1</sup> and in the book of Revelation we see that heavenly wealth on display. There the apostle John pulls back the veil to reveal the heavenly wealth is the deeds of the saints, metaphorically described as the *pure wedding garments* worn at Wedding feast of the Lamb<sup>2</sup>. What could be of higher value?<sup>3</sup> This *treasure of merit* (good deeds) is made possible only by grace as ultimately, *our merits are really Christ's merits*<sup>4</sup>. In contrast, Protestants see no possibility of merit “as all our works are as filthy rags”, a misunderstanding of Paul in Romans in his description of the pre-justified person.

But as with any gift Christ bestows, this treasure is not meant merely for oneself. Therefore, the point of this essay is twofold. First, Christians can merit. Second, God gives grace to some because of the merit of others. Let us be clear. The sanctified works of the Holy Spirit produced in us **are not filthy rags but instead are the pure robes John attests to**. Robes not rags! These points are the foundational principles underlying the treasury of the saints. For brevities sake, how the Church distributes this storehouse of grace is out of scope for this essay. Let us begin.

## **Paul Offers His Suffering for Others**

In his epistle to the church at Colossae, Saint Paul makes the following statement,

“Now I rejoice in **my sufferings for your sake**, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions **for the sake of his body, that is the Church**.”<sup>5</sup>

Paul's afflictions (whether imposed or voluntary such as fasting) are *for the benefit of the whole Church*. And following Paul's example, Catholics often “offer up” their afflictions for others. (This is where it comes from). From the earliest days, Catholics have understood they can offer their suffering as a means to unleash heavenly grace for others. It is an ancient practice.

Commenting on the first verse Saint Chrysostom (c. 347-407) states,

“The wisdom, the will, the justice of Jesus Christ requires and ordains that his body and members should be companions of his sufferings, as they expect to be companions of his in glory; **that so suffering with him and after his example they may apply to their own wants and to the necessities of others the merits and satisfaction of Jesus Christ** which application is what is wanting and what we are permitted to supply by the sacraments and sacrifice of the new law.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 6:20

<sup>2</sup> Revelation 19:8. Few Protestants, including clergy are aware of this passage or its implications. To get an idea on how festal garments were considered wealth in the Biblical world, read Judges 14, 2 Kings 5:19-27, Genesis 41:42 and Genesis 45:17-22

<sup>3</sup> See Matthew 22:1-14. To be without the proper garments at the Wedding Feast of the Lamb meant damnation.

<sup>4</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church Section I, chapter 3, article 2 part 3 states, “You are glorified in the assembly of your Holy Ones, for in crowning their merits you are crowning your own gifts.”

<sup>5</sup> Colossians 1:24.

<sup>6</sup> Taken from the Haydock commentary of the Douay-Rheims New Testament on Colossians 1:24

## **Job Offers His Sacrifice for Others**

Job had seven sons and three daughters. His sons held frequent feasts, with each brother taking a turn hosting the event. They would invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. Job was concerned his children might fall into sins of excess during these festivities. So he had a remedy.

“And when the days of the feast had run their course Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said, ‘It may be that my sons have sinned and cursed God in their hearts.’ Thus Job did continually.”

Job acted on behalf of his children *in order to have their sins forgiven*. But to offer a burnt offering was to make a financial sacrifice as livestock provided sustenance and wealth in the ancient world. In one sense, it was as if Job gave alms in order to make the sacrifice. For the New Testament Catholic, *offering a Mass for others is the equivalent deed*.

## **Our Righteousness Applied To Others**

The epistle of James says the following,

“Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed. **The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects.**”<sup>7</sup>

In this case a person cannot offer a “prayer of faith” that will suffice. It may be sin (as we shall see in a moment) that is cause of God’s refusal. But in the communion of saints God allows merits (righteousness) to be shared. *On behalf of the righteous man, God heals the sinner*.

But do not all Christians, robed with the righteousness of Christ *equally* qualify as candidates to make this prayer? The answer is no. The prayers of some Christians are hindered by sin.

