

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING: SOCIAL SERVICE OR SOCIAL ACTION?

Introduction

Back in the 1960's a bus driver in the southern United States was taking a group of people downtown. However behind him in the bus there was a battle going on between the white people and the black people over who could sit where on the bus. So he pulled over to the curb and ordered everyone out of the bus. Then he asked one man: "What colour are you?" The man said: "Black." The bus driver said: "No, you're green." Then he asked a lady: "What colour are you?" She said: "White." He said, "No, you're green." Then he said: "Does everyone have that straight? There are no black people on this bus and no white people. We are all green people. Now I want all you green people to get back on the bus. The dark greens in the back and the light greens in the front."

In my parish we are used to the rumble of big trucks rolling through town with loads of pigs. Pig farming is big business up our way. Well the story goes that one day a man was driving behind one of those trucks when a pig fell off. He stopped and picked it up, and then tried to catch up to the truck to return the pig. A police officer stopped him for speeding. He explained why he was driving so fast. The police officer said: "You'll never catch that truck now. Take the pig to the zoo." Next day the policeman saw the man driving along with the pig sitting beside him in the car. He stopped the man and said: "I thought I told you to take that pig to the zoo." The man said: "I did, and we had such a good time that today we're going to the beach."

Words often mean very different things to different people! I want to say something today about the difference between the words "charity" and "justice", because that difference has important consequences for our own efforts to teach and to apply the social teaching of our church.

Justice and Charity

A few years ago the following story appeared in the *Review for Religious*. Once there was a farming town that could be reached by a narrow road with a bad curve in it. There were frequent accidents on the road especially at the curve, and the preacher would preach to the people of the town to make sure they were Good Samaritans. And so they were, as they would pick up the people on the road, for this was a religious work. One day someone suggested they buy an ambulance to get accident victims to the town hospital more quickly. The preacher preached and the people gave, for this was a religious work. Then one day a councilman suggested that the town authorize building a wider road and taking out the dangerous curve. Now it happened that the mayor had a farm market right at the curve on the road and he was against taking out the curve. Someone asked the preacher to say a word to the mayor and the congregation next Sunday about it. But the preacher and most of the people figured they had better stay out of politics; so next Sunday the preacher preached on the Good Samaritan Gospel and encouraged the people to continue their fine work of picking up the accident victims – which they did. The story brings out very well the difference between justice and some of the things we usually call "charity."

Some of you may be familiar with one of the very best works on Catholic Social Teaching to appear in the years before the Second Vatican Council. It was a book, translated from the French, entitled, *The Church and Social Justice*. Its authors were two Jesuit scholars named Calvez and Perrin. One of the earliest chapters in the book dealt with the relationship between charity and justice. Having made it clear that justice concerns what is strictly due to a person as that person's right, they then looked at the various meanings of the word "charity" that appear in the Church's social documents, and they came up with three meanings.

First, "charity" sometimes means the *works* of charity, or what we might call "social service" as distinguished from "social action." The social encyclicals often praise the works of charity that Christians have practiced throughout the centuries. Pope Leo XIII reminds us of the tradition going all the way back to the *Acts of the Apostles* of feeding the hungry and caring for the poor. He speaks of religious communities founded to look after orphans, care for the sick, and give refuge to the elderly. Pope John Paul, in *Centesimus Annus*, says "the Church has always been present and active among the needy, offering them material assistance in ways that neither humiliate nor reduce them to mere objects of assistance, but which help them to escape their precarious situation by promoting their dignity as persons." He makes reference to "volunteer work" which he urges "everyone to cooperate in supporting and encouraging." (no. 49). This is a noble tradition and we could not envisage the Christian life without it.

Second, "charity" sometimes refers to actions that have become a *substitute* for justice. Pope Pius XI made the famous statement in *Quadragesimo Anno* that "Charity cannot take the place of justice unfairly withheld." (no. 137). Earlier in the same document, referring to the terrible poverty accompanying the industrial revolution, he says: "This state of things was quite satisfactory to the wealthy, who looked upon it as the consequence of inevitable economic laws, and who therefore were content to leave to charity alone the full care of helping the unfortunate; as though it were the task of charity to make amends for the open violation of justice, a violation not merely tolerated, but sometimes even ratified, by legislators." (no. 4). It is very important for us to take note of this meaning of charity as a "substitute for justice", because this is a constant temptation for all of us. We will say more about this later.

