

Vigil Light Echoes

When all the leaves have fallen, and most have blown away,
Churches in late afternoon feel dark and cold and gray.
But echoes linger from the prayers offered there each day.

The Crimson Sanctuary lamp brings comfort by its glow
But far up near the tabernacle, it's hard for it to know
The anguished prayer-filled longings rising from the pews below.

Yet some smaller candles closer to those pews
Launch those prayers as they burn bright.
And for just a few brief hours,
Filled with all those hopes and sorrows,
Tiny candles beam their pleading upward in the winter night.

Subtle echoes linger on the coins and on the bills
That trembling hands had dropped into the offering-filled box.
When after Vespers on a wear'ing day, the priest unlocks
And gathers up those scattered offerings--the toils, the thrills,
The heartaches, hopes and worries seem to paint their subtle hues
And soaring shadows on those flick'ring candles as they burn.

Their poignant stories touch his hands and somehow seem to yearn
To transfer deep inside him as he counts them each in turn.

\$5

Largest was a crisp five dollar
Neatly folded for the slot.
It came from a seasoned mother
Grateful for the kids she's got.

Yet her teens and twenty-somethings,
Like her parents, still need care:
She suspects they each still try things
That they know they should not dare.

\$1

A crumpled dollar reeked of teen-age guilt.
Although no theft occurred or blood been spilt,
Yet he had stayed out late and slept through mass--
And hoped this buck might buy him one week's pass.

\$1

One other dollar was replete with prayers
Lovingly folded—but weighed down with cares.
It had been carried for years now with joy
Earned doing yard work when he was a boy.
Painfully offered: it's all that he had.

No job and few prospects for this anguished dad
Whose wife and young children kept praying at home:
Still hoping employment of some kind would come.

The parish had helped with expenses like rent,
For all of their savings had long since been spent.

Still strong was his faith, but now fading his hope.

So searching through dumpsters was how he would cope
With finding some sustenance needed to feed
His little ones looking to him in their need.

\$.50

Wishing it could help that neighbor's boy but knowing it could not,
The only fifty cent piece in the box each week, for sixty years,
Keeps an old man's vow each paycheck--and donates this fraction more.
Memories adhere of times his arms were strong and wits less dull.

Great-grandchildren take his nickels now that once his toddlers got.
Fearing he would be a burden, he keeps hidden that he hears
Voices of his wife and school-mates calling from beyond some door.
All too soon the Lord will stamp his payday promise "paid in full."

\$.25

Gently nestled nearby was a quarter that came
As the typical cost, and with aches all the same
As each widow who rattles alone in her house:
With her kids on their own and bereft of her spouse.

Though she's still independent she waits for their calls,
But their oft-postponed visits now litter her halls.
"Every week I thank God when they promise to come;
So I fix their big meal--yet still eat alone."

\$.10

In the back of the box hid an old silver dime.
Six decades ago it remembered the time
When just it alone could still pay for a cup
Of hot soup or coffee--and some place to stop
Away from the cold of the night--or the hearts
Of the wage-earning folks who chased bums from these parts.

\$.05

Like the other four saved from lunch money, this bright Nickel too had come
With a tiny child's tear-filled plea, whose tender love had not grown numb:
"Baby Jesus, care for all our soldiers--and please bring my daddy home."

\$.01

The penny and its double dozen others understood that prayer,
A wounded vet had scavenged them, who, like his buddies, came and went.
By giving up some cigarettes and keeping them from being spent
He'd saved enough to offer them for missing comrades everywhere.

With gnarled hands he'd knelt and lit his candle, hoping it would shout:
"Alone we each don't count for much, but joined together we can buy
This little flame to intercede for all of us and voice our cry:
'Tonight, Lord, give us one more chance to shine before we all burn out.'"

As coins and bills passed from his hand
Their pleadings seeped into his heart.

He knelt and tried to understand
How each of them had done their part
In setting loose those soaring needs
To resonate around God's throne.

These funds would help with other deeds
Of grace known but to God alone.
The vigil light resources there
Will bring new help to young and old.

And warmed by echoes from each prayer
The church now feels much less cold.

Dedicated to all the priests with whom I have ever served.

Fr. Patrick Dolan, May 2011