

Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity
September 25, 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 16:16-31

Since my daughter's home tennis court is at the University of Scranton, I have been on that campus quite frequently the last month or so. There are both a construction project and a demolition going on along Monroe Ave. The demolition this past week was a part of the wall that surrounded the Scranton family estate, before the property was given to the University in the 1940s. A good part of the wall can still be seen along Linden Street between Madison and Monroe Avenues, and it is in places 20 feet tall.

That wall was necessary to protect the Scrantons from the people they employed. In fact, the threat of violence was real enough that armed guards were employed by several of the mine owners and executives who lived in the Hill Section. Most of these houses have been razed as the University has expanded, but old-timers 15 to 20 years ago were able to relate to me their memories of the armed night-watchmen from private security firms that patrolled the streets of the Hill.

Please note that there are no walls around St. Peter's Cathedral downtown, just four blocks from the Scranton Estate. Nor for that matter are there walls around St. Joseph Church here in Providence, a church built beginning in 1895. What this tells us is that the violence the mine owners feared was not endemic to Scranton or society in general but rather directed at the wealthy. The Church was not threatened and so did not have to exist behind stone walls. Well, you ask, what about the school across the street, surrounded by a wall topped by an iron fence? Before that was a school, until 1920, that property was the Von Storch family estate, the coal barons of the Providence section of Scranton. Again, we see the Church without walls and right across the street the wealthy living on the defensive.

If we look at the parable from today's Gospel we see that two thousand years ago Jesus saw the same sort of dynamic. He says that the rich man lived behind 'his gate', before which lay a poor man, Lazarus, '...who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table.' Lazarus was not violent or vengeful, trusting in the judgment of God, so he went to heaven. But the rich man, who did not share what he had or even protect Lazarus from the stray dogs in the neighborhood – he went to hell. Of this circumstance Jesus says, 'Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish.' If the temporal circumstances are the same as they were two thousand years ago, we can expect that the spiritual are, as well. The rich who don't share are in danger of eternal damnation, even as the Lord is sure to have mercy upon those who patiently suffer injustice.

How does this relate to us? Well, first, if we have to live behind gates then we aren't sharing enough of what we possess. Gated communities are increasingly popular across the United States, as the rich retreat with their wealth into the fortresses they call home, but if they looked at the physical terrain in Scranton they would see the solution to their dilemma. Who poured herself out? Who gave away as much as she could? Who was the refuge for the needy and the dispossessed? To whom did people turn when they had nothing and desired their voice to be heard? They turned to Holy Mother Church, who wasn't threatened because she provided for the needs of the poor and gave them a voice in the person of Pope Leo XIII. In *Rerum novarum*, written 125 years ago, our late Holy Father affirmed the right to private property, but he also reminded the world that workers are

human beings, made in the image of God, who have not only the right to organize, such as in labor unions, but also the right to be treated with the dignity inherent to those for whom Christ died. Generosity and advocacy of the Truth gave the Church such moral stature that even Adolf Hitler would not attack Vatican City during World War II, because he was afraid he'd alienate his own troops, for whom their Mother, the Church, had stood up over and over again. So if we don't want to be robbed, we should share. And if we want to be taken seriously by those who might rob us, we must speak openly and insistently on behalf of the poor.

We see that the rich man did not go to hell because of his wealth but because he did not share it. He knew Lazarus' name and was able to indicate to Abraham whom he wanted to help him. In other words, the plight of the poor was not invisible to him, he just didn't care. The rich man was content to feast sumptuously every day, even as a man lay in front of his gate, so hungry he didn't have the strength to keep the dogs from eating him before he was even dead. So not only must we share so that we are not threatened, we must also do something about the needs of the poor when we notice them, if we are to enjoy eternal felicity in heaven.

Please note that I said *we* must do something, not that we must avoid our responsibility to the poor by having the government do something. The thing that disturbs me most about the current election cycle isn't even the ridiculous choice we've been given between the devil and the deep blue sea. The most disturbing thing is the amount of money being spent by both sides to get their candidate elected. Every four years we set new records for money raised and spent on an election, and this money is being spent so the donors can influence policy. They won't give this much to actual charities, like Catholic Social Services, but they'll spend incredible amounts attempting to influence how the taxes we pay will be distributed. They want the power to spend our money more than they desire to give their own funds to alleviate the suffering of the poor.

I was on an airplane once when an anti-Catholic zealot identified me as a priest and accosted me with the old tired line, the old lie, about how the Church's wealth should not be used to beautify our churches but she should give every cent away to the poor. The only response I could think of at the time was that was exactly what Judas said when the woman anointed our Lord's feet, and we don't want to be like Judas. But if I met that woman again today I'd ask her to direct her fury away from the Church and against the money democracies spend on elections. Such money represents the abdication of responsibility that individuals have to aid the poor, and we are going to be judged on whether we were charitable, not on whether we got the government to be charitable for us. How this election money could have been used to aid the poor will be revealed on the Last Day, and we will be judged if we wasted our money giving it to politicians. The more the government has become involved in charity, the more the gap has increased between rich and poor.

The responsibility to aid the poor, therefore, is a personal one. We can't pass it off, or delegate it, but if you're looking for a charity to make a donation, the Church has a far better record and legacy in this regard than does Uncle Sam. To give to the Church is to make an actual difference, because her concern is for our bodies and our souls. Where the government can give out only money, the Church is able to give both charity and the Truth.

A good part of that Truth is peace. Lazarus suffered patiently, and so must we, appealing to people's consciences, not their fears. Please do not think for a second that the violence directed against the coal barons of Scranton was justified. John Mitchell, that convert to Catholicism whose statue stands down on Courthouse Square, was able to accomplish more in one meeting at the White House with the coal barons than the Molly Maguires did with all their bombs, all their murders, all their terror. Our confidence must be in the righteousness and justice of Him who will judge both the living and the dead at the end of time. And we can be sure that just as the rich who don't share will land in hell, they will be joined straightaway by the poor who have sought vengeance.

It's really quite simple. If you're rich, share what you have, and if you have nothing, peacefully remind the rich of their obligation before it's too late for them. For in the end we want both the rich and the poor as our

advocates before the Throne of Grace, not our accusers in the court of heaven. We want the rich to tell the Lord we warned them and the poor to recount how we heard their cry and helped them.