

**THE TWENTY-FIFTH (25<sup>TH</sup>) SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME  
YEAR C**

**“THE DAYS ARE COMING,” SAYS THE LORD**

As a general practice, priests take people where they are, as they are, and gently, patiently, but strongly try to lead them to a healthier, richer life – spiritual and otherwise. Humans, being what we are, have a hard time changing, and so often times pastoral leading has to include a measure of demanding, occasionally of motivating with a stick instead of a carrot, and always – always – with the expectation that people really do want to improve.

We always begin by identifying where a person is: who he is; what the manner of his life is; what the nature of his dissatisfaction with life is. So ... where are we these days? Pope Francis wrote in his most recent encyclical, “Humanity has entered a new era in which our technical prowess has brought us to a crossroads” (*Laudato Si*, 102). To illustrate what he means, consider that our country’s National Institute of Health (NIH) is proposing to authorize federally-funded research on combining human embryos with animal embryos. “The federal government will begin expending taxpayer dollars on the creation and manipulation of new beings whose very existence blurs the line between humanity and animals such as mice and rats” (USCCB). (Not content with confusing gender, we’re now going to confuse species.)

Pope Francis notes that “men and women have constantly intervened in nature, but [that] for a long time [namely, for the vast majority of human existence] this [has] meant being in tune with and respecting ... the things themselves. It was a matter of receiving what nature itself allowed” (*LS*, 106). The Human creature had lived in a healthier, more harmonious relationship with the world. Not so anymore. The view of the human’s relationship with nature, including the view of human nature, is changed. Pope Francis says we now use a “technocratic paradigm” in which we think of the world as an object to be used or controlled. He elaborated by explaining that the

technocratic paradigm makes every effort to exploit techniques “of possession, mastery, and transformation. It is as if the [human] subject [thinks himself] in the presence of something formless, [something] completely open to manipulation” (LS, 106). Pope Francis went on to say, “The technocratic paradigm also tends to dominate economic and political life” (LS, 109). The dominant economic structure [certainly] has contributed to “increasing wealth and material prosperity. But every form of progress comes with costs, and ignoring them does not make them go away” (Patrick Fleming, “Economics, Ecology, and Our Common Home: The Limits of a Preference-Based Approach to Human Behavior” in *Communio*, Winter 2015, 694).

This is where we are: the gap between the “haves” and the “have nots” is widening at a rate that will result in the destruction of all social structures: of nations, of borders, of services, of industries, of safety. The dominant material economy, controlled as it is today by “a purely financial market where wealth is generated and enjoyed by those who produce nothing except an incessant circulation of investment and divestment structure” (David Bentley Hart, “Mammon Ascendant” in *First Things*, June/July 2016, 36), “depends not merely on supplying needs and satisfying natural longings, but on the ceaseless invention of ever newer desires, ever more choices” (Hart, 35). Walk through any mall and count the number of retail stores that sell only frivolous, unnecessary “junk” and that seduce us to buy this garbage so easily, often effortlessly. Do we really need that iPhone 7? Or a bamboo pillow? Or a \$700.00 Coach handbag? Or an Emoji pillow? Or anything from Spencer Gifts or The Rocky Mountain Chocolate Factory or from any candle store? And can’t we find more valuable and satisfying things for the world’s workers to make?

The manufacture, sale, and promotion, and purchase, of many things is shameful and obscene. The economic reality is not that of supply meeting demand, but of supply creating demand. It’s

not based on bloodless markets forces, but on the cynical notion that “there’s a sucker born every minute.” The system is “inevitably corrosive of as many prohibitions of the will as possible, and therefore of all those customs and institutions – religious, cultural, social – that tend to restrain or even forbid so many acquisitive longings and individual choices” (Hart, 35).

In an article in which he maintains that “the history of capitalism and the history of secularism ... are the same story told from different vantages,” the theologian and polymath, David Bentley Hart pointed out that the current capitalist culture, intrinsically a consumerist economy, has the power to dissolve all the immemorial associations of family, tradition, faith, and affinity, [has an] irresistible dynamism [which] dissolves (*sic*) ancient values .... The secular world – our world, our age – is one from which as many mediating and subsidiary powers have been purged as possible, precisely to make room for the adventures of the will” (Hart, 35).

According to a report issued by Oxfam in 2015, the eighty richest people in the world – 80! 80 people – owned as much as did 3.5 billion others combined (Per Molander, *The Anatomy of Inequality: Its Social and Economic Origins – and Solutions*, 11). According to an article in the *Wall Street Journal* on January 16, 2016, that number at the top had shrunk from 80 people to 62. Sixty-two (62) people hold as much wealth as the bottom 3.5 billion people do combined. A day of reckoning is coming.

