

Study Guide for October 4, 2015

Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Theme

Reflections/Questions for discussion

1 - The danger for us, living in a capitalist society, is to misunderstand the role of private property. Pope Francis, drawing from the Catechism of the Catholic Church #2402-2406 (see below for passages), reminds us that "the universal destination of goods ... comes before private property" (JG 189). Private property is a necessary *means* to the *end* of promoting the "common good". Note that the Catechism passage comes from the chapter on the Seventh Commandment, "Thou Shalt not Steal". Caring for the poor is not just an option; it is one aspect of the commandments.

Q: In the Old Testament, God required his people to tithe 10% on their income. This money was used for the upkeep of the temple and to care for the poor. In the Gospels, Jesus commends Zacchaeus for tithing half of his income--and commends the poor widow for giving 100% of her income! What percentage of your income are you giving to the church and to the poor? Take a moment in prayer to ask God if he is excited by the amount you are giving. If you feel God's excitement, then it should be a boost to your spirits. If you doubt that God is excited, you could spend some time in prayer asking God the percentage of your income that he would be excited to receive.

2 - Hebrews tells us today that Jesus "tasted death for everyone". Jesus' present reaction to having died for us is not resentment, but rather a loving embrace of us as his "brothers and sisters". If salvation comes by way of disciples growing into the image of our master (see Lk 6:40), then we are called to be like Jesus in sacrificing for others, and in looking at them as brothers and sisters. Pope Francis calls us to a "loving

attentiveness" of the poor, that will reveal them as beautiful above and beyond mere appearances" (JG 199).

Q: Take some time in prayer, bringing to mind some images of poor people. As you picture them, take note of your spontaneous feelings. Did your feelings include some like, "Oh, look, my brother, my sister" or "That person is so beautiful!" Close your eyes and ask God to deepen your felt bond with the poor and your appreciation of their beauty.

3 - Pope Francis insists that we share our goods with the poor, but insists further that we work "to eliminate structural causes of poverty and to promote the integral development of the poor" (JG 130). This would include helping others to obtain "education, healthcare, and above all employment" (JG 192). The pope notes that "defenders of orthodoxy are sometimes accused of passivity, indulgence, or culpable complicity regarding ... injustice" (JG 194).

Q: Poverty causing structures do not readily change, because those of us who live a comfortable lifestyle would have to sacrifice something some of what we have in order for others to have more. How might we as Christians be more proactive in promoting solutions to poverty, so as to avoid being charged with "passivity" and "complicity"?

4 - The pope wants us to go beyond "programs" to reach a "real and sincere closeness" to the poor, so that "in every Christian community the poor feel at home" (JG 199). This call is for all: "No one must say that they cannot be close to the poor" due to "their own lifestyle demands." This is an excuse commonly heard" (JG 201).

Q: Take a moment to consider where in the Salem area poor people are to be found. How might I personally encounter those who are poor so that I can say that I feel a "real and sincere closeness" to them? If no avenue for this exists right now, is there anything you could initiate? Is there a way we as a parish can make the poor feel invited and welcome?

Readings from *The Joy of the Gospel*

The inclusion of the poor in society

186. Our faith in Christ, who became poor, and was always close to the poor and the outcast, is the basis of our concern for the integral development of society's most neglected members.

In union with God, we hear a plea

187. Each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society. This demands that we be docile and attentive to the cry of the poor and to come to their aid. A mere glance at the Scriptures is enough to make us see how our gracious Father wants to hear the cry of the poor: "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them... so I will send you..." (Ex 3:7-8, 10). We also see how he is concerned for their needs: "When the Israelites cried out to the Lord, the Lord raised up for them a deliverer" (Jg 3:15). If we, who are God's means of hearing the poor, turn deaf ears to this plea, we oppose the Father's will and his plan; that poor person "might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt" (Dt 15:9). A lack of solidarity towards his or her needs will directly affect our relationship with God: "For if in bitterness of soul he calls down a curse upon you, his Creator will hear his prayer" (Sir 4:6). The old question always returns: "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods, and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?" (1 Jn 3:17). Let us recall also how bluntly the apostle James speaks of the cry of the oppressed: "The wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts" (5:4).

