

FAITH IN MISSION OR MISSION WITH FAITH

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THE BASIS FOR HUMANITARIAN OUTREACH

Humanitarian and social works are not exclusive to the Catholic Church. Many are also involved in humanitarian works as well. So **what is the essential difference, or rather, the distinctiveness between Christian charity and humanitarian outreach or social work? The difference lies in its origin, motivation and its end.** In order to understand the essential difference between Christian charity and social work, let me begin by delineating **what is not Christian charity, although it is not excluded.**

Firstly, Christian charity is not based on humanism. This is to say, it is rooted in a philosophical system that merely focuses on humanity, devoid of God, raising humanity to the level of the divine. Humanists advocate the dignity of the human person as the ultimate, rejecting any religious beliefs, focusing simply on the capacity of the human person. It rejects any power that is superior to humanity, especially religion, believing that humanity can advance by its own efforts and reason. The origin and motive of charity in humanism therefore simply springs from their conviction that man is the beginning and end of everything.

This is not to say that Christians do not value man. On the contrary, the bible tells us that Man is created in the image and likeness of God. **Christian charity is rooted in the fact that we are all children of God.** God loves us so much that He created man to share in His life and love. This is the basis of human dignity, a dignity that derives from God alone who is our creator and redeemer. Christian charity therefore is based on the fact that every one of us is a creature of God. God loves every human person. This is demonstrated very clearly in the bible when God is described as passionately in love with His creatures. More than just our creator, God is our Father. And because we dare to acknowledge Him as our Father, we are all therefore brothers and sisters. God is the Father of us all. As the gospel tells us “He makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” (Mt 5:45) Christians cannot have the audacity to call God our Father if they do not recognize and identify with everyone, particularly fellow Christians, as brothers and sisters. If the Church is the family of God, then all the more, we cannot close our eyes to our brothers and sisters who are deprived of the basic needs of life.

Secondly, **Christian charity is not founded on any kind of ideology.** It is not a philosophy of life. It is not a social or political system. It is not tied down to any economic system either. There is no intention in Christian charity to champion any form of ideology. Indeed, Pope Emeritus Benedict in his Encyclical “God is Love” underscores that “Christian charitable activity must be independent of parties and ideologies particularly those inspired by Marxism. It is not a means of changing the world ideologically, and it is not at the service of worldly stratagems, but it is a way of making present here and now the love which man always needs.” (DCE 31) Indeed, “we contribute to a better world only by personally doing good now, with full commitment and wherever we have the opportunity, independently of partisan strategies and programmes.” (DCE 31)

Thirdly, **Christian charity is also not rooted in politics.** As Catholics, we must be clear that the just ordering of society is the function of the state. There is a clear distinction between the Church and State, even if both are inter-related. Hence, “the formation of just structures is not directly the duty of the Church, but belongs to the world of politics, the sphere of the autonomous use of reason. The Church has an indirect duty here, in that she is called to contribute to the purification of reason and to the reawakening of those moral forces without which just structures are neither established nor prove effective in the long run.”

Politics and faith complement each other insofar as the Church helps the state to purify reason in the exercise of justice. Catholic social doctrine has “no intention of giving the Church power over the State. Even less is it an attempt to impose on those who do not share the faith ways of thinking and modes of conduct proper to faith. Its aim is simply to help purify reason and to contribute, here and now, to the acknowledgment and attainment of what is just.” (DCE 25) The church’s social teaching is based on reason and natural law and helps the state “to form consciences in political life and to stimulate greater insight into the authentic requirements of justice as well as greater readiness to act accordingly, even when this might involve conflict with situations of personal interest.” (DCE 25) Nevertheless, the lay faithful as individuals and as citizens of the state has a direct duty to work for justice.

Fourthly, **Christian charity must not be reducible to social justice.** As Pope Benedict wrote, “The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument and she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper. A just society must be the achievement of politics, not of the Church. Yet the promotion of justice through efforts to bring about openness of mind and will to the demands of the common good is something which concerns the Church deeply.”

More importantly, besides the promotion of justice, **what the Church is most concerned about is charity.** Regardless how just society is, what is needed is love and compassion. Every one of us needs help in some form. The institution cannot replace the personal love and outreach of a person. Indeed, there is a big difference between living in a nursing home operated by the state or a private nursing home compared to a charitable nursing home. One is motivated by duty, obligation or even economic motive whereas in a home managed by volunteers, it is rooted in love and compassion. The personal touch and care of a person cannot be substituted by workers and machines. Professional medical and technical care alone without heartfelt love and concern will not suffice in giving dignity to those whom we serve.

