

DOING THEOLOGY WHILE PEOPLE STARVE

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“What’s the point of high-flung academic arguments when people are dying of hunger?!”

This was the challenge recently put to me over dinner with friends who work for prominent Catholic charitable organisations. We had been talking about the Vatican’s long-held concern regarding the specifically religious identity of such organisations as Caritas Internationalis. I had suggested, somewhat tentatively, that the unease was likely related to the potential of such organisations to become politicised or else reduced to a project of humanisation rather than evangelisation.

This reading seemed supported by the fact that in February of this year the then-secretary general of Caritas, Dr Lesley-Anne Knight, was formally refused a second four-year term, with the Secretary of State of the Holy See, Cardinal Bertone, explaining the decision as being underpinned by a desire to give new emphasis to the “theological dimension” of Caritas.

So does a “theological dimension” matter for the missionary practice of the Church’s charitable organisations? Who has patience for theology when, as I was passionately reminded, people are dying of starvation?

An initial, though perhaps bland, reason why the specific theological orientation of charitable agencies should matter to those who lead them is that the issue will land at their front door, whether it is welcome or not. I suspect that the growing momentum of the ‘new evangelisation’ will not leave these organisations untouched and bring into focus and question their particular ecclesiological identity and missionary principles, calling forth an explicit response.

In terms of the often-contested nature of Christian mission, which I suggest stands at the centre of the events at Caritas, it could be safely put that no one in the field is suggesting that there is a choice to be made *between* feeding the hungry and proclaiming the Gospel. These tasks are commonly recognised as inseparable dimensions of a faithful response to the person and message of Jesus and no amount of selective biblical exegesis could exclude one or the other. Therefore, the tensions on this question are a matter of degree and emphasis and there are number of positions along a continuum rather than only two poles of the debate. In fact, the very nuance of the question of mission and its emphases calls forth theological reflection rather than raising it as an inhibiting encumbrance to responding to people in an authentically Christian way.

What is clear is that the Holy See has a concern that the Church’s charitable works and agencies have a sound and explicit theological grounding. This concern is expressed in Benedict XVI’s encyclical letters *Deus Caritas Est* (2006) and *Caritas in Veritate* (2009). In both of these, Benedict points out that it is not the pursuit of a just ordering of society which

is the immediate responsibility of the Church. This is the proper responsibility of politics. Yet to make this delineation is not to relegate the Church “to the sidelines” in the struggle for justice, as Benedict puts it, but situates its mission within the need to reawaken the spiritual horizon of the human person above all. Without this vision and encounter with the transcendent, justice cannot prevail or ultimately prove lasting in human community.

As Benedict’s encyclicals underscore, the charitable activities of the Church certainly must include justice but must also go beyond it. The mission of the Church includes but extends beyond the purely material needs of those it serves, and so while practicing charity by the offer of social assistance is an essential and immediate response to the Gospel, it is not of itself sufficient.

This much is pointed out in *Deus Caritas Est* (#28) which submits that if the Church is to be a living force of love, a loving reflection of Jesus who is the incarnate love of God, a Jesus who gives not only material aid but indeed his very person, then our love must “not simply offer people material help, but refreshment and care for their souls, something which often is even more necessary than material support. In the end, the claim that just social structures would make works of charity superfluous masks a materialist conception of man: the mistaken notion that man can live ‘by bread alone’ – a conviction that demeans man and ultimately disregards all that is specifically human.”

The distinctive mark of Christian charitable activity is that it brings far more than “technically proper care” as Benedict characterises it. Our mission as Church brings an encounter with the love of God made present in Jesus, and so authentic human development can never come about when this ultimate goal of the human journey is left aside – precisely God as the guarantor of human development and fulfilment.

This kind of theological reflection may not carry much weight for those engaged at the coalface of the Church’s charitable activity, for those hard at work responding courageously, day in and day out, to the pressing scandals of poverty and hunger in a world of excess food, the underworld of human trafficking, and predatory globalisation.

However, I suggest that theology offers more than it ‘detracts’ from the urgency of this missionary zeal as a Church. An appreciation of charitable service within a theological context is not, in my view, to lure concrete acts of service into a world of abstraction. Taking care to take care, to consider the theological foundations which underpin our actions, brings to the surface the very depth, profundity and breadth of our mission as Church, precisely as a response to God who leads us to respond to our neighbour.

Such theological bases can energise, sustain and focus Christian action toward its proper goal and provide a holistic vision and context for mission. As a case in point, the French Jesuit theologian Henri de Lubac observed that, “a social paradise can be a spiritual hell; in which case, however, it would stop very quickly being even a social paradise.”

Without reflection on the ultimate purpose and identity of Christian agencies, which is not simply a sociological question but a theological concern, our mission as a community of faith risks being confined to the concerns of social activism or be reduced to a principle of pragmatism which can undercut the very Gospel values for which we stand.

It must be asked if it is a mere theological nicety to uphold that our life as Church must be expressed in historical form and action but also transcend the cause of worldly perfection if it is to genuinely meet people in their poverty, however that poverty is experienced.

This tension seems worthy of reflection, for the Church's charitable organisations and all of us engaged in mission, for this was the shape of God's own love in Jesus who took human history ever seriously but never enclosed its meaning within it.