

*Zacarias G. Damo, Jr.*  
In a certain parish, the priest demanded each family to donate 10 tiles, worth PhP 500.00, for the completion of a convent that could rival the size of the church. The priest's room is spacious enough to accommodate 10 persons at a time, and is well equipped with luxuries such as air-conditioning, complete entertainment set and bath tub. Ironically, the convent which costs around 7 million pesos appears out of place in a community where majority lives below poverty line. Be that as it may, the priest required the poor to donate, quoting the story of the widow's mite in Mark 12:41-44 as justification. This prescribed donation is either in the form of a tithe or a pledge.

Technically, tithing is a regular church contribution amounting to 10% of a parishioner's monthly income. Pledging, unlike tithing, may be more or less than 10 %, but similar to tithing, the manner of giving is regular. A tithing/pledging module of a certain diocese states: You don't have to possess large sums of money to be a larger giver as exemplified by the widow (Mk 12:41-44).

The priest in our opening story and the tithing/pledging module quote the story of the widow in Mark 12:41-44 as justification for demanding tithes or pledges from the poor. But the poor (as well as the non-poor) who are awakened -- concerned and struggling to eradicate poverty in view of a more humane world -- may validly ask: Why are the poor required to donate when they don't even have enough of the least amenities for a decent life? This is a query -- loaded with experience-born-insights -- which criticizes the validity of systems that do not only exact from the poor, but are also apathetic if not contributory to their destitution. Indeed, the struggling and awakened poor (and non-poor who are in solidarity with them) cannot but question biblical interpretations which may legitimize oppression. Accordingly, we ask: Is it valid to interpret the story of the widow's mite in Mark 12:41-44 as justification of tithing or pledging of the poor?

A Perusal of Mark 12:41-44. The aforementioned question demands a careful and thorough reading of Mark 12:41-44 (NRSV):  
He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.

Myers (1988) points out that one interpretation of the passage is the contrast between the religious hypocrisy of the scribes and the genuine piety of the poor widow. Horsley (2001), on the other hand, draws out the pastoral implication of this alleged genuine piety, that is, the demand of Sunday pledges from parishioners in support of church works. He, nonetheless, remarks that pledging is not the proper interpretation of the story. Horsley's point will be thoroughly discussed later.

A well-accepted interpretation of Mark 12:41-44 is that of Harrington (1988). The passage, according to Harrington, serves as a perfect transition to the story of how the one who had come to serve is going to give everything he had, not only his living, but his very life, for humanity (cf. Mk 10:45). If the story of the widow serves as a transition to Jesus' redemptive sacrifice, then Mark 12:41-44 is not about tithing or pledging, or genuine piety in relation to sacred donations. Hence, Mark 12:41-44 is not a justification of the tithing or pledging of the poor (as represented by the widow).

The Need of a Historical Reading of Mark 12:41-44. Harrington's interpretation is a theological reading of the widow's mite in relation to Jesus' offering of himself as ransom for many (Cf. Mark 10:45). Notwithstanding this interpretation's validity, it is the aim of this paper to show that Mark 12:41-44 can be

appreciated more fully in the background of the historical dynamics of Jesus' time. Jesus, anyway, did not just remark on matters within a vacuum. The message of Mark 12:41-44, moreover, cannot but be historical, at least (Cf. Bonino, 1975). Also, historical processes are indispensable in the proper understanding of biblical texts (Cf. Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1994).

In contrast then to Harrington's theological reading, we focus on a historical reading of Mark 12:41-44. It is hoped that on this perspective, we will come to see more clearly that the passage is not about tithing or pledging of the poor.

The Historical Dynamics of Jesus' Time. The following are important historical dynamics that can shed more light on Mark 12:41-44:

(i) In Jesus' time Israelite villagers were required to set aside a significant portion of their produce for priestly tithes, first fruits offerings, and various other sacred donations for the Jerusalem Temple. Added to these was the tribute they had to give to the Roman Empire. Oppressive double-taxation, indeed. Severe and violent penalties were imposed on those who could not comply. In an impoverished country, most found this multiple tribute system as extremely burdensome (cf. Horsley and Silberman, 2002).

(ii) In the authentic spirit of the Torah, Temple tithes and offerings were meant to ensure God's blessings for Israel's agricultural bounty (cf. Horsley and Silberman, 2002). This spirit was lost in Jesus' time. Clear evidence was mass poverty and oppression.

(iii) One factor for the absence of authentic Torah spirit regarding tithing in Jesus' time was the fact that there were no mechanisms by which resources from temple tithes and offerings would be channeled to those who were most in need (cf. Horsley and Hansen, 1998).