Fifthly, **Christian Charity is not a means to proselytism.** Christian charity is rooted in love and love has no other motive than the person who is loved. It is not used to achieve an end. Christian Charity however is concerned with the need of the entire person. The real poverty in the world is not just material poverty but the poverty of love. It is loneliness, rejection and abandonment. Most of all, it is the absence of God in their lives. That is why, even though Christian charity is not a means to coerce people into conversion or to “buy” them to join our

faith, yet, it does not mean that we cannot share our faith with them. The greatest gift we can give to them is not just food and physical comforts but also the gift of faith and the gift of God Himself. Man is not purely an animal but a spiritual being and cannot find rest until he or she rests in God. But such faith-sharing must be done in a sensitive way that no one feels pressured to accept the faith. Prudence is necessary in knowing when to share our faith with them. But to remove this possibility of offering them the gift of Jesus would be to short-change them in what they need most, which is the love and presence of God. Only in God can man find completion and integration. Christian charity therefore is concerned with the whole person, body, soul and spirit. We seek to attend to the material, physical, affective and spiritual needs of humanity.

In the light of what the aforesaid, **what then is the distinctiveness of Christian charity? Firstly, it is founded on God's love. The origin of Christian charity is always the love of God.** "We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" (1 Jn 4:16). It is this faith in God's love that motivates the Christian. Most of all this love is shown in the life, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Indeed, as St John remarks, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should ... have eternal life" (3:16).

It is this love of God for us that is the origin for our love for our neighbour. "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." (1 Jn 4:10) Our love for our neighbour is but our response to the love of God for us. Christians therefore are inspired by Christ's love for us in His passion, death and resurrection. **As St Paul tells us, we are coerced by the love of God for us.** "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again." (2 Cor 5:14-15) Because He loves us, we too can love like Him. It is this awareness of Christ's self-emptying love for us, especially in dying for us when we were undeserving of His love that we are inspired to love likewise. Thus, Christian charity "must not be inspired by ideologies aimed at improving the world, but should rather be guided by the faith which works through love (cf. Gal 5:6). Consequently, more than anything, they must be persons moved by Christ's love, persons whose hearts Christ has conquered with his love, awakening within them a love of neighbour." (DCE 33) Every act of charity must be inspired by the love of God.

From God's love, there arises the motive of Christian. Once we realize the mercy and love of God for us, when we serve the poor, it is no longer from a power of strength but weakness. That Christ loves us in spite of our unworthiness makes us grateful to be who we are today. When we acknowledge that who we are today is solely due to His love and mercy, there is no pride on our side in giving to the poor but only humility. This is because we know that we too were poor like them, but it is only because of God's grace that we have become what we are today. Even the ability to help others is not something we achieve on our own but purely through His grace and mercy. There is no question of claiming any merits for our service to the poor because we know every good we do comes from His grace alone. At the end of the day, we can only say to the Lord, "We are useless servants." (Lk 17:10)

An added motive for Christians to love is that in loving the poor, he or she loves Christ since **Christ is identified with the poor in a special way.** In the parable of the Last Judgement (Mt 25:31-46), Jesus identified Himself with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those in prison. When He appeared to St Paul at Damascus, He identified Himself with the Christians and reprimanded Paul saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4) Indeed, Jesus told His disciples, "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." (Mt 25:40). In Jesus, the love of God and the love of neighbour are united since loving Jesus in the poor is loving God in Christ.

What then is the goal or **the finality of Christian charity? It is to reveal the face of God to them.** Christian charity is more than merely lifting a person out of poverty but to let the person know that God loves him or her and that God is truly love and real in His life. We are called to be channels of His love. It is our hope that through our works of charity, they will come to know the source of our love and all that we are. So Christian charity, as distinguished from mere humanitarian works, seeks to make the love of God experienced and the face of God known. Through our good works, we become witnesses of God's love.

What then are the implications of the origin, motive and end of Christian charity? If the love of God, or rather God's love for us, is the fundamental origin and motive for Christian charity, it means that **Christian social workers must be rooted first and foremost in the love of God.** Without this prior experience of God's unconditional love for him or her, he or she cannot be truly motivated by the love of God. And without a contemplation of the love of God made visible in Christ's life, passion, death and resurrection, he or she would not have the exemplar of true divine and human love and compassion. It behoves every Christian social worker therefore, to have a deep relationship with the Lord Jesus if they are to be truly capable of seeing every human person in Christ and love each one the way Jesus loves us. Without contemplating on the face of Christ, we would be hopelessly inadequate to show the face of the Lord to others.

Otherwise, the **danger of social work without Christ is that charity can become merely an activity and not always out of love.** More often than not, the motives of charity are not so noble. Some give to charity in order to attract attention to themselves. They want to display their wealth and power. They suffer from low-esteem. By giving to the poor, they want to draw the attention of people. Such people seek recognition for the work they do. The poor becomes a means to fulfil their insecurity. For others, they give to charity in order to flaunt their wealth. They do it in a condescending manner, coming from a tower of strength. As a result they make their recipients lose their dignity because they are full of themselves. They think too highly of themselves, as if what they have comes from them and not from God or that what they own is theirs and not the people. For others, still, they do charity reluctantly because it is a duty and an obligation. They help and give to others out of guilt because they have more than others or fear of God's punishment for their selfishness. When charity does not originate from a heart of love, a love that is inspired by God, then such charity only belittles those who receive from us and separates us from the poor further as we are not identified with them. In fact, we are making use of the poor for ourselves. Hence, what we give to others must not be something

extraneous to us but a symbol and a token of our very self as a gift of love. What we receive freely, we are now called to give freely.

