

The Two Feet of Justice

By Leela Ramdeen, Chair of The Catholic Commission for Social Justice

Pope Pius XI stated in *Divini Redemptoris* (1937):

“Charity will never be true charity unless it takes justice into account...Let no one attempt with small gifts of charity to exempt themselves from the great duties imposed by justice.”

Social justice involves: a) works of mercy/ Charity; and b) works of social action – seeking systemic change.

These are often called *“the two feet of Christian Justice”* because to walk in justice we must walk with both feet. Although there is a relationship between charity and social action, they are not the same.

Working for justice often involves providing immediate aid (charity), but it also must include changing systems, structures, institutions and public policies that are at the root cause of injustices such as poverty and social exclusion (social action). It is important to understand the interplay and differences between the two approaches.

The Office of Social Justice, Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, USA, rightly makes the following distinction between works of mercy/charity and works of social action/justice:

Works of Mercy/Charity/Social Service

Scriptural reference: Good Samaritan story

- * The Gospel story does not attempt to survey the causes of highway banditry. The Samaritan provides temporary and immediate relief.
- * Private, individual acts
- * Responds to immediate need
- * Provides direct service: Almsgiving to the poor and needy, running homeless shelters, food distribution, clothing drives, offering shelter, emergency services, visiting the sick, the elderly, orphans and those in prisons, taking care of victims of crime, prayer, meditation, offering up masses, novenas, fasting, vigils etc.
- * Requires repeated actions
- * Directed at the effects of symptoms

Social Action/Social Change

Scriptural reference: Exodus story

- * Moses does not ask for food and medicine for the Jewish slave- labour force. He challenges the institutional system. Message: “Let my people go.”
- * Public, collective actions.
- * Responds to long-term need
- * Promotes social change in institutions.
- * Resolves structural injustice.

* Directed at the root causes of injustice: social injustice

In their document: "Faithful citizenship: Civic Responsibility for a new millennium," the U.S. Catholic Bishops said:

"Jesus called us to love our neighbours by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for the sick and afflicted, and comforting the victims of injustice (Mt 25:31-46). Our Lord's example and words demand a life of charity from each of us. Yet they also require action on a broader scale in defence of life, in pursuit of peace, in support of the common good, and in opposition to poverty, hunger, and injustice. Such action involves the institutions and structures of society, economy, and politics."

Social ministry, in the Catholic tradition, is a "both/and" proposition. While we meet immediate needs today, we work for long-term changes that will create a more just tomorrow – for all.

Mother (Blessed) Teresa of Calcutta was a model of mercy. She celebrated the value of every human person and symbolised the spirit of compassion that must characterise all Christian service. However, she did not reject social action.

If questioned about how to help those in need, Mother Teresa would simply say: *"What you can do, I can't do, and what I can do, you can't do, but together we can do something beautiful for God."*

We need to remember the work of people like Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, and Archbishop Tutu – models of social action. The poor need more than handouts. You know the Chinese saying: *Give people a fish, feed them for a day. Teach them to fish, feed them for life.*

Archbishop Tutu fought for the unjust system of apartheid in South Africa to be dismantled. He linked political action with his religious beliefs to bring about systemic change.

We need to look at the social, political, and economic system as a whole and press for systemic change. We need a holistic approach when dealing with 'violence'. Violence takes its forms also in unjust and inequitable social and economic structures.

We need to address the structural violence of poverty, deprivation and social exclusion and to consider peaceful ways of effecting changes in society to promote social justice. Each day we see a declining respect for human life. Human life is sacred. The dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. People are more important than things. The test of every institution or policy in our nation must be whether it threatens or enhances human dignity and indeed human life itself.

We must have a holistic approach to development since authentic development must be full human development. We must raise our voices to heal our broken nation/world. We have the capacity to make a difference.

We must stand in solidarity with people everywhere, which are on low incomes or unemployed, disabled, ill or infirm, homeless or poorly housed, in prison or who are otherwise vulnerable, powerless and at a disadvantage. Solidarity means the willingness to see others as another ‘self’ and so to regard injustice committed against another as no less serious than an injustice against one’s self.

Vatican II stressed the need for the Catholic Church to stand in solidarity with the whole human family: *“The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men and women of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ.”* (*Lumen Gentium*).

We are one human family. Our responsibilities to each other cross national, racial, economic and ideological differences. Learning to practise the virtue of solidarity means learning that ‘loving our neighbour’ has global dimensions in an interdependent world.

Prayers are essential to social justice work. Indeed, our social ministry must be anchored in prayer where we uncover the depths of God’s call to seek justice and pursue peace. Prayer helps believers to apply their faith to everyday situations.

People of faith have a duty to be in communion with God by prayer. We must find space for God, and nourish our own spiritual life by giving time to God daily. We must pray for a conversion of hearts because true justice and peace can be a matter of policy only if it is first a matter of the heart. Let us open our hearts to conversion to truly love one another as God loves us.

We must not underestimate the power of prayer in our efforts to transform the world. But remember, social justice is more than just prayer. As the late Cardinal Hume said: *“the deepening of the spiritual life must go hand in hand with practical concern for our neighbour, and thus with social action.”*

Today, the social mission and message of people of faith are more important than ever, and we must share these with credibility and integrity.