

Encountering the Poor

St. Maria of Paris as a Practical Role Model

“Here it is important to stress once more that quite often various exercises in external virtue – feeding vagabonds, sheltering beggars, and so on – are also accepted, as it were, by those who follow the path of self-salvation. But they are accepted as ascetic exercises useful for the soul. Of course, this is not the love that the Gospel teaches us, and it was not for this kind of love that Christ was crucified. His love, given to us in inheritance, is true sacrificial love, the giving of the soul not in order to receive it back with interest, so to speak, not as an act in its own name, but as an act in the name of a neighbor, and only in his name, our love for whom reveals to us the image of God in him. Here we cannot reason like this: Christ gave us the firm and true teaching that we meet Him in every poor and unhappy man. Let us take that into consideration and give this poor and unhappy man our love, because he only seems poor and unhappy to us, but in fact he is the King of Heaven, and with Him our gifts will not go for nothing, but will return to us a hundredfold. No, the poor and unhappy man is indeed poor and unhappy, and in him Christ is indeed present in a humiliated way, and we receive him in the name of the love of Christ, not because we will be rewarded, but because we are aflame with this sacrificial love of Christ and in it we are united with Him, with His suffering on the Cross, and we suffer not for the sake of our purification and salvation, but for the sake of this poor and unhappy man whose suffering is alleviated by ours. One cannot love sacrificially in one’s own name, but only in the name of Christ, in the name of the image of God that is revealed to us in man.” (*The Second Gospel Commandment*)

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“To be sure, acts of love and benevolence enter into the rhythm of the strict ritualist’s life. The strict ritualist knows that he must help the poor, especially during Great Lent. In his time he has sent *kalachi* [white bread loaves] to those confined in prison. He might even organize a benefit, build almshouses, and put on dinners for his poorer brethren. But the basic motive for such activity is that it is prescribed, that it enters into the general rhythm of his life, that it has become part of his ritualist concept of things. In this sense he has a greatly developed feeling of obligation and obedience. Thus his relationship to others is determined by a self-

imposed obligation and is not based on a spontaneous feeling of love toward them.”
(*Types of Religious Life*)

“Christ gave us two commandments: to love God and to love our fellow man. Everything else, even the Beatitudes, are merely elaborations of the two commandments which contain within themselves the totality of Christ’s Good News. Furthermore, Christ’s earthly life is nothing other than the revelation of the mystery of love towards God and towards man. These are, in effect, not only the true, but the only, measure of things. It is remarkable that their truth is found only in their indissolubility. Love for man alone leads us to the blind alley of anti-Christian humanism and the only way out of it is, at times, to reject man and love towards him in the name all of mankind. But love for God without love for man is condemned: “You hypocrite, how can you love God whom you have not seen, if you hate your brother whom you have seen.” Their linkage is not simply a combination of two great truths taken from two spiritual worlds but their linkage is a union of two parts of a single whole.” (*Types of Religious Life*)

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“A person should have a more attentive attitude toward his brother's flesh than his own. Christian love teaches us to give our brother not only material but spiritual gifts. We must give him our last shirt and our last crust of bread. Here personal charity is as necessary and justified as the broadest social work. In this sense there is no doubt that the Christian is called to social work. He is called to organize a better life for the workers, to provide for the old, to build hospitals, care for children, fight against exploitation, injustice, want, lawlessness.

In principle the value is completely the same, whether he does it on an individual or a social level; what matters is that his social work be based on love for his neighbor and not have any latent career or material purposes. For the rest it is always justified – from personal aid to working on a national scale, from concrete attention to an individual person to an understanding of abstract systems of the right organization of social life. The love of man demands one thing from us in this area: ascetic ministry to his material needs, attentive and responsible work, a sober and unsentimental awareness of our strength and of its true usefulness.” (*The Second Gospel Commandment*)

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