

# 1.

## THE GIFT OF BLESSINGS

Everyone in the crowd sought to touch him because power came forth from him and healed them all.

—Luke 6:19

Not long ago, I was walking through the airport, and a woman behind one of the kiosks across the terminal shouted, “Father, pray for me!” So I walked over to her and asked, “May I lay my hands on your head?” She nodded. I placed my hands on her head and prayed. Then, with the Sign of the Cross, I pronounced the words of blessing: “May almighty God bless you, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” This woman was not afraid to expose her desire for a priestly blessing in front of scores of people rushing by to catch their airplanes. Obviously she valued the blessing and felt the need of such a blessing in that particular moment of her life. If she was not embarrassed to ask in public, I should not be embarrassed to bless her in front of a crowd. I was happy to do so.

Also not long ago, I attended an exorcism. At one point, the exorcist—who ministers only after receiving faculties from his diocesan bishop—laid his hands on the head of the possessed person in blessing, and the individual started to writhe in agony. Out of her mouth came the words, “It’s burning!” The priest then sprinkled the person with holy water, and she screamed. He later explained that the screaming came because of the

demons, who suffered a tremendous agony as they came in contact with holy water.

The exorcist further explained that, as a priest, his hands were anointed by the bishop and so themselves are a kind of sacramental. The demons suffered greatly when blessed by a priest's hands. In Luke 4:40–41, we see Jesus healing and exorcizing through the laying on of his hands: "He laid his hands on each of them and cured them. And demons also came out from many." As early as the third century, Origen referred to the imposition of hands by exorcists to cast out evil spirits as well as "many prayers . . . many fasts."<sup>1</sup> There is even an earlier reference to the imposition of hands to cast out an evil spirit in the Qumran *Genesis Apocryphon*, one of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Abram exorcizes an "evil spirit" from the pharaoh by laying his hands on him.<sup>2</sup>

Steven LaChance reviewed the famous exorcism case that inspired the terrifying 1973 movie *The Exorcist*. In his book *Confrontation with Evil*, he described his own experience of being prayed over by a priest when he was personally oppressed by demonic forces:

Catholicism is not my faith, and in fact, at the time I was struggling with my faith in general. So one could imagine how shocked I was by the physical reaction my body was having to Catholic blessings, as the father began to pray. I could not breathe, almost like a severe asthma attack. I was sweating profusely even though it was a cool autumn day. I was on the brink of passing out, breathing quick shallow breaths, and it felt as if I had an elephant sitting on my chest. But through all this chaos, I could still hear the priest praying, fighting for my soul. Just when I thought I could not stand it anymore and I wanted to give up, I saw three bright white flashes, which made an audible sound in my ears. As each flash ascended forth, air found its way back into my lungs, and I felt this overwhelming sense of peace and calm. It was a feeling of euphoria and I wanted it to remain with me forever.<sup>3</sup>

In this passage, the author described the power of what he called "Catholic blessings" as the priest was "fighting for my soul." And then, with the demonic presence apparently gone, he experienced an "overwhelming sense of peace" and a kind of euphoria that sounds almost ecstatic.<sup>4</sup>

We priests spend quite a bit of our time laying hands on people's heads in prayer and blessing. More than a few times every week we move

our hands in the air, making the Sign of the Cross, and give a blessing. We do so at the end of every Mass, saying the words of absolution in the confessional, and in a variety of liturgical and nonliturgical settings. For us, it is part of the daily tasks of a priest.

We may not attach much significance to it. When people request such a blessing from us, perhaps because of an illness or maybe to bless their rosaries or crucifixes, the benign thought may go through our minds, “Why not, it can’t hurt,” or perhaps, “It’s a good, pious thing to do.” We have an idea that it is indeed a good thing, but the significance of the act is little known and, I think, underappreciated.

What if Steven LaChance’s experience of a priestly prayer and “blessing” in the Rite of Exorcism is actually more accurate than what our mundane thinking might ascribe to it? What if the priestly blessing carries a powerful divine grace that makes demons flee and imparts divine peace and calm? If it does, then we ought to rethink the way we minister as priests. If so, then it ought to reenergize our daily actions when we bless and pray over the people and things around us. It ought to help us rediscover the power of the ordained priesthood and the dynamic presence of Christ in his Church.

