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When Is Lucre Filthy

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The pope's recent move to send the German bishop to the woodshed for living like a king has been widely cheered.

Generally speaking, conspicuous consumption is believed to be bad form especially in clerics, a brazen contradiction to everything Jesus stood for. The Lord is something of a class warrior who scorns exploitation of the poor by the rich and repeatedly warns moguls that their money threatens their salvation.. Accordingly, the public censure of Bishop Franz-Peter Tebartz van Elst raises the age old question of what riches have to do with Christianity.

The association between holiness and poverty has long been strong, though the equivalency isn't perfectly clear in the New Testament. The rich young man had to liquidate all his assets for the sake of the poor to gain a foot in the heavenly door. But in the parable of the talents, the top dog gets more for making money and one who earns nothing gets kicked to the curb. In his letters, Paul describes prominent followers as most likely privileged. So the picture is mixed even in the Bible. Yet the model of exemplary Christianity that emerged emphasized simplicity and material minimalism. Among the "haves" the key was generosity. It mattered less how much certain believes had than how attached they were to it. The haughty man of wealth who ignores poor old Lazareth at his door pays for his arrogance in the afterlife when his parched throat is refused water.

The tension between things of this world and things of the spirit has never gone away. The German bishop highlights both its currency and the narrow way in which the conflict has been defined for centuries. The early church dodged the issue by creating a special category of aetetics who lived a threadbare existence as a kind of penance and vigil for the rest of the church. They did it for all of us so we didn't have to do it. Aspects of that specialty became vows in the clerical orders and secular clergy.

The elite corps of ordained ministers were elevated to a presumed status above the madding crowd, those who were assumed to obey sacred promises, among them poverty (though in fact it didn't strictly apply to all).

The laity was off the hook by institutional design but couldn't be shielded from that haunting thought that there was something incompatible between being prosperous and being Christians. The Calvinists came up with a theology that blessed material success as a favor from God, but they built on a much earlier theme in the history of the faith whereby the good guys were rewarded with land, goats and wives, while the bad guys were often literally blown away. Whatever the effort, wealth has never comfortably squared with the kind of conditions for spiritual fulfillment that Jesus taught.

America has been a superb testing ground and for the most part Christian imagination has rationalized the "riches as reward" ("giving back" is a must but no need to be sacrificial or rich young man about it) theme. Bold gospels of prosperity dot the airwaves and sawdust trails around the country. God and mammon can be simultaneously served, we declare. All the while, we rail against the perpetrators of these enterprises, and clergy who allegedly violate the materialist code.

Who is to decide what is enough or who should be held to the same standards? Vatican II took an ax to the pedestal that placed clerics above laity, insisting that the pursuit of holiness is "universal," not the assignment of vicarious agents who were made of holier stuff. That principle has made some difference but not much. Haul the German bishop in to be sure, for splurging \$41 million on his house, \$30,000 alone on his bathtub. If the criterion for being an authentic Catholic applies equally to all Catholics, however, isn't it fair to begin expecting more modest from everyone else?

Franz-Peter Tebartz van Elst sticks out because he's part of the official ruling class of the church, to be sure, but otherwise is he any different from super affluent lay people who occupy the top rungs of the economy and reap the benefits from policies that favor them over the poor?

These days, the Catholic church's wealth is scorned more than at any time since the French Revolution as scandals have re-focused attention on its huge market worth. The pope, an apostle of living simply, did well to make an example of the German bishop. Glitz and ostentation do create the wrong impression of the kind of Gospel he wants to preach. It signifies not only power of the purse but the kind of superior, oppressive attitude he's trying to get rid of. Singling out clerics for censure is good and many Catholics cheer, aware that the same spotlight will never fall on them. Lucre is only filthy when clergy break the elusive code. So long as the benefits of largesse go to church based appeals (Christian colleges see no problem conferring blessings on money bags of every origin), nobody much wonders about the actual cost of discipleship.

But what about the comfortable marriage of Catholicism and vast wealth outside of these bad examples and the clergy itself? Is it time to apply similar moral standards to Charles and David Koch or Tom Monaghan or Edward de Bartolo Jr. and legions of other staggeringly rich American Catholics? Should they and others like them be invited to have a talk with Pope Francis? Does he care about this aspect of it? Or is it enough for them to keep giving some of it away? Or is something more fundamental in terms of what it means to be a follower of Jesus at stake? The parable says the rich young ruler "went away very sad" for having to go beyond his notion of prudent giving "for he had great riches."

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