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From the Selected Works of Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell, D.Phil.

August 11, 2013

Poverty and Vigilance

Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell, D.Phil., *Seton Hall University*



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Poverty and Vigilance

Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell
Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies
Seton Hall University
South Orange, NJ

This article was previously published in *The Catholic Advocate*.

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sunday Readings for August 11, 2013 for Cycle C:

Wis 18:6-9; Ps 33; Heb 11:1-2, 8-19; Lk 12:32-48

POVERTY AND VIGILANCE

Lawrence E. Frizzell

Addressing those Christians dedicated to the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, the Sacred Congregation for Religious challenged them to link their lives to the least fortunate in our world. You hear rising up, more pressing than ever, from their personal distress and collective misery, 'the cry of the poor.' Was it not in order to respond to their appeal as God's privileged ones that Christ came, even going so far as to identify himself with them? (*Apostolic Exhortation on the Renewal of Religious Life*, June 29, 1971 #17).

Too often we gloss over this dimension of the Gospel, because for most people it contradicts common sense and concern for self. This is not an excuse for us to "romanticize" poverty in its crushing oppression of the human spirit as if it were a value in itself. Rather, it can become a context for people to place God first in their lives. Thus, when the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt and their affliction became unbearable "their cry for release went up to God..." (Ex 2:23).

The theme "measure for measure" (see Lk 10:37-38) governs the biblical approach to recording history. So, because the Pharaoh had declared that all Hebrew male infants should die (Ex 1:16) and repeatedly rejected God's call to free the Israelites, the plague that brought him low was the death of the firstborn of man and beast (Ex 11:4-8, a moderate response to Pharaoh's genocidal decree).

The Wisdom of Solomon, composed in Alexandria a few decades before the time of Jesus, reflected on the Exodus to provide lessons for Jews tempted to assimilate to the Greek culture. They should emulate the faith of their ancestors and their patience in awaiting the salvation of the righteous. This would not only rescue them from servitude and penury, but the gift of a land would enable them to serve God and to exercise their human dignity as free creatures.

Jesus knew that more subtle forms of enslavement pervade all societies. The dictum "You cannot serve God and mammon" (Lk 16:13) is the basis for the command for his disciples to sell their belongings and to give alms (12:33). Then one would be able to place the service of God and his kingdom at the center of one's life.

The parable about vigilance in the service of the divine Master includes a surprise. They were waiting and ready in order to ease the Master's burdens after a long journey, but found that he served them! Did the disciples take a hint of what Jesus would do at the Last Supper and on the cross?

Peter's question provides an occasion for Jesus to elaborate on the role of the manager of an estate,

a model for the leader of a community. The human tendency toward personal laxity and abusive conduct must be overcome as an aspect of the vigilance demanded of all.

In every generation the Church and its leaders should be exercising authority as an act of service in imitation of Christ. The human tendency to use one's position for self-aggrandizement and feathering one's own nest can be challenged best by example.

The more we despise poverty the more will the world despise us and the greater need we will suffer. But if we embrace holy poverty very closely, the world will come to us and will feed us abundantly. (St. Francis of Assisi)

The religious life raises simplicity of life or poverty to the level of a vow, but the counsel of Jesus to set our minds on higher goals than the accumulation of worldly goods is a challenge for every Christian. Vigilance that readies us to serve the Master should be an urgent concern as we evaluate what constitute the treasure in our lives.