

JUSTICE AND CHARITY

Something that I read recently got me thinking about justice and charity. The Bedouin word for “justice” is “balance” and the Bedouins compare it to the side sacks of a camel’s load. A camel can go on as long as the load is balanced, but once the load is tilted, uneven, unbalanced, the camel can’t move.

I think that this insight is worth developing. Justice exercised with charity achieves the balance, but justice exercised without charity results in injustice and damage to persons. As long as a person feels he (or she) has been treated unjustly, he can’t go on evenly until he feels that his treatment has been balanced or redressed by charity.

Justice and charity cannot be practised separately. They need to balance each other. Justice without charity is cold, even ruthless and destructive. But charity without justice is vulnerable, ineffectual, resulting in a futile surrender to injustice. For example, pardon granted “charitably” without the requirement of repentance or restitution negates justice.

Justice without charity can find its expression in legalism, which is strict adherence to law, especially to the letter of the law regardless of the spirit. Legalism is the judging of conduct in terms of precise adherence to laws. The legalist finds fault in those who do not strictly observe the law and may even go so far as to condemn them. The legalist may well be a perfectionist. I came across a gem of wisdom in a paper message inside a Chinese cookie: “Aim for compassion, not perfection.”

The gospel of Jesus imparts life to us. Jesus came “not to judge the world, but to save the world” (Jn 12:47). He disclosed the way of mercy and invited all to “learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart” (Matt 11:29). His consolation is secured by the Spirit of God, the source of all true life. His good news demands a spiritual service - a service that is free. “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Corinthians 3:17).

We need to exercise justice with charity, freeing justice from a purely juridical or legal meaning of being upright in dealings and rulings and insisting exclusively on the letter of the law. Canon 1752 of the Code of Canon Law states, “...one must be attentive to canonical equity and have before one’s eyes the salvation of souls, which must always be the supreme law of the Church.”

For the rest, I have drawn inspiration from an address to the St Vincent de Paul Society by Bishop Peter Elliott.

The word “charity” is rendered in the New Testament as “love”. This is not a mere sentiment. It is what some would call a “tough love”, the love derived from the Cross, that is, a love that seeks to gain nothing for itself, the love of the crucified Lord Jesus.

Jesus commands us to “love one another as I have loved you” (John 13: 34-35). The New Commandment hinges on the Cross, for that is where Jesus shows us how he has loved us. There should be no gap between our insistence on justice and our love of neighbour.

We find the link between justice and charity in the social teaching of the Church, teaching derived from the Gospels where Jesus Christ himself proclaims and lives the good news of justice and charity. Justice and charity converge in the words and actions of Jesus.

The "just person" in the Scriptures is a good person. God's justice is also sheer goodness and uprightness. This is what we receive in Baptism when we are "justified" by the grace of God. This grace is restored in the healing moments of the sacrament of Reconciliation. Through living faith and good deeds we are made just in God's sight, and not merely acquitted by God but inwardly transformed by his own goodness and holiness, by the Spirit dwelling within us.

Justice in this sense is also described as "righteousness", not to be confused with "self- righteousness", which has negative connotations, implying hypocrisy, or delusions of one's uprightness and correctness.

This deeper kind of justice as goodness also builds on our innate sense of right and wrong, of what is fair and unfair, in the Australian tradition of giving everyone a "fair go". Our social teaching maintains that justice is what we ought to grant to all people. They deserve it because they are all persons who deserve our profound respect. Their basic human right is amplified by Jesus, who says, "In so far as you neglected to do this to one of the least of these, you neglected to do it to me" (Matt 25:46).

But justice in action also needs a distinct grace to go with it, and the word for that grace is mercy. The ideal of mercy tempering justice is a strong tradition in the interpretation of law, obviously influenced by a realistic and compassionate Catholic and Franciscan understanding of human weakness.

There is a distinctly compassionate dimension to charity: mercy. To be merciful is not being condescending or patronizing. Merciful charity reveals the mercy of God.

St Thomas Aquinas wrote that mercy "does not destroy justice, but is a certain kind of fulfilment of justice. ..Mercy without justice is the mother of dissolution; (and) justice without mercy is cruelty" (*Super Matthaenum*, Chapter V, 1.2).

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