

Wealth and Pilgrimage

Wisdom 7:7-11; Hebrews 4: 12-13; Mark 10:17-30

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Every believer's life displays the sign of pilgrimage. Pilgrims have no permanent home. Wealth cannot be hoarded, but must be used for the common good, for pilgrims are only passing through.

We easily forget or deny our sign of pilgrimage, however. The Hebrew Wisdom tradition is sharp in noting how money usually acts like a trap.

Those who consider themselves Jesus' disciples know that in their very persons a form of life is at stake when they begin to follow him as pilgrims towards the Kingdom and that this form of life defines their being as his disciples.

The evangelist Mark sets the framework for the discipleship of wealth. His entire Gospel is a rich catechetical itinerary that pulls together the practices of many actual disciples. These practices are for us a challenge and a criticism, because the socio-economic system in which we live doesn't let us adopt a critical attitude towards money.

We move along unconcernedly and often unaware that we are enveloped in a form of life that is sustained by sophisticated mechanisms of injustice, much like the rich young man in today's gospel.

The rich young man considers himself an honest seeker of authentic life. Yet when he approaches Jesus, he feels himself judged, and though at the end of his conversation with Jesus he may understand why he feels this way, he cannot fully face the truth. For the truth is that his wealth confesses its source, in the dispossessing of others. That's the meaning of what Jesus urges him to do, "Go, sell what you own, and give it to the poor." Give it *back* to the poor, Jesus could have added.

Upon that suggestion of Jesus' the best of Catholic social teaching finds its support. In a nutshell: No wealth is innocent.

Always and in various ways wealth presupposes a process of possession that entails at the same time the dispossession of others. Jesus' disciples bear personal responsibility in the way they perceive the benefits of wealth and in their way of using them, but above all they must confront their complicity in the dynamic of a system which the Church's social teaching calls a "structure of sin," since these accumulated goods have been despoiled from others.

The community where the Gospel of Mark was written knows by experience that there cannot be coherence between the seeking of a full life and the grasping of wealth for oneself.

We know the outcome of today's gospel. We know it by the choice of many men and women of faith who have decided to break with that grasping form of life and who have assumed instead the "preferential option for the poor."

At a personal level, grasping, hoarding the benefits of wealth constitutes idolatry (Mammon) and closes off all possibility of joining God's project for humanity.

At a social level, accumulated wealth takes form within a sinful economic order. The rich person tends to live piously consecrated to the religion of the market, where the rich person's wealth comes from. Day by day the market is the route for the despoiling of the majority of the populations of poor counties.

Oddly enough, migrant workers arrive among us seeking work in order to earn money, but the great majority of them can neither accumulate nor possess wealth. When

you see the amazing volume of the remittances that the migrants send back to their countries of origin, you can't do anything but admire them. Their earnings are no longer money that produces money, as in financial markets, but money from labor that generates resources and sustains life in a multitude of small country towns, where it's really the only income that keeps families and communities alive. In Mexico's case, migrant workers' remittances constitute the second-highest source of state revenue after income from oil.

Mark proposes today a sign that authenticates the disciples. To follow Jesus demands a choice, in the form of putting oneself in the right relation to money. This right relation consists of getting rid of money's idolatrous character and of freely redirecting it towards a genuine project of solidarity with the world of those who are poor.