

Go and Do Likewise (III): At the Forefront of Transforming the World

As Christians, we share the longing to make true the ideals we want for our world — justice, solidarity, charity — with many others. Yet sometimes conflict still arises when we try to work together. How can love, justice, and solidarity become realities in our lives?

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A quick glance at any social media platform or news site, as well as our own personal experience, shows us two things: that there is much suffering in the world, and consequently that there are many calls for the world to be better. Sometimes these voices seem harmonious, and many other times they are discordant, as they ask for different, even opposite things. Yet the desire for what is due, the awareness of shared vulnerability, and the conviction that we must care for others definitely mark our consciousness today.

Following Christ means caring about the world and its problems. If “goodness, together with love, justice and solidarity, are not achieved once and for all” but “have to be realized

each day,”^[1] then each of us must ask how we are to act: “What is my role in all this?”

A calling to make the world ours

If we really think about it, the world is ours at least twice over. On one hand, we have been called to *co-create* the world, and on the other hand, we have been called to *co-redeem* it.

The universe has been created *in statu viae*, “in a state of journeying” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 302) and we have been given the task to collaborate in this perfection. On the other hand, the world we are asked to cultivate is marked by sin, and so also marked by suffering. And this moves the heart of Christ. When He saw the crowds who needed healing from disease and illness, *his heart was moved with compassion for them because they were troubled and*

abandoned like sheep without a shepherd (Mt 9:35-36) and He tended to them tirelessly. Again He is moved when those who had been following Him for three days had nothing to eat (Mt 15:30-36). He draws his disciples into the problem, having them think of solutions and giving them responsibility over the others: *Give them some food yourselves (Lk 9:13)*. With the little the disciples are able to find, the miracle of the multiplication of loaves and fishes takes place. In the face of indigence, distress or suffering, Christ is moved — and more importantly, He is never passive. He tends to tangible needs, but always in order to reach souls and draw them to eternal life (cf. Jn 6). And as the Father has sent Him to redeem all men, He sends us to collaborate in this redemption (cf. Jn 20:21, Mt 28:18-20).

In other words, any truly Christian efforts to establish just ways of

operating or to promote solidarity are motivated by more than simply a desire for pain and suffering to cease or be mollified. That is good and noble, but the heart of Christ seeks more: *This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another* (Jn 13:35). A child of God knows that the deepest motivation for social action lies in God's love for the world and for all humanity, and that we are called to bring the world back to God the Father in Christ, his Son. He or she knows that "while we are warned that it profits a man nothing if he gain the whole world and lose himself, the expectation of a new earth must not weaken but rather stimulate our concern for cultivating this one. For here grows the body of a new human family, a body which even now is able to give some kind of foreshadowing of the new age."^[2]

Key virtues for serving society

The call to be at the forefront of transforming the world cannot remain in the abstract. Caring, or better love, translates to action: justice, solidarity and charity are virtues to be lived. Each perfects a different aspect of the choices and activities we carry out in relation to others. And each of these can be lived in two broad areas: in our effort to renew the structures and systems in our different social spheres, and in our encounters with individual persons.

Justice is classically defined as the habit that enables us to give or render to each his or her due, consistently and in a committed way.^[3] It is a virtue we can live on a horizontal level — with our peers and colleagues — and on a vertical level, whether or not we are someone who holds authority over a particular group or community. One key way to live it is to train ourselves

to recognize what is really due to others by virtue of our relationship with them. We can thus first consider how we live justice in our professional work by doing our job well and with integrity — or, if we are in authority, by really looking out for the good of those we are responsible for, and not simply aiming for profit. However, if we take the fact that God has entrusted the world to us seriously, we will see that our activity should not stop at our immediate circle of work or family. We could consider taking on extra projects or joining initiatives outside of what we already do, to create conditions for other members of society to be able to live according to their dignity.

As a virtue, solidarity highlights our interdependence. If justice recognizes that each person deserves certain goods, solidarity recognizes our oneness with others—that is, that

we share the same human nature. It is “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good,”^[4] that is, “thinking and acting in terms of community.”^[5] On one hand, the practical exercise of this virtue is similar to that of justice: we target certain conditions of society with our work and projects, so that our cities and communities become places where each person can reach his or her perfection. On the other hand, solidarity is also expressed in taking the time to share suffering and not just address it. Some of us may be the type to publicly advocate for a particular cause; say, for instance, that we try to raise awareness for mental health and psychological safety in families. Others may show solidarity in more private, one-to-one ways, such as committing to visit the sick or dying without posting it on social media. Solidarity is particularly attentive to vulnerability

and suffering; it is “born of the consciousness that we are responsible for the fragility of others as we strive to build a common future” and “finds its concrete expression in service.”^[6]

Christian justice and Christian solidarity, however, are motivated by much more than the recognition of a common humanity. Why *should* I care for the other? When we use the lens of faith, we see that the unity of the human race does not merely stem from the fact that we share a nature, but in that we have a common divine and human origin, and a common destination and end.^[7] A loving God is Creator of each and every one of us, and, most importantly, we are destined for happiness with God through Christ and his Body, the Church. In short, there exists a real union between all human persons; a real union that is actualized in love. Justice and

solidarity find their full meaning only if we think that man's good life is about love — charity — making us responsible for each other's flourishing in this life, in view of the next.

