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"He could have been a source of blessing to many"

In his 24 January general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechetical cycle on vices and virtues, speaking about avarice.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

We are continuing our catechesis on vices and virtues, and today we will talk about avarice, that form of

attachment to money that keeps man from generosity.

It is not a sin that regards only people with large assets, but rather a transversal vice, which often has nothing to do with the bank balance. It is a sickness of the heart, not of the wallet.

The desert fathers' analysis of this evil showed how avarice could even take hold of monks, who, after renouncing enormous inheritances, in the solitude of their cell clung to objects of little value: they would not lend them, they did not share them and were even less willing to give them away. An attachment to little things, which takes away freedom. Those objects became for them a sort of fetish from which they could not detach themselves. A sort of regression to the state of children who clutch their toy repeating, "It's mine! It's mine!" In this claim there

lurks a disordered relationship with reality, which can result in forms of compulsive hoarding and pathological accumulation.

To heal from this sickness, the monks proposed a drastic, though highly effective method: meditation on death. However much a person accumulates goods in this world, of one thing we can be absolutely sure: they will not enter the coffin with us. We cannot take property with us! Here the senselessness of this vice is revealed. The bond of possession we create with objects is only apparent, because we are not the masters of the world: this earth that we love is in truth not ours, and we move about it like strangers and pilgrims (cf. *Lev* 25:23).

These simple considerations allow us to realize the folly of avarice, but also its innermost reason. It is an attempt to exorcise the fear of death: it seeks

securities that in reality crumble the very moment we hold them in our hand. Remember the parable of the foolish man, whose land had offered him a very abundant harvest, and so he lulled himself with thoughts of how to enlarge his storehouse to accommodate all the harvest. The man had calculated everything, planned for the future. He had not, however, considered the surest variable in life: death. “Fool!” says the Gospel. “This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”

In other cases, it is thieves who render this service to us. Even in the Gospel they make a good number of appearances and, although their work may be reprehensible, it can become a salutary admonition. Thus preaches Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves

break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal" (*Mt* 6: 19-20). Again, in the accounts of the desert fathers, the story is told of a thief who surprises the monk in his sleep and steals the few possessions he kept in his cell. When he wakes up, not at all disturbed by what has happened, the monk sets out on the thief's trail and, once he finds him, instead of claiming the stolen goods, he hands over the few things that remain, saying: "You forgot to take these!"

We, brothers and sisters, may be the masters of the goods we possess, but often the opposite happens: they eventually take possession of us. Some rich men are no longer free, they no longer even have the time to rest, they have to look over their shoulder because the accumulation

of goods also demands their safekeeping. They are always anxious, because a patrimony is built with a great deal of sweat, but can disappear in a moment. They forget the Gospel preaching, which does not claim that riches in themselves are a sin, but they are certainly a liability. God is not poor: He is the Lord of everything, but, as Saint Paul writes, "Though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that by His poverty you might become rich" (*2 Cor* 8:9).

This is what the miser does not understand. He could have been a source of blessing to many, but instead he has slipped into the blind alley of wretchedness. And the life of the miser is ugly. I remember a case of a man who I met in the other diocese, a very rich man, and his mother was sick. He was married. The brothers took turns to care for the mother, and the mother had a

yoghurt in the morning. This man gave her half in the morning so as to give her the other half in the afternoon, and to save half the yoghurt. This is avarice, this is attachment to things. Then this man died, and the comments of the people who went to the vigil were: “But, you can see that this man has nothing on him, he left everything.” And then, making a bit of a mockery, they would say: “No, no, they couldn’t close the coffin because he wanted to take everything with him.” This avarice, makes others laugh: that in the end we must give our body and soul to the Lord and we must leave everything. Let us be careful! And let us be generous, generous with everyone and generous with those who need us most. Thank you.

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