

Temptation of 'Limbolatry' - *Commentary on the Gospel of the 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time*

Msgr. João S. Clá Dias,
Founder of the Heralds of the Gospel

*(Taken from New Insights on the Gospels. v.
VI, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2012)*

¹³ One of the multitude said to Him, "Teacher, bid my brother divide the inheritance with me." ¹⁴ But He said to him, "Man, who made Me a judge or divider over you?" ¹⁵ And He said to them, "Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." ¹⁶ And He told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man brought forth plentifully; ¹⁷ and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' ¹⁸ And he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns, and build larger ones; and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹ And I will say to my soul: Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry.' ²⁰ But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' ²¹ So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God" (Lk 12: 13-21).

The Temptation of 'Limbolatry'

Before the pleasures, even legitimate, that earthly life can offer, man easily forgets the eternity for which he was created.

I - A VOCATION EXCHANGED FOR A LOCK...



he story is told of a monk who ended up abandoning his vocation in exchange for a mere trifle. He had worked for years as a skilled blacksmith and had felt, at one point, a strong inner urge to follow the path of the contemplative life. Leaving everything, he set out for a monastery, where he was admitted.

Shortly after his entrance, he was appointed a cell with a door that constantly creaked and rattled, day and night, for it would not close properly. To solve the problem, our monk, with the superior's permission, made a magnificent door lock. He fixed the door itself, adjusting it to the doorframe. In the end, he had transformed it into a piece that could serve as a model for the entire community.

Delighted with his own work, he walked through the corridors of the building, impressed that not another lock could be found to compare to his, so perfect and well finished. But as the months wore on, an excessive attachment for the apparently innocuous apparatus began to take hold of him.

One day the abbot ordered a change of cells in the community. Downcast at the thought of having to repeat the painstaking work in his new location, the monk-blacksmith asked permission to take the lock with him. However, by decision of the superior, no one was permitted to transfer any part of the furnishings from one

cell to another. Unhappy with the prior's ruling and unwilling to renounce his excellent lock, the monk tore it off the door, resolving to abandon the religious vocation received from God's hands, taking with him the object of his attachment and throwing himself into the ways of the world...

What is behind this story of the monk's lock? This is what the Gospel for the Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time teaches us.

II - THE DANGER OF COVETOUSNESS

The episode narrated in this Gospel takes place when Jesus and His disciples are on the way to Jerusalem, the city where He will consummate His divine mission. He had already foretold the Passion twice previously (cf. Lk 9: 22, 44). Nevertheless, the disciples did not understand the lofty significance of this proclamation and still held out hope of being the first in the supposed Messianic Kingdom that Christ would found in this world (cf. Lk 9: 45-46). To correct this human outlook, He sent them on mission, giving them power to expel devils, and taught them the Our Father, inciting them to perseverance and confidence in prayer (cf. Lk 10:1,17; 11:1-4). It was while exercising this supernatural ministry that this unusual request was made to the Master.

¹³ One of the multitude said to Him, "Teacher, bid my brother divide the inheritance with me."

The initial words of the Gospel passage being contemplated clearly show Our Lord's disposition of attending to all those around Him. Maintaining open access to Himself, without any intermediary, He was always ready to respond to the needs of those who came to Him. This minute detail alone is enough to fill us with confidence.



In fact, the scene narrated portrays the case of one who turns to Jesus for help. He is obviously a younger brother experiencing problems in securing the division of the inheritance due to him. Under Jewish civil law, when two brothers inherited a bequest from their father, it was to be divided into three portions, with two going to the elder sibling and only a third to the younger (cf. Dt 21: 17).¹ Given the covetousness of human nature, despite the Law, this precept did not prevent frequent quarrels at the time of its application. Such disputes would commonly be taken before a judge, a rabbi or some other adequate arbitrator. As Lagrange comments, “the rabbis had accustomed the Jews to have recourse to them to settle questions that should essentially have been resolved according to the principles of the Law.”²

A defect common to every era

The contender of the Gospel, in approaching Our Lord to ask His intervention in the division of his family possessions, does not seem to have paused to reflect on the Master’s grandeur, seeing Him merely as a popular figure who would be a sure advocate in the cause that he wishes to win for himself. We can imagine him as having lost his parents at a mature age. His youth has already passed and he desires to assure his future, a concern that often takes the fore as a person ages.³ This is the mentality of those who, at this stage in their life, lose their sense of generosity and their capacity to understand the transitory nature of temporal possessions. The younger brother of the Gospel has his eyes fixed on his future, in what we could describe—despite the paradox—as the perpetuity of this world.