In truth, charity unites us first and foremost to God.^[8] One concrete way in which this informs our social action is in ensuring that our goals, projects, and plans are always coherent with the Gospel, even if perhaps they are not explicit about it. Moreover, when we engage in activities for the sake of others, we must not lose sight of the fact that it is this union with God — his grace — that makes love for our neighbor possible. Through charity, we consider the other “as somehow united to ourselves,” and this affection “makes us freely desire to seek their good.”^[9] If we relate to others in this way, we can come closer to a culture of what Pope

Francis calls social friendship: a love and fraternity that excludes no one, is open to all, transcends borders, and can be a strong basis for cities and countries.^[10]

Each one of us finds himself in different environments and circumstances. Moreover, societies and their sub-units differ from country to country, and so the paths to materializing justice, solidarity and charity will have myriads of variations. But there are some concrete steps that all of us can consider, in order to become agents of true justice, solidarity, and charity.

Transforming the world by continuously transforming ourselves

The first step is to cultivate our capacity to perceive situations of need. To exercise any virtue, one must be able to perceive the right situation for it: in this case, the social

problem. Perhaps our scope of transformation is small, because we have been primarily absorbed with daily life and our immediate circle of action. Perhaps we know in a general way that there are a lot of problems in society, but we have not paused to take a closer look at them. Perhaps we are used to seeing or hearing bad news and shaking our heads, and we have never thought of letting these situations speak to us so that we respond. And perhaps this makes us less sensitive even to the needs of those beside us.

Choosing to cultivate our perception can mean watching or reading the news more, paying attention to the surroundings as you drive from one part of the city to the other, looking at the bulletin board or Facebook page of our parish or school, following news or advocacy accounts on social media... Every society has at least one sector in need of justice,

solidarity, and charity: the elderly who are left alone; the terminally ill; people without adequate food, water, or shelter; the disabled and the families that support them (or who abandon them); the mentally ill or psychologically distressed; un- or under-educated children or adults; isolated communities, perhaps of native or immigrant groups; the homeless and refugees; victims of violence or abuse; victims of natural disasters; the unemployed or underpaid; laborers in inhumane working conditions; people in prison; people living in insecure or conflict-ridden areas; people without access to leisure, sports, arts, or culture; people who are socially abandoned (single parents, street children, drug addicts, out-of-school youth, victims of bullying)... Enumerating them helps us see that really, there is no lack of opportunities to act.

Thus the next step is to commit to acting and not only feeling. Perhaps the examples mentioned above bring concrete images from recent local or international news to mind. We live in a world where we risk being passive in the face of constant input. True solidarity means not only feeling compassion for the misfortunes we see, but trying to alleviate the suffering when we can. We cannot provide solutions for every problem we hear about. But perhaps we can study how our work can contribute to a more just society, or how we can fit an extra social project into our time, perhaps even with family or friends. If large-scale problems seem out of our league (although for some of us they may not be out of reach), then perhaps we can make whatever donation we can to an organization we know.

If we choose to engage in some socio-civic activity, another important

habit to acquire is that of thinking and planning for meaningful or lasting impact, even if it is something like a one-day outreach at a shelter for persons with disabilities. Though some of us might be limited to short-term events, it would indeed be a waste to provide only band-aid solutions or create good feelings. And if some of us are able to carry out long-term initiatives, we do have to avoid creating permanent dependence on aid. We can carry out good projects if we clearly identify the goals we want to achieve in the timeframe we have: say, in this one-day visit to a shelter for disabled persons, we teach our volunteers to affirm their personhood and highlight that the good we give them is companionship, since they have been abandoned. We can also carry out good projects if we truly ponder the problem we have at hand, and get to the root of the issues, such that the interventions we design will

empower the persons we are helping, giving them the capabilities and tools to eventually help themselves. Instead of simply rebuilding homes for a poor community for free, for example, we can involve the persons such that they truly feel ownership for the homes, and commit to a plan to capacitate themselves for work such that they have the means to maintain a healthy and humanized environment.

Pope Francis tells us that “solidarity means much more than engaging in sporadic acts of generosity.... It also means combatting the structural causes of poverty, inequality, the lack of work, land and housing, the denial of social and labor rights. It means confronting the destructive effects of the empire of money... Solidarity, understood in its most profound meaning, is a way of making history.”^[11]

Expanding our comfort zone

Becoming an agent of justice, solidarity, and charity doesn't end in personal attitudes. There are at least two more areas where we can continuously challenge ourselves as Christians.

When we engage with the problems around us, we are surely going to encounter people who are also passionate about "changing the world," but who perhaps think or live in a way that is not informed by faith in Christ. Yet this does not mean that we cannot share with them some common goals that are true to the human person. One very concrete way of living solidarity and charity is to dare to dialogue with those who think differently from us; to find a way to work together with them instead of against them. The attempt to rebuild justice might bear more fruit if we make an effort to

overcome polarization, which is particularly relevant in today's environment, both online and in-person. We first have to listen and converse, in order to discover what might unite us, in order to bring about more good for those who suffer most in our society.

Finally, we can dare to take a step further each time. For instance, from trying to live justice at work, we can consider investigating ways that our company or institution can impact another community. Later, we could evaluate the possibility of collaborating in a social initiative outside of work entirely. And then we can get more people involved. If we choose a particular need to address, commit to action, and plan and collaborate with long-term solutions, then justice, solidarity, and charity will come closer to becoming realities in our surroundings.

To see Christ in each person

When we look at our imperfect world, we see that the possibilities for transformation are inexhaustible. There is obviously much work to be done, and we have tried to pinpoint different habits that capacitate us to carry out effective social action, to offer real solutions to the problems we see. But there is one thing that must be at the forefront of the mind and heart of a child of God: the true mission of a Christian in the world does not consist in merely solving problems, but in giving value to the singular person.

In other words, efficiency is important, but we cannot stop there. We might succeed in setting up and maintaining a program for an underprivileged group, and we might succeed in creating a commitment to solidarity among those who collaborate in said program. But if

those we assist remain an anonymous mass to us, mere “beneficiaries,” then we have not yet reached the heart of the Gospel. Justice and solidarity may not be separated from true charity, which enables us to see Christ in the other. This could mean that in whatever activity we participate in and in how we act, we try to focus on the people involved. “The wider spread of social remedies... which make it possible to achieve humanitarian results today that could not have been dreamed of in other times — will never be able to supplant the efficacious tenderness, both human and supernatural, of immediate, personal contact with our neighbor...”^[12] We also try to be conscious of the way we look at the persons we are helping, to know who they are and not just what they lack, because each person is much more than what he or she is suffering.

For the time we are in contact with those we are aiding, we enter into their needs and pains, offering them care and not matter-of-factness or indifference.^[13] This brings real consolation, a human-to-human contact which is as treasured as any material solution. We share time, attention, and presence with them, and so bring about — both for them and for ourselves — the presence of Christ. In this way, we give the “sincere gift of self,” which is our true fulfillment.^[14] We do not only love our neighbor, but “become a neighbor” to each person, just as Christ has asked us to.^[15]

^[1] *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 11

^[2] *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 39.

^[3] “...justice is a habit whereby a man renders to each one his due by a

constant and perpetual will': and this is about the same definition as that given by the Philosopher (Ethic. v, 5) who says that 'justice is a habit whereby a man is said to be capable of doing just actions in accordance with his choice" (*Summa Theologica* II-II, Q. 58, Art. 1 co.).

^[4] *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 193.

^[5] *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 116.

^[6] *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 115.

^[7] Cfr. *Laudato si'*, no. 202.

^[8] *ST* II-II Q. 26, Art 1 co. and Art. 2 co.

^[9] *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 93.

^[10] Cfr. *Fratelli Tutti*, nos. 94, 99.

^[11] *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 116.

^[12] St. Josemaría, Letter 24-X-1942, no. 44.

^[13] Cfr. Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral letter 14-II- 2017, no. 31.2.

^[14] “For [Jesus] implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons, and the unity of God's sons in truth and charity. This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself” (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 24).

^[15] “Jesus asks us to be present to those in need of help, regardless of whether or not they belong to our social group. In this case, the Samaritan *became a neighbour* to the wounded Judean. By approaching and making himself present, he crossed all cultural and historical barriers. Jesus concludes the parable by saying: 'Go and do likewise' (*Lk* 10:37). In other words, he challenges

us to put aside all differences and, in the face of suffering, to draw near to others with no questions asked. I should no longer say that I have neighbours to help, but that I must myself be a neighbour to others" (*Fratelli Tutti*, no. 81).

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