

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Place an open bible at the center of your group. Empty your pockets or purse of loose coins and heap them up. Pray together.

LEADER: Generous God, we come to learn from your word how to use our wealth wisely.
ALL: Help us see in our daily lives ways to be generous and charitable.

LEADER: Let us pray with Mary. God’s mercy is from age to age.
ALL: Upon all who revere God.

LEADER: The arrogant of mind and heart, God has thrown down.
ALL: The lowly God has lifted up.

LEADER: The hungry God has filled with good things.
ALL: The rich God has sent empty away.

Many people have ready plans for what they will do if they win the lottery. Help my children buy decent homes or find safe apartments. Pay off the mortgage. Put in central heating and cooling. Support a school in the developing world. Pay off college loans. Take a cruise. Quit work. Set up scholarships for kids who need a chance. Buy a car that runs. Start my own business, so I never again lose a job.

An economics professor invited me to talk about the principles of Catholic social teaching in her class. The first two principles are foundational—the human person is sacred, made in God’s image, and social, unable to thrive without others in family and community. People widely support the teaching that every person has basic rights to food, water, shelter, health

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care, education—the necessities of life—and corresponding duties to provide these for all.

However, for us who live in a capitalist economy that emphasizes the individual, the principles of solidarity and option for the poor are countercultural. We may not see ourselves as our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers. To opt for the poor among us, to lift up the lowest and least, and refuse to leave people out may seem too communitarian.

In the economics class an adult student raised her hand and observed, “It’s no sin to be as rich as you can be.” I disagreed. In *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis calls us to change our lifestyles because we are consuming Earth’s resources at levels that cannot be universalized (#50).

“The natural environment is a collective good, the patrimony of all humanity and the responsibility of everyone,” Pope Francis writes. He quotes the bishops of New Zealand, who ask “what the commandment ‘Thou shall not kill’ means when ‘twenty percent of the world’s population consumes resources at a rate that robs the poor nations and future generations of what they need to survive?’” (#95).

Luke raises similar questions about wealth in Sunday’s gospel. How much is enough? What is wealth for?

● Which of the principles of Catholic social teaching would you support with your lottery winnings?

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

The Church’s social teaching shows us how to build a just society and live lives of holiness in the 21st century.

Each person is SACRED,
made in God’s image, equal in dignity.

Each person is SOCIAL,
called to participate in family and community.

All people have RIGHTS and RESPONSIBILITIES.
The right to life and its necessities, the responsibility to respect the rights of others and work for the common good.

We care for people who are POOR and vulnerable,
before all else.

Workers have rights. WORK has dignity.
We are partners with God in creation.

SOLIDARITY is our call.
We are our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers.

We care for CREATION.
We live in interdependence with all God has made.

GOSPEL

What should we Christians do with our wealth?

NARRATOR: Someone in the crowd spoke to Jesus.

PERSON: Jesus, tell my brother to give me my share of our inheritance.

JESUS: Friend, who has set me to be a judge or arbiter over you?

NARRATOR: Then Jesus spoke to the crowd.

JESUS: Take care. Avoid greed in all its forms. For one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.

NARRATOR: Jesus told the crowd this parable.

JESUS: The land of a rich person produced abundantly. He thought to himself.

RICH FOOL: What shall I do? I have no place to store my harvest. I know. I will pull down my grain bins and build larger ones. All my grain and my goods will go there. Then I will say to myself: You have blessings in reserve for years to come. Relax! Eat heartily, drink well. Enjoy yourself.

GOD: You fool! This very night your life will be demanded of you. To whom will all this piled-up wealth of yours go?

JESUS: That is the way it works with those who grow rich for themselves instead of growing rich in the sight of God.

Luke 12.13-21

All of us see new homes and buildings around us. What do we see? Someone willing to take on more debt than I am? Someone with a gift for success that I don't know how to achieve? Someone who values appearances more than I care about? Someone who has worked hard and deserves a little luxury?

● How do you feel about signs of success you see about you?

From God's point of view a surplus harvest is not to provide one person secure access to food, drink, and merriment in lean years. It is for everyone's benefit in the present. The rich person in the parable plans no parties for friends, no feast for villagers, only self-indulgence. He has "blessings in reserve" with no plan to invest or lend his wealth. The gospel story makes a commonplace point: The rich man can't take it with him when he dies.

The gospel regards using wealth in one's own self-interest as foolish. In this perspective the gospel seems profoundly unAmerican.

Luke urges Christians to act in solidarity with those in need.

God calls the rich person in Jesus' parable a fool. Strong, insulting language. To be foolish is the opposite of wise, a treasured virtue in Israel's scriptures. King Solomon embodies the virtue and bounty of wisdom; he builds the kingdom of Israel to its height among nations yet recognizes that wisdom, which God alone can give, is what sustains his rule. Wisdom begins with knowing God is God.