---

---

Acknowledging the divine grace offered in the priestly blessing is a recognition of the dynamic presence of Christ in his Church and the authority given to its ministers.

---

---

There is little written on this subject of priestly blessings. During my years as a seminarian, I do not recall it ever being mentioned. In fact, during my priestly formation more than thirty-five years ago, instructors seemed concerned with not promoting clericalism and downplayed any special grace attached to the priesthood.

Indeed, clericalism is a horrible scourge on the priesthood and the People of God. If our instructors were quick to eschew any tints of clericalism, it is because they were reacting to obvious forms of clericalism that people experienced in the past. Pope Francis, in particular, rightly continues to

excoriate any hint of it. In a 2016 morning Mass homily addressing the Council of Cardinal Advisers he said, “The spirit of clericalism is an evil that is present in the Church today.”<sup>5</sup>

And yet, people continue to ask priests to bless them. The history of blessings suggests that blessings have arisen from the needs and piety of the People of God, and that they were not typically inventions of the hierarchy. Blessings are concrete ways that people have incorporated the sacred into their daily lives. They are an expression of the people’s belief that God can and does act in their daily lives and through the stuff of this earth. If the Church’s rituals and practice value blessings, it is because the Church takes seriously the people’s desires and their needs.

Blessings also express the fears and anxieties of the people.<sup>6</sup> During the Gulf War, a soldier clad in battle fatigues was on his way to a combat zone. He spied me at the airport and walked over. He was obviously a bit nervous and, in a crowded airport terminal, asked me for a blessing. I laid my hands on his head and blessed him, to the curious looks of bystanders. It was a public act of faith on his part and on mine.

Many of the faithful earnestly desire the blessing of a priest, especially in moments of need. They instinctively know that the priesthood carries a unique grace from God. They may not come to church, but the spark of faith is still alive in them. And in moments of need, they turn to God for help, as they should. When they see someone ordained by the Church to bring God’s grace to them, they instinctively reach out to him.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, the importance of a blessing can be exaggerated. In some Catholic parishes, those who are not Catholic, or Catholics not properly disposed to receive Communion, are invited to come up for a blessing at Communion time.<sup>8</sup> But one Catholic woman, after properly receiving Eucharist at the Mass, said to me that she was a bit envious of those who received the priestly blessing. It was as if those who received a blessing received more. At such moments we might be reminded that sacramentals, of which the priestly blessing is one, are oriented toward the sacraments and not vice versa.

Nevertheless, there are signs that some people, including priests, are losing a sense of the importance of the priest’s blessing. When we priests and laity downplay the power of the priestly blessing, we are ultimately losing a sense of the importance of the Church. The priest is appointed and ordained to bless in the name of the Church. The priestly blessing is a concrete instance of the Church herself blessing. When reverence for the

grace of the priesthood wanes, reverence for the Church follows quickly behind it.

The subject of priestly blessings is complicated and multivalent. As we shall see, the word *blessing* refers to many things. It can refer to a consecration of something for liturgical use, such as a chalice. In this case, we say the chalice has been blessed or consecrated. Blessings are also an integral part of sacramental graces, such as the nuptial blessing in a marriage or the final blessing typically found at the end of rites of sacraments. We can speak about blessings as a separate liturgical event, as envisioned in the revised *Book of Blessings* promulgated for use in the United States in 1989. These blessings include scriptural readings, responsorials, invocations, and prayers of blessing. Blessings can also be more informal, spontaneous pastoral acts, such as when someone walks up and asks for a personal blessing or the blessing of a religious object. Then the priest will typically make the Sign of the Cross and say a spontaneous prayer of blessing.

Exorcists will sometimes tell the possessed person that they are going to give the person a “blessing,” thus using the Church’s Rite of Exorcism, itself a sacramental, to expel evil spirits in accord with its long tradition stemming directly from the ministry of Jesus. The greatest blessing is when the priest “blesses” God over the bread and wine at the Mass, thus transforming them into the Body and Blood of Christ. All these are called “blessings,” and while they arise from different contexts and carry different meanings, they are inseparably linked in the one God who is the source of each and every blessing. It is God’s saving grace in Jesus that redeems all of creation and is active in each of these kinds of graced acts that we call blessings.

It might be important for us who bless, and for those who ask for blessings, to step back and look at this history, theology, and practice of blessings. It might be important for us to understand more fully what it is that we are doing. Such knowledge will help us to appreciate more fully the gift that God has given to us, the authority entrusted to the Church, and the saving power of Jesus Christ.

