

V. AVARICE & GENEROSITY

Dante's continuing journey up Mount Purgatory means he is becoming lighter, freer and less burdened by sin. In arriving at the Cornice of the Penitent Avaricious, we are looking at a sin which, while less serious than pride, envy, anger and sloth, is still deadly, as are all the capital sins. It is, after all, avarice that sends the rich man to hell in Jesus' parable of Lazarus and then. St. Thomas tells us that avarice is the immoderate or unreasonable desire for riches. It is not wrong to own property or to make a profit. Sin only enters into the situation when we love these created things more than we love God or our neighbor. The moment we care more about riches than about how to use those riches for the common good is the moment we are opening the door to avarice. Conversely, the moment we start recognizing our wealth as a gift of God given to us both for our good and for the good of our neighbor-and begin finding ways to share that wealth with our neighbor-is the day we begin to live generously and imitate God, who became poor for our sake that we might become rich.

QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. Read Matthew 6:19-34 and 1 Timothy 6:6-10. What is the attitude we are to take toward the wealth of this world? What can happen if we relentlessly pursue wealth, "longing to be rich"? What are "treasures in heaven"?
2. Read Luke 16:19-31. How much importance does Jesus place on generosity to the poor?
3. Read CCC 1906-1909. What is meant by the "common good"? What is our personal responsibility for contributing to the common good?
4. Read 2 Corinthians 8:1-15. How does Paul urge the Corinthians to be generous? How does he preserve their freedom and yet call them to give? In verse 15, he cites the story of the manna in the wilderness in Exodus 16. How does this picture of the common good relate to our own use of riches today?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Avarice is often thought of as a sin of the rich and, to be sure, many rich people are afflicted with this temptation. However, a poor person can also be obsessed with money and with envy of the rich). Have you ever struggled with an inordinate desire for riches? How does our culture encourage the love of money? How can you overcome this temptation?
2. Pope Leo XIII taught us that once the demands of necessity and propriety have been met, the rest of our wealth belongs to the poor. What is your honest reaction to that? Reflect on the demands of necessity and propriety" in your own circumstances and whether you should be giving more away.
3. Have you ever been poor yourself and found it necessary to rely on the help of others to get by? What was that like? Did you feel gratitude? Shame? Determination to change your circumstances? Were you able to share with others in some way even when you had little?
4. Jesus says of the poor widow who put two tiny copper coins in the temple treasury that she gave more than all those who had contributed out of their excess. Have you or somebody you know ever given sacrificially? Describe the situation and comment on the outcome of that gift, both to the receiver and to the giver.
5. Dante's penitents are purged of the sin of avarice by being fettered face down on the earth. Because avarice looks no further than the accumulation of wealth or its lavish spending on worldly pleasure, the punishment fits the sin: penitents must look only at the earth upon which they wasted their wealth. Have you ever had a time when you realized that you could never get enough of what you thought you wanted? If so, how did this realization affect your priorities?