Jesus' parable tells us the rich person's decision to build bigger barns to store an abundant harvest is foolish in God's eyes.

The parable doesn't say what other people of the time thought, but we can imagine. Perhaps some saw in the new barns and granaries a person whom God singled out and blessed with abundance.

Perhaps others saw a person they hoped to become—a landowner who never had to worry about food again. Perhaps they saw success.



The French commentator on 18th-century American life, Alexis deTocqueville, praises America for its experiment in self-interest, the freedom of the yeoman farmer to reap the benefit of his own labor rather than receive little more than the means to survive by working on the inherited estates of the nobility. As I have unearthed my family history, I find ancestors on every side came to America and to Minnesota and Iowa to own their own land, make a living, and marry the girl or boy on the next farm.

Gaudium et Spes, the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, is the Church's most authoritative, inclusive source of Catholic social teaching, approved by council and pope together at the Second Vatican Council. The most forward-looking of the Council documents, it passed on the last day of the Council, 2309 voted yes to 75 no.

In the Church in the Modern World the bishops describe the distance between rich and poor. "In no other age has humankind enjoyed such an abundance of wealth, resources, and economic wellbeing; and yet a huge proportion of the people of the world is plagued by hunger and extreme need while countless numbers are totally illiterate. At no time have human beings had such a keen sense of freedom, only to be faced by new forms of slavery in living and thinking" (#4). For Pope Francis the common good summons us to solidarity and a preferential

option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters (*Laudato Si'* #157).

- How does Catholic social teaching help you apply the gospel message to our world?
- If our lives don't consist in amassing possessions, what is most valuable?

In his gospel Luke urges us to see ourselves within a web of social relations, to stand in solidarity with those in need rather than alone like the rich fool. Like God, wise believers hear the cry of the poor and do their parts to empower those left behind or left out to participate in our common economic life. "To desire the common good and strive towards it is a requirement of justice and charity," writes Pope Benedict XVI in his encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*. "The more we

strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbours, the more effectively we love them" (7).

For Luke wealth is not a sign of favor but of danger. It is not good or bad in itself but faces the person with a choice to do good or evil. For Luke, God clearly holds the ultimate power to redistribute the wealth of people who will not share. This is the fate of the rich fool who must leave his full barns behind and face God with whom he has stored up no treasure.

- What wealth do you share with ease? What do you tend to protect?
- When and how has your giving connected you with others?



What is useless? What is worthwhile?

“All is vanity,” Sunday’s first reading begins, bringing to our contemporary ears the judgment of a community leader who lived about 300 years before Jesus. This reading from the book of Ecclesiastes raises the essential life questions: “What is useless? What is worthwhile?” The writer seems certain most people give their energy to empty ends.

The Hebrew word for *vanity* is *hebel*, which means *empty, perishable, nothingness*. The 20th-century poet T. S. Eliot uses the word *hollow* to describe people who pursue endless material gains in grinding, routine work that dries up their spirits and transcendent dreams.

Sunday’s passage from *Ecclesiastes* echoes Jesus’ parable in the gospel. Death is the great leveler. Death provides the ultimate perspective on what’s really worthwhile.

What is vain toil?

Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity!

One who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to another who did not toil for it. This is vanity and a great evil.

What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity.

Ecclesiastes 1.2; 2.21-23

- Describe your wisest, most worthwhile investment of personal energies and resources.
- What is one thing in your life you have found a vain pursuit? How did you discover this?

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PRAY

Consider making a resolution to use what wealth you have generously this week. Pray together the words of *Gaudium et Spes*. The All part is its final line.

LEADER: Today there is an inescapable duty to make ourselves the neighbor of every individual without exception.

ALL: Let us hold to the gospel, and join forces with all who love and practice justice.

LEADER: To take positive steps to help a neighbor whom we encounter, whether that neighbor be an elderly person abandoned by everyone, a foreign worker who suffers the injustice of being despised.

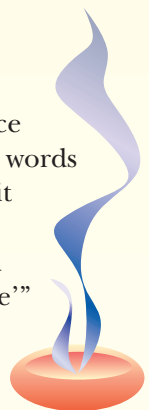
ALL: Let us hold to the gospel, and join forces with all who love and practice justice.

LEADER: A refugee, an illegitimate child wrongly suffering for a sin of which the child is innocent.

ALL: Let us hold to the gospel, and join forces with all who love and practice justice.

LEADER: Or a starving human being who awakens our conscience by calling to mind the words of Christ: ‘As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me’” (Matthew 25.40; #27).

ALL: Amen.



Cultivating the Wisdom of Vatican II

Sister Joan has written five two-page summaries of the teachings of this extraordinary council. Go to the home page of goodgroundpress.com to read and download the sessions. Find a friend to talk with. Or put a notice in your parish bulletin calling people together around this topic.



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