

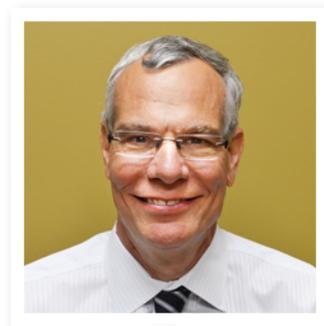
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SOCIAL JUSTICE AND LOVE

IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

What is the Relation Between Social Justice and Love in the Christian Tradition?

For the purposes of a brief reflection, let's consider three sources, one ancient, two contemporary. To begin with: St. Augustine, who takes up the question of the relation between social justice and love as the relation between justice and mercy. There is of course no fully developed "social teaching" in the Fathers if by that is meant a systematic analysis of something we now call "society" ("res socialis") with clearly articulated fundamental principles relating to its well being. Nevertheless, the Fathers did comment extensively on the poor and on the responsibility of Christians to care for the poor. St. Augustine in particular fills his sermons full of exhortations to give alms, to care for the poor, and thus to perform works of mercy. There is however no strict separation between mercy and justice. Commenting on Ps 49:5, "Gather his just ones to him," Augustine comments, "And who are the just? Those who live by faith (see Heb 2:4) and perform works of mercy, for works of mercy are works of justice" (*En. in Psalm 49.12*). The just are those who have "treated the helpless with mercy and have understood about the needy and poor" (*ibid.*).



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In fact, the standard of *justice*, the justice which “*the heavens will proclaim*” (Ps 49:6), and the “price” that Christ the Judge will exact for entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven, is the mercy enjoined by Matthew 25: “*Come, you whom my Father has blessed, take possession of...*” Of what? “*The kingdom.*” And what price have they paid for it? “*I was hungry and you fed me*” (Mt 25:34,35). Augustine connects this to the teaching on justice in the Book of Isaiah, where we find the exhortation, “*Break your bread for the hungry, and take the person with no shelter into your home. If you see anyone naked, clothe him*” (Is 58:7, cited at *En. in Ps. 49:13*). In other words, the “justice” that Christians are obliged to work in the world is not a worldly form of justice, or even one that can be fully understood from the perspective of philosophy or unaided reason, because what one “owes” in “justice” has been recalibrated by God’s acts of mercy in the economy of salvation revealed in Scripture. To put it most succinctly, God’s mercy is His self-emptying solidarity with us, fulfilled and enacted in the Incarnation.

This self-emptying is so complete that the God who can say, “*if I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the round world is mine and all its fullness,*” (Ps 49:12) nevertheless “*did graciously will to be hungry for our sake*” (*En. in*

Ps 49:19) and became “*poor*” (2 Cor 8:9) for us (similar point in *Sermo 113B*, on Lazarus and the Rich Man). Because of Christ’s mercy, we see in the flesh of the poor and hungry the true flesh of Christ, and our works of mercy on their behalf truly, by His grace, are feeding and sheltering Christ, accepting His economy of mercy as setting the standards of what justice means and what obligations it will impose. For it is not only Christ’s mercy that is revealed in the Incarnation and the associated economy but the poor and needy person as the true icon or image of all of humanity. The Church is in the world as the continuing locus of this revelation: “All the members of Christ, the body of Christ diffused throughout the world, are like a single person asking God’s help, one single beggar, one poor suppliant; and this is because Christ Himself is that poor man, since He who was ‘rich became poor,’ as the Apostle tells us: “*Though he was rich he became poor, so that by his poverty you might be enriched*” (2 Cor 8:9; *En. in Ps 39:28*). Christ’s mercy, binding human beings into the unity of “one person,” reveals the worth of humanity as consisting not in any observable human distinctions or even human virtues, but rather its “poverty,” its bare humanness as the object of God’s mercy. Almsgiving is thus to be based on

need, and not on the perceived virtue or goodness of any person (*Sermo 359A.11*), that is, it is based on their humanity as such. And it is thus all the better if one can even remedy the need of someone in person, thus emphasizing the bond of sympathy that finds its basis in our common humanity (*Sermo 259.5*), our neediness as seen and revealed from the mercy of Christ, and not in any further virtue, qualification or achievement.

