

32<sup>nd</sup> Sunday Ordinary Time  
November 6-7, 2021

*The jar of flour shall not go empty...*

Readings: 1 Kings 17:10-16; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

Any cursory trip through a grocery store today reveals how much things have changed. The percentage of pre-packaged meals has risen rapidly. Who buys a head of lettuce today? Good luck finding one. The bagged salad category alone is \$5.5 billion in the US. Nearly 25% of retail grocery sales are for prepared food. And I've never once purchased a bag of flour!

In our first reading today, we are told that “the jar of flour shall not go empty, nor the jug of oil run dry.” The widow of Zarephath was told by Elijah to “make a little cake” and bring it to him. First off, how long would that have taken? That is a two-to-three-hour process just for the dough to rise. After the flour was ready, it was combined with water and kneaded inside a large trough. One method was by means of a **tannur**. This was a beehive-shaped clay oven in the ground that was heated with a fire that was put aside, and the dough was baked on top of the hot clay.<sup>1</sup>

In short, the seemingly small request of Elijah was anything but simple. Perhaps he knew what he was doing? Did he purposely make this request so as to give her time to think, to re-consider her plans? After all, she said, “when we have eaten it, we shall die.” She was clearly in despair. That gap of time may have been just enough to save her life. We are then told that the jar did not go empty, nor the jug run dry for the next year. Each day she trusted, and each day the Lord did not disappoint. It did not run out.

The plight of widows in the Scriptures was horrific. Our Gospel spoke of how the scribes devoured the savings of widows, taking advantage of their congregation, preyed on their gullibility for their own wealth and profit. Our Lord says that they will receive a stiff sentence at the final judgment, the highest court of them all. Jesus warns that those who act for their own interests will undergo a “very severe condemnation.”

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<sup>1</sup> <https://amazingbibletimeline.com/blog/how-did-the-ancient-israelites-make-bread/>

The comparative form of the adjective is used here, implying that they will be more harshly judged because of their position of trust. After all, more is expected to those to whom more has been given.

In the case of Elijah, know that he was very forceful in his words to those in authority. He did not back down. He confronted King Ahab because of idolatry and as a result called down a drought upon the land. He lives by a brook for time and ravens feed him, but even the brook dries up. That is when he went to Sidon and encounters the widow.

For our part, the story of the widow offers a valuable lesson. Take time to think—and where appropriate to pray— before making any major decision. Wait and listen. Consider all angles, including possible negative outcomes. Not everything you think ought to be said and not every initial instinct is the right one. At times, yes, but do not always bet on it.

A rising 22-year-old star receiver in the NFL made a tragic and totally avoidable decision when he stepped into a sports car while intoxicated and smashed into a car going well over 120 mph at impact. An innocent woman died a horrific death. She lost her life; his life is forever changed.

Sometimes, the Lord gives us time to seriously re-consider our actions ahead of time. This is how a well-formed conscience works. Pray for the cardinal virtues— prudence, justice temperance and fortitude. The term *cardinal* comes from the Latin *cardo*, meaning hinge. They are hinge virtues on which our entire moral framework hangs. That structure needs to be solid. If we learn from mistakes, we will grow. But if we take the necessary time beforehand, we will avoid many potential problems.

Today in the Church, we need Elijah's to speak the truth clearly and when necessary, powerfully. I am praying both for our bishops and us priest to witness powerfully to the saving truths of our faith in love.

After all, the primary task of any religious leader is the salvation of souls, the highest good of all. The exercise of charity is always connected to the truth. If you love someone, you tell them the truth.

Each of us must examine our conscience and reflect on how we are approaching the Holy Eucharist. Are we mindful of the need to be in a state of grace? Are we concentrating sufficiently during the Mass to truly be entering into the sacrifice of the Mass? We pastors have a sacred duty to teach clearly about the Eucharist and our individual approach to it.

As our Catholic bishops continue their discussion on aspects of the Eucharist, I will follow it closely, as well fulfill my own duties to teach clearly—in season and out—on important matters of faith and morals. You deserve solid guidance, helpful advice, and honest feedback. We priests rely on the same principles in our lives in our own examination of conscience. May we take the time to reflect on these important questions.

Centuries ago, the Scribes represented a body of teachers whose office was to interpret the Law to the people.<sup>2</sup> Their office began after the time of the prophets; the derivation of the word “scribe” means “to count” and in the past they also held a civic role, including drafting legal documents for marriages, loans, inheritances or the sale of land.

As official interpreters of the Law as contained in the Torah (first five books of Scripture), effectively they were the ancient version of lawyers and judges. They had to interpret the law and apply it. But in today’s Gospel, they are neither respected as prominent leaders in society, nor are they heroes at all. No, it is the poor widow who takes center stage. The real hero is the quiet one who shies away from the limelight, yet who actually lives the fullness of the faith and its demands.

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<sup>2</sup> The original meaning of the Hebrew word "soferim" was "people who know how to write"; and therefore, the royal officials who were occupied in recording in the archives the proceedings of each day were called scribes. (See Jewish Encyclopedia entry “Scribes”)