

GOD OF EXTRAVAGANT GENEROSITY

Throughout my philosophical and theological studies at Bigard Memorial Seminary Enugu and Blessed Michael Iwene Tansi Seminary Onitsha, a classmate of mine was the envy of so many in the class including myself. This seminarian who is now a priest was the epitome and summary of living a carefree life. He was one of the noisiest seminarians in the seminary, very casual in his dressing and appearance, was not spiritually profound in our estimation, did not exhibit serious hunger for the priesthood and was not serious with his studies as well as slept through most of the lectures in class. During revision weeks, while many of us were serious and burnt candles at both ends, he only devoted minimal time to his studies and was always in bed at 10pm catching up on his beauty sleep. During our examinations, while many of us slaved to write so many pages and demanded extra sheets to prove our points, he never for once asked for an extra sheet. However, when the results were released, the same seminarian made 1st Class each time to the surprise of all including myself. Many of us thought he was undertaking private studies when nobody was watching but that was not true. When I mustered the courage to ask him the secret of his success, he laughed and told me that God blessed him with a very sharp, photographic, and retentive memory. What took a lot of people time to dissect, was never an issue for him which was why he answered complex questions during exams since he had the mental skills to tackle correctly and without much fuss. To make matters worse, because he was not uptight like most of us back then, he was the beloved of many of the seminary lecturers and he was always humble in accepting corrections. Today, he remains a wonderful and committed priest who has remained carefree with his views and approaches to life but a down-to-earth, humble, humane, and loving parish priest in Nigeria. Yes, the same gifts many of us had prayed and fasted for, were the same gifts God bestowed onto one person who never prayed nor fasted for them. No wonder Psalm 127:2 summarised this extravagant generosity of God thus: **“In vain is your earlier rising, your going later to rest, you who toil for the bread you eat, when He pours gifts on His beloved while they slumber.”** It is this extravagant generosity of God which is different from our ways and thoughts that we hear of in today’s readings.

In today’s Gospel pericope from Matthew Chapter 20, we are given a glimpse of what the kingdom of heaven would be like with the parable of the landowner who, after agreeing to pay his workers the then stipulated National and Living Wage of One Denarius each, began his recruitment drive. He recruited idle people to work at his vineyard at the 3rd hour – 9am, the 6th hour – 12am, the 9th hour – 3pm and the 11th hour – 5pm. When it was time to pay them their wages, the landowner decided to be just to the early recruits and generous to the later ones. While the early recruits grumbled at his sense of fairness to them, since they had done most of the day’s work and should have been paid more, they lost sight of the fact that He was just to the contract he agreed with them ab initio. This grumbling of theirs led the landowner to the statement which is the key to unpacking this parable. He said: ***E ho ophthalmos sou ponerous estin hoti ego agathos eimi* – Is your eye evil/wicked/envious because I am generous/good?** The most important phrase here is the **EVIL EYE**. The major issue with

the workers was not that they did not receive a fair wage, but that the landowner was generous to the late comers by paying them the same amount he paid them instead of less. Yes, their envy beclouded their minds from seeing the bigger picture which was the generosity of the landowner who wanted the happiness of every idle person who was willing to work. It is this envy encapsulated in their evil eye and evil thoughts that Prophet Isaiah condemned in today's First Reading from Isaiah Chapter 55, by asking the wicked man/woman to abandon their ways and thoughts and return to the Lord who is rich in forgiveness because His ways and thoughts are different from ours.

My friends, everything we have received and who we are, are gifts from God. They are gifts given to us not because we merit them but because of God's own extravagant generosity. This is well captured in the refrain of the hymn – 'We plough the field and scatter', we always and exuberantly sing – **'All good gifts around us are sent from Heaven above. Then thank the Lord, oh, thank the Lord for all His love'**. As we all know, envy is the sin of being upset at another's good fortune and all of us can relate to this either directly or indirectly.

- Why be envious when someone is succeeding more than us?
- Why be envious when someone is more talented/gifted than us?
- Why be envious when someone has a better job/house/car/wealthier than us?
- Why be envious when someone has a better husband/wife/partner than us?
- Why be envious when someone has been reconciled with God and the Church?
- Why be envious that many of our parishioners are back to the parish?
- Why be envious that the Church and our parish are more inclusive of everyone?

It was Socrates who said: **"Envy is the ulcer of the soul."** When we allow the ulcer of envy to take root in our hearts, we stopped being appreciative of who we are and the gifts we have been given, and start being upset at the gifts/talents of other people even to the point of wanting to destroy them to acquire those gifts/talents. This is why the Catechism of the Catholic Church #2539 stated: **"Envy is a capital sin. It refers to the sadness at the sight of another's goods and the immoderate desire to acquire them for oneself, even unjustly. When it wishes grave harm to a neighbour it is a mortal and diabolical sin."**

My friends, our God is extravagantly generous; He has blessed everyone of us so much that there are no other photocopies of us in the world. We are so unique that no one else can replace us in the world. Like the seminarian above, let us realise God's generosity towards us and all those around us and glorify Him for that. By so doing, we would have paid heed to the admonition of St Paul in today's Second Reading – To avoid anything in our daily lives that would be unworthy of the gospel of Christ. One of such things to avoid is envy since the world is big enough to contain all of us.

Fr Johnpromise Umeozuru

Homily for the 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A (24/09/2023)