

“The Church, in the very act of serving the poor and relieving their sufferings, must also continue to proclaim and serve their higher needs, those of the spirit”

THE HOLY FATHER’S ADDRESS TO REPRESENTATIVES OF CATHOLIC CHARITIES AT THE SAN ANTONIO MUNICIPAL AUDITORIUM ON SEPTEMBER 13TH

Dear brothers and sisters,

I am grateful for your presentation of the vast network of Christian love and human solidarity in which you are engaged. May the Lord sustain you in your zeal. “May mercy, peace, and love be yours in ever greater measure” (*Jude* 1).

Catholic Charities is a title that speaks wonderfully well of the generous commitment of the Catholic people of the United States to the cause of human solidarity and Christian love. It gives me great joy to be among you, members of Catholic Charities U.S.A., your associated agencies, and your colleague organizations in social ministry. Through your efforts you help to make the loving compassion of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ present to human needs.

Jesus Christ was born poor, lived poor, and died poor. He loved the poor. In His Kingdom the poor have a special place. The Church cannot be any different. She must be ever more fully aware of her fundamental duty to reflect in her life and action the very love with which God loves His creatures. For what is at stake is the mystery of God’s love as explained in the *First Letter of John*: “We, for our part, love because He first loved us” (1 *Jn.* 4:19). All service has its first moment in God.

You carry on a tradition and you live out a teaching grounded in sacred Scripture, proclaimed by the Church and relevant to every age. Service to the needy not only builds up social harmony, it reveals God, our Father the rescuer of the oppressed. In the Old Testament it was God’s love for His people that decreed a special concern for the stranger, the widow, and the orphan. As God had treated His people, so were they to treat others. The year of jubilee and the sabbatical year restored economic balance: slaves were set free, land was returned to its original owners, debts were canceled (cf. *Ex.* 21 ff.; *Lev.* 25). Justice and mercy alike were served. The Prophets repeatedly drew attention to the inner qualities of heart that must animate the exercise of justice and service: “Not as man sees does God see, because man sees the appearance but the Lord looks into the heart” (1 *Sam.* 16:7).

In the New Testament the mystery of God’s love is further revealed: “God so loved the world that He gave His only Son” (*Jn.* 3:16). Through the Heart of Jesus the fullness of God’s infinite mercy appeared in the world. Marveling at the Incarnation of God’s Son, Mary exclaims that through this Child the lowly shall be lifted up, their hunger shall be satisfied, and God’s mercy shall be extended to all (cf. *Lk.* 1:46-55). Years later, in announcing His own ministry, Jesus sums up His life’s program in the words of Isaiah: “To bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and release to prisoners, to announce a year of favor from the Lord” (*Lk.* 4:18-19). Jesus identifies Himself with the poor and the defenseless: what we do for them is done for Him, the service we fail to render them is service denied to Him (cf. *Mt.* 25:31-46).

Gross disparities of wealth between nations, classes, and persons re-enact the Gospel parable of the rich man and the poor man, Lazarus. And with the same dire consequences of which the Gospel speaks: “My child, replied Abraham, remember that you were well off in your lifetime, while Lazarus was in misery. Now he has found consolation here, but you have torment” (*Lk.16:25*). The warning is as valid today as it was 2,000 years ago.

From the beginning the Church has worked to carry out this teaching in her ministry. It is not necessary here to trace the extremely varied history of Christian service. The Church has always sought to respond to the stranger, the widow, and the orphan; she has founded countless schools, hospitals, hospices, childcare facilities, and shelters. In our own times, the Second Vatican Council has forcefully reaffirmed the Church’s vocation, in fidelity to her Lord, to love all those who are afflicted in any way: to recognize in the poor and the suffering the likeness of her poor and suffering Founder; to do all she can to relieve their needs, striving to serve Christ in them (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 8). Twenty years after the Council, the Christian community is more than ever aware that the poor, the hungry, the oppressed, the sick, and the handicapped share in a special way the Cross of Christ and therefore need the Church ministry.

