COMMENTARY ON READINGS FOR SEPT. 19, 2004
(Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time)

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This Sunday's readings have to do with responsibility for and care of the poor. Amos stands out among the prophets for his denunciation of the abuses of the upper classes of Israel at a time of great prosperity (and a lavish cult!) which did not, alas!, "trickle down" then, either. The psalm reflects a biblical mystery: that the most high God is concerned with the lowliest of human beings (see Isa 57:15; cf. Matt 25:40, 45), and will lift them up in due time. The reading from 1 Tim is concerned for good order in society and the world. There can be no peaceful coexistence unless there is justice; towards the end of this letter, it will be said that quarrels and disturbances have a lot to do with greed, and that the "love of money is the root of all evil," 1 Tim 6:3-10.

The steward in the Lucan parable was accused of squandering his master's property (same verb used of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:13). It is not exactly clear whether the steward then is giving up his own commission in reducing what is owed *to his master,* or is further squandering his master's property (which is referred to twice), which seems more likely. In any case, his bold and extravagant attitude toward wealth, a sort of detachment, if you will, is praised by Jesus, and even by the ripped-off master. Imagination and courage are called for in this world: wealth and money must be used creatively for the good of others, especially the poorest. How much ingenuity do we not use in military and other endeavors, and how little in feeding and educating the needy! We must be faithful in everything. But this means serving God with an undivided heart. And God's biggest competitor, uniquely mentioned by name here, is "mammon," Jesus' Aramaic word for wealth, property and profit. In the gospels, it always has a negative connotation, as it does in other literature of the period.