

BROTHER COULD YOU SPARE A DIME, OR A PRAYER?

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HE GREEKS had a name for it. But, for that matter, so did the Romans. What was "eleemosyna" at Athens was "miseratio" in Rome. And what was "almsgiving" in mediaeval times, is today called "charity." To all outward appearances these different names signify exactly the same thing: any external act by which something is contributed to help the indigent.

But it is a far cry from the supercilious Greek aristocrat, who tossed a coin towards a wayside beggar, to Saint Martin of Tours, who gave half of his cloak to a freezing pauper. And it is just as far a cry from the pompous Roman Senator lavishly handing out food and circus tickets amongst the rabble of Neronian Rome, to the Catholic laymen of today, successors of Saint Vincent De Paul, entering humble homes to minister to the needs of the poor and suffering. Pagan almsgiving lacked God in its bestowment. The natural feeling of virtuous superiority may have been incense sufficient to satisfy an aesthetic Greek, but probably did not suffice for the practical Roman. He was a friend and benefactor of the poor for another reason. The rabble was his constant worry; he had to feed and entertain it, with revolution a likely alternative.

Christianity put God into almsgiving. No longer was it merely a humanitarian gesture, but an act prompted by love of God. Christianity taught men the worth and value of their immortal souls and the resultant dignity of each individual man. Hence the Christian did not see the blind beggar nor the starving wayfarer as human derelicts whose sufferings and indigence were ostensible proof of their worthlessness; he did not look upon the rabble as human scum, whose favor must be bought at a price. The Christian saw the poor and needy as his brothers in Christ, whose very necessity gave them a claim upon his charity. That is why Saint Martin divided his cloak with the beggar, that is why you can find men today who are willing to give time, energy and money to help those in distress because the poor are His loved ones.

Almsgiving is an act of Charity through the medium of the virtue of Mercy.¹ Charity binds the Christian to God and to his fellow man by a supernatural friendship. This bond of affection lays the foundation for Mercy because, moved by love of God, a man considers his neighbor as another self.² Thus he computes as his own the evils and infirmities which his neighbor undergoes, and consequently grieves over them. He seeks to remedy the dire straits of his neighbor just as he would seek to alleviate his own suffering. And any act by which he assists his indigent fellow man is an almsdeed, whether it be a gift of food or money or of any other means which can relieve his neighbor's necessity. While an almsdeed attains the end of Mercy in assisting the needy, Charity is its foundation and motive.

The modern use of the term "charity" to designate all the works directed toward the relief of the unfortunate is paradoxical. Such an appellation seems to indicate that all these works are manifestations of love of God and neighbor. This optimistic estimate, while very idealistic, is hardly true. "Charity" today seems to be woefully lacking in the supernatural motive. Almsgiving has taken on a very business-like aspect; organization has extended the scope of its work and increased its efficiency. Charitable programs have become civic institutions. And while the requirements of the destitute are more competently fulfilled contributors and workers are prone to consider only the material proportions of the assistance. This is a danger which must be avoided by Catholic charitable organizations, lest the love of God and of neighbor be drowned in a flood of efficient and impersonal details.

In spite of widespread organization, however, many opportunities for personal acts of mercy are offered to the people of our day. Even with relief, doles, soup-kitchens and the like, men have come to recognize the genuine request of their needy fellows as an ordinary occurrence. And it is a good thing. While a man may contribute to a Community Fund merely with an eye to the list of donors which will appear in the daily papers, an alms he gives on a street corner cannot be thus motivated. And although it is true that any gift which alleviates the wants of another attains its good purpose, yet only those almsdeeds which are motivated by love of God and neighbor bear spiritual fruit

¹ Saint Thomas, *Summa Theol.*, IIa IIae, q. 32, a. 1.

² *Op. cit.*, q. 30, a. 2.

for the donor.³ Then, too, a neighbor who has been assisted by a corporal alms is moved to pray for the benefactor.⁴ A prayer is a most eloquent means of showing gratitude, and it is a spiritual boon to both the giver and the receiver of the material help.

Man's corporal shortcomings and privations are seven-fold. Food, drink, clothing and housing are necessities common to all men. It is the lack of these which we are daily called upon to fulfill. These temporal wants are ordinarily supplied by monetary offerings, in the form of gifts to charitable institutions and chance contributions made personally. Privation of health or of freedom are evils incurred less commonly but no less painfully, and these menaces to the life and liberty of a neighbor can likewise be made more tolerable by charitable assistance. Man's final corporal requirement is that of decent burial, so that the body which he loved on earth may not bring his memory into dishonor.⁵ These seven categorical deficiencies in the corporal order are remedied by the seven corporal works of mercy.

