

Social service critical to living the Gospel

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Pope Benedict XVI has extolled people and organisations responding to the needs of those disadvantaged in some way as crucial for Christians, since Jesus identifies profoundly with those in need, the hungry, sick and strangers. Indeed, such ‘love becomes the criterion for the definitive decision about a human life’s worth’, the Pope wrote in his recent encyclical, *God is love (Deus Caritas est)*.

The first encyclical of a pope is often seen as a fundamental statement of direction, and this encyclical reflects the very heart of the Gospel – God unveiling his inner being through the life and words of Jesus, to the point of laying down his life that we might live in the intimacy of God’s presence. The first part of the document examines how our experience of human love can open us to the greater mystery of love that we call God.

In the second part of the encyclical, Benedict writes that this experience of God’s earnest care can in turn empower us to recognise the image of God in others, particularly those in distress. The Pope is concerned to show the essential link between ‘God’s passionate love for his people’ and our response to the needs of others in practical, realistic ways.

The Pope invites Catholics to deepen their understanding of the implications of the Eucharist: this ‘mysticism’ of union with Christ is not just a personal experience but is ‘social in character’. Indeed, worship that ignores our social responsibilities to others would be defective. ‘A Eucharist which does not pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented’ (#13-14). Benedict is insistent that genuine love of God must be closely linked with our social obligations. He is not against a piety that nourishes concern for others, of course, but rejects ‘a desire to be “devout” and to perform my “religious duties”’ as inauthentic if it neglects attending to the needs of others.

He continues that from the first, Christians recognised that concern for the poor ‘had a constitutive relevance’ for the Church. Sharing the bread of the Eucharist implied sharing their earthly bread, so they shared their goods and held all things in common. Benedict commented: ‘love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind, is as essential to her as the ministry of the sacraments and preaching of the Gospel’ (#22). Hence charitable and welfare activity is not an optional extra for the Church, but an ‘indispensable’ part of her nature.

The encyclical has special significance for all those in caring roles. The later sections were prepared in consultation with the Pontifical Council, *Cor Unum*, which relates to the charitable and welfare works of the Church. Its German head, Archbishop Paul Josef Cordes, has been concerned about the increasing secularisation of some Catholic agencies in Europe. He fears that ‘large church organisations could be tempted, in practice, to dissociate themselves from the church and to drift away... even preferring to identity

themselves as independent, non-governmental organisations', Cordes said at a conference in January 2006. 'In such cases, their "philosophy" and projects are indistinguishable from those of the Red Cross or an agency of the United Nations'.

Hence the encyclical wishes to deal with issues around the identity and mission of church charitable or service organisations of various types. What does Christian inspiration add to what secular organisations with skill and sensitivity might offer in their service provision?

The encyclical can be seen as Benedict's answer: the motivation of a Christian offers another layer of meaning that a committed agnostic or atheist humanitarian does not have, at least explicitly. Christians believe that God is intensely concerned about human wellbeing, and invites us to experience this personally, as confirmed in the life and resurrection of Jesus. This trust and experience impel us see in others not just the innate dignity of the human person, but a brother or sister with whom God identifies profoundly.

Far from care for our neighbour being an obstacle to our experience of God, Benedict recalls the words in 1 John 4: 20: 'he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen'. Such love for our neighbour is 'explicitly demanded', the Pope commented. Moreover, 'love of neighbour is a path that leads to the encounter with God, and that closing our eyes to our neighbour also blinds us to God' (#16).

This is a tremendously important point. Social or charitable work is not a secondary aspect of faith. Faith without works is dead. The Pope sees social concern, expressed in charitable, welfare or social justice activities, as the practical living out of the heart of the Gospel. Hence the value many schools and parishes attribute to such endeavours should not be considered trivial, but can develop as a privileged path into a more mature conviction about who God is and what is asked of us.

Benedict especially invites all Christians to collaborate together, particularly in addressing the global issues of hunger and poverty. He wrote that 'we all have the same fundamental motivation and look towards the same goal: a true humanism, which acknowledges that man is made in the image of God and wants to help him to live in a way consonant with that dignity' (#30).

This does not take away the value of what non-believers may do for others. God is surely delighted with their concern and solidarity with those in need. As the Last Judgment scene in Matthew's Gospel clearly highlights, God is not fooled by the religious badges people wear, but here looks exclusively to how they treated the poor and distressed. It is a very sobering and challenging message.

While Benedict says that belief gives Christians special inspiration and motivation for their social or charitable works, he insists such efforts must not be instrumentalised or used for 'proselytism'. He believes that actions can speak louder than words, and that Christians must respect the conscientious integrity of others. 'A Christian knows when it

is time to speak of God and when it is better to say nothing and to let love alone speak.’ Members of Church charitable organisations must show this love in ‘their activity – as well as their words, their silence, their example’ (#31).

This second section of the encyclical deals mainly with the charitable activity of the Church, but it also reaffirms the need for the Church to pursue social justice, rousing consciences to the acute issues of our time. It reiterates the standard view - since Jacques Maritain at least, who so influenced the Second Vatican Council - about the relationship between the Church and the State or society, that the political task of organising and maintaining societies does not belong directly to the Church, though it has an indirect role in helping educate people’s consciences on the moral aspects of social matters through its social teaching and role in public debate. Generally it is up to lay people independently on their own initiative to take part in the political processes in the pursuit of social equity, peace and prosperity. Nevertheless, ‘the promotion of justice... is something which concerns the Church deeply’ (#28).

The encyclical at this stage becomes surprisingly sketchy, saying very little about the great global economic or social problems, and does not mention at all the Millennium Development Goals or the Make Poverty History campaign. While it repeats a critique of Marxism, it makes not mention of neoliberalism in economics, the massive imbalances in economic power and wealth, or the plight of the most impoverished nations. This is surprising, given the gestation time for this encyclical and the Vatican’s vigorous support of the Millennium Development Goals in international forums. Maybe it indicates that Pope Benedict is preparing a special document on these themes, notably in his response to the 2005 Synod of Bishops in Rome, where many bishops spoke urgently about the problems of developing countries.