

FRATERNAL CHARITY

Fraternal charity may be described as a supernatural love for all men. It is neither that natural sensual love which external beauty excites nor is it that affectionate love which prevails among members of the same family and among friends. It is an esteem, a regard for all men because they reflect, in some way, the goodness of God, they are the effects of His handiwork, they are loved by Him. It is called fraternal not only because we are spiritual brothers, coming from God as children from the same Father and returning to God as heirs of the same heaven, but also on account of the natural relationship which binds us, for we all have the same blood in our veins, born as we are of a common parentage. "Bones of my bone and flesh of my flesh" expressed the reason of the fraternal love of Adam for Eve, and that same expression will voice the reasonableness of fraternal charity to the end of time.

The reasonableness of brotherly love has appealed to reformers past and present. But many extremists have warped its meaning and distorted the manner of its realization. Fraternity was the object of the French revolutionists, to be obtained only when the last king had been strangled by the entrails of the last priest. The brotherhood of man is the goal of socialism to be reached only across the ruins of the present social order. Compare these bloody means, these drastic measures with Christ's simple recipe for the attainment of fraternal charity. "Love your neighbor as yourself" is the method by which He proposes to arrive at the desired end and that method is made practical by doing unto others as you would have them do unto you. Fraternal charity means, then, at bottom, a realization that whatever accidental properties may differentiate men, they are nevertheless men, creatures like ourselves, susceptible to all human frailties but still creatures infinitely dear to God.

It is not enough to feel our love, it must also be exhibited by external action. Rejoicing in the prosperity of one's neighbor, taking pleasure in the natural gifts with which he has been endowed, desiring for him all the supernatural good that God can bestow, that is feeling love and that is necessary, but there is a tinge of aloofness about it which makes it too weak to be

of itself a constituent part of fraternal charity. Our love must be expressed in a more tangible form. It entails the obligation of contributing materially to our neighbor's welfare, of extending to him a helping hand to aid him over the rough places he may encounter in life.

How this may be done can be summed up, pithily, in the general principle do unto others as you would have them do unto you, for this is translating into practice the commandment love your neighbor as yourself. A more detailed line of action, showing how men are to fulfill that great precept, is proposed in the works of mercy. These works are classified under two great headings, corporal and spiritual, in as much as they are directed toward the material prosperity or the spiritual well-being of our neighbor.

The corporal works of mercy are seven in number: to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to visit the sick and the incarcerated, to redeem captives, to bury the dead and to found hospices. Time has changed our relation with some of these obligations and today there are few opportunities to redeem captives and to bury the dead. But the works of mercy still offer the followers of Christ many opportunities to prove their love of Him. Among the corporal works of mercy the first three are of great interest today. "The poor you always have with you" Christ foretold and nineteen hundred years have proven the truth of the prophesy. The hunger and raggedness of the poor demand their feeding and clothing and these acts are made obligatory by the general precept of almsgiving. Alms is the giving of something, out of compassion, to relieve a need for the love of God. It carries with it a strict obligation and the gravity with which the obligation binds is measured from the need relieved and from the condition of the one relieving. The need may be extreme, as for example, when a man is so far reduced as to see nothing but death from starvation staring him in the face. His need is serious when he is threatened with financial ruin unless he receive help. And it is merely common when he is in the position of the majority of beggars today. Likewise the means at the disposal of the almsgiver can be considered in three ways. First there are those necessary for the preservation of his own life, secondly those needed for the maintenance of the state he occupies in life, and

lastly something superfluous—something remaining when these two offices have been performed.

There is grave or serious obligation of succoring extreme need from superfluous resources and even from the means necessary for the preservation of a becoming position in society, provided that serious inconvenience is not incurred by the benefactor. Nobody is bound by charity to relieve extreme need with that which is necessary for the sustenance of his own life, the reason being that nobody is held to prefer another's life to his own. It is the common opinion of moralists that grave and common need must under pain of sin, be alleviated from that which is superfluous. In common neediness, however, the obligation is general, not being extended to the relieving of this or that particular case (Prümmer, Vol. I, p. 390-391).