(iv) Who benefited then from Temple tithes, and other sacred donations? The scribes, other religious leaders and elitists who lived in extreme luxury amidst the extreme poverty of the majority (cf. Horsley and Hansen, 1988).

Interpreting Mark 12:41-44 in the Light of History. Based on the aforementioned historical dynamics of Jesus' time, we can assert that the poor widow represents the common people who, despite their poverty, had to give tribute (tithe and other sacred donations) to the Temple treasury. This tribute, however, was not meant for God or God's beloved poor (the ptochoi or anawim), but for the insatiable greed of the scribes and other religious elite. This interpretation is confirmed by Mark 12:38-40 (NRSV) which immediately precedes Mark 12: 41-44. (We then read Mark 12:41-44 in its immediate context) Mark 12: 38-40 reads:

As he taught, he said, Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.

Myers (1988) quotes Fledderman for a commentary that allows the historical dynamics behind the tonality of the aforementioned passage to speak:

the explanation lies in Mark's narrative opposition between prayer and robbery. The site of scribal prayer is the temple, and the costs of this temple devour the resources of the poor. Jesus, who fiercely opposed such exploitation in the temple action points to the tragic story of the widow's mite by way of illustration.

Myers (1988) quotes Wright for further comments:

The story does not provide a pious contrast to the conduct of the scribes in the preceding section (as is the customary view); rather, it provides a further illustration of the ills of official devotion. Jesus' saying is not a penetrating insight on the measuring of gifts; it is a lament Jesus condemns the value system that motivates her action, and those who conditioned her to do it.

Finally, Horsley (2001), commenting on the widow's mite, claims:

The widow in this episode in Mark's story is a symbolic and representative

figure. She illustrates the extremes to which the scribes (and the rulers generally) had gone in securing revenues for their Temple stronghold. Not only did they engineer the exploitation of the people generally, but they even preyed on helpless widows, inducing them to give away even their last coppers.

**Initial Conclusion.** By now, it should be clear that Mark 12:41-44 is not to be interpreted as a passage justifying the practice of demanding the poor to tithe or give pledges.

**Theologically,** Mark 12:41-44 is a transition story reinforcing Jesus' redemptive death on the cross.

**Analysis of the passage in the light of historical dynamics** reveals that Mark 12:41-44 is about condemnation of the greed of religious leaders (and all rulers, generally) who, in their greed for wealth and power, did not even spare powerless and helpless widows (representative of the oppressed, helpless poor).

**Pastoral Implication.** Whenever churches plan to implement a tithing/pledging system, the historical message of Mark 12:41-44 should be seriously considered. One important lesson from this message is that for greedy or unnecessary purposes such as religious leaders' extremely comfortable, millionaires' or elitist lifestyles' exploitation of the poor through pledges in the guise of 'sacred donations' is certainly a no, no thing. I cannot but remember our opening story. Should not pastors, priests and any religious leader prioritize the welfare of their flock over their own vested interests? (In the first place, is it proper that they harbor vested interests?) And gone should be the days when religious leaders measured their success through the number of church buildings they erected. Ought not religious leaders be nurturing people rather than establishing infra-structures? Should not church (temple) resources be spent for human development such as poverty alleviation, liberation from political, economic and even religious slavery and the like, instead of building lifeless edifices which indicate the powers of oppressive institutions that hinder and kill life? (Cf. Mk 3:1-3)

**Acts 4:32-35 as Model of Authentic System of Sharing.** The insights insinuated by the aforementioned questions resonate with the authentic system of sharing found in Acts 4:32-35 (NRSV). (Maybe, let us rest a bit from mentioning tithing and pledging so that we can breathe and enjoy the 'fresh air' of sharing depicted in the following passage):

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Remarkable in this passage are the following:

- (i) All held their possessions in common.
- (ii) Those who contributed were only those who owned lands and houses which they sold.
- (iii) The proceeds of the sale of properties were distributed according to the needs of the believers so that no one was ever in need (equitable sharing).

These are pointers that should be considered in a Christian system of tithing/pledging. And note, unlike the case of the widow in Mark 12: 41-44, the helpless or destitute are helped rather than exploited.

**Problem.** There is, however, one issue we have to consider before making a final conclusion on the topic of tithing or pledging of the poor. The tithing manual which uses Mark 12:41-44 as justification for exacting from the poor cites another passage, i.e. 2 Corinthians 8:1-3 (NRSV):

We want you to know brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means.

