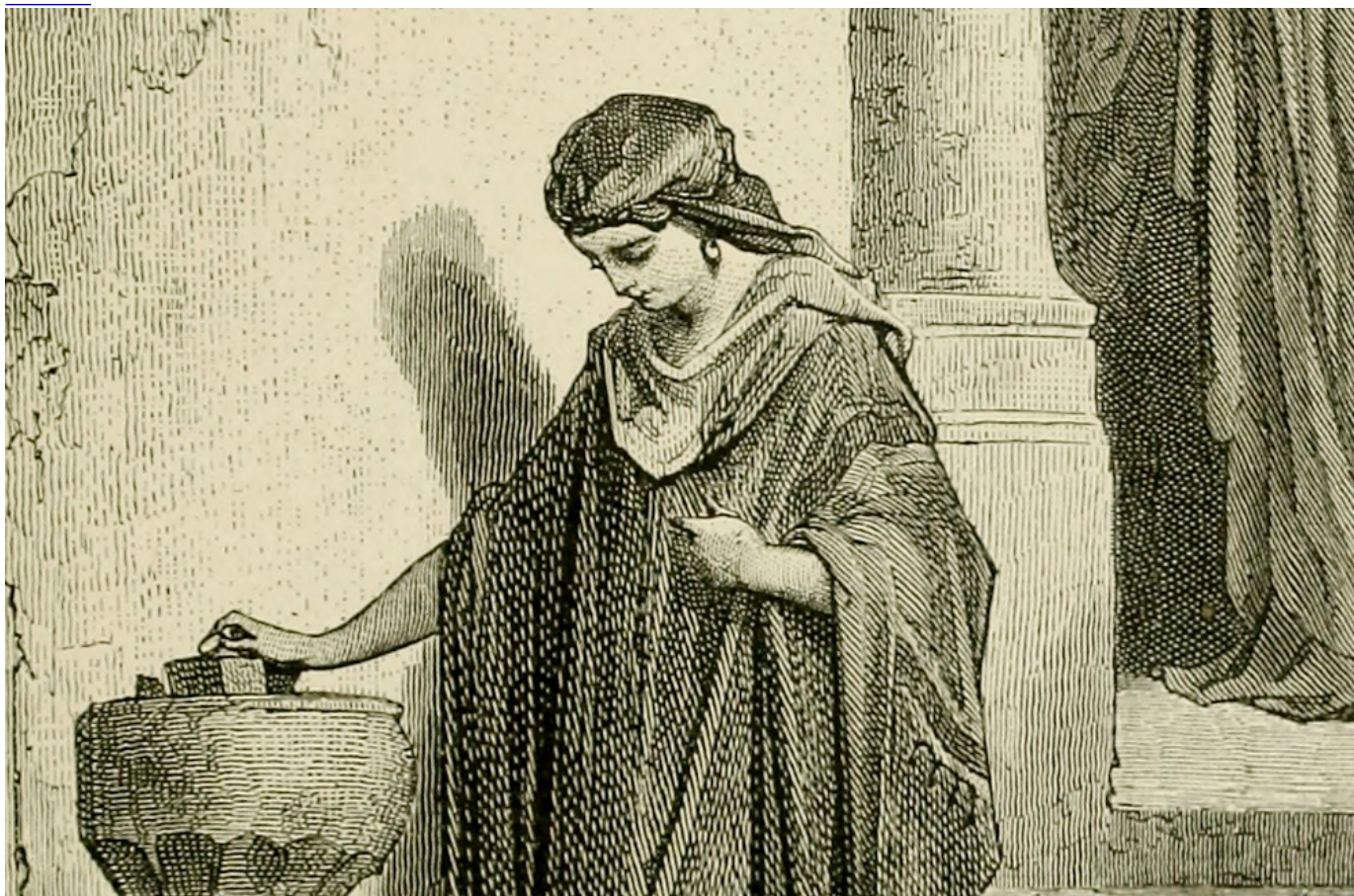


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by Thomas Gumbleton

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November 15, 2018

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As we reflect on the Scripture readings this evening, especially the Gospel, it's very important that we remember the context of what happens in the Gospel lesson. We're all very familiar with what we call the "widow's mite," that story of the widow who gave her last two very insignificant coins into the box for the poor. It's often used when people are trying to raise money for the church. Think about that widow; she gave everything. Can't you give something?

Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

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1 Kings 17:10-16

Psalms 146

Hebrews 9:24-28

Mark 12:38-44

But in the context, Jesus really isn't focusing so much on what the widow gave, but rather on the failure of the religious leaders.

His words are such a strong condemnation: "Teachers of the law who enjoy walking around in long robes, being greeted, being noticed — everybody knows who they are. They like to occupy reserved seats in the synagogues and the first places at feasts." They're very proud of their wealth and they show it off. These are the religious leaders.

