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# Dives and Lazarus: A Story of Personal Relationships

## Biblical Reflection for 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time C

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, SEPT. 21, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- In today's first reading (Amos 6:1a, 4-7), the prophet Amos is quite serious about the complacent folk who pamper themselves at the expense of others and have apparently lost interest in the sufferings of their fellow human beings.

Amos is the great champion of the poor. The idle rich are the target of his wrath primarily because their conspicuous consumption of delicacies is always at the expense of those who lack even the bare necessities. The "lambs taken from the flock, and calves from the stall" upon which they feast are supposed to be set aside for sacrifice to the Lord; thus, they add sacrilege to their sins of gluttony. They do not lament the imminent moral collapse of Joseph (meaning the whole people); indeed, they contribute to it.

The entire scene from today's first reading capitalizes on the stereotypes we recognize even in our own day. But there is nothing exaggerated about the promise of divine retribution -- not for mere excess and self-indulgence but for the neglect of the hungry and the poor. While the social revolution inherent in Christianity is scheduled for the next world, it begins here: "God puts down the mighty and exalts the humble." This reversal is brought about by God: the lowly will be exalted; the exalted will be brought down low.

A study in contrasts

In today's Gospel (Luke 16:19-31), the provocative parable of the rich man and Lazarus again illustrates Luke's concern with Jesus' attitude toward the rich and the poor. The parable presents a remarkable study in contrasts. The oldest Greek manuscript of Luke dating from circa 175-225 A.D. records the name of the rich man as an abbreviated form of "Nineveh," but there is very little textual support in other manuscripts for this reading. "Dives" of popular tradition is the Latin Vulgate's translation for "rich man."

Dives' life was consumed in self-centered living. He is dressed nicely, eats well, lives it up every day. He is clearly on the inside. He has everything in this life that a person could want and yet he had no compassion for the poor or anyone else but himself. His values were based on gaining worldly possessions and wealth. The rich man did not have a desire to serve God nor did he feel a need for God's guidance. He only felt a need to satisfy his own worldly desires and wants. The rich man knew Lazarus in real life (we know that because he knew his name in heaven), but he ignored him. Treatment of Lazarus on earth revealed the rich man's true relationship to God. Since the rich man only cared about himself and was not right with God, after he died, he woke up in hell, tormented and frustrated. The rich man was not with Father Abraham in paradise like he expected to be.

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Lazarus, on the other hand, lived all his life in poverty, yet his heart was right with God because he never gave up his faith in God. He is dressed in rags, hungry, struggling to survive, filled with open sores -- therefore unclean, too weak to fight off the dogs. He is clearly on the outside. At his death, the angels took Lazarus immediately to Paradise to be with Abraham and God. Now in Abraham's bosom -- in heaven -- Lazarus is very happy as he reclines at the great heavenly banquet with Abraham. He is on the inside!

When they were in this life, there was no chasm between Lazarus and Dives. In fact Lazarus was begging just outside Dives' gate. The rich man could have gone out and helped Lazarus any time he felt like it. But in eternal life there is a great chasm separating heaven and hell. Jesus uses space to emphasize that this gap is uncrossable and permanent. "Send Lazarus to help me," Dives pleads! This rich man still believes that he can command and control the situation! Some chasms cannot be crossed. There is a point of no return.

The rich man did not listen to the law and the prophets, which taught about how to love one's neighbor (Micah 6:8). He did not love his neighbor. The prophets also predicted that Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, be the friend of outcasts, etc. (cf. Micah 5:2f; 4:6, Isaiah 61:1-2). The rich man rejected that truth also. He was too good to be the friend of outcasts.

A parable of personal relationships

Luke 16 is not just about money or wealth. When we really understand the chapter, the key element in both the parables is personal relationships. Almsgiving is good but involvement is better. Ministering to the financially poor and the spiritually bankrupt develops our potential to enrich others as we are enriched in the process. Our focus must be on the well being of the poor and downtrodden. It is in giving that we receive. And God loves cheerful givers! What are we depending on? Do we think being rich means we are right with God? Do we worry enough about eternity?