To properly deal with this passage, it is helpful to note the following:

- (i) The Bible has no uniform theology (cf. Abesamis, 2002). If, for the sake of argument, we may indeed say that for

Paul, the poor may be allowed to contribute, such however is not mentioned in Mark 12:41-44, and therefore not the point of Jesus as portrayed by Mark. Go back to the passage and realize that even though Jesus remarked on the widow's act of sharing, Jesus was just simply stating a fact, that is, the widow gave more because she gave all that she had compared to those who shared their surplus. And note well, Jesus, did not command his listeners to do what the widow had done. There was no prescription such as **Go and do the same.**

Similarly, letting the poor donate is not mentioned in Acts 4:32-35. (ii) Paul clearly states in the passage that the Macedonian Christians voluntarily donated. This indicates that contribution from the poor was not a forced or strict requirement of authentic, Christian tithing system. And as we will see shortly, Paul's context is different from the context of the widow in Mark. Interpretation in context will clarify more the matters we have been discussing so far.

Assuming that the poor were required to give tithes or pledges, this form of tithing/pledging system should not be problematic in the context of an egalitarian society in which nobody, as much as possible, is neglected. Note that tithing/pledging of the poor in Mark 12:41-44 is questionable because it is within the context of an oppressive exploitative socio-religious system ruled by greedy leaders. But in a caring and loving system such as that depicted in Acts 4:32-35 which, most likely, was the atmosphere that inspired the poor in 2 Corinthians 8:1-3 to share, mutual sharing should not be a big issue. There are other biblical passages which indicate that even the poor may, but are not forced, to tithe or give pledges, e.g. 2 Cor 9:7,13; 2 Cor 8:8; Mt. 6:31-33 and Lk 6:38. But again, to reiterate the point, one has to note that tithing/pledging of the poor is not a big or problematic issue in the context of an egalitarian society. Tithing/pledging of the poor, however, becomes scandalous within a system that exploits the poor while the elite greedily devour the accumulated sacred donations of the poor. As long as this kind of structural evil exists, the widow and her mite in Mark 12:41-44 will continue to convey a message of protest against oppression and poverty, in the name of the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus.

**Final Conclusion.** When is tithing/pledging of the poor justified? It should be clear by now that tithing/pledging of the poor may or may not be justified depending on context. The story of the widow's mite in Mark 12:41-44 is never a justification of tithing or pledging of the poor because it is within a death-dealing context wherein most suffer miserable lives of destitution caused by an oppressive societal-religious-economic-political system manipulated by elitists with insatiable greed.

On the other hand, in a life-giving context of authentic, Christian egalitarianism wherein equality of dignity is a core value on which equitable sharing is anchored, as may be implied in Acts 4:32-35, voluntary (not forced) sharing by the poor is indeed very much welcomed (Cf. 2 Corinthians 8:1-3). Donation given by the poor in this context, anyway, is truly sacred because it is a sign of authentic gratitude that naturally springs from their jubilant hearts. Donation, therefore, becomes an authentic eucharistia (eucharist = thanksgiving) of those who have concretely experienced God's blessings through the tangible love of brothers and sisters who genuinely care. Hence, the celebration of the Holy Mass becomes authentically a worship of the true God and not the idolatrous bowing to a mammonic system that siphons the resources of the poor in order to maintain and nurture the luxurious lifestyle of the elite.

The aforementioned reflections emphasize the importance of socio-political-economic-religious context as a major factor to consider in the implementation of any tithing/pledging system. This demands a careful, well-discerned and well-prayed for social analysis made not only by the Church hierarchy and their experts, but most especially the empowered faithful, who, in the Philippine context, are most likely

composed of the poor. It is a good counsel to hear the voices of the struggling and awakened poor because from them, precious data for social analysis can be abundantly drawn.<br />♦♦♦♦♦ Lastly, one important issue to consider is the readiness of Church structures for tithing. Is the present Church institution, i.e. her systems and organizational components ready for the type of egalitarianism (such as that in Acts 4) where a genuine, authentic Christian tithing/pledging system can fruitfully thrive and be sustained?</div><div

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ms,sans-serif"><br /></font><font face="comic sans ms,sans-serif">1 This paper was first published in the Research Section of the Website of the St. Hannibal Empowerment Center. Its exegesis and theological foundations were perused and approved by Sr. Miriam R. Alejandrino, OSB. Sr. Miriam finished her Licentiate in Sacred Scriptures (SSL) at the Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome, and her Doctorate in Sacred Theology (Biblical Theology) at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome.</font></div>