188. The Church has realized that the need to heed this plea is itself born of the liberating action of grace within each of us, and thus it is not a question of a mission reserved only to a few: "The Church, guided by the Gospel of mercy and by love for mankind, hears the cry for justice and intends to respond to it with all her might".^[153] In this context we can understand Jesus' command to his disciples: "You yourselves give them something to eat!" (Mk 6:37): it means working to eliminate the structural causes of

poverty and to promote the integral development of the poor, as well as small daily acts of solidarity in meeting the real needs which we encounter. The word "solidarity" is a little worn and at times poorly understood, but it refers to something more than a few sporadic acts of generosity. It presumes the creation of a new mindset which thinks in terms of community and the priority of the life of all over the appropriation of goods by a few.

189. Solidarity is a spontaneous reaction by those who recognize that the social function of property and the universal destination of goods are realities which come before private property. The private ownership of goods is justified by the need to protect and increase them, so that they can better serve the common good; for this reason, solidarity must be lived as the decision to restore to the poor what belongs to them. These convictions and habits of solidarity, when they are put into practice, open the way to other structural transformations and make them possible. Changing structures without generating new convictions and attitudes will only ensure that those same structures will become, sooner or later, corrupt, oppressive and ineffectual.

190. Sometimes it is a matter of hearing the cry of entire peoples, the poorest peoples of the earth, since "peace is founded not only on respect for human rights, but also on respect for the rights of peoples".^[154] Sadly, even human rights can be used as a justification for an inordinate defense of individual rights or the rights of the richer peoples. With due respect for the autonomy and culture of every nation, we must never forget that the planet belongs to all mankind and is meant for all mankind; the mere fact that some people are born in places with fewer resources or less development does not justify the fact that they are living with less dignity. It must be reiterated that "the more fortunate should renounce some of their rights so as to place their goods more generously at the service of others".^[155] To speak properly of our own rights, we need to broaden our perspective and to hear the plea of other peoples and other regions than those of our own country. We need to grow in a solidarity which "would allow all peoples to become the artisans of their destiny",^[156] since "every person is called to self-fulfilment".^[157]

191. In all places and circumstances, Christians, with the help of their pastors, are called to hear the cry of the poor. This has been eloquently stated by the bishops of Brazil: "We wish to take up daily the joys and hopes, the difficulties and sorrows of the Brazilian people, especially of those living in the barrios and the countryside – landless, homeless, lacking food and health care – to the detriment of their rights. Seeing their poverty, hearing their cries and knowing their sufferings, we are scandalized because we know that there is enough food for everyone and that hunger is the

result of a poor distribution of goods and income. The problem is made worse by the generalized practice of wastefulness".[158]

192. Yet we desire even more than this; our dream soars higher. We are not simply talking about ensuring nourishment or a "dignified sustenance" for all people, but also their "general temporal welfare and prosperity".[159] This means education, access to health care, and above all employment, for it is through free, creative, participatory and mutually supportive labour that human beings express and enhance the dignity of their lives. A just wage enables them to have adequate access to all the other goods which are destined for our common use.

Fidelity to the Gospel, lest we run in vain

193. We incarnate the duty of hearing the cry of the poor when we are deeply moved by the suffering of others. Let us listen to what God's word teaches us about mercy, and allow that word to resound in the life of the Church. The Gospel tells us: "Blessed are the merciful, because they shall obtain mercy" (Mt 5:7). The apostle James teaches that our mercy to others will vindicate us on the day of God's judgment: "So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy, yet mercy triumphs over judgment" (Jas 2:12-13). Here James is faithful to the finest tradition of post-exilic Jewish spirituality, which attributed a particular salutary value to mercy: "Break off your sins by practising righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your tranquillity" (Dan 4:27). The wisdom literature sees almsgiving as a concrete exercise of mercy towards those in need: "Almsgiving delivers from death, and it will purge away every sin" (Tob 12:9). The idea is expressed even more graphically by Sirach: "Water extinguishes blazing fire: so almsgiving atones for sin" (Sir 3:30). The same synthesis appears in the New Testament: "Maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Pet 4:8). This truth greatly influenced the thinking of the Fathers of the Church and helped create a prophetic, counter-cultural resistance to the self-centred hedonism of paganism. We can recall a single example: "If we were in peril from fire, we would certainly run to water in order to extinguish the fire... in the same way, if a spark of sin flares up from our straw, and we are troubled on that account, whenever we have an opportunity to perform a work of mercy, we should rejoice, as if a fountain opened before so that the fire might be extinguished".[160]

