

CAN SPACE TOURISM BE ETHICALLY JUSTIFIED?

BY **BRUCE DUNCAN**

A rich South African businessman has recently been on a voyage into space after paying nearly \$40 million for the privilege. No doubt others will be tempted to follow his flight path in such an exotic adventure, again at a huge cost.

Curiously there seem to have been no howls of outrage at what could be seen as a spectacularly self-indulgent lark. The media are grateful for the novelty and human interest of the story, but seem reluctant to raise questions about whether this is a responsible use of financial resources. How many thousands of lives in Africa could have benefited immensely from that \$40 million?

I do not mean this as a personal attack on the South African space tourist. He is only doing on a grander scale what others have done with attempts to balloon or sail solo around the world. What must people suffering hunger and poverty in third-world countries have thought at the sight of a rich man's balloon floating high above them? It's almost a metaphor for our times.

In uncritically reporting such events, are the media colluding in a vast conspiracy of silence about the injustices suffered by the poor in a world of unparalleled wealth? For the assumption is that rich people are entitled to spend their money how they please, as if they were accountable to no one.

This view has been repeatedly condemned by the Church and, of course, by Jesus himself. The parable of the rich man with the beggar Lazarus lying, and dying, unnoticed at his gate dramatises the point strongly. Pope John Paul has



insisted that the parable is particularly relevant for our world today.

Certainly the Church has defended a right to personal property, but it has not defended the heaping up of

great fortunes in the hands of the few, who can then squander it at mere whim. Pope Leo XIII in his 1891 social encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, argued for the ownership of property to be extended to all people, especially workers, and castigated the unjust distribution of wealth that reduced so many to near destitution.

The Church has often repeated that wealth has a 'social mortgage': the wealthy are obliged to use their resources in a socially responsible way, not by squandering them in self-indulgence, but while living modestly, by investing it productively to increase employment, provide genuinely useful goods and services, advance the values and institutions of a just civil society, and by direct practical efforts to alleviate poverty and human suffering, especially by paying their due taxes and generously contributing to worthy causes.

This is not a message that is very popular in some circles, of course. But Christians must continue to hammer away at it, lest we too become complicit with this deep moral darkness – perhaps corruption is not too strong a word – at the heart of our consumerist culture.

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FRONT COVER

The original painting is part of the collection of Corpus Christi College Seminary, Carlton.
The artist is Anthony Molezyk.

KAIROS CATHOLIC JOURNAL

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Registered by Australia Post. Category A. Publication No. VAR 9010487
Volume 13 No. 9 Sunday, 12 - 19 May 2002