

THIRTY SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (11/7-8/2009)

1 Kings 17/10-16, Psalm 146, Hebrews 9/24-28, Mark 12/38-44

Many years ago, I worked in a financially strapped parish on the west side of Chicago. Our average Sunday collection was around \$180, and out of that we had to run the rectory, pay salaries to two priests, as well as one housekeeper and one janitor; we also boasted a school of 140 children with six nuns living in the convent.

As you might imagine, we learned to stretch a buck.

One Christmas, the parish and the school each received a \$100 check from a donor.

I asked the principal to write a thank-you letter from me, as well as from herself; this she did.

Shortly thereafter, I received a very critical letter from the donors (who were quite well off); they berated me for not writing a thank you note personally.

In my frustration and anger, I fired off an answering letter citing the story of the generous widow in today's Gospel (among other things), and explaining my work and lack of time, etc.

I heard nothing back, but those same donors sent another \$100 check the following Christmas.

I confess I wrote a letter of thanks the second year; hopefully, we had all learned something.

Sharing our treasure with others is not always an easy thing to do.

Sometimes our charity is self-serving. In other words, we give in order to get.

What we may get is praise, good feelings, a reputation for generosity, smugness in our giving.

That's probably what Jesus saw as he watched the people deposit their donations to the temple.

Many were presenting reasonably large sums, but may have been doing so with the hope that someone would notice their "generosity".

The widow, dressed in her poor clothing and probably embarrassed by her poverty, comes forward and drops her precious pennies into the coffer. Then she hurries off.

Jesus is impressed.

It reminds me of a Puerto Rican parishioner back at the parish mentioned above.

Each year, we held a raffle with a first prize of \$500; that was a princely sum, perhaps a month's salary for most of our parishioners and three Sunday collections for us!

Well, the prize was won by Flor Quinones this one year; everyone was happy for him because Flor was a popular guy who could use the money to augment his meager factory salary.

On Monday evening, the day after the raffle, our rectory front doorbell rang, and there was Flor.

He smiled at me and somewhat sheepishly gave me back the check for the \$500.

At first, I refused to take it knowing that he and his family could well use the prize.

But he insisted with the words: "Mi iglesia es mi familia y mi casa, Padre." "My church is my family and my home."

He teared up and so, I admit, did I.

No fanfare, no special letter of thanks, no one else knew of it; for Flor, presenting the check was enough.

He was my "widow" and I was privileged to be there to witness his generosity.

Remembering what Flor did has helped me to understand today's Gospel passage, and to seek to imitate such selfless generosity in my own life.