So Jesus makes this strong contrast. It's almost like he's saying, "Look, here's just the opposite. Here's what happens as the religious leaders exploit the poor and take the last of their material goods."

We in the church today are suffering, as everyone knows, a severe crisis. Part of the problem is the wealth of the church and the wealth of religious leaders. I won't dwell in the negative, but I want to share with you examples of what really should be our leadership in the church.

First of all, Pope Francis: You may remember when he was elected pope, he came across immediately as a very humble, simple person, simple in the sense of not expecting lots of greetings in the marketplace — that type of thing. He moved out of the Vatican palace. When we talk about the Vatican palace, literally it's a huge palace where rich people live. He moved into a small hotel-like for his living quarters. He goes up and down the elevator with everyday people. He lives a very simple life, refuses to have the ostentatious richness of a palace.

A couple of Sundays ago, you may remember he canonized [Archbishop Óscar Romero](#). There's another marvelous example. I was privileged on a number of occasions to visit El Salvador. I would always go to the chapel where he was murdered. Close to that chapel were the living quarters where he lived as the archbishop. Not a palace by any means, just a few small rooms across the street from the church where he celebrated Mass. The rooms were in a small hospital. He lived very simply.

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But I can also tell you about a local bishop. He died a few years ago, a very close friend of mine: [Bishop Ken Untener](#), the bishop of Saginaw [Michigan]. When he first went to Saginaw and was ordained bishop, as part of the ceremony the new bishop always gets up to speak, to preach the homily. When he did that, he did something quite extraordinary. He stood up, went out close to the edge of the platform so he could be close to the people, and he said, "You probably all know what happens when you go to a restaurant. A young man or young woman comes up and says, 'I'm Suzie or I'm Joe. I'm your waiter or I'm your waitress.' Well, I'm Ken and I'm your waiter."

He meant that. He was there to serve.

One of the things he did (and this is really extraordinary), he immediately sold the house, big mansion that the bishops lived in (four, five different bishops over the period of years), and he never bought another house to live in. He would travel around the diocese and live in a rectory or in a hospital room as a chaplain for four to five months. He never had a home. He worked out of his car and out of his office, but always so he could be close to the people and live very simply.

These are the kinds of things that we need as a reform in our church because there seems like an understanding that if you become a priest, you have all your needs taken care of. If you become a bishop, you get even more. It's very hard to live simply, but that's what our leadership needs to do.

This coming week, the bishops of United States are meeting in Washington on Monday. They're going to be spending a whole day in prayer and retreat because a good part of their meeting is going to focus on the sex abuse scandal and they need guidance from the Holy Spirit, for sure.

But also they need to bring about the reforms in the church leadership that we truly need. Jesus was very clear when he spoke about those leaders of his time and how they were failing. I'm afraid that he could say the same thing about our church leaders. I know them, I lived with them, and that is sad.

But it's not just the leaders of our church that have to listen to this Gospel today, but all of us. What is the foundation for leading a simple life where we do not have way more than we need, especially in a society where we're always being drawn to buy more, have more, get the latest? Do we need all that?

How can we change our attitude so that we really do not become destitute, not become people who are needy and poor, but have enough so we can live a full human life?

But also remember that God made the world for all, not for a few, and to have a sense (and this is what really gives us the ability to begin to carry out that beatitude: Blessed are the poor) that everything we have is a gift — everything.

We have no right to what we have, really. Our very existence is not something we earned or we brought about. It's a gift from God — our life, all of our talents — everything. If we can get a deep awareness of how we have been gifted by God, not because we earned it, deserved it, but because God loved us into being. God loved all of creation into being to be the gift for all of us.

If we get that understanding that it's not really mine, it's a gift, then we begin to understand we have to find ways so that everyone shares in the fullness of creation that God has given for all people.

When we begin to do that, then our lives will change. We'll find a joy and a peace in having enough, but also know that others are being able to live because we do not have far more than we need.

Today, as we reflect on the Gospel lessons, I hope we also reflect deeply on that widow in the first lesson and the widow in the Gospel lesson. Both of them clearly understood that even the meager goods they had belonged to others who were in greater need. When we can always have that attitude, then we'll begin to be following the way of Jesus.

Once more, pray that our whole church can be reformed and be what Pope Francis calls for: a church of the poor, for the poor. That would bring about a tremendous change in our church and, ultimately, it would help us to carry on the work of Jesus of transforming our world into the reign of God where everyone has a chance for a full human life.

[Homily given Nov. 11 at St. Philomena Parish, Detroit. The transcripts of Bishop Thomas Gumbleton's homilies are [posted weekly](#) to NCRonline.org. [Sign up here](#) to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]