

KNIGHTS, THE SERVANTS OF MERCY

6/1/2016

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SINCE THE MIDDLE AGES, THE VOCATION OF KNIGHTS HAS BEEN DEFINED BY SACRIFICIAL SERVICE TO GOD AND MAN



A stained glass window in the Church of Notre Dame in Saint-Hippolyte (Doubs), France, where the Shroud of Turin was preserved and venerated from 1418-1452, depicts Count Humbert de la Roche holding the shroud, which had been entrusted into his care through his marriage to the granddaughter of Geoffrey de Charny.

(Photo by Dorian Rollin)

The connection between knighthood and mercy may not be obvious to the popular imagination. On one hand, we typically picture the knight as a warrior, a courageous soldier in battle, laying low his enemies. On the other, we tend to associate mercy with acts of gentleness and kindness. But in fact, knighthood has a deep connection with mercy, both in its history and in its core meaning, which remains relevant today even though cultural customs have changed. As we observe what Pope Francis has designated the Jubilee Year of Mercy, it is especially fitting to reflect on this connection, deepening our understanding both of knighthood and of mercy itself. This, in turn, will help us to appreciate what it means to be a Knight today.

IN SERVICE TO THE KING

From its origin, knighthood has always been tied to service; the English word “knight” comes from the German word *Knecht*, which means “servant.” Of course, a knight was a man who had been elevated to a special position of honor as the devoted servant of his country and king. At a deeper level, however, the knight served an *ideal* as he strove to conform himself to the perennial values of justice, truth and honor. This entailed, above all, a willingness to sacrifice himself in order to protect the defenseless, the weak, the poor and the innocent.

In contrast to the modern “bourgeois,” the person who looks after his own self-interest most of all, the knight understands himself as serving something higher and more important than his particular self-interest. He is not just an individual, but part of a greater whole. The knight knows that he has a special duty to take care of others. Twentieth-century German poet Reinhold Schneider, who is known for his Catholic and anti-Nazi literature, once wrote, “The knight exists for the sake of everyone: that is his proper position in the world.”

In this position of honor that entails a devoted service to others, it is not hard to see that there is a natural affinity between knighthood and Christianity. The pledge of one’s life in service to one’s king and country can be taken up, in a Christian soul, into the pledge of one’s life in service to the King of kings, to Christ and his Church –and indeed to all people whom Christ came to save. In the Christian knight, the ideal of the warrior, as defender of the weak, joins with the ideal of Jesus Christ, who emptied himself, taking the form of a servant (cf. Phil 2:7).

Geoffrey de Charny, author of one of the great works on the meaning of knighthood, the famous *Book of Chivalry*, was known in the 14th century as the “true and perfect knight.” The king of France accorded Geoffrey the great honor of carrying the Oriflamme, the banner of France, in battle.

Geoffrey is also the first reliably attested person to have custody of the Shroud of Turin, an ancient piece of fabric that bears the as-yet-unexplained imprint of a scourged and crucified man, which has been venerated as the burial cloth of Christ himself. We might say that this knight carried the emblem of his king and country with one hand and the image of the central Christian mystery with the other, proudly displaying both the temporal and Christian ideals. He represents a responsibility for the world and a devotion to Christ, a servant of both ideals together.

THE GIFT OF MERCY

The institution of knighthood flourished during the Middle Ages, when various Christian chivalric orders formed. These were orders of knights, many of whom took vows of chastity, poverty and obedience, like monks. But unlike monks, they lived those vows through direct service to people in the world, carrying out what came to be called the “works of mercy.”

Beginning in the 12th century, the Sovereign Order of St. John of Jerusalem, also called the Knights Hospitaller, established and staffed hospitals, devoting themselves to healing the sick and wounded, and providing food, drink, clothing and shelter for the poor. They protected travelers, ensuring safe passage for those making pilgrimages to and from the Holy Land, accompanying them and even building bridges to make the journey possible.

The Order of Our Lady of Mercy, also known as the Mercedarians, was founded in 13th-century Spain to ransom Christians held captive by nonbelievers. The Mercedarians not only raised money to ransom captives, as one of the corporal works of mercy proscribes, but also enjoined its members to offer themselves as collateral in order to obtain the release of prisoners. They, like other knights, thus sought to live the Christian ideal in very concrete and practical terms.

The English word “mercy” comes originally from the Latin *merces*, meaning “reward.” In Christian usage, the Roman word came to mean spiritual reward for answering injustice with kindness. Of course, the “reward” for an unmerited gift can only be itself an unmerited gift. The works of mercy are not investments made for the purpose of reaping a payoff in the afterworld; instead, they are gifts that reflect the gift of redemption that we ourselves have received.

Mercy is ultimately the expression of a love that is poured out beyond measure: not “tit for tat,” but grace unbidden. The Greek word for mercy, *eleos*, comes from the word for flowing oil; the image evokes the blood and water poured out from Christ’s side –that is, God’s superabundant love that answers our sinfulness with redemption.

Knighthood and mercy go together because they are both expressions of sacrificial generosity. The knight is someone given a special honor, lifted up beyond his natural status, and he lives that honor by lifting up those around him. The external forms of medieval chivalry may no longer be part of our culture, but knighthood was never first about such forms. Rather, it was above all a spirit of service, an impetus to alleviate suffering and provide for those in need.

MODERN-DAY KNIGHTS

The spirit of knightly service continues to exist in our own day. When Father Michael J. McGivney brought together a group of young men in 1882, they called themselves "Knights" because they wished to be rooted in this ongoing tradition.

To bind these men to each other, Father McGivney appealed to their faith and idealism, their desire for community that would be founded on more than individual self-interest. He asked them to look out for each other in fraternity and, in unity with their brothers, to care for those in the broader society. And he showed them that their commitment to the Church and their love for their country went hand in hand.

The foundations of the Order show a key element of knighthood: devotion to the service of others out of gratitude for the grace of charity one has received himself. In this, there is the convergence of responsibility in the world and devotion to the Christian mystery of merciful love. When Christ sent his apostles into the world to teach and heal, he told them, "Freely you have received; now freely give" (Mt 10:8). This is the essence of mercy, and it is the essence of the vocation of the knight.

In his second encyclical, dedicated to the theme of mercy, St. John Paul II wrote, "Modern man often anxiously wonders about the solution to the terrible tensions which have built up in the world and which entangle humanity. And if at times he lacks the courage to utter the word 'mercy,' or if in his conscience empty of religious content he does not find the equivalent, so much greater is the need for the Church to utter his word, not only in her own name but also in the name of all the men and women of our time" (*Dives in Misericordia*, 15).

On behalf of the men and women of our time and on behalf of the Church, knights are called to be living words of mercy – active expressions of God's love. To quote Reinhold Schneider once again, "If the world is torn by divisions, if the peoples are thrown into the confusion of mutual hostility, how is the world to be healed, how are the peoples to be reconciled, if not through such a new body of knights, which is nothing other than carrying out the will of Jesus Christ, here and now, in this time?"

We who call ourselves Knights have been entrusted with a great responsibility to heal the divisions of our own time and to make manifest the Father's gift of mercy by faithfully bearing witness to Christ.

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