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Commentary on the Gospel: Rich Towards God

Gospel for the 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Cycle C), and commentary.

Gospel (*Lk* 12:13-21)

One of the multitude said to him, “Teacher, bid my brother divide the inheritance with me.”

But he said to him, “Man, who made me a judge or divider over you?”

And he said to them, “Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for a

man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”

And he told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man brought forth plentifully; and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns, and build larger ones; and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich towards God.”

Commentary

The Gospel relates how once when Jesus was preaching, someone from the crowd asked him to insist on his brother's sharing their inheritance with him. But instead of granting the petition, as Jesus had often done in the past, he speaks to those present about the danger of avarice and the eagerness for a security based on riches.

To all appearances, it seemed just for that person to seek part of their inheritance from his brother. But we don't know the particulars of the family conflict mentioned here. Moreover, from Jesus' cautious reply and since he knows what is in each person's heart (cf. *Jn* 2:25), we can deduce that the petition made here is not an upright one. First, because he is asked to be the judge in a material affair that already has its own judges foreseen by the law. Saint Ambrose comments that Jesus shows with his negative reply that he does not wish

to be “the arbiter of the material possessions of men but of their merits.”[1]

Jesus knows that this petition stems from avarice, which he exhorts his listeners to be on guard against, since neither the desire for material goods nor their possession guarantees a fulfilled human life. As Pope Francis said, “avarice is the first step: it opens the door to vanity, to seeing oneself as important and powerful, and then to pride. And from there come all the vices, all of them. But the first step is avarice, the desire to accumulate riches. This is precisely where our daily struggle should be: learning how to administer the riches of the earth properly so that they lead to heaven and are converted into riches of heaven.” This is the aim of the Christian virtue of poverty: “True poverty does not consist in not having, but in being

detached: in voluntarily renouncing one's dominion over things.”[2]

With a superficial reading, we might conclude that the protagonist in Jesus' parable is not acting badly: if the harvest has been plentiful, why not store it up carefully and enjoy it? Many Fathers of the Church have answered this question as Saint Augustine did: “What is superfluous for the rich is necessary for the poor. One possesses what belongs to another when one possesses what is superfluous.”[3] The eagerness for human security spurs us to accumulate and store up goods “just in case,” when in reality we often don't use them. They are goods that could be used by others, that is, by those suffering real needs and not only possible or imaginary ones. The rich in their granaries store up the goods the poor cannot make use of. In contrast, when those who are blessed with riches see in them a way

to serve others, they learn to live poverty and detachment.

Moreover, Jesus calls that person a “fool” in the parable because his anxious efforts to store up material goods happen on the very day he has to leave this world. It is only natural to want a certain degree of well-being and prosperity for one’s own family, but we need to shun the foolishness of grounding our hope and happiness on material goods. As Benedict XVI said, “Today, the 18th Sunday of Ordinary Time, the Word of God spurs us to reflect on what our relationship with material things should be. Wealth, even being a good in itself, ought not to be considered an absolute good. Above all, it does not guarantee salvation; even more, it could put it in serious danger. In the pages of today’s Gospel, Jesus puts his disciples on guard precisely against this risk. It is wise and virtuous not let our heart get

attached to the goods of this world, because everything is temporary, everything can end abruptly. For Christians, the true treasure we should seek unceasingly is to be found in ‘the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.’”[4]

[1] Saint Ambrose, *Catena aurea*, in loc.

[2] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 632.

[3] Saint Augustine, *Commentary on psalm 147*.

[4] Benedict XVI, *Angelus*, 5 August 2007.

Pablo M. Edo

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