

Prayer Before a Twenty-Dollar Bill

by Michel Quoist

We can hardly respect money enough for the blood and toil it represents.
Money is frightening. It can serve or destroy humanity.



“Corruption has fallen on your riches; all the fine clothes are left moth-eaten, and the gold and silver have long lain rusting. That rust will bear witness against you. . . . You have kept back the pay of the workmen who reaped your lands, and it is there to cry out against you; the Lord of hosts has listened to their complaint.”

(Jas 5:2-4)

“Sell what you have, and give alms, so providing yourselves with a purse that time cannot wear holes in, an inexhaustible treasure laid up in heaven, where no thief comes near, no moth consumes. Where your treasure-house is, there your heart is too.”

(Lk 12:33-34)

Lord, see this bill! It frightens me.

You know its secrets, you know its history.

How heavy it is!

It scares me, for it cannot speak.

It will never tell all it hides in its creases.

It will never reveal all the struggles and efforts it represents, all the disillusionment and slighted dignity.

It is stained with sweat and blood,

It is laden with all the weight of the human toil which makes its worth.

It is heavy, heavy, Lord.

It fills me with awe, it frightens me.

For it has death on its conscience . . .

All the poor fellows who killed themselves for it,

To possess it for a few hours,

To have through it a little pleasure, a little joy, a little life.

Through how many hands has it passed, Lord?
And what has it done in the course of its long, silent journeys?

It has offered white roses to the radiant fiancée.
It has paid for the baptismal party, and fed the rosy-cheeked baby.
It has provided bread for the family table.
Because of it there was laughing among the young and joy among its elders.
It has paid for the saving visit of the doctor,
It has brought the book that taught the youngster.
It has clothed the young girl.

But it has sent the letter breaking the engagement,
It has paid for the death of the baby in its mother's womb,
It has brought the liquor that made the drunkard,
It has produced the movie unfit for children, and has recorded the indecent song.
It has bought for a few hours the body of a woman,
It has paid for the weapons of the crime and for the wood of the coffin.

O Lord, I offer you this bill with its joyous mysteries, its sorrowful mysteries.
I thank you for the life and joy it has given.
I ask forgiveness for the harm it has done.
But above all, Lord, I offer it to you as a symbol of all the labors of men, indestructible
money, which tomorrow will be changed into your eternal life.

Taken from Michel Quoist, *Prayers* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), pp. 31-33.