

Charity and Justice as the essence of the Gospel

Published on: 20 March 2020



There are numerous biblical passages that speak about charity and justice, passages from both the Old and the New Testament. As members of the Vincentian Family, it may seem relatively easy to access that content, to reflect on it and to put it into practice as we minister on behalf of those persons who are poor and in need. Justice and charity, however, although they may appear to be synonymous, are in reality two different concepts and we will analyze some of those subtle differences.

We cite here some examples of Jesus' parables about charity: the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), the story of the Final Judgment (Matthew 25:31-46), the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). It is important to note that human virtues can be fully lived only if they are combined with the practice of charity. If that does not occur, then those virtues are devoid of meaning. Saint Paul stated: If I do not have love, I am nothing (1 Corinthians 13:2).

There are also countless biblical passages that urge us to reflect on the reality of justice, for example, the famous passage from the Sermon on the Mount: seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides (Matthew 6:33). The Social Doctrine of the Church reflects upon and develops these two realities of charity and justice. In fact, we could say that those realities of justice and charity are the essence of the gospel.

The Scriptures state that those who practice charity cannot remain alone in a state of shock but rather, they must act and reach out to other people. Charity means placing oneself in the place of the other, to experience the suffering of another as one's own. Furthermore, it means empowering people to free themselves from hopeless and helpless situations, from situations of abandonment. Jesus always extended his hand to those who were in need and we are called to imitate Jesus and extend a helping hand to the humble and the "little ones" of this earth.

Many confuse charity as providing some form of material assistance and understand justice in a legal manner as some form of punishment. We should recall that charity has a threefold dimension: providing assistance, human promotion, and liberation.

Charity as providing assistance: one sees a person who is poor and/or destitute and attempts to provide for that person's immediate basic needs: I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was a stranger, I was naked, I was in prison ... whatever you did for one of these least ones, you did for me (Matthew 25:35-45).

Charity as human promotion: one sees a person who is marginalized, on the fringes of society, not able to enjoy the benefits that society offers. Therefore, that same individual provides tools so that those marginalized individuals learn how to fish, generate an income, integrate themselves into the process of development and empowers them to combat the causes that prevent their growth as human beings.

Charity as liberation: one sees people exploited in their work and seeks to heighten an awareness for solidarity that will lead people to engage in a struggle for the rights of those excluded from participation in society. In our activities as members of the Vincentian Family we must be sensitive to all three of these dimensions of charity.

The preferential option for the poor, which has been affirmed by various Episcopal Conferences throughout the world, reveals that the struggle for social justice and the defense

of human rights is not only a biblical demand but is also a fundamental condition for life in society. Vincent de Paul stated: there can be no act of charity that is not accompanied by justice [1]. Saint Augustine expressed a similar thought when he stated: where there is no love (charity) there can be no righteousness (justice) [2]

Vincent de Paul is known throughout the world for his charitable activity. It should also be noted that Vincent confronted the political leaders of his era and attempted to mobilize them to “welcome” the poor and to free them from the situation of hardship in which they lived. Vincent acted charitably and justly.

The same could be said for Frederic Ozanam, one of the founders of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul who insisted on the fact that justice and charity must go hand in hand. I believe that all the members of the worldwide Vincentian Family are aware of the need to maintain the intimate relationship between justice and charity.

Charity is the message of gospel that makes us aware of the fact that we are all brothers and sisters ... no one is greater than another; we are all equal because we share the same dignity. That vision enables us to understand the concept of social justice that the Church frequently places before us.

True charity cannot be summed up with gestures of paternalistic assistance. For authentic Christians, charity is selfless love extended to every human person because of their intrinsic dignity. Yes, such charity is love of neighbor, of our brothers and sisters who are created in the image and likeness of God. That charity is grounded on the communion of people who participate in the life of God. Charity has a social function and complements the demands of justice without replacing them.

Social justice has a specific concern: the collective common good which is placed above any particular interest(s). Social justice involves providing assistance to the poorest members of society, engaging in a struggle for dignified employment, housing, health care and education. Furthermore, social justice means that we attempt to mitigate the negative effects of the economic systems that generate income and social inequality.

Therefore, let us always keep in mind that the essence of the Gospel is found in the two realities of charity and justice and that as members of the worldwide Vincentian Family we are to make charity and justice ever more visible in our world.

In your group, you might take time to discuss the following words of Victor Hugo: Being good is easy, what is difficult is being just!

Notes:

[1] Vincent de Paul, Correspondence, Conference, Documents, translators: Helen Marie Law,

DC (Vol. 1), Marie Poole, DC (Vol. 1-14), James King, CM (Vol. 1-2), Francis Germovnik, CM (Vol. 1-8, 13a-13b [Latin]), Esther Cavanagh, DC (Vol. 2), Ann Mary Dougherty, DC (Vol. 12); Evelyne Franc, DC (Vol. 13a-13b), Thomas Davitt, CM (Vol. 13a-13b [Latin]), Glennon E. Figge, CM (Vol. 13a-13b [Latin]), John G. Nugent, CM (Vol. 13a-13b [Latin]), Andrew Spellman, CM (Vol. 13a-13b [Latin]); edited: Jacqueline Kilar, DC (Vol. 1-2), Marie Poole, DC (Vol. 2-13b), Julia Denton, DC [editor-in-chief] (Vol. 3-10, 13a-13b), Paule Freeburg, DC (Vol. 3), Mirian Hamway, DC (Vol. 3), Elinor Hartman, DC (Vol. 4-10, 13a-13b), Ellen Van Zandt, DC (Vol. 9-13b), Ann Mary Dougherty (Vol. 11-12 and 14); annotated: John W. Carven, CM (Vol. 1-13b); New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2014, volume II, p. 68.

[2] St. Augustine, Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, V:13; https://www.piercedhearts.org/magisterium_church/commentaries/augustine_sermon_on_the_mount.pdf

Written by: Renato Lima de Oliveira

16th General President of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul