

“The Word Was Made Flesh, and Dwelt Among Us”: the Direction to be Taken in the Church’s Service to the Poor in China

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Service for the Poor

Today’s Chinese society needs the strength of the Gospel witness, and of a witness to life. The Chinese Church is now capable of bringing this to society. This is the good news of love and life that the church brings to the weakest persons in society. Beginning from 2010, after a chance meeting, this writer came into contact with the people living between the two districts of Hong He and Wen Shan in Yunnan Province. They belonged to the Miao and Yi ethnic minorities. I began to serve them to the best of my ability. Summing up the experience of several years’ work, I would like to express a few basic thoughts regarding the Chinese Church’s service to poor people.

The Church’s priority for service should always be to the neediest persons in society. In loving service to the poor, what is displayed is God’s own love (See Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical, *God is Love*). This is so because the Christian discovers the face of Jesus Christ Himself in the persons of the poor. Therefore, where people are most in need, that is just the place to be the priority for Christian service. The Church’s 2,000 years of historical witness continuously tells the world that God’s love for the world’s peoples is unconditional, and that the Church loves others for no other reason than that they are among the world’s neediest.

The rapid speed of China’s economic development has created a serious imbalance in society. We see the towering buildings and the life of luxury and dissipation of the big cities, while at the same time many people are not getting enough to eat, proper clothing to

wear, nor are their most basic requirements for life being met. Faced with these needy people, the Church should first of all, extend a helping hand. However, in China, many local churches are still themselves only in the beginning stages of development, many facilities are not yet in place, and as for financial requirements, they cannot make ends meet. Nevertheless, even in conditions like these, each local church should clearly recognize that in spite of deficiencies in their own economic situations, they should not neglect their loving concern for the poor. Their loving concern for the poor, and the extension of a helping hand to them, should not wait until after one's own economic needs are fulfilled. In the Church, even the poor widow's two pennies have everlasting value, and the poor have no time to wait.

Moreover, service to the poor and charity should not be for the purpose of gaining a profit. In fact, we can say absolutely that they should have no incidental results. In the last 15 years, this writer has observed that many church organizations, especially those sponsored by religious congregations, under conditions of government approval and in the name of welfare work, have started up many small homes for the elderly, clinics and kindergartens. Undoubtedly these projects contribute very positive benefits to Chinese society. This writer has met many responsible persons in several church organizations. Before building their projects, they seek funds from generous persons both within China and abroad, in the name of starting a charitable work. However when the building project is finished and is being put into operation, they ask for a considerable amount of money from those who will be served by the project. In and of itself, seeking such funding should give no cause for criticism, and can ensure that the project will get underway, and the possibility for success will not be lost. This type of project will definitely make a contribution to society, and can become a means of propagating the Gospel. However, whether such a project can be called charitable work, or service to the poor, is worth questioning.

Now in China, many school-age children, for economic reasons, cannot go to school, many old people, for economic reasons, do not receive basic care for their old age, and for lack of money, many sick people cannot treat their illnesses and die tragic

deaths. It even happens that for all kinds of reasons so many people do not have enough to eat, nor warm clothes to wear. The Church should have as its first priority the taking care of their needs, for they are the neediest people in the world. We feel that real charitable work should not carry profitable results along with it. Rather it should be focused on fulfilling the needs of those neediest of persons. Moreover, if church organizations carry out real charitable work, many good-hearted people will definitely lend a helping hand. God would never permit the Church to be unable to carry out real charitable work for lack of resources. However, real works of charity should be freely bestowed on people.

To Become Poor

Here we touch upon the fundamental attitude people should have when they give service to the poor. When the Church takes care of, or renders service to the poor, its basic attitude should not be to solve all the world's poverty problems. Rather they should discover the face of Jesus in the faces of the poor. They should use Christ's way (*Formalitas Christi*) to save them. Christ's salvation was not bestowed from on high, far removed from the masses. Rather, He came to earth: "The Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us." The difference between the Church and other welfare organizations or NGOs is just right here. The first time this writer went to Yunnan, the villagers in that area told me that previously many good-hearted people, even clergymen, came to their place, but they never stayed overnight, or celebrated Mass with them. This was because they would have to sleep with the animals in the barn like them, and have to drink rain water, like them. Those people from outside could not accept the living conditions there. So after they went there, they gave out a little money, and left. The visitors even brought purified water and bread, and would not eat with the villagers. We feel that this attitude and behavior is basically not charitable work. The poor do not need help bestowed on them from above. What poor people need is to be given God's love. They need for people to be like them, to experience what they experience, to feel what they feel, and to bear the burdens that they bear. The Church's cross is not only a decoration in a church building. Rather

the cross is the one and only way to salvation. Therefore we must save others through Christ's method (*Formalitas Christi*). This is especially true when performing works of charity.

In this way, you will experience a second attitude. The starting point and the basic purpose of the Church's charitable work is not to solve the problem of poverty. Rather it is to pass on life to the poor. When you are carrying out works of charity, you must have a real face and a real name. You are a special person, with a different life and a different background, meeting them. You must meet them at the level of their lives. As the saying goes, "when you drink water with someone, you feel their warmth and coldness." Only when you make contact with their concrete lives can you know their concrete needs. Every poor person has different needs. You cannot have preconditions when you meet each one. You must get to know their names and their facial features. And only when you live with them can you really get to understand them. Life requires concrete contact, life requires real contact, and life requires an internal exchange. A great danger in these fictitious times is using images to substitute for real contact. Jesus' method of saving the world was not to stand outside the world, and in this way, solve the world's problems. Rather he placed the cross on his own shoulder, and made his way up the hill of Golgotha. Therefore in serving the poor, one should have the sentiments and attitudes of lifting up, bearing with, and suffering with other people.

A third attitude we should have when serving the poor is to learn to appreciate their lives. While serving them, our own lives are uplifted. We will feel a certain interior worth. If a helper only has an attitude of service when he makes contact with the poor, he cannot really enter into this kind of work. Unless he can discover in the person he/she is serving, the true presence of the living God, he can only have an attitude of bestowing gifts from on high. Unless we can meet another group of people and discover in their lives something that is worthy of our imitation, and in the process of that contact experience a greater influence on our own interior lives, our help to them can only proceed from pity. With this kind of attitude our own life cannot grow and mature. Each time this writer goes to live with the poor, the deepest, and only feeling that does not change is that the boost to my faith life which I receive, far

surpasses the little help that I give them. The more contact I have with these good-living, unsophisticated villagers, the more I have discovered that life in the big city causes us to lose too many faith and human values. Rather, these values are manifested naturally and deeply in the villagers' lives.

Conclusion

For today's Chinese society to completely accept Christianity, many misunderstandings and preconceived ideas must first be overcome. Time is still needed for Chinese society to truly and naturally accept the Christian faith. Loving concern for the poor has not been integral to the traditional Chinese religions of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. However, love and service to the poor has always been one of the most important manifestations of the Christian faith. Several of the most recent Popes have emphasized this. They are very concerned about love and service to the poor. Love and service to the poor can become, and indeed should become, in the short term, the intermediary vehicle between Christianity and its acceptance by Chinese society. In an evangelical manner, Christians should, to the best of their ability, offer service to the weakest and poorest in that society, because in taking care of them and in serving them, one takes care of, and serves Jesus Himself.