

Giving to the Poor

This relatively unknown and often misunderstood Church teaching is tough... but salvific.

We own the things God gives us, but yet they also belong to others. This is a hard truth, and one I don't much like. It's one of those places in life where holiness stops being a comforting ideal and starts demanding something I'm not so eager to give.

St. Thomas Aquinas explains this, as he explains so many things. The things God gives us are truly ours, he writes in the *Summa Theologica*. The Church teaches that we rightly own things. She supports private property. But She does so with a qualification. "But as to their use, they belong not to us alone but also to those whom we are able to succor out of what we have over and above our needs."

The hungry man's bread

After explaining the use of property, St. Thomas quotes St. Basil, the 4th-century bishop often called "the great." Basil brings the teaching home: "Why are you rich while another is poor, unless it be that you may have the merit of a good stewardship, and he the reward of patience? It is the hungry man's bread that you withhold, the naked man's cloak that you have stored away, the shoe of the barefoot that you have left to rot, the money of the needy that you have buried underground: and so you injure as many as you might help."

Thomas wasn't speaking as some idealistic friar way back in the 13th century, who didn't own anything anyway. The world's Catholic bishops said this at the Second Vatican Council. They speak in *Gaudium et Spes* of the "universal destination of earthly goods." This meant, they say, that "man should regard the external things that he legitimately possesses not only as his own but also as common in the sense that they should be able to benefit not only him but also others." They speak as pointedly as Basil did, urging everyone to remember that the Fathers instruct us to "Feed the man dying of hunger, because if you have not fed him, you have killed him." The *Catechism* says this as well, though without the sharp quote from the Fathers.

It would be easy to pile on the quotes. St. Augustine tells us that "God does not demand much of you. He asks back what he gave you, and from him you take what is enough for you. The extra possessions of rich persons are the necessities of poor persons. When you possess more than you need, you possess what belongs to others."

St. Gregory the Great, pope at the end of the 6th century, warns those "who claim to their own private use the common gift of God." He claims they kill those dying in need. "When we administer necessities of any kind to the indigent, we do not bestow our own, but render them what is theirs. We rather pay a debt of justice than accomplish works of mercy."

Demanding Christianity

It's this kind of thing that reminds you how radical and demanding Christianity is. Unless you're the very rare saint, it always asks more of you than you're going to give. If you're middle class, you may think you live a simple life without too many luxuries, even a life of admirable restraint and limitation.

You're not the guy with the BMW and the Italian shoes and the elegant dinners out. You're the guy driving the old Honda with 105,000 miles on it and wearing deck shoes from the thrift store and only rarely treating yourself to the Irish pub dinner. You can feel that you're doing your part, because you're not that guy living a life of luxury. You could be a lot more self-indulgent than you are, which you count as virtue. I tend to feel this way, I confess.

Then you read St. Basil declaring, "It is the hungry man's bread that you withhold." You see St. Thomas saying "This!" to what Basil says. Or you stumble on some other Fathers saying the same things. Or you read the *Catechism* or *Gaudium et Spes*. The Church's heritage is loaded with traps if you want to live comfortably.

You could – if you were me, a few evenings ago – have had the burger rather than the shepherd's pie, and one Guinness rather than two, and given the \$12 saved to the poor, with only slight reduction in the pleasures of your dinner out, but you didn't. It wouldn't have been that much of a sacrifice. It would have been easy to do.

It's fairly easy, and it has its rewards. Giving things away makes you feel good. You're also storing your treasure in Heaven, as Jesus tells us to do. St. Augustine describes the poor to whom we give as porters we've paid "to transfer our assets from earth to heaven." How does this work? Jesus, he says, "has received what you have given. It has been received by the one who gave you the means to give it. It has been received by the one who at the end will give you himself."