

THE UNIFICATION OF CHARITY

"The concept of a "people", which naturally entails a positive view of community and cultural bonds, is usually rejected by individualistic liberal approaches, which view society as merely the sum of coexisting interests. One speaks of respect for freedom, but without roots in a shared narrative; in certain contexts, those who defend the rights of the most vulnerable members of society tend to be criticized as populists. The notion of a people is considered an abstract construct, something that does not really exist. But this is to create a needless dichotomy. Neither the notion of "people" nor that of "neighbour" can be considered purely abstract or romantic, in such a way that social organization, science and civic institutions can be rejected or treated with contempt.

Charity, on the other hand, unites both dimensions – the abstract and the institutional – since it calls for an effective process of historical change that embraces everything: institutions, law, technology, experience, professional expertise, scientific analysis, administrative procedures, and so forth. For that matter, "private life cannot exist unless it is protected by public order. A domestic hearth has no real warmth unless it is safeguarded by law, by a state of tranquillity founded on law, and enjoys a minimum of wellbeing ensured by the division of labour, commercial exchange, social justice and political citizenship".

True charity is capable of incorporating all these elements in its concern for others. In the case of personal encounters, including those involving a distant or forgotten brother or sister, it can do so by employing all the resources that the institutions of an organized, free and creative society are capable of generating. Even the Good Samaritan, for example, needed to have a nearby inn that could provide the help that he was personally unable to offer. Love of neighbour is concrete and squanders none of the resources needed to bring about historical change that can benefit the poor and disadvantaged. At times, however, leftist ideologies or social doctrines linked to individualistic ways of acting and ineffective procedures affect only a few, while the majority of those left behind remain dependent on the goodwill of others. This demonstrates the need for a greater spirit of fraternity, but also a more efficient worldwide organization to help resolve the problems plaguing the abandoned who are suffering and dying in poor countries. It also shows that there is no one solution, no single acceptable methodology, no economic recipe that can be applied indiscriminately to all. Even the most rigorous scientific studies can propose different courses of action.

Everything, then, depends on our ability to see the need for a change of heart, attitudes and lifestyles. Otherwise, political propaganda, the media and the shapers of public opinion will continue to promote an individualistic and uncritical culture subservient to unregulated economic interests and societal institutions at the service of those who already enjoy too much power." (*Pope Francis: "Fratelli Tutti" paras 163 to 166*)

We are really being challenged here to reconsider a deeper understanding of what the word "charity" means. We freely and often use that word as an umbrella for our thoughts and activities – and rightly so – but Pope Francis shows us how there are many elements in that word which must be fully brought together (orchestrated) in our everyday behaviour in order for it to be authentic and genuine. There is an old saying that many will be familiar with – "charity begins at home". This section of the Encyclical brings, for me anyway, a reflection of how true that saying really is. It is the individual who must bear responsibility for any approach to others and for contributing to forming the attitudes and values that are adopted by the various movements, interest groups and change agents that abound. This is an important responsibility and a relentless activity.

Our appreciation of ourselves with all our gifts and talents is a total package. As we deepen our acceptance of the wonderful ways God makes known his presence in our own life, we become aware of both the depth of the dignity he has freely given us and of our 'connectedness' through him to others – near and far. In this context particularly individualism is a source of disunity – not just between individuals but also within each person. In an extreme form it can also lead to a breakdown of the unity between the creator and the created. Such a separation is what we call sin, and the responsibility for that state lies within each individual.

Reflection.

1. How often do I pause to appreciate and thank God for sharing with me the opportunity to be alive?
2. What more can I do to influence the dignity of the life of others and help them appreciate their gifts?
3. In what ways can I reinforce the importance of the value of each person in the institutions of which I am a part?

Prayer from the Encyclical*An Ecumenical Christian Prayer*

O God, Trinity of love,
from the profound communion of your divine life,
pour out upon us a torrent of fraternal love.
Grant us the love reflected in the actions of Jesus,
in his family of Nazareth,
and in the early Christian community.

Grant that we Christians may live the Gospel,
discovering Christ in each human being,
recognizing him crucified
in the sufferings of the abandoned
and forgotten of our world,
and risen in each brother or sister
who makes a new start.

Come, Holy Spirit, show us your beauty,
reflected in all the peoples of the earth,
so that we may discover anew
that all are important and all are necessary,
different faces of the one humanity
that God so loves. Amen.