Since Adam and Eve left Terrestrial Paradise, human nature has been searching for the fruit of the tree of life in exile, in their

1) Cf. FILLION, Louis-Claude. *Vida de Nuestro Señor Jesucristo, vol. II: Vida Pública*. Madrid: Rialp, 2000, p.381; GOMÁ Y TOMÁS, Isidro. *El Evangelio explicado, vol. III: Año tercero de la Vida pública de Jesús*. Barcelona: Rafael Casulleras, 1930, p.226-227.

2) LAGRANGE, OP, Marie-Joseph. *Évangile selon Saint Luc*. Paris: J. Gabalda, 1927, p.357.

3) Cf. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS. *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.118, a.1, ad.3.

earthly home. Nowadays as well, and even more intensely than in earlier times, there is an ambition to find, through medicine, a ‘fountain of eternal life;’ in the hope of living in a permanent limbo in this world. This very common attitude was called ‘limbolatry’⁴ in the expression of Prof. Plinio Corrêa de Oliveira. It is a term that aptly describes the position of those who adore a happy existence in an endless limbo, continually enjoying the pleasures of this world, while forgetting the true eternity and the supernatural. Let us observe the Divine Redeemer’s response toward such a view of life, implicit in the request narrated in the Gospel.

Our Lord’s mission was not temporal

¹⁴ But He said to him, “Man, who made Me a judge or divider over you?”

The Gospel’s make no clear and explicit mention of Jesus having denied any request, especially one made with sincere humility of heart. Nevertheless, with this man, He refuses to pronounce Himself on the matter, as this is not His mission, but rather that of the judges and rabbis who legally held this responsibility. According to St. Ambrose, “well does He avoid earthly things Who had descended for the sake of divine things, and deign not to be a judge of strifes and arbiter of inheritances, He having the judgment of the living and dead and the recompensing of works.”⁵

These first verses are sufficient to afford us a beautiful lesson. Christ’s reaction shows us that when someone desires a good only for itself, God withdraws. However, zealous for the eternal salvation of all, He offers this man a new teaching on the danger of becoming disproportionately involved in questions of family inheritance. “The plaintiff demands half the inheritance,” St. Augustine affirms, “he asks for half of an earthly inheritance, and the Lord offers him a full inheritance in Heaven; He gives him more than what

4) CORRÊA DE OLIVEIRA, Plinio. *Conference*. São Paulo, Nov. 15, 1980.

5) ST. AMBROSE. *Expositio Evangelii secundum Lucam*, L.VII, n.122. In: *Obras*, vol. I. Madrid: BAC, 1966, p.405.

he asked.”⁶ This was because the man was turned toward visible goods with an uncommon affectivity, wanting them in his hands at all costs.

What is covetousness?

¹⁵ And He said to them, “Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”

First, we are surprised that Our Lord uses the expression “take heed,” to show the key importance of what He is about to proclaim. In this verse, we should note that when Jesus speaks of “all covetousness” He is saying that we should not be excessively focused on the question of money. But not only this. Indeed, had He said only “covetousness,” it could have meant simply money. But “beware of all covetousness” may or may not refer to money; thus, it includes other material goods.

If we desire something for our own stability or personal good, dissociated from the love of God and striven after with greediness, this is called covetousness. The Angelic Doctor teaches us that the sin of covetousness occurs by “wishing to acquire or keep them [riches] immoderately. This is what is meant by covetousness, which is defined as immoderate love of possessing.”⁷ Returning, then, to the story of the unhappy monk-blacksmith, we could ask: how is it possible that the life of a man can be summed up in the love of a lock?

Let us be honest and look directly at the broad assortment of goods surrounding us. St. John of the Cross describes them precisely: “We understand by temporal goods, riches, status, positions and other pretensions, and even children, relatives, marriage, etc.”⁸ These goods can even consist of a lock, an animal or any object to

6) ST. AUGUSTINE. Sermo CVII, c.I, n.2. In: *Obras, vol. VII*. Madrid: BAC, 1958, p.427.

7) ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, op. cit., a.1.

8) ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS. Subida do Monte Carmelo, L.III, c.XVIII, n.1. In: *Obras Completas*. (Ed.5). Paço de Arcos: Carmelo, 1986, p.301.

which we become attached excessively or in an imbalanced manner, while it draws us away from God.

