

Almsgiving in the Twenty-First Century

“Grace builds on nature.”¹

This statement from the *Summa* of Saint Thomas Aquinas provides the principle upon which I wish to base my remarks about almsgiving. The axiom expresses in succinct form the theological insight that creation and redemption are the work of the same God, and hence, at their best, will be in harmony with one another. Consider in this light our Lord’s words in the Sermon on the Mount: “But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be liable to the hell of fire.”² The demands of family loyalty are not denied; they are strengthened. Similarly, Saint Paul’s concern for the poor Christians is common decency infused with grace:

Now concerning the contribution for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that contributions need not be made when I come. And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me.³

In his concern for his poverty-stricken fellow Christians in Jerusalem, Saint Paul provides an instance of a general principle that is applicable not only to Christians but to society at large. The religious term for this term is “almsgiving,” which means using our possessions to help others, but it’s not restricted to religion. It comes from the fact that no one has an absolute claim on anything that he owns. We become aware of that when the government appropriates our property, e.g., to build a highway. The common good takes precedence over our rights of ownership. Less obviously, the same principle is at work when the government uses our taxes for welfare or unemployment benefits. In other words, the money collected by the government is to be used for the common good. Members of

¹ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I.1.8.ad 2.

² Matt 5.22.

³ 1 Cor 16.1-4

Parliament are stewards, not owners, of the resources of our country, and so we are rightly indignant if they abuse their privilege by using our tax money, e.g., to pay for abortions. Businesses, too, will have benefits for their employees, in the form of dental plans, paid leave of absence, and so on, all of which indicate that ownership, individual or collective, is not independent of outside claims. We don't think of such things as alms, but properly understood, that is what they are. Saint Thomas Aquinas, the great mediaeval theologian has, as you might expect, something to say on the subject. He notes that God has provided things that man needs, such as food, shelter and clothing, and as far as it is possible, no one should have to go without.

Hence whatever certain people have in superabundance is due, by natural law, to the purpose of succoring the poor. For this reason Ambrose says, . . . "It is the hungry man's bread that you withhold, the naked man's cloak that you store away, the money that you bury in the earth is the price of the poor man's ransom and freedom."⁴

1. *Family: Time, Possessions*

Anyone who is a member of a family knows what almsgiving is, although we never think to use the term for the care we give to one another. Parents, to take the most obvious case, are generous towards their children, providing them not only with food, shelter and clothing, but also with affection, education, good example, and that most precious of all commodities, time. The joyful assumption of these responsibilities is, or should be, characteristic of married couples the world over. Christian parents, however, add something more, in that they educate their children in the faith, the greatest gift of all. In the case of a mentally or physically handicapped child, this fundamental form of almsgiving is intensified. There is, however, the consolation of knowing that the biblical injunction to love God and neighbour, which is the ultimate source of our almsgiving, is being fulfilled in a superlative manner.

What does the season of Lent have to add to these ideas and actions? Two things, corresponding to the twofold nature of Lenten penance: to overcome sin and to grow in virtue. During Lent, parents who have not been meeting their responsibilities towards their children are called upon to repent—not too strong a term—of their neglect by putting things right. The

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* IIa-IIae, 66.7; Saint Ambrose *Sermon* 64.2.

positive element of Lent—growing in virtue—is accomplished when parents reflect on their relationship with their children. Consider family prayer. Grace before meals, for example, could be expanded a little by, say, reading a verse of Scripture or adding a short extemporaneous prayer. Parents often pray with their young children at bedtime. Could a way be found to keep something similar going into adolescence? We should also reflect on the obvious fact that parents and children both change as they grow older. Parental responsibility will certainly alter, diminishing radically, but never to the vanishing point. The declining curve of the parents' role is matched by an ascending one on the part of the children, who practise this “familial almsgiving” by caring in an appropriate way for their parents. This reciprocal care begins when as a youngster the child loves and obeys his parents, shares in the running of the household, and gradually assumes more and more personal responsibility financially and emotionally.

