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Teaching the Faith

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To Embrace the One in Need

By J. Brian Benestad, Ph.D.

*Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time,
September 29, 2013*

*Readings: Amos 6.1a, 4-7;
1 Timothy 6.11-16; Luke 16.19-31*

Today's readings focus our attention on the needs of the poor, and in so doing they offer a frank challenge: The well-off are exhorted to use their wealth properly, lest they risk seriously offending God.

In the first reading God calls Amos, a shepherd, to prophesy in Israel during the prosperous reign of Jeroboam (786-746 B.C.). This passage from Amos focuses on the complacency of the rich ruling classes in the face of the extreme material deprivation of the lower classes in the community. The self-satisfied, unworried rich lie on their beds of ivory, eat excessive amounts of food, drink wine – not from cups but from bowls – and give themselves over to revelry and immoderate enjoyment of their luxuries.

The Main Problem

The main problem here is not wealth in itself, but the lifestyle of excessive partying that makes the rich indifferent to the needs and suffering of their neighbors. Luxury becomes a problem precisely when “it deadens the mind and the senses to responsibility” for the well-being of one's needy countrymen and women.

This reminds us of the wise author of Proverbs, who wrote that the best protection against being misled by one's possessions is to have neither too much nor too little: “Give me neither poverty nor riches; Lest being full, I deny you, saying, ‘Who is the Lord?’ Or being in want, I steal, and profane the name of my God” (Proverbs 30.8-9).

Today's second reading approaches the same theme from a different angle. Perhaps it is helpful to give some context. The two verses preceding today's passage read: “Those who want to be rich are falling into temptation and into a trap and into many foolish and hurtful desires, which plunge them into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all evils, and some people in their desire for it have strayed from the faith and have pierced themselves with many pains.” Saint Paul urges Timothy to avoid envy, rivalry, and insults.

All of this helps to illuminate today's text, which begins: “But you, man of God, avoid all this. Instead pursue righteousness, devotion, faith, love, patience, and gentleness. Compete well for the faith. Lay hold of eternal life, to which you were called.” A more familiar translation: “Fight the good fight of the faith!”

It can be a struggle to avoid the deadly sin of greed, the love of money. But we as followers of Jesus Christ must train ourselves, with all the rigor of an athlete competing for a prize, to avoid these things. Indeed, it is not without good reason that among the Ten Commandments which God gave to Moses, two directly pertain to money, the seventh and the tenth.

The Rich Man and Lazarus

Today's gospel parable about the rich man and Lazarus clearly echoes the same themes from Amos and Timothy. The story in Luke describes a wealthy man who failed to take notice of the poor man, Lazarus, lying at the rich man's door and hoping for crumbs from his overflowing table. Lazarus was not only poor but also ill and alone, without anyone to provide relief for his suffering. When the two men die, however, the rich man suffers punishment in Hades, while Lazarus receives consolation in the bosom of Abraham.

The rich man then asks Abraham to send Lazarus to give him some relief. Abraham responds in a kindly manner, but explains that no one is able to give the rich man relief. The rich man then asks Abraham to send Lazarus to his father's house, to caution his five brothers to change their selfish ways of life and to repent, so they won't end up in Hades as he did. In reply, Abraham notes that the brothers have Moses and the prophets as their teachers. Still, the rich man insists, they need someone to come back from the dead in order to warn them. But Abraham concludes, "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if one should rise from the dead."

This parable teaches us that the rich man is at fault and duly punished – not because he is rich, but because he fails to share his bounty with Lazarus and others in need. The story also implies that the rich man was empty-hearted and shallow, feasting and carousing in an attempt to escape from the meaninglessness of his life. Benedict XVI reflects on the basic message of this parable, which "summons us to the love and responsibility that we owe to our brothers and sisters – both on the large scale of world society and on the small scale of our everyday life" (*Jesus of Nazareth*, 215). The parable is a stark call to repentance for those of us who are lovers of money, a call to share what we have, while we still can, before it is too late. As Saint John Chrysostom counsels in his treatise *On Wealth and Poverty*, we are really no better than thieves if we have resources but fail to share them with others in need.

