

SURVEYING THE QUALITY, NOT THE QUANTITY OF GIVING

(A Meditation for the 32nd Sunday, Yr B 07.11.21 by Fr Galadima Bitrus, OSA)

When we gather together to mobilize resources in view of some Church or community project (launching, Bazaar or harvest), it can be observed that the degree of appreciation is often dependent on the quantity of the contribution one brings forward. Hence, contributors of higher amounts are recognized with high acclamations accompanied by intense and endless clapping of hands, whereas those who donate lesser amounts, are announced swiftly and are hardly accompanied by any applause.

This shows how we humans tend to measure the quality of giving by its quantity. However, celebrating the generosity of two widows prepared to give from the little they had, today's first and gospel readings show us that God looks beyond external dimensions; he looks at the heart, not the size, and he surveys the quality, not the quantity of our giving. In both cases, the element of sacrifice, which the 2nd reading underscores, is central to the measurement of the quality of giving.

The 1st Reading (1 Kgs 17:10-16) presents the story of the widow of Zarephath who risked her life and the life of her son by accepting to share only a handful of meal meant to be eaten by her and her son for one last time before they gave in to the cruelty of pervading hunger and famine. Although this story is set to portray the miraculous powers of the prophet Elijah, the faith, absolute trust and sacrificial spirit of this widow push her to the fore in the story of the prophet, almost making her the protagonist.

It is interesting that the Lord God of Israel is sending a zealous and radical Yahweh alone prophet such as Elijah to be fed by a non-Israelite widow, a Sidonian. It is also interesting that the prophet is not sent to a place of plenty for his nourishment but to a town and to a woman even more vulnerable to the cruelty of famine than himself. It becomes even more interesting in light of the fact that the Bible repeatedly portrays widows as typically poor, alongside orphans, and are specifically recommended for our care. As we read in James 1:27, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (cf. Deut 10:18; 18:1-8; Isa 1:17). This passage, however, recommends the prophet to the care of the widow explicitly described as having just one more meal to eat with her son and die.

Clearly, some of the lessons to take home include the fact that no one, including the extremely poor, is exempted from practicing the virtue of charity to anyone who is in need. For there may be someone somewhere who is even more needy than oneself. Secondly, being in need as well as offering assistance have no ethnicity or religion, as Jesus' famous parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10 clearly demonstrates. Finally, the measure of generosity is not in the quantity given out but in the depth of sacrifice which giving even a penny or sharing a morsel requires from the giver. The Bible is replete with examples of persons who had little but were prepared to share it, as well as rich people who were unprepared to share with the poor from their plenty.

The Gospel Reading (Mk 12:38-44) presents the story of yet another poor widow contrasted with rich people in the context of making contributions to the treasury. While Jesus (apparently with his disciples) sat looking at how people were throwing money into the treasury, he saw “many rich persons” (Gk, “polloì plousioi”) throwing “much” or “plenty” (Gk, “pollá”), unspecified amounts but he noticed “a poor widow” (Gk, “mià chēra ptōchē”) putting in a specified amount of only “two copper coins” (Gk, “lepta dúo”), the smallest coin in circulation at the time, amounting to just a “penny” or a roman “quadrans” (Gk, “kodrantēs”).

It could be noted that at the beginning of the story, we are told of how many rich people made their donations but of the poor, we are told of only one, and even in this case, it took Jesus calling the attention of the disciples. The evangelist, however, soon changed the perspective from this dominant tendency of acknowledging only the rich by minimizing the attention on the rich, ignoring the details of what they were donating and simply giving it a generic description, “much” (“pollá”). He focused rather on a detailed account about what the poor widow put in, the number of pieces of the coins and how much they amounted in Roman currency.

In this way, we are taught a new way of evaluating donations, no longer based on the highest quantity given but the highest quality of the giving, which is to be judged on the extent to which the giver has had to sacrifice to make the donation and not on the amount donated. As Jesus put it, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in “more than” or “exceeding” (“pleîon”) all those who were throwing into the treasury. For all of them were putting out of “their abundance” (“perisseuontos autois”), but she out of “her needy state” (“hustereseos autēs”) has put in all she had, all her life” (“hólon tôn bíon autēs”) (Mk 12:43-44). In other words, hers was not a giving from something she possessed but from her very state of being, her everything, all her “life” (“hólon tôn bíon autēs”).

Let pastors and the faithful alike know, therefore, that the coins of all those poor men and women which we find in our offering boxes are worth much more than the millions our rich politicians and business moguls contribute. For these poor men and women are mostly unemployed and do not earn or possess anything. When they give, therefore, they are not fetching from anywhere but are giving from their needy status, they are giving out of who they are, everything they have, their very life or being. As such, their giving is an act of pure love which is self-sacrificing love.

In the 2nd Reading (Heb 9:24-28), Christ offers to bear the sins of many, not from the abundance of something he possesses but with the abundance of all that he is, his very being, his very life, because he was not only to deal with sin but to save. For sacrifices that deal with sin alone were already offered by Old Testament priests who offered expiatory sacrifices as many times as they and the people committed sins (cf. Heb 5:1; 8:3; 10:1-18), but Christ’s sacrificial offering goes beyond dealing with sin to a more fundamental issue, the salvation of humanity.

Thus, we learn that offering our resources is not enough for a salvific mission; we need to offer our very selves. This is perhaps what we may be lacking in the Church and in our societies but which we really need: men and women who are offering themselves for service, not men

and women who are offering their wealth, profile, talent or name. The former bring about real transformation because they are involved with their being; the latter offer only something they have and expect to be thanked for it.

May the Lord raise up from among us men and women ready to share their last meal with others and offer all that they have and are, all their life, to the service of God and the people!