Although it is true that regimented gifts of money ordinarily fulfill these wants, yet professional organization should not be allowed to stifle the love and desire of performing personal almsdeeds. Christ will not welcome the elect into Heaven with: "I was hungry and you overlooked Me because you had given ten dollars to the Community Fund; I was in prison and your paid social worker visited Me." Pagan "charity" and much of our modern "charity" envision a completed task when man's corporal wants are succoured. Christian Charity considers such work only half completed. Purely natural virtue estimates that the oft repeated request, "Brother, could you spare a dime," spells the limits of man's needs. Supernatural virtue maintains that it tells only half the story.

Being a composite of body and soul man suffers privations and defects in the spiritual order also. Spiritual wants are taken care of by spiritual acts.⁶ Charitable works in the higher order have two possible modes of execution: seeking help from God by praying for the spiritually indigent, or employing human assistance. The former mode is within the capacity of all; rich and poor, young and old, laborer and magnate can manifest their

³ IIa IIae, q. 32, a. 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ IIa IIae, q. 30, a. 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*

charity by praying for the living and the dead. This is flatly opposed to the popular notion and narrow concept of almsgiving which curtails the work to those who possess an abundance of worldly goods.

The employment of human means in subsidizing another's spiritual deficiencies is an outstanding phase of Catholic Action. Papal Encyclicals, in calling the laity to restore all things in Christ, have repeatedly emphasized the broad field of the spiritual works of mercy. The instruction of the ignorant in the essential and fundamental doctrines of their religion is the first of these spiritual works. Despite the best efforts of pastors ignorance of Catholic doctrine is prevalent. There is a movement on foot to correct this evil. Under the auspices of the hierarchy Catholic lay men and women are charitably sacrificing time and energy to prepare themselves for the positions of catechists that they may go before audiences in church, school, and upon street corners, to expound the doctrines of Jesus Christ and His Church.

The opportunities to render spiritual assistance by the instruction of the ignorant, counsel of the wavering and doubtful, and even consolation of the sorrowful may be somewhat limited by one's natural endowments and state of life. However, there are occasions in the lives of all when Charity can manifest itself in the correction of sinners, forgiveness of injuries, and in supporting and bearing the foibles, idiosyncracies, and petty selfishness of one's associates. And even though one may not be capable or competent personally to execute some of these spiritual works of mercy he always has the alternative of rendering vicarious assistance by prayer.

Man's relations with God and his fellow man are governed by two virtues, Justice and Charity. These two go hand in hand in regulating human intercourse. Justice maintains equality by strict observance of right and obligation; Charity, extending its scope beyond strict right and obligation, attains the perfection of the Christian life in love of God, self, and neighbor.

Sometimes strict Justice demands that we give assistance to others. In the corporal order of almsdeeds a man is bound to render assistance to one who is in extreme necessity when the material donation is warranted by his possessions. But no man is bound to give to another those things without which he and his dependents cannot themselves subsist. Indeed such excessive liberality is sinful. The ordinary and recognized source of ma-

terial assistance is superfluous holdings, those which exceed the requirements of their owner's state of life. In the scope of the spiritual works of mercy, too, Justice may join Charity in commanding that the sin of another be corrected, particularly in combatting the evils of contumely, calumny, and detraction. Checking such sins is one's duty both in Justice and in Charity.

Today more emphasis is placed upon the corporal works of mercy; at least they are the more highly publicized. During the depression, the vital task of millions was self-preservation, so corporal works of mercy were abundant and widespread. Under extreme conditions corporal almsdeeds are to be preferred to those of the spiritual order, even though the latter are of their very nature more noble. For, as Saint Thomas points out, "It is better that one dying of hunger should be fed rather than instructed."⁷

The Church overlooks no means in leading men to God. Although she centers her attention upon the works of the spiritual order, yet she willingly extends her attention to men's bodies, but always with the motive of ultimately benefiting their souls. Since almsgiving is an exterior manifestation of Charity, wherever supernatural love is strongest there should be found more perfectly performed works of mercy of both orders. And history bears out the truth of this statement. In the early Christian centuries monasteries were the havens of refuge for all who needed help. With their destruction on a wholesale scale during the Protestant Revolt, the poor lost for a time their most loyal champion.

But the monastic tradition of charitableness flourishes today in our own country. Writing of the traditions and life of the "Knights of the Road," a modern economist has related that the veterans of the group hold this as a first principle: the parish rectory for money, the Sisters' convent for food. The Priests and Sisters are the surest bet in any town. The knights very probably do not know that pastors have a duty as fathers of the poor, nor that the lives of religious are devoted to striving after the perfection of charity; but experience has taught them where they will receive prompt, willing and kind assistance. Their current request, "Brother, could you spare a dime," telling only half the story is often answered as though it were voiced: "Brother, could you spare a dime, or a prayer?" After all, almost anyone can obtain a dime but a prayer is a little harder to get.

⁷ IIa IIae, q. 32, a. 3.