The amount of the alms to which each individual is obligated is a matter of interest. In extreme need as much alms must be given as will suffice to avert the threatening peril. The majority of theologians estimate that two per cent of one's income should be devoted to lessen the pangs of common need. When smallness of salary makes such percentage incommodious a smaller ratio will do. It is well to remark that in this matter no hard and fast rule can be drawn. In our day, moreover, state and private institutions for the needy dot the land and by paying the taxes struck for the former or by contributing to collections made for the latter the obligation of alms giving is probably fulfilled (Prümmer, Vol. I, pp. 393-394). However, charity is not measured strictly by mathematics and surely peace of mind is better secured by observing the general rule which charity dictates, "do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

Beautiful was the thought of the Fathers of the Church that the rich are appointed by God to be dispensers of His riches. The wealthy have dominion over their possessions but only a participated dominion that depends on the Divine Will as much as poverty is the instrument of God. Why the inequality between the opulent and the pauper? Why the seeming reflection on the justice of God? St. Basil's answer is as satisfying as any that can be given. The inequality exists, he replies, so that the rich may merit by dispensing and that the poor may have their patience rewarded.

The spiritual works of mercy are of vital importance to those who believe in a life beyond the grave. For if fraternal charity bids us look to the corporal welfare of our neighbor short and fleeting though it be, how much more does it oblige to contribute to his spiritual well-being, ordained as it is to an eternal existence. The spiritual works of mercy are also seven in number: to teach the ignorant, especially those truths necessary for salvation; to counsel those in doubt; to console the afflicted; to pardon injuries; to bear trials patiently; to correct those erring; and to pray for the living and the dead. Some obtain from these duties the impression that fraternity is burdensome, but only selfishness takes this attitude and there is no room for selfishness and fraternal charity in the same person. Brotherly love calls us out of that shell of egotism in which we fain would bide, leaving the world to wag on without our active participation. To teach, to counsel, what a high office charity confers on us. Directing a soul, in our own humble way, towards its destiny, urging it along the narrow path that leads to eternal beatitude is a service commensurate with the high calling of Christianity. To correct our grievously erring brethren, in all graciousness, in all humility; to endeavor by private admonition to turn them away from the danger of sinning; to attempt to save their souls from spiritual suicide is a duty that invites us all to be spiritual heroes. There is rarely grave obligation for a private individual to play the role of corrector, because for such obligation is necessary certain knowledge that a grave sin is about to be committed, that the admonition will be efficacious and that no grave disadvantage shall accrue therefrom to the corrector, knowledge of which three rarely concurs nevertheless, charity makes such action obligatory in some way. Suppose, then, we know somebody is going to place in jeopardy his chance of salvation, shall we not utter a word of warning, a sentence of advice! What though we be laughed at for our trouble, scoffed at for our pains! In God's sight it shall not pass unnoticed that we have tried.

To pardon injuries, to love our offenders is always difficult, but with the great example of Christ before our eyes it is made a part of Catholic life. For Catholic fraternity is not only joined by natural bonds, it is further linked by supernatural chains. It constitutes Christ's mystical body, of which every Catholic is a

member, and hatred between members of such a body would work havoc with the harmony which that close union implies. Love your enemies, not only in a negative way by wishing them no harm, but even positively by showing them those external signs we are wont to exhibit to all men whose place in life is similar to that occupied by ourselves. Our behavior towards them must be of such a character that no prudent man can deduce from it the fact that there is an unfriendliness between us.

The works of mercy are only the salient features in the line of action charity proposes. In our daily life numerous occasions will undoubtedly present themselves in which we may show our love. By a kindly attitude, by forbearance, by thoughtfulness we can create an atmosphere of fraternal charity. "Charity is patient, is kind, charity envieth not, is not puffed up, is not ambitious, is not provoked to anger, thinketh no evil," thus St. Paul describes brotherly love. By it we may test the genuineness of our charity—see how far our conduct towards our fellow man measures up to the standard of fraternity set by the Apostle of the Gentiles.

Praying for the living and the dead is one way we all can practise brotherly love—a way that is easy and yet helpful to all. Charity does not stop on this side of the grave, it bridges the abyss between the future and present worlds and over it we can bear succor to the departed who have need of it—to the suffering souls. Through our prayers and through our other meritorious acts we can shorten their term of purgation and hasten their exit from the tormenting, purifying flames. We are bound to pray for the living, for friend and enemy, for all men irrespective of class, color, creed. We are obliged to love them, and how can we better show our love than by speeding on the wings of prayer a petition to our Heavenly Father for their welfare. And that prayer may well include a petition that God institute a reign of fraternal charity in the hearts of men, for in that alone seems to be the panacea for the world's ills.

—Bro. Antoninus Healy, O. P.