Works of mercy, justice, and compassion are basic to the history of the Church in the United States. The two American women who have been numbered among the saints, Frances Xavier Cabrini and Elizabeth Ann Seton, have been thus honored principally because of their work for their poorer brothers and sisters. The initiatives of Catholic charities in the United States go back to before the Declaration of Independence. Countless institutions and structures have been established to assist the orphan, the immigrant, the ethnic groups, all persons in need — of every race and creed. Countless Americans of all extractions have made the compassionate service of their fellow human beings the whole purpose and method of their lives. In particular, generations of Religious, women and men, have consumed themselves in selfless service, under the sign of love.

The Church has always proclaimed a love of preference for the poor. Perhaps the language is new, but the reality is not. Nor has the Church taken a narrow view of poverty and the poor. Poverty, certainly, is often a matter of material deprivation. But it is also a matter of spiritual impoverishment, the lack of human liberties, and the result of any violation of human rights and human dignity. There is a very special and pitiable form of poverty: the poverty of selfishness, the poverty of those who have and will not share, of those who could be rich by giving but choose to be poor by keeping everything they have. These people too need help.

The Christian view is that human beings are to be valued for what they are, not for what they have. In loving the poor and serving those in whatever need, the Church seeks above all to respect and heal their human dignity. The aim of Christian solidarity and service is to defend and promote, in the name of Jesus Christ, the dignity and fundamental human rights of every person. The Church “bears witness to the fact that this dignity cannot be destroyed, whatever the situation of poverty, scorn, rejection, or powerlessness to which a human being has been reduced. She shows her solidarity with those who do not count in a

society by which they are rejected spiritually and sometimes physically. She is particularly drawn with maternal affection toward those children who, through human wickedness, will never be brought forth from the womb to the light of day, as also for the elderly, alone, and abandoned. The special option for the poor, far from being a sign of particularism or sectarianism, manifests the universality of the Church's being and mission'' (*Instruction on Christmas for Freedom and Liberation*, 68).

For "the poor in spirit" the Church has a very special love. She has inherited it from Christ, who called them "blest" (*Mt.* 5:3). On the one hand the Church knows, from the words of Christ, that despite all human efforts the poor will always be with us (cf. *Mt.* 26:11). On the other hand, in all her efforts to uplift the poor she knows and proclaims the ambivalence of possessions. Indeed, where the pursuit of wealth is treated as the supreme good, human beings become imprisoned in the hardening of their hearts and in the closing of their minds (cf. *Populorum Progressio*, 19). For this reason too, the Church, in the very act of serving the poor and relieving their suffering, must also continue to proclaim and serve their higher needs, those of the spirit.

Service to those in need must take the form of direct action to relieve their anxieties and to remove their burdens, and at the same time lead them to the dignity of self-reliance. In this respect I wish to express the Church's immense gratitude to the many Americans who are working to help their fellow human beings, in all the different forms which relief and development take in today's world. And I solemnly thank the American people for the generous way in which they respond to the appeal for financial support for the many splendid programs of assistance carried out in their name. In the case many programs run by the Catholic Church, I wish to invite all who have responsibility for them to ensure that they will always be, and be seen to be, in full accord with Catholic principles of truth and justice.

The organizational and institutional response to needs whether in the Church or in society, is extremely necessary, but it is not sufficient in itself. In this regard I would repeat a concern I mentioned in my apostolic letter on human suffering; "Institutions are very important and indispensable; nevertheless, no institution can by itself replace the human heart, human compassion, human love, or human initiative, when it is a question of dealing with the sufferings of another. This refers to physical sufferings, but it is even more true when it is a question of the many kinds of moral suffering and when it is primarily the soul that is suffering" (*Salvifici Doloris*, 29)

Furthermore, in the necessary organizational and institutional response to needs, it is essential to avoid reducing human beings to mere units or categories of political or social planning and action. Such a process leads to new and other unjust forms of anonymity and alienation.

Service to the poor also involves speaking up for them, and trying to reform structures which cause or perpetuate their oppression. As committed Catholics involved in helping to meet people's many concrete needs, you are still called to reflect on another dimension of a worldwide problem: the relationship between rich societies and poor societies, rich

nations and poor nations. Your insights must be prayerfully joined to those of many other people to see what can be done as soon as possible to purify the social structures of all society in this regard.

