



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

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RICH MAN, POOR MAN

In the first of a series of articles on money and Catholic Social Teachings, we look at what the Church says about wealth and poverty.

The Catholic Church has always been concerned about the poor and cares deeply for them. Its emphasis on the poor has led some to say that the Church over-romanticises poverty and spurns wealth.

At first glance, the Bible seems to teach that wealth is wrong for Christians. After all, there were many instances when Jesus himself took a very strong stand against the rich.

In *Luke 6:24*, Jesus says: "But woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation." In *Matthew 19:24*, He says "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (see box). In *Luke 16:19-26*, Jesus tells the story of the poor man Lazarus who was suffering at the gates of the rich man. He tells how "the poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom" while the rich man was tormented in hell.

The lives led by our clergy and religious reinforce the view that the Church emphasises poverty rather than wealth. Most religious orders, including the Dominicans, Franciscans and Carmelites, take a vow of poverty in addition to vows of celibacy and obedience. Their promises are made as part of their religious profession. While diocesan priests do not take an explicit vow of poverty, they lead a simple and modest life.

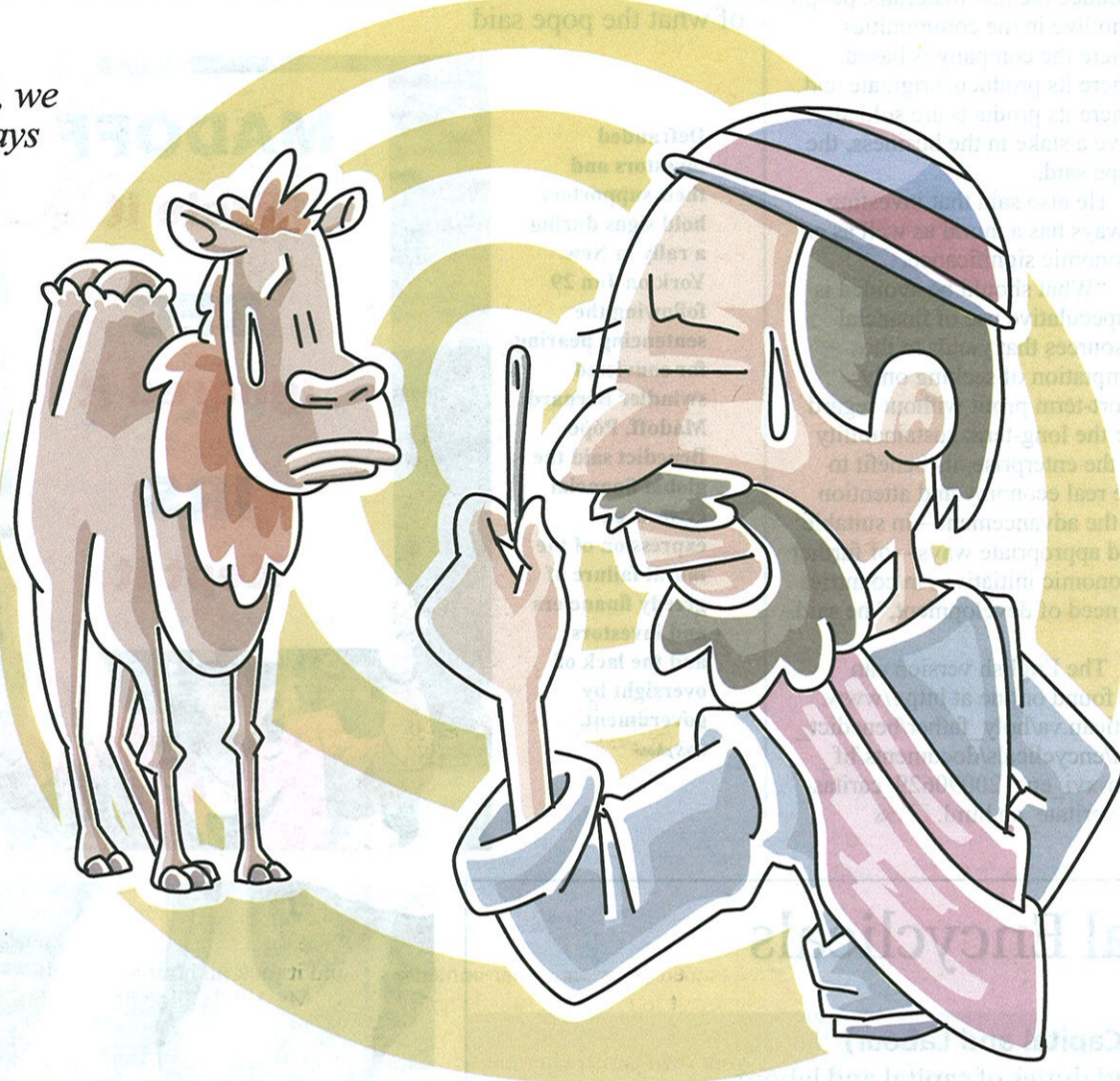
So, does the Church glorify poverty and encourage Catholics to be poor so that we have a better chance of gaining a place in heaven?

