

## Wealth & Holiness

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JOURNEY TOWARD HOLINESS

# Journey Toward HOLINESS



By Sr. Mary Garascia, Ph.D.

Wealth—let’s define it here as surplus money not needed for necessities like food or housing, etc. We all have some of it, and some have lots of it. Wealth need not be a blinding, idolatrous addiction. It also can be a path to holiness, a setting for and the stuff of our holiness journey.

Sometimes both in politics and religion, having wealth is made to sound morally suspect, even sinful. Sunday Gospel passages recurrently present us with the story of the poor beggar Lazarus, lying ignored outside the door of a rich householder; the story of the poor widow, putting all she has into the temple treasury while rich merchants figure out tithe dodges; the rich young man who turns away when Jesus says, “Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor;” the three upper class Jews who pass by the man beset by robbers on the road to Jericho.

Meanwhile, wealthy good people get a bit lost in the Gospels: there’s Zacchaeus, the tax collector, who after meeting Jesus gives half his wealth to the poor; Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, men of influence who provide the costly spices and a grave for Jesus’ body; the wealthy woman who breaks the pricy container of perfume on Jesus’ feet; Martha and Mary and the other Lazarus, opening their house to Jesus and his disciples; the women of means who contributed money that supported Jesus’ ministry. And in the first century after Christ, wealthy people were important patrons of the first Christian communities throughout the middle east.

Those with wealth are important to Church and society today. Years ago, I had the opportunity to study political sociology and “power elites,” a complex and intriguing topic. We all learn, in our U.S. history, about “robber barons,” financial speculators, and other examples of accumulated wealth used wrongly, resulting in calamities. In contrast with other nations, however, political sociologists point out that the U.S. has been rather fortunate in having “responsible elites.” Wealthy founders created a system of government for the new U.S. that allowed others to acquire wealth. Wealthy citizens created philanthropic enterprises that built and still sustain libraries, medical centers, universities. A wealthy president started social security. Taken as a group (sociology studies groups), the wealthy are conservative in that they value and help maintain the social stability that supports commerce and economic enterprises. Thus, they support families, education, and the legal system. They favor people having enough surplus income to be consumers. In the U.S., the wealthy also significantly support the art and music and museums we all enjoy. And

many wealthy people also support churches, not only because of private belief but because churches are a primary place of ethical and moral formation. Because of the exponential growth of wealth in the last 50 years or so, today wealthy elites have the power to positively influence international development, climate challenges, global communications, and domestic politics.

The wealthy need the Church. Church is one place where a strong moral character is formed and informed. In Church they keep hearing those uncomfortable Gospel stories, important for making spiritual choices about the use of wealth. And the Church is also where those with significant wealth can meet and engage with people less wealthy. As sociologists like Christopher Lasch point out, privileged elites living in wealthy neighborhoods, learning, socializing and recreating with other wealthy people, can lose sensitivity for people living other kinds of lives.

We actually all share with the wealthy the same struggles with wealth. No matter what amount of wealth we have, it is seductive. In his recounting of the Good Samaritan story (Fratelli tutti No. 69), Pope Francis remarks: All of us have in ourselves something of the wounded man, something of the robber, something of the passersby, and something of the good Samaritan.” Whether we have much wealth or just a little surplus, wounds of class aggrievances and entitlements can dull our perceptions of justice. When our talents and good fortune help us to advance, wealth can make it easy to forget those we left behind, stilling our compassionate impulses. Wealth preys on our basic need for security. It makes us think we never have enough, especially when we compare ourselves with those who have more.

Wealth is a gift, but one that can be dangerous to our souls. We are all wealth managers, called to deal with the complexities of having some wealth while being detached and generous. I think a special kind of grace is given to those with significant wealth. The special responsibility greater wealth places on them calls them to a special awareness and a continuing reflection about the power they have and how to use it for the common good. That is their particular way of practicing social justice.

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