In the final analysis, however, we must realize that social injustice and unjust social structures exist only because individuals and groups of individuals deliberately maintain or tolerate them. It is these personal choices, operating through structures, that breed and propagate situations of poverty, oppression, and misery. For this reason, overcoming “social” sin and reforming the social order itself must begin with the conversion of our hearts. As the American Bishops have said: “The Gospel confers on each Christian the vocation to love God and neighbor in ways that bear fruit in the life society. That vocation consists above all in a change of heart: a conversion expressed in praise of God and in concrete deeds of justice and service” (*Economic Justice for All: Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, 327)

To many people, mercy and conversion may seem like poor tools for solving social problems. Some are tempted to accept ideologies that use force to carry out their programs and impose their vision. Such means sometimes produce what appear to be successes. But these successes are not real. Force and manipulation have nothing to do with true human development and the defense of human dignity. Catholic social teaching is totally different, not only as regards goals, but also as regards the means to be used. For the Christian, putting right human ills must necessarily take into account the reality of creation and Redemption. It means treating every human being as a unique child of God, a brother or sister of Jesus Christ. The path of human solidarity is the path of service; and true service means selfless love, open to the needs of all, without distinction of persons, with the explicit purpose of reinforcing each person’s sense of God—given dignity.

Solidarity and service are above all a duty of Christian love, which must involve the whole community. When we are tempted to congratulate ourselves on what we have done, we must bear soberly in mind the words of Jesus: “When you have done all you have been commanded to do, say, ‘We are useless servants. We have done no more than our duty’” (*Lk. 17:10*). When we are faced with the vastness of this duty of love, with the boundless needs of the poor in America and throughout the world, when we are disappointed by slowness and setbacks in the reform of structures and in our own conversion, let us not lose heart, and let us not settle for what has already been accomplished. Love can overcome great obstacles, and God’s love can totally transform the world.

As the Church tries express Christian solidarity in generous service, she also wishes to draw attention to the importance of worship and prayer and their relationship to service. In looking to the example of Christ, the Church can never forget that all Christ’s actions were accompanied by prayer. It is in prayer that the Church develops and evaluates her social consciousness, and unceasingly discovers anew her vocation to serve the needy if the world, as Jesus did. Addressing a group of American Bishops during their last *ad Limina* visit, I spoke of this specifically Christian and ecclesial dimension of all social and charitable action: “Only a worshipping and praying Church can show herself

sufficiently sensitive to the needs of the sick, the suffering, the lonely — especially in the great urban centers — and the poor everywhere. The Church as community of service has first to feel the weight of the burden carried by so many individuals and families, and then strive to help alleviate these burdens. The discipleship that the Church discovers in prayer she expresses in deep interest for Christ's brethren in the modern world and for their many different needs. Her concern, manifested in various ways, embraces — among others — the areas of housing, education, health care, unemployment, the administration of justice, the special needs of the aged, and the handicapped. In prayer, the Church is confirmed in her solidarity with, the weak who are oppressed, the vulnerable who are manipulated, the children who are exploited, and everyone who is in any way discriminated against" (Address of December 3rd, 1983, No. 6)

Catholic Charities and related organizations exist essentially to spread Christian love. It is especially through charitable activities at the parish level that the entire Church in the United States joins in the tasks of mercy, justice, and love. We have seen today how Catholic Charities and all its colleague associations have lent God their own flesh — their hands and feet and hearts — so that His work may be done in our world. For your long and persevering service — creative and courageous, and blind to distinctions of race or religion — you will certainly hear Jesus' words of gratitude: "You did it for me" (*Mt.* 25:40).

Gather, transform, and serve! When done in the name of Jesus Christ, this is spirit of Catholic Charities and of all who work in this cause, because it is the faithful following of the One who did "not come to be served but to serve" (*Mk.* 10:45). By working for a society which fosters the dignity of every human person, not only are you serving the poor, but you are renewing the founding vision of this nation under God! And may God reward you abundantly!