“Likewise you husbands, live considerately with your wives, bestowing honor on the woman as the weaker sex, since you are joint heirs of the grace of life, in order that **your prayers may not be hindered.**”<sup>8</sup>

Instead find people like Zacharias or Elizabeth, parents of John the Baptist. Scripture tell us,

“And they were both righteous before God, **walking in all the commandments and ordinances** of the Lord **blameless.**”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> James 5:16b

<sup>8</sup> 1 Peter 3:7

<sup>9</sup> Luke 1:6

## **David's Righteousness Applied to Others**

Israel was often spared judgment and granted favors *based on King David's merits*.<sup>10</sup>

“Nevertheless I will not take the whole kingdom out of his hand; but I will make him ruler all the days of his life, **for the sake of David my servant** whom I chose, **who kept my commandments and my statutes**.”<sup>11</sup>

“Therefore thus says the LORD concerning the king of Assyria, He shall not come into this city or shoot an arrow there, or come before it with a shield or cast up a siege mound against it. By the way that he came, by the same he shall return, and he shall not come into this city, says the LORD. **For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David**.”<sup>12</sup>

“And before Isaiah had gone out of the middle court, the word of the Lord came to him: Turn back and say to Hezekiah the prince of my people, thus says the Lord, the God of David your father: I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; behold I will heal you; on the third day you shall go up to the house of the Lord. And I will add fifteen years to your life. I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of Assyria, and I will defend this city for my sake **and for my servant David's sake**.”<sup>13</sup>

## **The Apostles Must Fast For Others**

*Without suffering (fasting) offered on behalf of a possessed person, some demons would remain.*

“So He said to them, “This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting.”<sup>14</sup>

## **Other Examples**

In the following examples God treats one person *in light of another person's righteousness*.

“He who receives a prophet because he is a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward, and he who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Some might object and say it was God's promise to David to have an heir on the throne forever that is the cause of Israel's reprieve, not David's righteousness. There are two problems with this conclusion. First, it was David's desire “to keep [God's] commandants” as opposed to Saul's unwillingness that brought about the promise in the first place. Second, the promise David received (see 2 Samuel 7:12-16) was ultimately about Christ and his kingdom, not the political nation of Israel – something the disciples misunderstood right up to Pentecost. This can be proven by the fact that with the Babylonian captivity, the kingdom and David's throne was destroyed hundreds of years before Christ. But this did not nullify the promise as it was about Christ and not the political Old Testament nation of Israel.

<sup>11</sup> 1 Kings 11:34

<sup>12</sup> 2 Kings 19:34

<sup>13</sup> 2 Kings 20:4-6

<sup>14</sup> Mark 9:29. Here we stumble onto the topic of textual criticism as very few modern Bible include “and fasting”. But regardless, the prayers are a deed performed on behalf of others. The Latin Vulgate and Textus Receptus include “and fasting” as faithfully evidenced in the RSV-2<sup>nd</sup> Catholic edition, the King James Version, New King James Version and the Douay-Rheims.

“For the unbelieving husband is consecrated through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is consecrated through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is they are holy.”

### **The Catechism of the Catholic Church**

**1476** We also call these spiritual goods of the communion of saints the Church's treasury, which is "not the sum total of the material goods which have accumulated during the course of the centuries. On the contrary the 'treasury of the Church' is the infinite value, which can never be exhausted, which Christ's merits have before God. They were offered so that the whole of mankind could be set free from sin and attain communion with the Father. In Christ, the Redeemer himself, the satisfactions and merits of his Redemption exist and find their efficacy.

**1477** This treasury includes as well the prayers and good works of the Blessed Virgin Mary. They are truly immense, unfathomable, and even pristine in their value before God. In the treasury, too, are the prayers and good works of all the saints, all those who have followed in the footsteps of Christ the Lord and by his grace have made their lives holy and carried out the mission the Father entrusted to them. In this way they attained their own salvation and at the same time cooperated in saving their brothers in the unity of the Mystical Body.

**1368** *The Eucharist is also the sacrifice of the Church.* The Church which is the Body of Christ participates in the offering of her Head. With him, she herself is offered whole and entire. She unites herself to his intercession with the Father for all men. In the Eucharist the sacrifice of Christ becomes also the sacrifice of the members of his Body. The lives of the faithful, their praise, sufferings, prayer, and work, are united with those of Christ and with his total offering, *and so acquire a new value.* Christ's sacrifice present on the altar makes it possible for all generations of Christians to be united with his offering.

In the catacombs the Church is often represented as a woman in prayer, arms outstretched in the praying position. Like Christ who stretched out his arms on the cross, through him, with him, and in him, she offers herself and intercedes for all men.

### **Conclusion**

To the Catholic, righteousness is infused in the Christian and there is therefore an ability to merit. We see this in the book of Revelation where the saints are robed in clean white linen which is their good deeds. And as co-laborers with Christ, we have the privilege and duty to build God's Church<sup>16</sup> joining our prayers and sacrifices (alms, fasting and afflictions) to Christ. As King David helped Israel long after he left this earth with his merit, so too the righteousness of saints of old can benefit the Christian on earth today. We would be wise to participate.

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<sup>15</sup> Matthew 10:41

<sup>16</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:9