

Justice and Charity

By Jim Dinn, Pax Christi

Social justice and charity are sister values, but charity seems to be the sibling that people give the most attention to. Social justice, on the other hand, is more easily overlooked or given a back seat.

The past 100 years have seen a dramatic development in the Catholic Church's emphasis on social justice. As Pope John Paul II emphasizes in *Centesimus Annus*, religious teaching today "must include among its essential elements a proclamation of the church's social doctrine." It is as if the teaching of the church needed to gradually grow into that recognition and emphasis just as we individually must do also.

Justice and charity are both rooted in the social dimension of the gospels. Both reflect the same gospel mandates. The Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount, and such parables as the Last Judgment, the Good Samaritan, the Rich Man and Lazarus, the Pharisee and the Tax Collector—these and dozens of comparable passages inspire acts of justice and charity.

Both can be powerful Christian responses to human need. The dividing line between them is often blurred and, in reality, many a response is a dynamic blend of justice and charity. For descriptive purposes, however, some people find it useful to see charity in terms of giving direct aid and justice in terms of correcting structures.

For example, if we see someone drowning in a river, we try to save the victim. But suppose we find another person struggling in the water an hour later at the same place, then two or three the next day. If we finally realize that they are falling in the river because there is a hole in the bridge, we might change our response. We could still wait by the riverside to aid victims or we could take a hammer and nails to try to rebuild the bridge.

Of course, more often the structure that needs changing isn't built of wood or steel. It is more likely a social structure. And the biggest obstacle is that all of us grow attached to social structures just as they are. The more comfortable we are, the less need we feel for change.

Even the more flawed structure is an extension of ourselves. It is hard to dissociate ourselves from it, hard to endure others' criticism, hard to undertake or permit change. Our defensiveness about the status quo of our institutions is entangled with our defensiveness about ourselves. We instinctively sense that if the institution needs to change, we may well be forced to change with it. And the institutional shortcomings to which we are blind are often reflections of the same shortcomings in ourselves. So we smile on the charity that assists the needy within the existing structures and resist or resent the justice that threatens to reform the structures.

Archbishop Camera of Brazil has commented, "When I tried to help the poor, people said I was a saint. When I asked why they were poor, people called me a communist." The

Archbishop touches on a rather widespread irony. Sometimes people applaud those who try to help the needy through direct assistance but they are critical of any attempt to change the structures that put people in need.

Even within the system of slavery, being “nice” to a slave did not provoke the kind of resistance and opposition from the slave owners that working against the structure did. Within our own system that fosters private ownership and competitiveness, nobody feels threatened at the idea of sponsoring programs to help the needy or donating to causes. But suggesting responsibility for others’ needs or implying that the poor are entitled to share in our resources—these ideas disturb us because they move us out of the more comfortable zone of charity into the challenging zone of justice.

This is why working for social justice can be controversial. If we respond to ozone depletion by giving direct aid (nursing the skin of cancer victims) nobody would object. But if we work to pass and enforce laws to eliminate the chemicals that deplete the ozone, some companies and investors are sure to oppose us. If we knit bandages and collect medicine for war casualties, we will be universally admired. But if we work to prevent war, we risk being branded as unpatriotic or subversive.

In our imperfect world, of course, there will be continuing need for direct aid to be rendered even as we struggle for structural solutions. As for the competing claims that justice and charity make on us, Archbishop Camara offers this suggestion: “In the war against injustice, 80% of our time and effort must be devoted to changing structures and promoting human advancement; but 20% must be set aside for tending the wounded and the victims of war.”

There are no limits to the variety of arenas that need our attention. Education, civil rights, environment, war and peace, rights of the elderly, rights of the handicapped, women’s rights, immigration, literacy, employment, etc., all cry for our commitment.

Any method of involvement is possible. It may initially be a matter of learning more about a particular issue. We might join or form a group of people to share ideas or prayer about a local need. We might get involved in contributing to a cause, or fundraising for it. We might find ourselves getting into letter writing, demonstrating, lobbying. No issue is too minor or insignificant to provide an outlet for our principles.

In all of this we are reminded that we need to be guided by the Spirit and sensitive to our own gifts. Precisely because structures are extensions of ourselves, we must undergo and must help others undergo a change of heart. Our U.S. bishops in their pastoral letter on economic justice put it this way: “the transformation of social structures begins with and is always accompanied by a change of heart.”

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