Nevertheless, there are other forms of covetousness such as that of sentimentalism and romanticism, which make us put God aside to adore what is merely human. When people give their heart to covetousness for the consideration and adoration of others—which is the essence of romanticism—they will always want more, and experience constant restlessness. Yet another form of covetousness is vanity, which leads to the desire to call attention to oneself, whether for physical beauty, giving rise to excessive care for personal appearance, or for believing that one possesses uncommon intelligence or is gifted with other qualities. We can even be covetous of our health, taking disproportionate and exclusive precautions toward the body and the treatment of illnesses.

Attachment can be focused on a few goods

Our Lord speaks of an “abundance of possessions.” However, we should remember that even being in circumstances of material scarcity, whether monetary or of other types of goods, does not mean being free from the risk of attachment to some object, as the story about the monk and the lock demonstrates.

In this sense, continuing his analysis, St. John of the Cross comments how, in fact, the disorderly affection for material abundance is terrible, but explains that if a person has many goods his appreciation is divided among all of them. For example, if a person possessing a thousand gold coins were to lose only one, being left with 999, this would not signify a great blow. However, should he lose 999, all his care for the thousand coins would then be concentrated on the one that remains. It is seen, then, that those who have few goods can have as strong an attachment for them as a nabob for his entire fortune, forgetting God for their cause.

Nevertheless, to emphasize an important nuance in this parable, Jesus is not condemning the possession of goods, nor the prin-

ciple of property, but rather covetousness; namely, immoderation toward temporal goods.⁹

A man blessed by God

¹⁶ And He told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man brought forth plentifully;"

From the outset, the Divine Master stresses the fortune of this man of the parable. He was rich and well established; all his needs were met plentifully. Livestock and agriculture were, in fact, the main sources of wealth in Palestine at that time. Thus, he benefitted from God's generosity, which afforded him the joy of living in abundance. He had been so favoured that his land yielded a plentiful harvest; from what we can assume by the rest of the narrative, much greater than usual.



Gustavo Kraij

The protagonist of the parable wished to keep the fruits of his successful harvest for his exclusive satisfaction

Wheat field on the Mount of Beatitudes – Galilee (Israel)

9) Cf. ST. BEDE. *In Lucae Evangelium Expositio*, L.IV, c.12: ML 92, 491-492.

Now, to whom did this land belong? Undoubtedly, it was the property of the farmer, but who created it? Who made it produce fruit? Certainly it was the sower. But who made the seed germinate? Going further, we reach the conclusion that, in the end, everything is from God and belongs to Him alone! “From God come all these benefits, the good land, the right climate, the abundance of seeds, the help of the oxen and everything that the farmer needs to produce abundantly. And what do we find in this man?”¹⁰ We find that, in face of Divine Providence’s goodness, he did not react with reciprocity.

Egoism and covetousness always go hand in hand

¹⁷ “and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ ¹⁸ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns, and build larger ones; and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹ And I will say to my soul: Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry.’”

The initial attitude of the landowner is that of one who suddenly finds himself in a situation of unexpected abundance. “What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?” Implicit in this first thought is a reproachable intention, filled with egoism. Finding the fields fruitful and on the point of yielding a more bountiful crop than he had imagined, the man feels the elixir of ‘limbolatry’ welling up within himself; that is, the desire to remain eternally on this earth, without misfortunes, as the words of the next verse show.

God disappeared from his plans, and when this happens, mishap enters. Indeed, when we remove Him from the centre of our concerns, we ourselves soon assume the principal role in our life, because for us there are only two loves: either we love God to the point of forgetting ourselves, or we love ourselves to the point of forgetting God.¹¹

10) ST. BASIL THE GREAT. *Homilia in illud dictum Evangelii - Destruam horrea mea*, n.1: MG 31, 261-264.

11) Cf. ST. AUGUSTINE. *De Civitate Dei*, L.XIV, c.27: In: *Obras*, vol. XVI-XVII. Madrid: BAC, 1958, p.984.

The protagonist of the parable wants to store the produce from the good harvest exclusively for his own enjoyment. As Our Lord had warned earlier, he is covetous and avaricious; he wants everything for himself and only for himself! Starting from an erroneous principle—that of self-worship—it does not even occur to him to do good for others. Receiving that plentiful crop from the Creator's hands in quantities that so far exceeded his expectations that he had nowhere to store it, he should, according to the divine desire, have used it also for the good of his neighbour. However, nothing of the sort even passes through his mind! If a soul does not have God as the centre of its thoughts, the greed that comes with attachment enters, and with it, perturbation. "*Non in commotione Dominus*—the Lord was not in the earthquake" (1 Kgs 19: 11). The spirit of covetousness robs us of peace.¹²

Just as the aforesaid monk-blacksmith did not concern himself with making new locks for all the cells of the monastery—although he was outstanding in the craft and had more than enough skill to do so—the landowner of the parable plans to build barns in view of a stability based on a mere personal enjoyment of life. In both cases, a deep-rooted egoistical attitude stands out.