194. This message is so clear and direct, so simple and eloquent, that no ecclesial interpretation has the right to relativize it. The Church's reflection on these texts ought not to obscure or weaken their force, but urge us to

accept their exhortations with courage and zeal. Why complicate something so simple? Conceptual tools exist to heighten contact with the realities they seek to explain, not to distance us from them. This is especially the case with those biblical exhortations which summon us so forcefully to brotherly love, to humble and generous service, to justice and mercy towards the poor. Jesus taught us this way of looking at others by his words and his actions. So why cloud something so clear? We should not be concerned simply about falling into doctrinal error, but about remaining faithful to this light-filled path of life and wisdom. For "defenders of orthodoxy are sometimes accused of passivity, indulgence, or culpable complicity regarding the intolerable situations of injustice and the political regimes which prolong them".[161]

195. When Saint Paul approached the apostles in Jerusalem to discern whether he was "running or had run in vain" (Gal 2:2), the key criterion of authenticity which they presented was that he should not forget the poor (cf. Gal 2:10). This important principle, namely that the Pauline communities should not succumb to the self-centred lifestyle of the pagans, remains timely today, when a new self-centred paganism is growing. We may not always be able to reflect adequately the beauty of the Gospel, but there is one sign which we should never lack: the option for those who are least, those whom society discards.

196. Sometimes we prove hard of heart and mind; we are forgetful, distracted and carried away by the limitless possibilities for consumption and distraction offered by contemporary society. This leads to a kind of alienation at every level, for "a society becomes alienated when its forms of social organization, production and consumption make it more difficult to offer the gift of self and to establish solidarity between people".[162]

The special place of the poor in God's people

197. God's heart has a special place for the poor, so much so that he himself "became poor" (2 Cor 8:9). The entire history of our redemption is marked by the presence of the poor. Salvation came to us from the "yes" uttered by a lowly maiden from a small town on the fringes of a great empire. The Saviour was born in a manger, in the midst of animals, like children of poor families; he was presented at the Temple along with two turtledoves, the offering made by those who could not afford a lamb (cf. Lk 2:24; Lev 5:7); he was raised in a home of ordinary workers and worked with his own hands to earn his bread. When he began to preach the Kingdom, crowds of the dispossessed followed him, illustrating his words: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor" (Lk 4:18). He assured those burdened by sorrow and crushed by poverty that God has a special place for them in his heart: "Blessed are you poor, yours

is the kingdom of God" (Lk 6:20); he made himself one of them: "I was hungry and you gave me food to eat", and he taught them that mercy towards all of these is the key to heaven (cf. Mt 25:5ff.).

198. For the Church, the option for the poor is primarily a theological category rather than a cultural, sociological, political or philosophical one. God shows the poor "his first mercy".^[163] This divine preference has consequences for the faith life of all Christians, since we are called to have "this mind... which was in Jesus Christ" (Phil 2:5). Inspired by this, the Church has made an option for the poor which is understood as a "special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity, to which the whole tradition of the Church bears witness".^[164] This option – as Benedict XVI has taught – "is implicit in our Christian faith in a God who became poor for us, so as to enrich us with his poverty".^[165] This is why I want a Church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us. Not only do they share in the *sensus fidei*, but in their difficulties they know the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them. The new evangelization is an invitation to acknowledge the saving power at work in their lives and to put them at the centre of the Church's pilgrim way. We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them.