Third, "charity" refers most appropriately to the Christian *virtue* of charity which is absolutely essential to the Christian life. In this connection St. Thomas Aquinas reminds us that "Charity is the form of all the virtues," in the sense that no action can possibly be described as virtuous unless it proceeds from charity, that is from love of God and love of our neighbour for the love of God. Jesus makes it clear that on these two commandments "hang the whole Law and the Prophets." (Matt. 22:40). Justice that is not motivated by charity is not justice at all, and can result in seriously misguided activity. Without charity we don't even know what genuine justice is in any given situation. I remember a colleague with whom I worked on a co-operative housing project years ago. He was surprised that I was opposed to abortion. He said to me: "I thought you were in favour of liberal causes." His remark shows the abyss into which we can fall if our understanding of justice is not informed by charity.

When we think of “charity” as the *virtue* of charity, the virtue that is at the heart of the Christian life, we can see why we have to be committed *both* to social action, that is the works of justice, and to social service, that is the works of charity. Unless we are people who are ready to engage in social service, and so who are prepared to give financial and personal assistance to those who are here and now suffering from hunger, or to visit the sick, welcome refugees, and so on, then we are not the sort of people who should think of undertaking social action, or the works of justice.

Justice

If we turn our attention now to justice, in the sense of the virtue of justice, a virtue that is motivated by Christian charity, we find that in Catholic social teaching it is often referred to as *social* justice, or in the case of Pope John XXIII, as “justice and equity.” This meaning of justice is closely connected to the growing awareness, throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, *first*, that much of the personal suffering experienced by people is caused by social and political *structures*, that is, laws, social arrangements, social practices, and *second*, that most of these can be changed. The history of the Christian social movements in the 19th century is very revealing. Catholic organizations in France and Germany, for example, that were originally established simply to carry out the works of mercy began to see that they had to address the root causes of the misery they were trying to alleviate. The Protestant Social Gospel Movement in the United States spoke of the need for a Christian Sociology, an expression that reflected its awareness that Christians need to understand, and sometimes work to change, the social conditions that lead to human suffering. This realization of the need for social justice reaches its most articulate expression in Catholic Social Teaching in the 1971 Synod document, *Justice in the World*, which makes the statement: “Action for the sake of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us to be a constitutive element of the preaching of the Gospel, that is, of the mission of the Church for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every state of oppression.”

What we call Catholic Social Teaching is that body of principles, that part of Moral Theology, that concerns working for social justice, or undertaking what is usually called social action. It is therefore distinct from the “works of charity” or social service. Though both social action and social service are needed, it is important not to confuse them.

Why We Need to Distinguish Social Action and Social Service

Sometimes social action and social service, the works of justice and the works of charity, are not distinguished clearly from one another. For example, the United States Catholic Conference has a helpful video dealing with parish life that is entitled *Communities of Salt and Light*. Though it has many good features I refrained from using it in a social justice group because it simply lumps together, without distinction, social work and social action. Why does this matter? There are several important reasons.

First, social service can obscure the need for social action because it can *absorb our energy*, and thus stand in the way of our seeing the underlying issues that need to be addressed. I have read articles that list Catholic social service as one of the main *obstacles* to getting people involved in Catholic social action. A practical example of this is the effort

so many people and parishes put into food banks. While those food banks have been a much-needed source of assistance for many people, we have become increasingly used to them and rarely reflect any more on what a scandal it is that we need hundreds of food banks in a rich country like this. Thirty years ago there were no food banks in Canada. Our dependence on food banks is a sign of some basic injustices in our society, like inadequate social assistance rates and a lack of affordable housing, and those issues need to be addressed by us.

Second, social service tends toward *paternalism*. Necessary as it is to lend people a helping hand, to provide financial and material support, and so on, the danger is always there that we increase the dependence of people on us. Those of you who have been involved in sponsoring refugee families to come to Canada have probably seen some of the bad effects of our typical over-eagerness to do practically everything for them.

Third, social service can play into the hands of *neo-conservative governments*. They can claim that caring for the needy and the poor is properly the work of volunteer groups, church organizations, charitable associations, and they can use this claim in order to ignore their responsibility for instituting the social programs required by social justice. Exactly this approach has been taken by some governments in Canada and the United States in the past twenty years. They have insisted that aiding the poor was the task of charitable and Church groups, and they used this as a justification for cutting taxes, a step that, as we know, benefits the well-off much more than it does the poor. Moreover they ignored the fact that the sheer dollar amount of what was needed to assist people struggling to live on reduced social assistance payments far outstripped the resources of Church and charitable organizations.

Fourth, exclusive involvement in social service can adversely affect our sense of the common good and result in our failing to take the *critical stance* we should toward certain government policies. Good works, in other words, can mute our voices, especially if governments make it easier in some way for us to do our good works, and if they publicly praise those good works. Most of you will recall the famous words of Dom Helder Camara, the late Archbishop of Olinda and Recife: “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a Communist.”