On the other hand, the Master does not affirm that there is an explicitly sinful intention in all of this. Nevertheless, by putting in the man's mouth the words "take your ease, eat, drink and be merry...", He indicates a neglect of the First Commandment of the Law of God: "Love the Lord thy God above all things." The Provider of this plenty was now put aside and forgotten.

This is why the landowner does not deem the considerable reserves stored in his existing barns as sufficient. In the following year and those after, he would harvest again, perhaps even more bountifully. Nevertheless, avarice and the desire for pleasure have blinded him. This is the thinking of all dominated by covetousness. They are never satisfied with the gifts received from God's hands, but always hanker after more. "Greed is never satisfied because the heart of man is made to receive God. [...] As such, it cannot be filled with

12) Cf. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, op. cit., a.8.



Gustavo Krajič

St. Thomas Aquinas, by Zurbarán –
Museum of Fine Arts of Seville (Spain)

something less than God.”¹³
This dissatisfaction brings with it emotional imbalance, giving fruits in lack of virtue, due to the excessive desire for more. St. Bernard describes covetousness as a “subtle evil, secret poison, hidden plague, artifice of pain, mother of hypocrisy, father of envy, source of vices, seed of intemperance, [...] the moth eating away holiness and blinding hearts, which transforms remedies into illnesses and treatments into new aches and pains.”¹⁴

Woe to those who spend their lives—spiritual or temporal—only for themselves! Sooner or later they will hear the same reprimand which came from the lips of Our Lord,

directed at the man of this parable.

At the end of this life, covetousness will be of no use to us

²⁰ “But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ ²¹ So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”

He continued collecting his wheat and material goods, intending to build a sturdy new barn, for he had made his earthly life

13) ST. THOMAS AQUINAS. *De decem praeceptis*. Art. 11. De nono praecepto.

14) ST. BERNARD. *Sermo in Psalmum XC*, c.6, n.4. In: *Obras Completas, vol. I*. Madrid: BAC, 1953, p.388.

into his last end, hoping to prolong it eternally. His foolishness lay in his act of disdain of the eternal. Perhaps the unfortunate man even watched the demolition of the old barn. Yet he would not be able to see even the foundations of the new one laid.

Those who do not fulfil the First Commandment of the Law of God find themselves in the same situation as this unhappy soul. This is the attitude of many people, who “blinded by greed, serve money and not God in spiritual things, and act for money and not for God, putting price first and not divine worth and reward, in many ways making money their main god and end, placing it before the ultimate end which is God.”¹⁵ They forget about the two lives present within them: human and divine; taking every care for the former, they neglect to care for the latter, which is the state of grace.

Who among us has not been tempted to accumulate other types of goods, even though they distance us from God and eternity, in forgetfulness of the brevity of life? There are countless cases in history of people whose lives were suddenly snatched from them at the height of earthly achievement. In fact, St. John of the Cross rigorously affirms: “Every time we vainly indulge in pleasure, God is watching us, preparing some chastisement and bitter dose, according to our deserts.”¹⁶ Let us not be fools! Who can know the day and hour of their own death, seeing as even doctors are incapable of pinpointing it? Who can guarantee that their life will see them through this very night? Who can be certain of lasting through tomorrow? Death only requires one condition: that of being alive!

Therefore, it is a thousand times better to have one’s main focus constantly on what is eternal. After death, we will live forever and at a certain point regain our bodies, in a state of glory or of horror, depending on our works. If we went to Heaven we will receive glory, but if we went to hell, perpetual suffering.

Is it worthwhile, then, to be troubled and anxious over concrete things, to the forgetfulness of the eternal? If we do this, no matter how many harvests we gather, we will desire to build

15) ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS, *op. cit.*, L.III, c.XIX, n.9, p.310.

16) *Idem*, c.XX, n.4, p.314-315.

countless barns or to have endless properties. Or conversely, in a state of poverty, pan-handling on the roadside, the result will be the same: we will become callous, like the hapless man of the parable, inclined with him to build a barn for this earth and not for eternity.

