

**Question: “How is the Lord’s church to provide for its elderly members and widows?”**

**Answer:**

The Houston Chronicle recently reported a lawsuit filed by the Sisters of Mercy of Providence, R.I., against the estate of one of their deceased members. Marilyn Condon, known for many years as Sister Sean, died of leukemia at 53, six years after being bequeathed a one-quarter share of her families \$2 million trust.

The Sisters of Mercy say the case is a simple misunderstanding of what it means to be a nun. Nuns are required, by their religious order, to take a vow of poverty. Meaning they must promise to give all their money not used for food and rent to the order. They are allowed to own and retain property as long as it is held in trust. But when Marilyn died, she left only one-quarter of her estate to the order and the rest to her siblings. The Sisters of Mercy argue that Marilyn’s full share in her family’s estate now belongs to them.

The Chronicle also reported that about 70 percent of orders have pension funds that are less than half funded. A professor at Indiana University indicated that over 90% of religious orders are in financial trouble. So while we, the casual observers, understand the principle of a vow of poverty to a religious order, we also see what can be construed as a secondary motive for demanding Marilyn’s estate.

What does the Word of God say about how the Lord’s church is to provide for its aging and widowed members? Is there a New Testament pattern to follow? Yes, indeed, there is! And the first and second application of scripture do not even involve the church, except by way of teaching the principles.

**1st — A family is to care for its own (young, old, ill, widowed).**

“But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1Ti 5:8).

**2nd — The care of a widow is, first, the duty of her family.**

“But if any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God” (1Ti 5:4).

**3rd — Christian widows, with no means of support, are cared for by the local church.**

“Honor widows who are really widows...Now she who is really a widow, and left alone, trusts in God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day. But she who lives in pleasure is dead while she lives. And these things command, that they may be blameless...Do not let a widow under sixty years old be taken into the number, and not unless she has been the wife of one man, well reported for good works: if she has brought up children, if she has lodged strangers, if she has washed the saints’ feet, if she has relieved the afflicted, if she has diligently followed every good work” (1Ti 5:3, 5-7, 9-10).

In addition, the only authorized collection of church funds to care for these widows is the voluntary contribution taken-up on the first day of the week (c.f., 1Co 16:1-2; 2Co 8:12-13; 9:6-8).

Someone may ask, “But what about a Christian woman who never married or a widow who is not yet sixty years of age; who is going to care for them?” The responsibility for their care, as pointed out earlier, belongs to their relatives. And if their relatives refuse to help, it becomes the duty of each individual Christian according their ability.

“Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those of the household of faith” (Ga 6:10). “Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit the orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world” (Js 1:27).

In conclusion, when New Testament teaching is set aside, i.e., when religious orders are established for which there is no apostolic authority (like nunneries), then people will find themselves in the untenable position of having to violate scripture (Mt 22:39) to keep their traditions (Mt 15:9). For the simple reason, that God’s word of Truth (Bible) was not given to sustain human innovations, but to direct His children and to set in order His plan for the Lord’s church until He comes again.

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