John Paul II and Benedict XVI on human solidarity

As I reflect on today's readings, the teachings of two Popes come immediately to mind. During his historic 1984 pastoral visit across Canada, Pope John Paul II delivered a stirring homily in Edmonton, Alberta, on Sept. 17, 1984. In a loud and clear voice that rang out across the airport where Mass was celebrated, he said:

"The human person lives in a community, in society. And with the community he shares hunger and thirst and sickness and malnutrition and misery and all the deficiencies that result there from. In his or her own person the human being is meant to experience the needs of others. So it is that Christ the Judge speaks of 'one of the least of the brethren,' and at the same time he is speaking of each and of all.

"Yes. He is speaking of the whole universal dimension of injustice and evil. He is speaking of what today we are accustomed to call the North-South contrast. Hence not only East-West, but also North-South: the increasingly wealthier North, and the increasingly poorer South.

Yes, the South -- becoming always poorer; and the North -- becoming always richer. Richer too in the resources of weapons with which the superpowers and blocs can mutually threaten each other. And they threaten each other -- such an argument also exists -- in order not to destroy each other.

"This is a separate dimension -- and according to the opinion of many it is the dimension in the forefront -- of the deadly threat, which hangs over the modern world, which deserves separate attention.

"Nevertheless, in the light of Christ's words, this poor South will judge the rich North. And the poor people and poor nations -- poor in different ways, not only lacking food, but also deprived of freedom and other human rights -- will judge those people who take these goods away from them, amassing to themselves the

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imperialistic monopoly of economic and political supremacy at the expense of others.”

Twenty-six years after Pope John Paul II spoke those powerful words in Edmonton in Canada, Pope Benedict XVI addressed these words to the British Government assembled in historic Westminster Hall in London on Sept. 17, 2010:

“The inadequacy of pragmatic, short-term solutions to complex social and ethical problems has been illustrated all too clearly by the recent global financial crisis. There is widespread agreement that the lack of a solid ethical foundation for economic activity has contributed to the grave difficulties now being experienced by millions of people throughout the world. Just as 'every economic decision has a moral consequence,' so too in the political field, the ethical dimension of policy has far-reaching consequences that no government can afford to ignore. [...]

"In recent years it has been encouraging to witness the positive signs of a worldwide growth in solidarity towards the poor. But to turn this solidarity into effective action calls for fresh thinking that will improve life conditions in many important areas, such as food production, clean water, job creation, education, support to families, especially migrants, and basic healthcare. Where human lives are concerned, time is always short, yet the world has witnessed the vast resources that governments can draw upon to rescue financial institutions deemed 'too big to fail.' Surely the integral human development of the world's peoples is no less important: here is an enterprise, worthy of the world's attention, that is truly 'too big to fail.'"

Humble openness to God is difficult

The rich, the powerful, and the "just" find it very difficult to be humbly open to God; they are full of confidence in their own treasures and securities. The only real security is the one based on friendship with God and service of God: to be a servant of human beings and of God after the example of Jesus of Nazareth. Exalting oneself is a form of self-reliance, as opposed to reliance on God. This makes clear why being rich, prosperous, satisfied almost naturally implies being arrogant, proud, godless. As human beings, we are radically weak and constantly try to cover up our weakness by finding security in power, wealth and status. This deception will ultimately be unmasked by God's act of judgment. The only way to salvation is to recognize one's weakness before God and to find one's security in God alone. To humble oneself does not only mean lowliness and misery, but also a willing acceptance of this misery as an act of service.

[The readings for Sept. 26 are the following: Amos 6:1a, 4-7; Psalm 146:7, 8-9, 9-10; 1 Timothy 6:11-16; Luke 16:19-31]

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