199. Our commitment does not consist exclusively in activities or programmes of promotion and assistance; what the Holy Spirit mobilizes is not an unruly activism, but above all an attentiveness which considers the other "in a certain sense as one with ourselves".^[166] This loving attentiveness is the beginning of a true concern for their person which inspires me effectively to seek their good. This entails appreciating the poor in their goodness, in their experience of life, in their culture, and in their ways of living the faith. True love is always contemplative, and permits us to serve the other not out of necessity or vanity, but rather because he or she is beautiful above and beyond mere appearances: "The love by which we find the other pleasing leads us to offer him something freely".^[167] The poor person, when loved, "is esteemed as of great value",^[168] and this is what makes the authentic option for the poor differ from any other ideology, from any attempt to exploit the poor for one's own personal or political interest. Only on the basis of this real and sincere closeness can we properly accompany the poor on their path of liberation. Only this will ensure that "in every Christian community the poor feel at home. Would not this approach be the greatest and most effective presentation of the good news of the kingdom?"^[169] Without the preferential option for the poor, "the proclamation of the Gospel, which is itself the prime form of charity, risks

being misunderstood or submerged by the ocean of words which daily engulfs us in today's society of mass communications".^[170]

200. Since this Exhortation is addressed to members of the Catholic Church, I want to say, with regret, that the worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care. The great majority of the poor have a special openness to the faith; they need God and we must not fail to offer them his friendship, his blessing, his word, the celebration of the sacraments and a journey of growth and maturity in the faith. Our preferential option for the poor must mainly translate into a privileged and preferential religious care.

201. No one must say that they cannot be close to the poor because their own lifestyle demands more attention to other areas. This is an excuse commonly heard in academic, business or professional, and even ecclesial circles. While it is quite true that the essential vocation and mission of the lay faithful is to strive that earthly realities and all human activity may be transformed by the Gospel,^[171] none of us can think we are exempt from concern for the poor and for social justice: "Spiritual conversion, the intensity of the love of God and neighbour, zeal for justice and peace, the Gospel meaning of the poor and of poverty, are required of everyone".^[172] I fear that these words too may give rise to commentary or discussion with no real practical effect. That being said, I trust in the openness and readiness of all Christians, and I ask you to seek, as a community, creative ways of accepting this renewed call.

The economy and the distribution of income

202. The need to resolve the structural causes of poverty cannot be delayed, not only for the pragmatic reason of its urgency for the good order of society, but because society needs to be cured of a sickness which is weakening and frustrating it, and which can only lead to new crises. Welfare projects, which meet certain urgent needs, should be considered merely temporary responses. As long as the problems of the poor are not radically resolved by rejecting the absolute autonomy of markets and financial speculation and by attacking the structural causes of inequality,^[173] no solution will be found for the world's problems or, for that matter, to any problems. Inequality is the root of social ills.

203. The dignity of each human person and the pursuit of the common good are concerns which ought to shape all economic policies. At times, however, they seem to be a mere addendum imported from without in order to fill out a political discourse lacking in perspectives or plans for true and integral development. How many words prove irksome to this system! It is irksome when the question of ethics is raised, when global solidarity is invoked, when

the distribution of goods is mentioned, when reference is made to protecting labour and defending the dignity of the powerless, when allusion is made to a God who demands a commitment to justice. At other times these issues are exploited by a rhetoric which cheapens them. Casual indifference in the face of such questions empties our lives and our words of all meaning. Business is a vocation, and a noble vocation, provided that those engaged in it see themselves challenged by a greater meaning in life; this will enable them truly to serve the common good by striving to increase the goods of this world and to make them more accessible to all.

204. We can no longer trust in the unseen forces and the invisible hand of the market. Growth in justice requires more than economic growth, while presupposing such growth: it requires decisions, programmes, mechanisms and processes specifically geared to a better distribution of income, the creation of sources of employment and an integral promotion of the poor which goes beyond a simple welfare mentality. I am far from proposing an irresponsible populism, but the economy can no longer turn to remedies that are a new poison, such as attempting to increase profits by reducing the work force and thereby adding to the ranks of the excluded.

Commentary from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on the seventh commandment: "Thou shalt not steal."