The legitimacy of storing reserves

However, a question may arise within us: what should be our attitude toward life's uncertainties? Is it legitimate to store up a reserve? Can we appease licit human concerns with material stability? In reality, if we only skim the Gospel text, we may get the erroneous impression that the right to possess goods is being admonished here, because Jesus Himself holds up the man of the parable as a fool. Could God be condemning the aspiration for a right, which He Himself put in the human soul¹⁷—the right of property—leading us to think that it is a sin to desire or possess goods? What was the foolishness of the man? Did Christ condemn the act of storing up a reserve, simply for the fact that the farmer, having gathered an enormous harvest that exceeded his expectations wanted to build a barn equipped to hold great quantities until the end of his life? If this were so, every household with a pantry would be condemned; it would be wrong to store up provisions, according to this Gospel...

Unfortunately, it is not rare to hear absurd arguments against the right to property. But this right is present in this aspiration placed by God in the human heart. The practice of this right allows us to set aside means to assure our subsistence and to attend to personal and family needs or even to promote a respectable social standing. However, before all else, it is necessary to be rich in God's eyes. And this wealth is attained by having one's main focus placed on eternal goods. In this way, if love for God is present and

17) Cf. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, op. cit., q.66, a.1: "Man has a natural dominion over external things [...] for the imperfect is always for the sake of the perfect. [...] This natural dominion of man over other creatures [...] is competent to man in respect of his reason wherein God's image resides..."

egoism in check, even setting aside a reserve and storing up goods will be legitimate.

However, love for God needs to unfold in love for our neighbour. Thus, it is necessary to receive and economize to always distribute, without keeping exclusively for oneself. This rule applies not only to money and purely material goods, but also to all and any God-given benefit or quality. The condemnation of the Gospel could likewise be applied to one who studies only to be taken for a genius and not to transmit his knowledge to others; those who pray for themselves and never for others; those who interact with others to satisfy the desire for praise and personal esteem, and not to do good to their neighbour, in light of eternal salvation. Such deviations render a person's acts harmful and marks them with the unmistakable stamp of egoism.

III - WE MUST NOT TAKE OUR EYES OFF ETERNITY



We must, then, bear in mind the fleetingness of time on this earth. Our attention cannot be fixed only on this world, oblivious to the other. How often across the centuries do we see that, when a nation or sector of civilization decides to turn to God, opening itself to the eternal perspective, everything good in it flourishes!

On the other hand, when men exclude God from the centre of their lives, robbing Him of His rightful place, all manner of disasters and chastisements come crashing down upon them. We presently find ourselves in an era of inventions and brilliant scientific discoveries, unthinkable in previous eras. However, these marvels bring about a serious and new problem for man, since they cause many to become so blinded that they forget about God...

Nowadays, with more impetus than ever before, immorality seems to want to definitively destroy morality, as is indicated by the rapid degradation of fashions, of customs and of the family. Moral disorders are becoming so generalized that, if people threatened with imminent death were offered a cure to prolong their lives a little longer, under the condition of renounc-

ing impurity, there can be little doubt that a considerable number would prefer to die rather than lose the possibility of committing this type of sin. Deep down, those who act in this way have a spirit entrenched in deliberate disobedience to the Ten Commandments, because their eyes are fixed on the things here below and not those on high. With them will happen what today's first reading from Ecclesiastes also expresses: "Because sometimes a man who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by a man who did not toil for it. This also is vanity" (Eccl 2: 21).

The etymological sense of the word 'vanity' is emptiness. Those who seek only after gain, imagining that they will fill their soul with it, run after a void.

If we make a permanent move to another country, we may take all of our belongings with us. But when we depart from this world—passing through Judgement—into eternity, we can take nothing with us, not even our clothes, for these will remain in the grave with the body, becoming food for worms. Thus, it is better to invest capital in spiritual treasure, so as to arrive much better off at the other side. This is the counsel given to us today: not to fix our attention and concerns on concrete, earthly things, but rather on those of eternity, which can be achieved by accepting the admonishment of St. Paul to the Colossians, in the second reading of this Sunday's Liturgy: "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness" (Col 3: 5).

In short, the problem is not in having or not having, but in being rich in God's eyes. And this means avoiding romanticism, vanity and praise-seeking, greedy money-seeking, and pride. To be rich in God's eyes, essentially, is to be unpretentious and abnegated. Being rich in God's eyes means having great faith. This is the wealth to which Jesus invites us.

To attain this goal, there is no other way than that of a life of prayer, where we will find the necessary graces to arrive happily at eternity. To practice virtue, seeking to be good toward others and wanting our genuine personal good; this is the preparation for this one-way trip, a voyage that does not require a passport,



Gustavo Kralj

The Apostle of the Gentiles – Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls, Rome

identity card, credit card or even an entrance visa. The entrance will depend, rather, on a life pleasing to God and one entirely faithful to His Law. ✧