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Helping widows, orphans in a just society

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Helping Widows, Orphans in a Just Society

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Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sunday Readings for November 11, 2012 for Cycle B:

1 Kgs 17:10-16; Ps 146; Heb 9:24-28; Mk 12:38-44

HELPING WINDOWS, ORPHANS IN A JUST SOCIETY

Lawrence E. Frizzell

In most societies people are accepted and function best if they "fit in" its structures. The average person does not know how to react to those who are different, even because of some handicap or loss. How many of us reach out to those who are new to the parish? When we plan a social event, do we include the neighbor who has lost a spouse recently? Do we show respect for the inherent dignity of the person who is disabled?

In the ancient Middle East the widow and orphan were often at a grave disadvantage socially and legally. The culture did not think of women as independent nor did their education make them self-sufficient. From childhood and throughout adult life the woman was in constant need of a male protector. For this reason the laws of Moses concerning the poor often mentioned the rights of widows and orphans explicitly. But was this sufficient? Oppressors paid no attention to divine law. "They crush your people, O Lord, and afflict your heritage. They slay the widow and the stranger and murder the orphan" (Ps 94:5-6). When economic conditions were bad the poor usually suffered the most.

Such was the situation of the widow whom Elijah the prophet met near Sidon (in present-day Lebanon). The stranger not only asked for water, a precious commodity, but he requested bread! She explained her penury and he challenged her to a test of faith. If she gave to him from her meager stock of flour and oil, she would find an inexhaustible supply for herself and her child! She might have thought: "Charity begins at home! Why should I share with this foreigner?" Somehow her sense of hospitality and an incipient faith led her to be generous, and the three survived the drought and famine.

How open to the needs of others are we who claim to be children of Abraham and Sarah? "Do not neglect to show hospitality, for by that means some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Heb 13:2; see Gn 18:1-15).

Throughout his public ministry, Jesus defended the dignity and rights of those who were thrust aside as the result of other's low perception of their worth. Mark and Luke placed the narrative about the widow who gave all she had to the Temple treasury after Jesus' critique of certain scribes. "These men devour the savings of widows and recite long prayers for the sake of appearance; it is they who will receive the severest sentence" (12:40). This passage makes us realize that the Gospel about "the widow's mite" has two aspects. Indeed, the woman is commended for her extraordinary generosity. God knows whether people give out of their surplus or whether their offering also has a personal sacrificial dimension. But what should we say when the structures of society (political or religious) drain the minimal resources of the poor? Probably these offerings were made for maintenance of the Temple or were used for aiding the poor. In any case, the leaders and teachers in Jerusalem should have protected the widows in their midst. Probably many interpreters of the commandments were sensitive to plight of widows, orphans and those on a "fixed income." However, Jesus knew that some of them exploited the most vulnerable and he condemned this fleecing of the devout in their simplicity. The ideal would be for every person to exercise his or her talents to gain a living wage, and then they could express their dignity by giving for worship and the care of the less fortunate. But did Jesus not say: "The poor you will always have with you" (Jn 12:8)? Lest some interpret this statement fatalistically, we must read Mark's text. "You always have the poor with you, and whenever you will, you can do good to them...."

(14:7; see Dt 15:11). Jesus made reference to a familiar commandment, one that demands a response from the faithful in every generation.