In order to better understand priestly blessings, we begin by looking to the sacred scriptures and then to Church history and centuries of pastoral practice. We will investigate what the saints and the Doctors of the Church have told us. And, of course, we will rely on the teaching of the Catholic Church to guide us at every step.

As we weave our way through the Old Testament, the New Testament, Church history, and the Church’s official teaching on blessings, we will

begin to discover the rich tradition that we have inherited. It will help us to understand why we bless the way we do, and we will begin to discover the ancient roots of our pastoral practice. As I engaged in research for this text, I found myself becoming excited about giving blessings. I began to realize what a wonderful grace our generous God offers to his people through this Church sacramental. I began to cherish even more the priesthood of Jesus Christ. I hope this book does the same for you.

## 2.

# BLESSINGS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

I will bless the LORD at all times;  
his praise shall be always in my mouth.

—Psalm 34:2

The notion of blessings is not new. It is not something that began in the Middle Ages. In fact, it is older than even the Old Testament. Primitive cultures incorporated ideas of blessings. But what the Old Testament began, and the New Testament continued to develop, was a rejection of any *magical* notions of blessings.<sup>1</sup> In the Judeo-Christian tradition, all blessings come from God. And beginning with the New Testament, they are now mediated through the Son, Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

---

---

God is the source of all blessings; no magical understandings are proper to Judeo-Christianity.

---

---

## BE FERTILE AND MULTIPLY

The very first biblical blessing in general, and the first blessing of animals in particular, occurs in Genesis 1:22. God blessed the first animals he created. “God blessed them, saying: ‘Be fertile, multiply, and fill the water of the seas; and let the birds multiply on the earth.’” Then God blessed the first male and female he created. “God blessed them and God said to them: ‘Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it’” (Gn 1:28). God’s imparting a blessing both to humans and to animals was thought to be important because procreative power was seen as coming only from God. God was recognized as the Author of all life, and thus it was his power that allowed them to bring forth life.<sup>3</sup>

It is also appropriate that the first blessing came from God himself. It reminds us that all blessings come from God, including, of course, the priestly blessing. Such a reminder should be a healthy curb against any manifestations of clericalism: God is the source of all life and all blessings. This will be an important theme running throughout this book.

The Hebrew root for blessing is *bārak* the word for blessing is *berakah*. As the *Sacramentum Verbi* points out, the word has a broader meaning than the English word.<sup>4</sup> Historian Derek Rivard wrote, “The act of blessing, *barakh*, was understood as the imparting of vital power to another person, thus giving another a part of the blessing of one’s soul originally bestowed by God.”<sup>5</sup> That power, ultimately derived from God as the source, can manifest itself in many salutary ways.

A blessing can have a variety of meanings that are translated into English using different words, depending upon the context. For example, *bārak* can be linked to fertility, as it is here in Genesis. God’s blessing brings prosperity in the form of offspring. Hebrews who had no children felt most unfortunate and perhaps even cursed. Elizabeth, Mary’s cousin, spoke of her childlessness as a “disgrace before others” (Lk 1:25), as did Rachel before her (see Gn 30:23). Recognizing the true blessing of having children might be an especially important grace for our day!

The blessing of children is perhaps one of the most fundamental blessings in this life, finding its origin in God and the foundation of creation. Looking at the beaming faces of new parents reminds me of this grace. We priests ought to be especially supportive of new parents and the challenges of parenthood. We also should be most solicitous in those sad cases where



couples are willing but not able to conceive. Continuing life and passing on the faith are humankind's most sacred responsibilities.

## BLESS THE LORD

Interestingly, a blessing in Old Testament times could also be in reference to people “blessing” God. In the same book, Genesis, we read, “Then I knelt and bowed down to the LORD, blessing the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who had led me on the right road” (Gn 24:48). In this context, “blessing” refers to praising God. Some have suggested that the word *bārak* is related to the Hebrew word *berek*, meaning “knee.” Hence to “bless” God implies an act of worship on one’s knees.

---

An important use of the word “bless” refers to blessing God. In the Jewish *berakah*, we praise and “bless” God for his overwhelming generosity to us, and we thank him.