2. *The Extended Family, Colleagues*

Almsgiving, in the broad way I am discussing it, affects all of our contacts with other people in all their manifold dimensions. If we are to fulfil our Lord's command to give alms, i.e., to love our neighbour, we should spend a moment considering the extended family, our workplace, our friends and acquaintances, and so on. The genuine concern of the Christian for his fellow man governs his dealings with all of these groups. Familial relationships are often difficult, mainly, I suppose, because these are the people we have continual contact with. Not only in-laws, but even siblings can be rancorous to one another. Our Lord's strong demand should give us all pause: “So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”⁵ Of course, there are situations that seem beyond repair, and if you are caught in one such there is no need to hold back from receiving Communion. Before that happens, however, one must examine his own conscience to make sure that the rift is not even partly his own doing. In extremely rare circumstances it may actually happen that I am completely innocent. In that case, rejoice! For once you have the opportunity to fulfil our Lord's command about turning the other cheek or going the extra mile. Usually, however, if we are honest with ourselves, we find the fault lies on both sides. Then there is room for going half way to meet the other party.

⁵ Matt 5.23-24.

But, whatever the situation, a Christian should always act keeping the spiritual welfare of the other party uppermost in mind. Each should ask himself, “What can I do to foster the spiritual wellbeing of my opponent in this matter?”

These principles apply equally to employers and employees or to students and their teachers. These are enterprises directed to the good of everyone affected by the individual decisions of the persons involved. The employer has a responsibility to pay his employees a living wage, and to supply the public with a worthwhile product. The employer, similarly, has pledged himself to do his work well and to co-operate with management and his colleagues. An obsessive concern for rights on the part of the employee and for profits on the part of the employer subvert their service to the common good, that is to say, in their special form of almsgiving. The industrial model is based on the idea that people have to do work they hate, and so replaces the desire for a certain excellence with a minimalism that saps the energy of the worker and his boss alike. Different should be the attitudes of educators and artists, who have a freedom of schedule and movement that others do not. But this very freedom requires a responsible maturity in which the dedication to their work for the common good

3. *Society: Church*

As we move more broadly, from the individual to the family and then further to colleagues and acquaintances, we experience a law of diminishing returns. Most of us restrict our examination of conscience to these matters, forgetting that we have a responsibility for the entire society in which we live: for our governments, because of how we vote,; for the homeless and our of work because of how we use our possessions; and for the nature of our entertainments because of what we watch on television or in the cinema, for our use of computer games and the internet. Almsgiving is acting responsibly in these areas, and there is more than one way to do so. The anti-abortion movement, for instance, has many facets whereby a pregnant woman can be assisted to keep and care for her child. “40 Days for Life,” a commitment to prayer and fasting to expel this sort of demon,⁶ is something each one of us can assume. Or consider our parish programme “Out of the Cold,” which is an effective way of implementing the Gospel ideal:

He said also to the man who had invited him, “When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your

⁶ Mk 9.29.

kinsmen or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”⁷

4. *The World: Government’s Role*

The final stage for our charity is even wider in scope, in being international. The rich nations have a responsibility to assist the poorer countries, especially when, as is often the case, our (relative) affluence is achieved by their impoverishment. The principle is clear; its application is fraught with difficulty. To what extent should we support a brutal and corrupt regime whose policies have impoverished and abused the very people for whom they are responsible? No one here, I suspect, is capable of answering that question on his own. We elect members of Parliament precisely to handle such matters. But we cannot overlook the fact that there are also organizations in our society that are well-informed about certain aspects of the third world and have mounted effective ways to reach the common people that governments—local or foreign—bypass. Our own Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace is a striking instance of what I have in mind. We have an obligation to support its work, and we can easily do so by its Lenten ShareLife campaign.

My purpose in writing has been to remind you that almsgiving is more than giving a looney to the next beggar we encounter, good as that may be. We must replace Cain’s cynical question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” with a resounding, “Yes, I am my brother’s keeper.” We shall be then ready to act, anticipating Christ’s words at the final judgement:

Then the King will say to those at his right hand, “Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.”⁸

⁷ Lk 14.12-14.

⁸ Matt 25.35 ff.