

Sunday. 18.10

On Thursday night on Public Television there was a program about hobos, young hobos, kids who hopped onto trains in the days of the depression, that is, in the thirties. The program moved from pictures of these kids hopping on and off trains and sleeping on top of them to interviews with some of these kids, now old men in their eighties. One of them, a black man, began to cry when he recalled what his father said to him: "You've got to go. I can't keep you here any longer. You've got to fend for yourself." Can you imagine yourself as a fourteen or fifteen year old hearing those words from your father? But it happened, and there was that boy, now an old man, unable to recall the scene without crying.

Are things any better now than they were there? I think we have to say they are because there are more safety nets provided by government, although some today say there are too many such nets. They want to cut back on government spending for such programs. They see too many people taking dishonest advantages of them. Think of the fraud in the world of Medicare and Medicaid. Dishonest people, with the help of doctors willing to cooperate with them, have billed the government for services which never took place. But despite these abuses most of us would

say that our society is better off with such programs than without them.

All of this has a necessary relationship to our faith lives. Today's readings which talk about greed make that very clear to us. In both the first reading from the Book of Ecclesiastes and the Gospel we are reminded of the fact that it is foolish for people to put their trust in money because life is short and uncertain and we cannot promise ourselves even tomorrow. So it is foolish to labor exclusively for money to spend tomorrow because there may not be a tomorrow. What we should do instead is labor to become rich in what matters to God. We should aim to leave this life with empty pockets and hearts full of charity and love for others, and not the other way around. That is true richness because that is what matters in the sight of God. Our faith is warning us about greed, which the dictionary defines as an excessive desire for getting and having, a desire for more than one needs or deserves.

But such a warning does not mean that we should neglect our daily needs. Indeed, in his second Letter to the Thessalonians (3:10) St Paul wrote that if a person will not work, he should not eat. We should earn our livelihood quietly, Paul taught. Some of us who are present at our food pantry on Thursdays often think of these

words of Paul and whisper to ourselves: “Why don’t these people get a job? Why do they expect others to give them their food for nothing?” But when we look around at these people, we realize that more than half of them can’t work. They are either too old or too sick to do so. And then we also realize that many of them have not had a good family background or education. So they don’t qualify for many jobs. They need help.

Our church through its popes and bishops has been trying to say something about economics since the 1890s when Pope Leo XIII wrote an encyclical about the new economic situation created by the Industrial Revolution which brought about a change from a farming society to a mill society. It soon became evident that while some people lived better as mill workers, many did not. Even children became disposable tools in the hands of greedy mill owners. This situation has not changed, although in the first world laws have improved it. The question of poverty and work remains. How to build a society where people can find work which will support them and their families? That remains the question for us here and now even in the richest country of the world.

In 1986 the bishops of our country wrote a pastoral letter on the economy in which they asked that our country, which was founded

on the ideal of liberty and justice for all in the civil and political order, now extend this ideal to the economic order, that is, that it recognize the fact that there are such things as economic rights, and among these is the right to have work. We are still working on that today. People want to work and cannot find work. How can we restructure our economy, our society, so that more people will be able to find work more easily?

But in our world today, and in our country as well, the disparity between the rich and the poor continues to grow. This means that we are moving farther and farther away from the ideal which is a more equitable distribution of wealth. In this struggle we as a church must be on the side of the poor, not the rich.

“You fool, this night your life will be demanded of you; and the things you have prepared, to whom will they belong? Thus will it be for all who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich in what matters to God.” Let us pray that we as individuals and as a society will heed these words of the Lord.