

A Distinctly American Theology

Ukrainian Catholics can discuss their theological tradition with understanding in the United States, Canada, France, and Ukraine, to name a few. Our theology is genuinely universal. Roman Catholics can discuss theology with common foundations throughout the world. The word "catholic" means universal. Our Ukrainian Catholic theology is universal. But in the United States, the Protestants have a distinctively American theology. It goes all the way back to the Puritans.

The Puritans were Protestant Calvinists who believed in predestination, that is: God chose some people to be saved and other people who were damned. They contend it is important to know whether you are in the saved group or the damned group, so you look for signs in this world. This way, one of the signs of being saved is you have God's favor, which is shown through material success. This is gained through a salary or wage from your labor. Some call this the "Protestant Work Ethic".

In the 19th century, this became combined with what was called "New Thought," which was also distinctively American. New Thought meant that an individual was responsible for their own happiness, their own health, and their own situation in life. A person was called upon to use their mental energy to bring all of these things about. As one New Thought person, Ralph Waldo Trine, born in northern Illinois, wrote, "See yourself in a prosperous condition, affirm that you will before long be in a prosperous condition." Thinking along these lines produces self-help books which found popularity in the United States by being promoted by Oprah Winfrey on her show.

Sociological studies going back to 1905 show that most Protestants held the belief that working hard and receiving material financial rewards were connected. This was found in American Protestantism and people like Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker. In 2006 17 percent of American Christians identified with this movement. 31 percent believed "if you give your money to God, God will bless you with more money". And 61 percent held that God wants people to be prosperous. This is now called the Prosperity Gospel espoused by people like Joel Osteen. This "gospel" put less focus on work and more on faith. If you have "faith", God will take care of you. This theme is found in many Christian movies. For example, a football team is in last place, and they bring in a new coach who has them pray as a team. As they prayed, they started winning games. More enthusiasm

was involved in their prayer, so they won the state championship.

Ukrainian Catholics in the United States are exposed to this theological trend. Most of our people work hard and hope to be successful. But we do not consider that wealth is a sign that we are going to heaven. So, following this theological theory, we should all be rich since we are very faithful people who show their faith through persecutions. This suggests that if we're not wealthy, the only thing that is lacking is our true faith in Jesus Christ. Of course, following the "logic" of the Prosperity Gospel preachers, God will reward you *if* you are faithful, which makes you generous to their ministry. I pray that none of our priests tell our faithful that if they give 10% off the top of their earnings in the collection, God will reward them a hundredfold for every donation. But the proof that Osteen and others point out in their message is that they are rich and they live well.

This seems contrary to the lived experience of our Church. Our Lord tells His followers not that they will be prosperous for following Him, but will be persecuted. While we are called to repent, the intention is not to make us monetarily rich but better Christians or simply, holier. Our God is a compassionate God who desires all His children to be with Him in the eternal paradise of heaven. In heaven, we will be surrounded by love, as seen in the image of the heavenly banquet. While the *Book of Revelation* truly speaks of streets of gold in heaven, it points out that gold isn't valuable in heaven because it's what the streets are made from.

God loves us as His children. He loved us first, even in the war. Some people grow in His love other people reject His love. So Jesus's command to love our neighbor, even our enemies, means that we should share God's love with them so that they too may accept God's love and go after this life here to paradise with God in heaven.

The movement of the Gospel of Greed generated movies with the same theme. As Satan tempted Our Lord in the desert by quoting Scripture, we should not be led astray by how some misquote St Paul's second letter to the Corinthians (8: 9), which states "you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though He was rich yet for your sake He became poor so that by His poverty, you might become rich". As with everything else in Scripture, we need to balance it with another quote in which Saint Paul asks the Corinthians to contribute generously to the needs of the Saints (Christians living in poverty throughout the Mediterranean world, but





particularly in Jerusalem). He makes this statement to people who are already poor, asking them to be generous. Paul did this to create a bond among people, not wealth and justice, because St Paul says our Lord becoming poor does not mean financially. Jesus' poverty can be found in his letter to the Philippians (chapter 2, verses 5 through 11), when our Lord fully shared in the divinity of God the Father. He emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant. This was Jesus' poverty. It was a poverty of His laying aside the appearance in His nature. Thus, He enables us to become rich and share in the divine nature. Jesus' wealth is to have the divine life in us as opposed to being rich with things. We have a gospel of Theosis—we become rich by participating in the divine nature, a spiritual treasure—which surpasses any material wealth any day.

Our duty as a Church is to come out strong in support of our authentic teaching that we are called to be sharers in the divine nature, not rich, greedy or

selfish. In the love of our neighbor, we share this knowledge that God wants to share His life with them so that they may be spiritually rich, rather than materially rich. This wealth is the love that they take into heaven, and they will go there because, in love, we have shown them the way.

Our God is a God of love. God loves us and helps us be the best person we can be. Sometimes, God uses tough love, so this is why sometimes bad things happen to good people. St. Paul was a good man, yet he was scourged, shipwrecked, imprisoned, and rejected by his people. Truly, he was a man of great faith who preached the Good News and supported himself in his ministry by making tents. St. Paul's life "refutes the 'gospel of greed'".

Many saints of the Church were wealthy but supported the work of the Church. Many saints in the Church were poor and were dependent upon others for their sustenance. The ones who were special to Jesus were those who lived on the margins of life. So the

rich are disadvantaged, but they can still be saved, like Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. It is just more difficult for them. They have to control their wealth and not let their wealth handle them, as in the camel and the eye of the needle similitude. So, if you are poor, it is genuinely proper to thank God for that gift because your temptation to sin is lessened. As our Lord said, "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. (Luke 6:20)." He follows this with, "But woe to you rich, for you have already received your reward. (6:24)." Therefore it is better to be poor here and be comforted in the life to come for all eternity.

Lastly, in our Tradition, we are called to be monks in the world. A rich monk is a contradiction in terms.

Since we cannot take our wealth to the next life, we can take our goodness, compassion, and love. Let us be glad and rejoice, for our reward is genuinely great in heaven if we are poor.

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