

This Sunday’s Scriptures center our reflection on the issues of money, material possessions, private property, and stewardship.

Just what is Catholic understanding, and practice regarding money, material possessions, private ownership of property and stewardship of these gifts? The answer to this question can be found in today’s scriptures, in the treatment of the Seventh Commandment in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (articles # 2401—2463) and in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (a summary of the social teachings of the Church found in the Bible, the post-biblical early centuries Church Fathers, Church Councils, and its modern re-emphasis in the teachings of the Popes beginning in the late nineteenth century with Pope Leo XIII through Pope John Paul II) issued by the Vatican’s Pontifical Council For Justice and Peace in 2005. Finally, Pope Benedict XVI in his encyclical letter of 2008, “*Caritatis in Veritate*” (Charity in Truth) also addressed this question continuing the tradition of the church in this area of Christian life.

In the Bible material wealth and possessions are seen as gifts given to the human family as part of God’s original plan of creation for the building up of both the earth and human life. Material wealth and possessions are neither good nor evil in themselves. No where does the Bible condemn private ownership of property. Good administration (stewardship) of the gifts of creation received from God or earned as the result of human labor is commended as a work of justice towards oneself and others. The Bible teaches us that what has been received is to be used properly, preserved and increased, as illustrated in the parable of the talents in the Gospel accounts of both Matthew and Luke. (Mt. 25:14 ff., Lk. 19: 12 ff). The *Compendium*, elaborating on these biblical truths, comments, “*goods, even when legitimately owned, always have a universal destination; any type of improper accumulation is immoral, because it openly contradicts the universal destination assigned to all goods by the Creator. ...Riches fulfill their function of service to man when they are destined to produce benefits for others and society*”. St. Clement of Alexandria, an early post-biblical Church Father

states, “‘How could we ever do good to our neighbor,’ if none of us possessed anything?’ Another early Father, St. John Chrysostom teaches that riches belong to some people so that that they can gain merit by sharing them with others. Wealth is a good that comes from God and is to be used by its owner to circulate so that even the needy may enjoy it. Evil is seen in the immoderate attachment to riches and the desire to hoard.” (# 329, p.143). This said, the Church delegates to legitimate civil authority to propose and implement policies and laws that enshrine these principles as they relate to particular places and cultures.

The issue for the “rich man” in today’s Gospel parable was not that he was rich, but that he saw his riches as a “right” to selfishly hoard, as license to accumulate still more without any regard to understanding and using them as a blessing from God, a trust given to him to steward wisely not only for his benefit but the benefit of other people as well. In a culture where we are constantly bombarded with messages to acquire more simply for the sake of having, when is enough, enough? As each of us looks at our house, vehicles, clothes closets, and other possessions—do we own them or do they own us? Is our use of them only benefiting us or do they provide a way for us to help physically, emotionally or spiritually enrich the lives of other members of our family or wider society? Do we allow others a claim on them? How much are we like or different from the man in the parable?

A widow was standing at the open casket of her late husband on the day of his funeral. Speaking with a friend who offered her condolence, she stated she had fulfilled her husband’s dying wish to “take it all with him” by placing all his money in his casket. Shocked, her friend exclaimed: “What will you live on?” Oh, I’ll be okay” the widow replied. “I wrote him a check.”

*“Thus will it be for all who store up treasure for themselves but are not rich in what matters to God.”*