Fifth, when Christians devote their efforts simply to social service and ignore social action, the *real movements* for social change that arise in a society tend to become *anti-religious* in character. They come to see Christian social service as undermining their efforts to bring about real social change. How many times this has happened in the past one hundred and fifty years, for example in 19th century France! I think this also helps to explain the suspicion that some labour unions have toward churches.

Finally, perhaps most important of all, concentration simply on social service can fail in the long run to *serve the human person*. The ultimate aim of our efforts for others must be to enable them to develop as persons. Real development is always the development of persons. It is not just putting in water wells or building houses for people. It is enabling people to take control of their own lives. I have been President of Save A Family Plan for 30 years. This is a Catholic organization that assists the poor in India. More and more as the years have gone on, our efforts have been directed toward helping poor people to grow

in self-awareness and self-confidence, to assist them in getting the social skills and resources that will enable them to take control of their lives and to challenge, themselves, the forces that oppress them. This is also the approach we find in our Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace, as presented in their recent video, *Committed to Change*.

The Question Raised by *Centesimus Annus*

All of this brings me to that section of *Centesimus Annus* that has been quoted by neo-conservatives in support of their position that helping the poor is more properly a work to be undertaken by charity rather than by State or Government agencies. That seems to undercut our calls for adequate government social programs which we regard as a matter of justice. Let me read the entire section. In no. 48 the pope talks about the Social Welfare State or the “Social Assistance State”, and says that “excesses and abuses, especially in recent years, have provoked very harsh criticisms of the Welfare State, dubbed the ‘Social Assistance State’. Malfunctions and defects in the Social Assistance State are the result of an inadequate understanding of the tasks proper to the State. Here again the principle of subsidiarity must be respected: a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to coordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good. By intervening directly and depriving society of its responsibility, the Social Assistance State leads to a loss of human energies and an inordinate increase of public agencies, which are dominated more by bureaucratic ways of thinking than by concern for serving their clients, and which are accompanied by an enormous increase in spending. In fact, it would appear that needs are best understood and satisfied by people who are closest to them and who act as neighbours to those in need. It should be added that certain kinds of demands often call for a response which is not simply material but which is capable of perceiving the deeper human need. One thinks of the condition of refugees, immigrants, the elderly, the sick, and all those circumstances which call for assistance, such as drug abusers: all these people can be helped effectively only by those who offer them genuine fraternal support, in addition to the necessary care.”

All of us recognize at once the truth of what the Pope is saying. There is simply no substitute for the great works of charity. Many enlightened government policies reflect awareness of this truth. I think, for example, of the federal government’s Joint Assistance Program for the sponsorship of refugees, in which the government assumes financial responsibility for the refugees for two years as long as an approved sponsoring group, usually a church group, provides all the needed human assistance.

Some people, though, have interpreted the Pope’s remarks as support for neo-conservative policies like cutting back on social programs and “reducing welfare rolls” in order to provide tax cuts. Yet we should notice that the pope does not condemn the Welfare State as such. What he condemns are “excesses and abuses, especially in recent years.” On another occasion he stated that what he condemned was what he called “systematic welfarism.” Moreover when we take into consideration the context of this entire document, it is clear that the pope’s concern is with the full development of the human person. He does not want to see programs that increase a person’s dependency, but ones that enable people to grow in personal initiative, freedom and moral responsibility. Most of all, in a document

celebrating the one hundredth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, he is not opposing an entire tradition of Catholic Social Teaching on social justice that begins with Pope Leo XIII's statement in that document that "The richer class have many ways of shielding themselves, and stand less in need of help from the State; whereas the mass of the poor have no resources of their own to fall back upon, and must chiefly depend upon the assistance of the State." (29)

The Ultimate Difference Between Charity and Justice

What finally is the ultimate difference between charity and justice, between social service and social action? An obvious answer is that social service or the works of charity is about helping *individuals* while social action, the works of justice, is about changing society. In general, I think this answer is correct but the matter goes further than that.

Both social service and social action are about evangelization, or preaching the Gospel. Social service preaches the Gospel by serving as a *model* of how humans should act in the light of Christian revelation. Thus Mother Theresa's homes for the dying or our own St. Vincent de Paul Societies announce the Gospel simply by being there. They are living pictures of the Gospel.

Social action however preaches the Gospel by actively seeking to change culture so that it is more in accord with the Gospel. Pope John Paul says in *Centesimus Annus*: "To teach and to spread her social doctrine pertains to the Church's evangelizing mission and is an essential part of the Christian message, since this doctrine points out the direct consequences of that message in the life of society. . ." (no. 5). This notion has gradually become more and more explicit in Catholic social statements over the past fifty years. It is worthwhile to trace that development briefly.

