

God's blessings are not meant to be wasted...

Day after day Christians say the Lord's Prayer, asking God to "give us this day our daily bread," that is, to provide us with what we need for today. The rich man in Christ's parable (Lk 12:16-22) clearly has a different perspective. He is not just concerned about today but about tomorrow, finding his security in the "grain and goods" he has stored up. The man's approach seems practical. Nobody wants to end their days on earth in a welfare hotel. But if we put absolute confidence in any earthly resource we will be as foolish as this rich man for "a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Lk 12:15).

The parable raises a number of questions for Christians: what are possessions for? Should a Christian's use of his or her wealth differ from that of a non-Christian? Where do we find God's will in these matters?

The Scriptures frequently speak about money or other assets. It has been estimated that there are over 800 indications in the Bible about using our resources. Perhaps the greatest clarity on this question is found in St Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians. He tells his readers that "God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that you may always have enough of everything and may provide in abundance for every good work." (2 Cor 9:8) St Paul's principle is clear: God provides – that we have "enough of everything" and "an abundance" for doing good.

What is "Enough"? – this refers to what we actually need: the "basics" (food, clothing, shelter, etc.). What is actually necessary varies over time and place as well as circumstances of life. We need things in our culture which others societies either did not require or have. Today we need health or car insurance, for example – something which did not even exist before our own age.

Similarly "need" is different for a family than for a single person. A single person probably doesn't require three cars while a suburban family with a son or daughter in a university might require just that. The circumstances of our lives and of our society will dictate what we actually need to live the lives which we have been given. St Paul's principle applies in all circumstances, however. Anything more than what we truly need is given to us by God for the doing of good.

Sociologists have long described the modern age as a time of "conspicuous consumption" when people spend money on expensive or unnecessary items, not to meet their real needs but to display wealth or status. People often are pushed to acquire bigger and better houses, flat screen TVs, etc. – not because they need them but in order to outshine their neighbors or social rivals. We are taught to keep upgrading our possessions and thus "better" our lives. This dynamic is not limited to the upper classes of society. The poor are perhaps more susceptible to the tendency to prove one's real worth by the number of their possessions.

Two automobiles have become icons of contrasting economic strategies in the world today. The "solid gold Cadillac," title of a 1950s Broadway play and film, represents the world of spending for show rather than for need. The second automobile, symbolizing the Scriptural principle of spending for need, is the Fiat compact sedan in which Pope Francis rode during his 2015 American visit. The pope's Fiat was saying something important about the ways of God on earth. God's blessings abound, but they are not meant to be wasted on empty display. As the British newspaper *The Guardian* quipped at the time, "A Fiat is worth a thousand words."

Many people feel that they are just getting by, they have no "abundance" to share with others. This is often because we have come to believe the admen who say you absolutely need the latest model, style or title, especially when promoted by a celebrity. If Nicole Kidman says you need it, who am I to judge?! Once we take a realistic look at our needs we find that we can do without things which may be pleasurable or desirable but are not necessary for our life. We may then find that God has actually provided us with an abundance, which can be used for the good of others.

This exercise, recognizing that our needs and our desires are not always the same, is a healthy exercise for all Christians to undergo especially these coming days as we approach the Christmas Season. Let us then all embark on this exercise guided by the tools the Church has provided us throughout its history: fasting, which begins in our Melkite Church on December 10 (the Traditional Christmas Fast begins on November 15), coupled with almsgiving.

Adapted from the Melkite Office of Evangelization and Catechesis (Newton, US)