Even if we do not fall into activism, **there is a danger that we fall into disillusionment especially when we are not able fulfil the needs of the poor and the suffering.** As Jesus tells us in the gospel, “The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me.” (Jn 12:8) Indeed, quite often, activists championing the rights and cause of the poor eventually become indignant with man, at the cruelty they see, and with God, who apparently seems unmoved at the sufferings of humanity and fails to resolve all the sufferings of humanity. The other extreme reaction is to give up doing good completely, since we succumb to despair, realizing that we can never eradicate suffering, poverty and injustice in this world completely.

For these reasons, it is crucial **that catholic social workers and volunteers must be given proper formation in the faith, both doctrinal and spiritual.** Without a clear understanding of the social teachings of the Church, many of our workers who are helping out of goodwill will end in disappointment and frustrations; and those who are full-time workers can also become burnt out and disheartened at the lack of results. Only a deep faith in God and a personal relationship with Him will prevent us from falling into arrogance on one hand and despair on another. Rather, trusting in God’s divine providence and mercy, we do all we can and leave the rest to His mercy and grace. Only faith prevents us from usurping the authority of God. Only in faith, will we not end up as enemies of God, accusing Him of indifference.

Most of all, this **faith must rest first and foremost in a personal encounter with the Risen Lord** through our realization of our sinfulness and unworthiness of His love for us. Without a personal encounter with God in Christ, we will not be able to love after the heart of the Good Shepherd. It is in contemplating on the Crucified Christ and the Risen Lord that we find strength in times of trials but always hope in victory because the Lord is Risen. Faith gives us the confidence that our sufferings will not be in vain. By contemplating on the Crucified Christ and His pierced Heart, we are moved to love. His resurrection enables us to overcome all tribulations and despair. Only then will our works of charity not spring from mere humanistic values or from duty. Rather, it is faith which becomes alive through love (cf. Gal 5:6).

For this reason, **during the Year of Faith, the Church invites us to renew, reinvigorate and re-appropriate our faith.** We are encouraged to deepen our love for the Word of God and our knowledge of the faith through a proper understanding of the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the Vatican II documents. We must also develop a Eucharistic faith, for only those of us who have contemplated on the love of the Lord in the Eucharist can also empty ourselves in love for others. Love for the Eucharist, the bread of life will empower us to love others and give ourselves through His grace to others in imitation of Jesus’ command, “Do this in memory of me.”

Faith in Jesus must be seen in charity. Indeed, Pope Emeritus Benedict in *Porta Fidei* wrote, a good opportunity to intensify the witness of faith is charity. He wrote, “As Saint Paul reminds us: “So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor 13:13). With even stronger words – which have always placed Christians under obligation – Saint James said: “What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his

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faith save him? (Jas 2:14-18). Faith without charity bears no fruit, while charity without faith would be a sentiment constantly at the mercy of doubt. Faith and charity require each other in such a way that each allows the other to set out along its respective path. Indeed, many Christians dedicate their lives with love to those who are lonely, marginalized or excluded as the first with a claim on our attention and the most important for us to support, because it is in them that the reflection of Christ's own face is seen. (PF 14)

Indeed, at the end of the day, **the power to love and to give ourselves spring from the Holy Spirit who is the love of God.** The interior power of love comes from the Holy Spirit for He is the principle of the New Law of love. The Holy Spirit is given only to those who pray with faith. To rely on prayer means that we believe in the primacy of grace, that healing and fulfilling the needs of our fellowmen is not a matter of our ingenuity and hard work alone but from Christ. Only He can give us new strength to love each day. Indeed, those who are activists must first be contemplatives, otherwise the social mission of the Church becomes but an ideology that we seek to propagate. Prayer does not take away our involvement in our service to the poor but purify us in our service to them because we know that only God can make all things possible. Prayer gives us the confidence that even in hopelessness, God might appear to be silent, but He is at work in our lives as He did when Jesus was on the cross. We can then commend everything into His hands as Jesus did.

Finally, we **must realize that in our service to our neighbour, we will be privileged to encounter Christ through them and in them as much as they encounter Him in us.** God will give us the grace to see Him through the sufferings of our neighbour. Indeed, it is my work at the Catholic Spirituality Center, where I attend to the many people who come for all kinds of healing, physical, spiritual, emotional and psychological liberation, that I have come to learn the meaning of compassion, the love of Christ in His passion and most of all, the power of His resurrection at work in our lives, particularly in my ministry. My greatest joy as a priest is to know that in spite of my unworthiness, God has used me to heal so many people, to empower them and to give them a sense of identity, new hope and renewed faith to live their lives purposefully. Hence, the words of Jesus are so true that the love of God and love of neighbour are so inseparable. In either way, we find God. Those who serve the poor will encounter God and those who are served by us will also find Him. Love unites us with God and with each other. And what is more is that love grows through love, from strength to strength, from depth to depth.

Synopsis: Why are we called to serve? What is the basis for humanitarian outreach? Is it a commandment of faith or is it the charity inherent in mission work? Which comes first – faith or charity? Link with the year of faith