

Tenth Sunday after Trinity
July 31, 2016
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
116 Theodore St.
Scranton, PA 18508
Scranton, PA
Luke 12:13-21

We had to wait for forty minutes for a table at our favorite German restaurant in Columbus, Ohio, while we were on our way back home from vacation. After our name was called we had to walk by the duo that had been hired to entertain the diners. The accordion player noticed us and said, “Wow, look at all the kids,” then said into his microphone, “Hey, the Catholics are here.” I smiled and raised my hand to let him know he was right.

Large family size at one time distinguished Catholics from the rest of their fellow Americans, but this has not been the case now for almost fifty years. Nor are Catholics statistically distinguishable from their fellow Americans by political affiliation, as they were until about twenty years ago. Using other indicators, like income or even, sadly, the rate of elective abortion, Catholics look no different from the general population in this country.

Our Gospel today indicates a way that we are different from those around us, when we are true to the teachings of the Church. The rich fool decided that he would pull down his barns and rebuild new ones to preserve for himself the wealth he had accumulated. That night his soul was required of him, and the question was asked of him, “Whose now will this be?” The obvious implication we are to draw is that his surplus should not have been squirreled away, but used to the benefit of his fellow man to the glory and honor of God. In their generosity, American Catholics do distinguish themselves. The Catholic Church is the largest charitable organization in the world, due in no small part to the generosity of American Catholics.

The rich fool falls under judgment, therefore, not because he has wealth, but because of his hedonistic attitude. He says to himself, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry.” Not only was he going to keep his goods for himself, he had decided that he would take it easy for the rest of his life, also. He is the prototype for the secular American aspiration to spend the last thirty years of one’s life not working.

I saw this aspiration expressed in a bill board here in Scranton on S. Washington Ave. It shows a woman looking concerned, and next to her it says, “Thirty years without a paycheck” and beneath her it reads “Now I’m ready.” At first I was confused and thought to myself, “That woman really got shafted. How did she work for thirty years without getting paid? I’d be ready, too.” Then I realized it was a bank billboard, not a lawyer’s one. She wasn’t going to sue because she’d been exploited. She was ready not to work for thirty years because her bank had managed her wealth correctly. This is not a Catholic aspiration. She might be ready for thirty years without a paycheck, but she’s certainly not ready to meet her maker. Tonight she may have the very unpleasant experience of the rich fool in our parable this morning.

This was driven home this week by the martyrdom of Fr. Jacques Hamel outside of Rouen, France. Fr. Hamel was celebrating daily Mass on Tuesday when Muslims from the Islamic State interrupted his prayers to murder him at the altar. He was eighty-six years old, filling in for the pastor, though he had officially retired ten years ago. A fellow priest joked to him recently that it was time to take his pension. Fr. Hamel replied, “Have

you ever seen a retired pastor? I will work until my last breath.” Fr. Hamel is an example not just for his fellow priests, but for all Catholics, whose objective late in life should be service, not taking one’s ease. Fr. Hamel was able to die a martyr’s death because his desire was to live a martyr’s life.

We Catholics can distinguish ourselves from the rich fools in our midst if we become a people of sacrifice. While our neighbors aspire to goof off for thirty years, we desire with Fr. Hamel to work until our last breath. While our neighbors aspire to use for themselves all that they’ve acquired, we desire to give our wealth to Holy Mother Church. While our neighbors give scandal because of their wasteful conspicuous consumption, we give witness to Christ by our frugality, the exercise of self-control, and our dedication to those closest to us, our families and the members of our first household, the Church.

If the rich fool’s mission was pleasure and ours is sacrifice, we must look at what motivates each of us to do what we do. The rich fool was intent to be comfortable, but this does not mean that the opposite applies to us. Those of us who desire to be faithful do not aspire to be uncomfortable, though we recognize that sacrifice entails a certain discomfort. While the rich fool’s motives can be traced to comfort, this is true because he is a man of temporal concerns, against which St. Paul warns in our Epistle today. Our goal is not discomfort, because our motives are based in the eternal, the salvation of souls. We are willing to make sacrifices and suffer discomfort because our ultimate desire is the salvation of souls. Our purpose in life, the Catholic purpose in life, is to see that our fellow men come to the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ in their reconciliation to Holy Mother Church and so attain eternal happiness.

It may be that God requires our souls of us tonight, and we will be in good stead if we worked today for the redemption of our neighbors. Indeed, this is true for us every day until we take our last breath. Did we devote ourselves in some manner to contributing towards the salvation of souls, or did we only take our ease, eat, drink, and be merry?

And so, we and our neighbors must live long enough for this reconciliation to occur. If the Lord does not take our life tonight, we must make sure no one else does, either. So part of the mission of sacrifice in the coming decades will hazard well beyond the standard Catholic practices of having children and working until our last breath. That mission will also entail the defense of life. I have in mind here, of course, the defense of the unborn and those at risk of being killed before their time because of our culture’s incorrect conception of mercy. For such advocacy Catholics are well known, of course. What we must become known for now is our willingness and ready ability to neutralize immediate threats to human life.

The psychopaths now accosting western civilization and, in a particular way, the Catholic Church, have their precedent in those who invaded the Iberian Peninsula, southern Italy, Austria, Hungary, and countless other nations that were forced to resist the Muslim horde. And in all those cases, the Church raised up men like Charles Martel in the eighth century, St. John Capistrano in the 15th, Don Juan in the 16th, John Sobieski and St. Lawrence of Brindisi in the 17th to push back to preserve life and allow for the continued expression of our Catholic faith. The Catholic Church was known as the defender of civilization because her members recognized the threat posed and then met it with a willingness to sacrifice their lives that others may live.

Back then, though, for the most part the enemy did not live next door. He does today, and about every eighty-four hours he commits a horrific atrocity that our political leaders seem stupefied about how to prevent. The Church does know, because she has always stood up to the bully. The martyrdom of Fr. Hamel shows us that we may well have to stand up to the bully here in church during Mass. Yes, even here in Scranton. And when we do, when we stop him from wantonly destroying human life, we will become known for more than big families and working well past retirement age. We’ll be known for more than standing up for the unborn and vulnerable elderly. Living lives of sacrifice means we’ll be known for running into the fire while others flee. Our dedication to life will mean that when a smart-aleck with a microphone announces that the Catholics are here, people won’t just laugh at his joke; they’ll feel safer, and they will be.