When Catholic social documents first tried to explain why it was proper for the Church to say things about the economy they tended to use an indirect argument. Such things as improper working conditions or inadequate wages, they said, prevented people from attending to their spiritual needs, and so the Church, as the guardian of their spiritual needs, was entitled to speak up. However under Pope Pius XII some papal statements began reflecting the view that Catholic Social Teaching is simply an unfolding of the implications of the Christian understanding of the human person. Granted our understanding, in the light of the Gospel, of who the human person is, Christian Social Action is about enabling that person to be and become all that God intends. In this respect the Catholic Church and the Soviet Union found themselves in basic agreement. If you have a particular view of the nature and goal of the human person then consistency calls for you to try and form society in such a way that it reflects and promotes that view of the person.

However it is the documents of the Second Vatican Council that explain much more fully some of the basic things that Christianity says about the person, and that show us the implications these teachings have for the kind of society we need to form.

First, they pay special attention to the notion of the person as *the image of God*, and so as one called to manage this world in God's name. The picture in *Genesis* of humans made in God's image and likeness *so that*, on God's behalf and as God's managers, they

could have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, over the cattle and so on means that the way in which humans relate to this world is the Church's business and the Church has every right to speak about it. Pope John Paul, in his document *On Human Work*, spells out in some detail what this vision of the human person means for the kind of economy we need to promote as Christians. For as God's manager, the human person is therefore *by nature a worker*, meant to find human fulfillment by working on this world. This has all sorts of implications for such things as the promotion of a full employment economy, the effort to make businesses function as genuine communities where people have some sense they are "working for themselves", and the anti-human character of such practices as "contracting out" and hiring "replacement workers."

Second, the Council documents picture human persons as ordered toward God's Kingdom and so as called to live already in the light of that final community that is their goal. If we hope to be part of a heavenly community of mutual love and respect then we have to start emulating that kind of community now. This means that Christians are required by their faith to show active concern for the kind of society we are forming now. Activities like paying taxes and obeying traffic laws find their way into church statements. So too do things like choosing a government conscientiously and acting as responsible citizens.

Third, they picture the social order itself as an extension of the human person and so as something that has to be transformed by the Gospel. Pope Paul VI and the present pope speak of the ways in which social structures and practices can solicit us into sinful ways of action and can also prevent us from doing the deeds of justice and charity. Indeed they speak of the ways in which certain laws, social customs and trade relations do our sinning for us. Hence the 1984 and 1986 Vatican documents on liberation. Hence also that dramatic statement of Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: "For the Church is it a question not only of preaching the gospel in ever wider geographic areas or to ever great numbers of people, but also of affecting and as it were upsetting, through the power of the gospel, mankind's criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life, which are in contrast with the word of God and the plan of salvation." (no. 19).

The Second Vatican Council's *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* clearly relates Christian social action to the mission of the Church when it says: "Christ's work of redemption, which deals essentially with the salvation of people, embraces also the renewal of the entire temporal order." It goes on to say that the mission of the Church is "not only to bring Christ's message and his grace to people, but also to penetrate and perfect the temporal order with the Gospel spirit." (no. 5). A respected commentator on this document says that the second of these two tasks involves both the healing of those wounds in the temporal order that come from sin, and positive steps to help open this order to Christian values.

As one writer points out, the pastoral consequences of this view of social action are far-reaching. They mean we must balance our efforts to lead individuals to conversion with efforts to change social institutions. We must see our role as not only reconciling people in situations of conflict but also of sometimes making the painful decision to take sides in

struggles for justice. We must bear witness in our lives to the reality of the spiritual world and the Kingdom of God and yet also work for the transformation of this world.

A Final Comment: Where Do We Start?

Social action, in my opinion, must be directed first of all toward profound changes that need to take place in *us*. It is about the conversion of our social attitudes or images. It is about coming to see the world in a new light, so we can come to act toward that world in a new way. Pope Paul VI says in *Octogesima Adveniens*, “It is too easy to throw back on others responsibility for injustices, if at the same time one does not realize how each one shares in it personally, and how personal conversion is needed first.” (no. 48). The 1986 document *On Christian Freedom and Liberation* says: “It is therefore necessary to work simultaneously for the conversion of hearts and the improvement of structures.” (no. 75). Pope John Paul, in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* says: “The God who is rich in mercy, the redeemer of man, the Lord and giver of life, requires from people clear-cut attitudes which express themselves also in actions or omissions towards one’s neighbour.” (no. 36). In recent years my own efforts have been directed toward helping people look at their social attitudes. If we take seriously the need not only to change our hearts but also to change our attitudes then I think Christian social action, the work of justice, is more likely to take place.