

Charity

Colleagues,

This week's ThTh posting is the text of the first two pages of the Summer Newsletter '05, LUTHERAN URBAN MISSION SOCIETY, 5 West King Edward Avenue, Vancouver, BC Canada. Writer is Canadian Lutheran Pastor Brian Heinrich, once-upon-a-time TA in systematic theology at Seminex, class of 1983. As a "street priest" for LUMS, Brian's parish is what the locals call the "East Side," the scruffy side of town in Vancouver, British Columbia, the southwestern corner of Canada. His people, the rejects of this international metropolis, huddle here for survival. Brian and his LUMS colleagues join other Christians as Christ's emissaries—for care and redemption—in this conflicted corner of the world. Their website is

Peace & joy!
Ed Schroeder

CHARITY

One of the places we stopped on our Good Friday Procession this year [through the streets of Vancouver] was the office of the politician who introduced a bill to prevent street people from begging. A few days earlier my advocate colleague here at First United [the church-base home for this ecumenical ministry] asked me for a suggestion for content as she was to speak at this particular station. I replied that the Master Himself (standing in continuity with ancient tradition) was pretty explicit on this one, & that we have a direct saying from the

Lord, "Give to the one who asks of you!" And the context suggests generously (in an "Abba"/parental/God-like way) not just to satisfy any minimum requirement! (Matthew 5:42).

Many people ask me what to do when confronted by the growing number of beggars on our downtown streets (spreading even into fashionable West End locations now!). In complete contradiction to the Lord's imperative I usually recommend that people don't give to the panhandler, but instead, offer to buy food or cigarettes or whatever it might be. This will sometimes dissuade the beggar & usually assuage the beggee. In my capacity as street priest I give a limited amount, for which I am reimbursed by our community, usually (but not always) to those whom I know & usually (but, again, not always) in smaller denominations. But on any given wander about downtown I might be hit upon by as many as 25-30 beggars & sheer force of numbers limits me as our resources are not endless.

In the last paragraph I only hinted at but didn't yet address the judgement call. One of my favourite patristic heroes is St. John Chrysostom. In the same vein as the Lord, he says, it is not our place to interrogate the asker, circumspection is not our business, responding is. So our modern prevarications are exposed & justly set aside. The appropriate humane response to plea is share. Personally I am humbled by beggars. It is my conviction that it takes incredible courage to ask.

What immediately follows the afore-mentioned saying of Jesus is more of His wisdom on giving (that we usually hear in the Ash Wednesday Liturgy) that suggests giving benefits the giver (Matthew 6:1-4). Alms-giving, Jesus says, is for the giver's good & well being, not the recipient's! Giving is part of spiritual health. Giving is for our own good! Because... giving is a divine attribute. Who is God, but the One who gives us life & consistently sustains that life by repeated

benefactions? By giving we participate in the divine action. Giving is a lesson in holiness, godliness. And what is the character of God's giving? Again just a few lines earlier (Matthew 5:45), God causes His sun to shine on the bad as well as the good & His beneficent rains to fall on the dishonest as well as the honest. God gives generously, indiscriminately, lavishly, unstintingly. It is the divine character. It is the nature of Godness. Which we in these same lines are invited to participate in. "You must be like your dad. Godlike, Giving, Generous" (5:48).

Does this sound reminiscent of LUMS founding concepts? Quite marvelously from the outset we have believed that our mission is bifocal. Not just a one-way flow of having suburban churches coming to the inner city poor. But that somehow those churches were also being evangelized by the opportunity to serve the needy. Gospeled by giving. St. Francis' prayer reminds us, "it is by giving that we receive." If our hands are already full, if we are receiving an alternative reward, we've missed the opportunity. We've settled for a cheaper imitation reward that will ultimately prove empty & unrewarding. We don't need to receive compensations for giving. Giving itself is the reward. God has already superabundantly blessed you if you are in a position to be the giver. Your sibling, the begger, does not share that same advantage. Therefore, share. Express the divine nature in you. Act divinely, be extravagant. Without expectation of return or compensation.

In this whole segment of the gospel Jesus is teaching what the reign of God is like, in contrast to the old way of doing things that currently holds sway. In the reign of God the poor possess (5:1), (the rich who "have" are dispossessed! cf Luke 1:53). In the old way, (that still holds sway) you are a wiley politician who makes sure that you get the most press coverage you can for your charity dollar, so you help build a public

stadium but you make sure your name is on it in big letters. You (sell if you can get the suckers to buy them, or if not ok) give away "free" t-shirts, mugs, pencils with your logo on it, & convince the users to sport your advert as fashionable! (Amazing!!! the persuasive power of advertising!) "We'd like to thank all our contributors that made this possible... endless list of corporate benefactors & logos..." immediate investment advertising return, reward got. But the Lord says in the reign of God giving isn't like that. Instead you just do it. "Abba" God notices. It expresses the divine character. In the reign of God we don't need incentives to be good. If you require compensation it is not truly giving, it is an economic exchange & the divine opportunity is missed. The poor offer us a divine opportunity.

I intentionally chose to title this reflection "charity," though charity smacks of negative connotation these days. The currently politically correct saying is, "justice not charity" as if charity were a bad thing! But I would like to argue for the redemption of charity. Charity is too good for us to give up on. We often hear 1 Corinthians 13 read at weddings, which I think confuses us. The *caritas* described there is Divine love. Charity is the character of God. "Ubi caritas et amor, deus ibi est." "Wherever love & charity are, God is there."

It is godly to give.

Part of the divine opportunity we at LUMS offer the faithful is a possibility to express the divine character in them. From the outset we've recognized that ministry & service were a gospel mission for the churches as much as the needy.

Our mission statement begins, "in response to the Gospel..." In other words, because God has first gifted us, with life, with sustenance, with the Beloved Jesus, our *caritas* is the

response, the echo, the ripplewave that continues to perpetuate the divine action in the universe. We are not giving, we receive. We have the privilege of acting like God.

We need to clarify this scriptural, Christian, redemptive perspective on giving for ourselves & our support constituency. If we succumb to the old way of economics offering reward points & incentives for charity, we miss the opportunity to illustrate & incarnate the reign of God, where giving is its own reward.

Pastor Brian

P.S. from E .S.

Check the LUMS website to learn more of “charitas incarnate” in Vancouver.