Today's gospel parable also presents Lazarus as a model of patient endurance – a model for all of us, but especially for the poor. Saint John Chrysostom comments: "Christ set [Lazarus] before us, so that whatever troubles we encounter, seeing in this man a greater measure of tribulation, we may gain enough comfort and consolation from his wisdom and patience."

Letting the Poor into Our Hearts

The Preacher to the Papal Household, Rev. Raniero Cantalamessa, O.F.M. Cap., has urged all Christians to keep the poor before our eyes, to let them "get under our skin." We must "let them into our hearts, so that they stop being someone else's problem rather than ours and become a kind of family problem." In order to acquire this proper attitude toward the poor, we need to develop habits of self-denial, and we need constantly to keep in mind the fact that to welcome the poor is to welcome Christ. For many among us who are parents, Father Cantalamessa notes, this is a familiar lesson: "For parents, children are a constant reason to do without things, to give up something, to make savings – in a word, to be poor."

We should also reflect honestly on the fact that each of us is poor in different ways. For when we recognize our various forms of poverty – be they spiritual or material – we are more likely to perceive the poor with our hearts, to see Christ in others. By contrast, when we live self-centered lives focused on our comforts and luxuries, we tend naturally to neglect God and neighbor.

Thinking and Praying

If we pray for guidance, God will let us know what we need to give up and how we can serve the poor in our particular circumstances. Father Cantalamessa tells the story of rich businessman who went to a cloistered nun and asked her how he might serve the poor. She eventually replied, "Well, go and open another factory and give jobs to some more workers!" And that is what the businessman did, thus serving both the Lord and his neighbor in a way uniquely possible for him. Similarly, each of us has our own means, our own circumstances, our own opportunities to do God's will in our lives.

In addition to our prayer, of course we need to use our God-given minds, our intelligence, both to think through the best general solutions to poverty, as well as to figure out specifically what we each can do, in our daily lives, to help this or that poor person we may encounter.

For example, education may be the most important and effective means for raising vast numbers out of poverty, and so I can reflect on how I might give special attention to both public and private schools in disadvantaged neighborhoods in my local area. Furthermore, because divorce often plunges children and families into poverty, it behooves me to discern what I can do to help people marry well and stay together once they are married. To be sure, this work is especially the responsibility of churches; but properly framed laws and policies can also help, and as citizens each of us can contribute to the process of bringing such laws and policies into existence.

During the recent World Youth Day gathering, Pope Francis spoke movingly of our duty to address the needs of the poor. At Saint Francis of Assisi of the Providence of God Hospital in Rio de Janeiro the pope said, "To embrace, to embrace – we all have to learn to embrace the one in need, as Saint Francis did." This privileged way of embracing the suffering body of Christ brings light to the one offering help, as the leper embraced by Saint Francis was a "mediator of light" for the saint.

In another address, among the poor community of Varginha, Brazil, Pope Francis urged his audience to aim for solidarity in their lives, for that is the path to genuine wealth and greatness: "[O]nly when we are able to share do we truly become rich; everything that is shared is multiplied. . . . The measure of the greatness of a society is found in the way it treats those most in need, those who have nothing apart from their poverty."

A final thought. In our concern to benefit of the poor, we should always be mindful to make it easy for people to receive what we have to give them. A scene in a famous Italian novel, *The Betrothed*, comes to mind. In this scene, a father prepares a plate of food for some neighbors. He packs it up with a bottle of wine, gives the bundle to his daughter, and tells the girl: "Run round to the house of Maria, the widow, and give her these things. Tell her that it's for her to have a bit of a party with her children. But do it nicely, mind; don't make it look like charity; and don't say anything if you meet somebody on the way."

May God grant us the graces to do likewise.

About the Author

J. Brian Benestad is the D'Amour Professor of Catholic Thought in the Department of Theology at Assumption College, Worcester, Massachusetts. He is the author of Church, State, and Society: An Introduction to Catholic Social Doctrine (Catholic University of America Press, 2011).

FOR FURTHER READING

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IN SHORT...

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- *In our own circumstances, each of us has unique opportunities to do God's will.*
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