

Chaplain's Reflection—March 14, 2011—© Very Rev. Steven Belonick

"And when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing." (Matthew 6:3)

Each local parish is called to have a missionary character, bringing people to Christ and proclaiming His kingdom. Similarly, each local church must become Christ's hands and feet, extending His love and charity to those in need, within the Eucharistic community and beyond. A parish that turns inward, seeking merely to maintain itself, has, unfortunately, lost its way; a parish that fails either to proclaim Christ or to extend His compassion to others ceases to be the Church.

Early on during my last parish assignment, it became evident to me that the community needed to look beyond its own life and interests. Change took place slowly, with much coaxing, with God's grace, and through a number of small initiatives: sharing ten percent of all proceeds from fundraisers with a local charity; donating bi-weekly to the local food pantry; and participating in the annual, six-mile "Triple City Hunger Walk-a-Thon." My parish became the first Orthodox church among seven Orthodox parishes in the area to participate in that walk-for-hunger. Over time the idea caught on, and eventually nearly all the Orthodox parishes in our locale became involved.

However, my parishioners never took the subsequent step: actually to "encounter" the hungry and the needy. It was easier to help the poor from a safe distance, and, like most Orthodox Christians, they tried to fulfill Christ's mandate to care for the needy by collecting and sending money and/or food elsewhere. I encouraged this, but I realized that the givers still were missing an essential experience.

For my parishioners, participating in soup kitchens or even establishing one in the parish center would have been the next important step in their growth, but we as a church never got to that point. Thanks be to God: many Orthodox parishes are beginning to engage in social awareness. Our own seminarians are regularly involved in organizations like Youth Equipped to Serve (YES), Midnight Run, and similar ministries. Their work involves face-to-face encounters; they, and the poor they serve, do not remain unnamed, unknown, and anonymous.

That said, I'd like to further explore the idea of anonymity and generosity, from two perspectives. On the one hand, the poor need to be approached in a personal manner. Jesus didn't come to establish, organize, or finance state-run social agencies. Instead, he *met* each person who came to him. Each had a name, a face, and a story. People in local parishes must encounter the poor as Jesus did.

On the other hand, Jesus stressed the unacknowledged gesture of the giver, a peculiar unawareness of doing good: "When you give alms do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your alms may be in secret" (Matthew 6:3-4). Could our Lord be speaking here about an attitude of anonymity, a sort of inner humility? St. John Chrysostom seems to have understood it in that way, for he wrote:

Jesus is not talking about literal left and right hands. Rather, he speaks spiritually with intentional exaggeration. "If it is possible," he says, "for you to remain unaware let this be your goal. The result, if it be possible, is that your giving be concealed from the very hands that serve." (*Commentary on St. Matthew's Gospel*)

St John's suggestion is a remedy for pride.

Charity can easily proceed from a pedestal of our own making, a vantage point that makes us feel better about ourselves. But charity, according to our Lord's words, must never be done to build up our own image—even in our own eyes. How can we avoid this pitfall of pride as we go about serving the needy?

Henri Nouwen once wrote that Christians are called not only to serve the poor but also to become the poor (*The Road to Daybreak: A Spiritual Journey*—entry for March 18). His words have always haunted and disturbed me. Is Christ actually calling me to divest of everything I own in order to serve the poor? This would fly contrary to the fact that God has deigned some to be rich so that they might be able to help and sustain those less fortunate. I believe that Nouwen is suggesting a different type of poverty, which becomes clear when we look at Jesus' own acts of compassion.

Jesus came to identify with us fully. He underwent baptism in the Jordan, even though He was sinless. He became like us in all things except sin (Heb 2). "Though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9). He took on our human limitations. To become poor can mean to divest oneself of material goods, but it also can mean to identify with the other, to become "one" with them in spirit.

How can we identify with the poor as Jesus did? How can we become "one" with them? And why is it so important that we do so? Jean Vanier, who established homes for the mentally disabled around the world, in his book *Essential Writings*, quoted from an insightful letter that Carl Jung had written to a young Christian woman:

I admire Christians, because when you see someone who is hungry or thirsty, you see Jesus. When you welcome a stranger, someone who is "strange," you welcome Jesus. When you clothe someone who is naked, you clothe Jesus. What I do not understand, however, is that Christians never seem to recognize Jesus in their own poverty. You always want to do good to the poor outside you and at the same time you deny the poor person living inside you. Why can't you see Jesus in your own poverty, in your own hunger and thirst? In all that is "strange" inside you: in the violence and the anguish that are beyond your control. You are called to welcome all this, not to deny its existence, but to accept that it is there and to meet Jesus there.

Vanier recalled that Jung's letter helped him to realize that we cannot welcome and receive Jesus unless we welcome our own weakness, poverty, and deepest needs. We cannot accept the wounds of others unless we are open to accept our wounded self and seek help. How can we be compassionate toward others if we are not compassionate toward ourselves?

Poverty has many manifestations; poverty may take different forms in different circumstances, but they are equally debilitating and oppressive. Mother Teresa of Calcutta once said that the spiritual poverty of people in the West was far greater than the physical poverty of those she served in Calcutta, and we in North America can attest to her statement.

We with material wealth can serve the needy by recognizing that our own poverty—within our impoverished souls—matches and or exceeds their lack. In this spirit, we can better give from our material plentitude, from hearts that connect and unite with the poor.

Great Lent reminds us of the importance of almsgiving. *How* we give is as important, if not more important, than *what* we give. May our Lord's own example of self-emptying, his *kenotic* love and His identification with us, be imprinted on our hearts.

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