---

For failing to worship the god of King Nebuchadnezzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were thrown into the white-hot furnace. God miraculously saved them; and, in unison, they blessed God with an ecstatic song of praise: “Blessed are you, O Lord, the God of our ancestors, praiseworthy and exalted above all forever” (Dn 3:52). The three young men then went on to exhort all of creation to bless the Lord, perhaps reminding us of St. Francis’s Canticle of the Sun. They sang, “Sun and moon, bless the Lord. . . . Stars of heaven, bless the Lord. . . . Fire and heat, bless the Lord. . . . Cold and chill, bless the Lord” (Dn 3:62, 63, 66, 67). All of creation was invited to join in their exultant song of praise.

Similarly, there are many types of psalms, but one type is called the psalm of blessing. In these psalms, the author sings the praise of God. Again, to praise God and to bless God are synonymous. For example, in Psalm 34: “I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall be always in my mouth” (v. 2). Also in Psalm 104, we are invited in the first verse to “bless the LORD, my soul! LORD my God, you are great indeed!” Psalm 104 goes

on to praise God as Creator of the universe. He is the one who “spread out the heavens like a tent” (v. 2) and “fixed the earth on its foundation” (v. 5). He “made springs flow in wadies” (v. 10), and he “made the moon to mark the seasons” (v. 19). In his creation, we see the glory of God manifest, and we pray, “May the glory of the LORD endure forever” (v. 31).

In Psalm 103 we read, “Bless the LORD, my soul; all my being, bless his holy name! Bless the LORD, my soul; and do not forget all his gifts” (vv. 1–2). The psalmist (and we too!) goes on to enumerate the reasons for our praise of God. God is praised because of his many blessings or gifts that he gives to us; he is praised for his goodness. He is praised because he is “merciful” (v. 8) and “has compassion on his children” (v. 13). Also, he “pardons” and “heals” (v. 3). Most importantly, he “redeems your life from the pit” (v. 4)—that is, he saves or delivers you from danger and destruction. This is a foreshadowing of the ultimate salvation in which God’s deliverance or salvation of the human race will be definitive and eternal. This is a wonderful litany of the reasons why we praise (bless) the Lord.

Most importantly, however, we praise God for just being who he is. God is infinite love, beauty, and truth. When we gaze upon the Lord, we are completely overwhelmed with such goodness, and praise spontaneously leaps up from our hearts. Our mouths burst forth God’s praise: “Bless the Lord!” We need no other reason to praise God than this.

## BLESS THE GRAIN AND THE WINE AND THE OIL

As noted previously, Genesis speaks of God’s primordial blessing of human beings and animals. In the Old Testament, blessings apply not only to animals and people but also to God’s creation. In Deuteronomy we read: “He [God] will love and bless and multiply you; he will bless the fruit of your womb and the produce of your soil, your grain and wine and oil, the young of your herds and the offspring of your flocks” (7:13). And again, in Exodus: “You shall serve the LORD, your God; then he will bless your food and drink” (23:25).

---

---

God blessed all of creation. God called it to be fruitful and multiply.

---

---

The blessings of the fruits of the field were linked to the righteousness of the people to whom they belonged. God's creation itself properly receives God's blessings, but most especially when linked to the human person, who is called to have dominion over the earth (see Gn 1:28). "His blessing rests upon all of creation but preeminently upon human beings."<sup>6</sup> These notions will be especially important in understanding the post-Vatican II revised *Book of Blessings*. Later in this book, when we look at these newer blessings, we will see that creation is thought to be blessed through its service to God's people and through its proper use.

Unlike animals and creation, the human person can choose. Thus, God's blessings for people are linked to choosing him—that is, "loving the LORD, your God, obeying his voice, and holding fast to him" (Dt 30:20). The choice is stark: "I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse" (Dt 30:19).<sup>7</sup> The reward for choosing God—that is, choosing life—will be a "long life for you to live on the land which the LORD swore to your ancestors" (Dt 30:20).

God's blessing for his people who love and follow him was thought to be a long life on this earth in the promised land. This is the land that is filled with God's material blessings, "flowing with milk and honey" (see, for example, Ex 3:8, 3:17; Lv 20:24; Nm 13:27, 14:8; Dt 11:9, 26:9, 31:20). Thus, God blessed the righteous and blessed their lives with longevity and abundance.

---

---

God especially blessed men and women and gave them dominion over the earth. God's blessings would descend on those who heard his voice and held fast to him.

---

---