Which brings us to the Prophet Amos. “Hear this, you who trample upon the needy and destroy the poor of the land ... I will make the sun set at midday ... and cover the land with darkness. I will turn your feasts into mourning and all your songs in dirges. [...] I will make it ... the time of mourning. [...] The days are coming ... when ... you shall stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east in search of the word of the Lord but you shall not find it. On

that day, beautiful young woman and young men shall faint from thirst. Those who swear by [present ways], they shall fall, never to rise again” (Amos 8:4, 9, 10a, 10c, 11, 12, 13, 14).

To be fair, “of all the classical prophets, Amos’s message is the least hopeful. [To Amos] Israel’s fate – destruction – is certain, inescapable, [and] total” (Michael L. Barré, “Amos” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 3.II,(a); p. 210). Ironically enough, however, Amos preached “during a period of great material prosperity for Israel” (Barré, 2.I; p. 209). The prophet’s “harsh words were directed in a particular way against leadership – king, priests, and upper classes. But the coming judgment would affect the entire people, for Israelite thought ... perceive[d] the nation as a unity, with a common destiny” (Barré, 3.II.(a); p. 210).

It was the covenant at Mount Sinai that served Amos as the touchstone (the hermeneutic) for his message. “The quality of one’s relationship with God depended to some extent on how one related to fellow members of the covenant community. At the time of Amos many among Israel’s powerful had chosen to ignore this aspect of Israelite religion and to treat the disadvantaged as they wished. Wealthy landowners oppressed the less fortunate, taking over the landholdings of many impoverished Israelites” (Barré, 3.II.(a); p. 210).

Today, the prevailing wisdom maintains that inequality is a result of differences in capability and effort. That inequality is a manifestation of justice. The evidence, though, indicates that the prevailing wisdom is inadequate for explaining inequality (Molander, 11). The truth is much more complex. In addition to differences in capability and in effort, people also start from different advantage points, and throughout life have varying levels of luck (good and bad). Regarding the latter, in a book just published by Princeton University Press that includes hard data and mathematic proofs, Robert H. Frank shows that chance events play a much larger role in important life outcomes – including financial success – than most people care to admit. The

name of that book? *Success and Luck: Good Fortune and the Myth of Meritocracy*. In another new book, this one by a former consultant for the World Bank, for the OECD, for the European Commission, and for the Swedish Government, Per Molander, using a mathematical tool, dramatically and simply proves that “accidents of birth” (e.g. being born into wealth as opposed to being born into poverty) will seriously enhance or inhibit one’s potential for success regardless of intelligence or skill. In point of fact, a game theory indicated that a person who starts out with less family wealth, with fewer family assets than another has to be 26% better (26% smarter, 26% more attractive, 26% luckier, 26% what-have-you) than the other person just to have the same chance in life that she does. The point is, we are foolish to believe that market forces do justice. Market forces are incapable of making the world fair. Only people can do that.

So where do priests want to lead people? Our Holy Father points the way. Pope Francis tells us that we have to reject our present technological paradigm and embrace what he calls “integral ecology.” Your pastor will call it the “harmony of right order.” There is a divine harmony to creation, a “divine milieu” (Fr. Teilhard de Chardin, S.J.) to it. We must first recover the good sense to see nature as “a reality which ... precedes our existence and our abilities” (LS, 140). We must hear again “the message contained in the structures of nature itself” (LS, 117).

Pope Francis seeks our conversion in matters of consumption and waste, a conversion to more modest, healthier lifestyles, to – in Pope Benedict XVI’s phrasing – “more sober lifestyles” (LS,193). In the Gospel (Luke 16:1-13) Jesus tells people to be prudent and wise in the use of money and the goods of this world. And the prudential and wise use of money and goods is sharing them. If we count on them, if we keep them to and for ourselves, if we “serve mammon” by orienting our worlds around it, the wealth will destroy us. Jesus said, “You cannot serve God

and mammon” (Luke 16:13c). David Bentley Hart, in words perhaps reminiscent of the fierceness of Amos, put it this way, “[There is a point at which] the claim that capitalist culture and Christianity are compatible ... [is] not only self-evidently false, but quaintly (and perhaps perilously) deluded” (Hart, 38).

“The days are coming,” says the Lord, “when I will raise the needy from the dust, lift the poor from the ash heap and seat them with the princes of the people” (Ps 113:7-8). The days are coming.

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Readings:

Amos 8:4-7.  
Psalm 113: 1-2, 4-8.  
1 Timothy 2:1-8.  
Luke 16:1-13.

***HIS HEART, OUR HOME***