The Universal Destination and the Private Ownership of Goods

2402 In the beginning God entrusted the earth and its resources to the common stewardship of mankind to take care of them, master them by labor, and enjoy their fruits.¹⁸⁶ The goods of creation are destined for the whole human race. However, the earth is divided up among men to assure the security of their lives, endangered by poverty and threatened by violence. the appropriation of property is legitimate for guaranteeing the freedom and dignity of persons and for helping each of them to meet his basic needs and the needs of those in his charge. It should allow for a natural solidarity to develop between men.

2403 The right to private property, acquired by work or received from others by inheritance or gift, does not do away with the original gift of the earth to the whole of mankind. the universal destination of goods remains primordial, even if the promotion of the common good requires respect for the right to private property and its exercise.

2404 "In his use of things man should regard the external goods he legitimately owns not merely as exclusive to himself but common to others also, in the sense that they can benefit others as well as himself."¹⁸⁷ The

ownership of any property makes its holder a steward of Providence, with the task of making it fruitful and communicating its benefits to others, first of all his family.

2405 Goods of production - material or immaterial - such as land, factories, practical or artistic skills, oblige their possessors to employ them in ways that will benefit the greatest number. Those who hold goods for use and consumption should use them with moderation, reserving the better part for guests, for the sick and the poor.

2406 Political authority has the right and duty to regulate the legitimate exercise of the right to ownership for the sake of the common good.¹⁸⁸

Scripture Readings from Today's Mass

Reading 1

GN 2:18-24

The LORD God said: "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a suitable partner for him."

So the LORD God formed out of the ground various wild animals and various birds of the air, and he brought them to the man to see what he would call them; whatever the man called each of them would be its name.

The man gave names to all the cattle, all the birds of the air, and all wild animals; but none proved to be the suitable partner for the man.

So the LORD God cast a deep sleep on the man, and while he was asleep, he took out one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. The LORD God then built up into a woman the rib that he had taken from the man.

When he brought her to the man, the man said: "This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called 'woman,' for out of 'her man' this one has been taken."

That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one flesh.

Responsorial Psalm

PS 128:1-2, 3, 4-5, 6

R. (cf. 5) **May the Lord bless us all the days of our lives.**

Blessed are you who fear the LORD,
who walk in his ways!
For you shall eat the fruit of your handiwork;
blessed shall you be, and favored.
R. May the Lord bless us all the days of our lives.
Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine
in the recesses of your home;
your children like olive plants
around your table.
R. May the Lord bless us all the days of our lives.
Behold, thus is the man blessed
who fears the LORD.
The LORD bless you from Zion:
may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem
all the days of your life.
R. May the Lord bless us all the days of our lives.
May you see your children's children.
Peace be upon Israel!
R. May the Lord bless us all the days of our lives.

Reading 2

HEB 2:9-11

Brothers and sisters:
He "for a little while" was made "lower than the angels, "
that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

For it was fitting that he,
for whom and through whom all things exist,
in bringing many children to glory,
should make the leader to their salvation perfect through suffering.
He who consecrates and those who are being consecrated
all have one origin.
Therefore, he is not ashamed to call them "brothers."

Alleluia

1 JN 4:12

R. Alleluia, alleluia.
If we love one another, God remains in us
and his love is brought to perfection in us.
R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel

MK 10:2-16

The Pharisees approached Jesus and asked,

"Is it lawful for a husband to divorce his wife?"

They were testing him.

He said to them in reply, "What did Moses command you?"

They replied,

"Moses permitted a husband to write a bill of divorce and dismiss her."

But Jesus told them,

"Because of the hardness of your hearts

he wrote you this commandment.

But from the beginning of creation, *God made them male and female.*

For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife,

and the two shall become one flesh.

So they are no longer two but one flesh.

Therefore what God has joined together,

no human being must separate."

In the house the disciples again questioned Jesus about this.

He said to them,

"Whoever divorces his wife and marries another

commits adultery against her;

and if she divorces her husband and marries another,

she commits adultery."

And people were bringing children to him that he might touch them, but the disciples rebuked them.

When Jesus saw this he became indignant and said to them,

"Let the children come to me;

do not prevent them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

Amen, I say to you,

whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it."

Then he embraced them and blessed them,

placing his hands on them.