To move to a contemporary theologian is to find this theme developed further in the form of the “preferential option for the poor.” In his book *On Job*, theologian Gustavo Gutierrez explores the relation between justice and love that is implied in the idea of a preferential option for the poor. Contrary to popular belief, the “preferential option for the poor” is first and foremost a doctrine about God, and not about the poor: “The ultimate basis of God’s preference for the poor is to be found in God’s own goodness and not in any analysis of society or in human compassion, however pertinent these reasons may be” (*On Job*, xiii). If the poor and the “little ones” are “the privileged addressees of revelation,” this is “the result not primarily of moral or spiritual dispositions, but of a human situation in which God undertakes self-revelation by acting



and overturning values and criteria. The scorned of this world are those whom the God of love prefers” (*ibid.*). We are confronted with a mystery of God’s transcendent love that cannot be reduced to human reason, because it is a “preference,” based in God’s “goodness.” Again, “This special love [for the poor] does not have for its ultimate motive the virtues and merits of the poor, but the goodness and freedom of God, a God who is not simply the guardian of a rigid moral order” (*ibid.*, 88). The Christian must speak in two languages: “mystical language expresses the gratuitousness of God’s love; prophetic language the demands this love makes” (*ibid.*, 95).

Ultimately, Gutierrez says, we must learn to join these languages into one language, to speak one language, which, he says, is the “language of the Cross.” Jesus in his cry of dereliction on the Cross spoke in solidarity with all the abandoned in invoking Psalm 22 on the Cross: “His cry on the Cross renders more audible and more penetrating the cries of all the Jobs, individual and collective, of human history” (*ibid.*, 101). Just as in St. Augustine’s case, the revelation in Christ recontextualizes justice from a purely human point of view, and it becomes impossible to refer to justice without a wider and prior reference to God’s mercy. St. Augustine says that Christ, in His cry of desolation on the Cross, gives voice to all of the desolation of the human race, and by speaking it in our person, transfigures our voice into His. The more desolate and despised the voice we hear, the more we hear Christ

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speaking in the voice, the more we hear God's mercy speaking, and the more we are called to "prefer" these voices, hearing in them the one language of justice and mercy which Jesus spoke from the Cross.

Without the preferential option for the poor, as grounded in God's goodness, the language of justice can quickly be truncated into a "sclerotic" (*On Job*, 88) moralism with no proper connection to anything truly human or humane. This observation leads us to our third source, Pope Benedict the XVI, whose encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (*God is Love*, 2005) carries forward the themes we have already observed in St. Augustine and Gustavo Gutierrez. We find, once again, that justice, for the Christian, is contextualized in and by love. "What is justice? The problem is one of practical reason; but if reason is to be exercised properly, it must undergo constant purification, since it can never be completely free of the danger of a certain ethical blindness caused by the dazzling effect of power and special interests" (*DCE*, §28a).

Truly to see the human person is to see him or her from the perspective of the Eucharistic gift of Christ's self. From the point of view of communion with this sacrifice, we encounter a "sacramental 'mysticism' which

is social in character," such that "union with Christ is also union with all those to whom He gives Himself," which is every person (§14). Our idea of justice must be "purified" by this sacramental mysticism so that it resists all narrowness, and must be supplemented by the awareness that we have not met all human needs if we attempt to exclude love: "There is no ordering of the State so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love. Whoever wants to eliminate love is preparing to eliminate man as such. There will always be suffering which cries out for consolation and help. There will always be loneliness. There will always be situations of material need where help in the form of concrete love of neighbor is indispensable" (§28). The notion of "justice" withers away into something incommensurate with the fullness of humanity if it is separated from love. The Church "cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice," but this does not mean relinquishing all human caring into the hands of the state, for the state which absorbs all human caring into itself becomes a "mere bureaucracy incapable of guaranteeing the very thing which the suffering person – every person – needs: namely, loving personal concern" (*ibid.*). The Church's charitable works, as works

of love, are proper to her person and are irreplaceable because they are witness to the wider worth of human beings, beyond their utility to the state, that grounds all struggles for justice in a proper sense of humanity. "Love is the light – and in the end the only light," in which the needs of human beings can be fully and finally seen, assessed and met (§39). Love is the light in which we see the true dimensions and scope of social justice.