Far from it.

A closer reading of the passages of *Luke 6*, *Matthew 19* and *Luke 16* shows that Jesus is not glorifying the poor but repeatedly warning against greed and the reliance on material possessions. He warns those who have the means – and these are not only the rich – and yet ignore the poor, especially those without the most basic of needs.

We can draw three attitudes about wealth from the Bible.

First, wealth in itself is not condemned. In Genesis, God blessed Abraham with land, progeny and blessings (*Genesis 22:17-18*). Jesus himself did not spurn the wealthy. He dined with the rich tax collector Zacchaeus who later repented, repaid his sins fourfold and gave half his



property to the poor (*Luke 19:1-10*). Jesus came to save all, rich and poor.

Secondly, when wealthy people in the Bible were condemned, they were condemned because of the means by which their riches were acquired or used, not for the riches themselves. This is

seen in the warnings from the prophets like Amos, who warned of wealth obtained through oppression or fraud (*Amos 4:11*), and wealth of merchants derived from wantonness (*Revelation 18:3*).

Thirdly, our individual attitude towards wealth matters. We should be concerned about the

effect wealth can have on our lives since it tempts us to forget about God who is our true provider. Furthermore, it is not God's way that we should desire wealth, to flaunt wealth or be tied to it. The Bible tells us "not to store up treasures on earth, where moth and woodworm destroy them and thieves can break in

Is wealth a bad thing?

Jesus takes a strong stand against the rich many times. But what is He saying to us? Here's what the Bible tells us:

- Firstly, wealth in itself is not condemned. Jesus came to save all, rich and poor.
- Secondly, when wealthy people are condemned in the Bible, it is because of how they acquired or used their riches.
- Thirdly, our attitude to wealth matters. Wealth can tempt us to forget God, our true provider. We should not desire wealth to flaunt it or be tied to it.

and steal" (*Matthew 6:19-20*). Instead, we are to store our treasures in heaven.

The Catholic Church teaches that wealth exists to be shared. In Catholic Social Teachings, this is known as the Principle of the Universal Destination of Goods: "Goods even when earned honestly always have a universal destination; any type of improper accumulation or hoarding is immoral, because it openly contradicts the intention by the Creator that all goods are meant for everyone, rich or poor" (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 328).

We should therefore consider ourselves administrators and not owners of the goods that God has entrusted to us.

How should wealth be shared? We are asked to put the needs of society's most poor and vulnerable members first among all other social concerns; they are the ones who are often neglected and often do not have a say in their own welfare or have the means to improve their own lives.

This is what the Social Teachings' "preferential option for the poor" is about. The poor and vulnerable are not only those without money, but also those who are deprived of their basic rights or of equal participation in society.

As Catholics and stewards of God's resources, we are called to reach out to the poor by sharing what God has blessed us with. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus illustrates how a complete stranger provided for the needs of another person. We are called to do the same.

We can use our wealth to help the poor to meet their basic needs in life, or provide care for orphans or the elderly, or even grant job opportunities to the marginalised. We can also use our gifts and abilities to help the poor break out of the cycle of poverty. Educators, for example, can render literacy and remedial programmes for the poor.

Indeed, how can we do good works without money? As St Clement of Alexandria puts it: "How could we ever do good to our neighbour if none of us possessed anything?"

So, with wealth, comes the responsibility to use it properly, to be fruitful for God's purposes.

The Rich Man and the Eye of a Needle

Jesus uses this analogy in responding to a young man who asked what he needed to do to inherit eternal life.

"If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." And when the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. Jesus then said to his disciples: "Truly, I say to you, it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." *Matthew 19:21-24*

The general interpretation of this passage is that Jesus uses the physical impossibility of a camel passing through the eye of a needle to express the difficulty of entering heaven if we are laden with the material possessions of this world.

Because of the incredibility of a camel

passing through the eye of a needle, biblical scholars have come up with two alternative interpretations.

One is that it may be "easier" for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, but it is "not impossible". For along with this analogy, Jesus had also said, "by man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (*Matthew 19:26*).

Another interpretation is that there was a gate in Jerusalem that was called "The Needle's Eye" because it was shaped like a needle and the size was such that a camel could only pass through if it entered the gate kneeling and without any baggage on its back. Although such a gate was never found by modern historians, scholars felt that Jesus used the analogy to teach that a rich man may be able to enter the gates of heaven if he enters humbled, unburdened by sin and by worldly possessions.