

## “Actions on Behalf of Justice”

By John Gonzalez

In a retreat program on social justice that the Campaign for Human Development offers the parishes the facilitator offers the following story to the participants:

*Once upon a time there was a church picnic. It was a beautiful day. The picnic site was by a river, and there was a cool breeze across the water. Kids were playing ball. There was lots of food. Bingo was in full swing! All of a sudden someone shouted, “Look, there is a body floating face down in the river.” At once, a few people waded into the river and pulled the person ashore. Someone else called an ambulance while another administered CPR. Other shaded the person from the heat of the sun. Everything looked under control, but then another body was sighted and then another, and then another... Everyone scurried to help in some way. One person, left the group and began to run upstream. “Where are you going?” the crowd cried out. “We need you to help.” He replied, “I’m going upstream to find out why people keep floating down the river...”<sup>1</sup>*

This story begins to describe to us the concept of the two feet of justice (Diagram #2)<sup>2</sup>. The basic concept is that if we are to participate in God’s salvific plan that includes the transformation of unjust systems then we must address two aspects of social injustice. The first dimension of injustice is the real manifestations of suffering and injustice. We must help those who are suffering. Like the story above we must give aid to the people who are floating down the river. This form of service is traditionally called **charity** and we usually express this with direct social service ministries or donations. Homeless shelters, soup kitchen, prison and hospital ministries, educational opportunities, all these are expressions of charity ministries that address the real needs of people who are suffering.

However the person who left to group to run upstream exemplifies the other dimension of justice. In this case the person is analyzing the situation to uncover the root cause of suffering. As the person goes upstream and discovers the reason for why people are ending up in the river he will have to further understand the reason of this situation and respond to the need. It may be that a bridge is broken and in need of repair. It may be that a criminal activity is happening whereby they will need to advocate for the end of this practice. This is the dimension we traditionally call **justice** and it is usually expressed with advocacy and community development. Legislative advocacy, corporate responsibility, micro-finance and development projects, Community organizing, are all expressions of justice ministries that address the root causes of suffering in the world.

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<sup>1</sup> The Catholic Campaign for Human Development, *Journey to Justice Retreat*, <http://www.usccb.org/cchd/journeytojustice.shtml>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.usccb.org/cchd/twofeet.shtml>

## The Two Feet of Justice

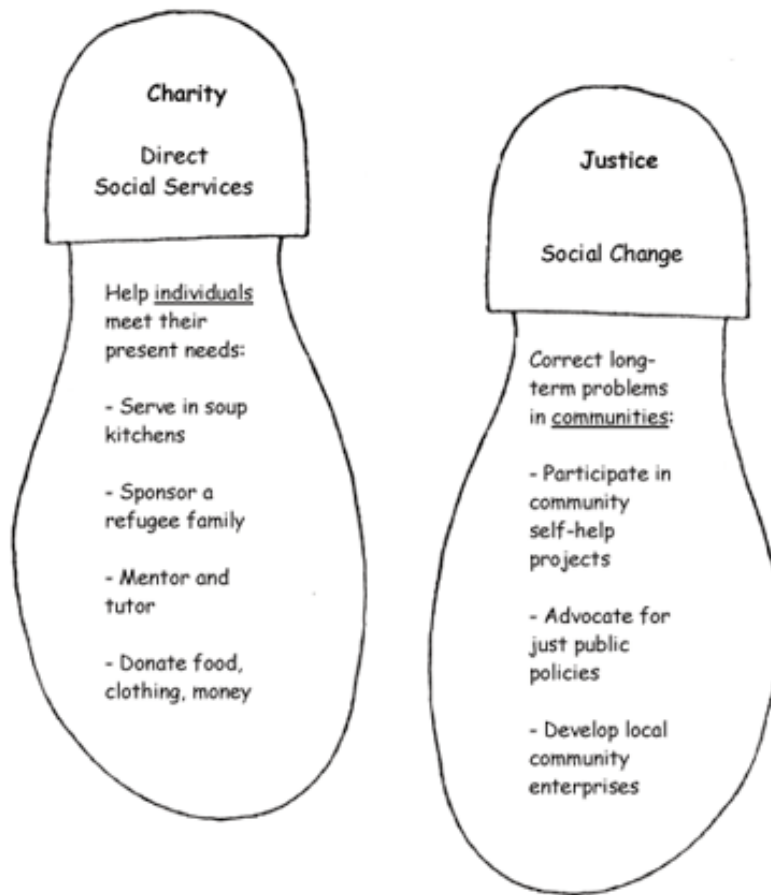


Diagram #2

The analogy of the two feet is intentional because it suggests that just as a person finds it easier to progress walking on two feet versus hoping on one so to is it easier for a society to experience progress by utilizing both justice and charity. Justice without Charity is insensitive and bound to fail since it is not taking into consideration the needs of the victims. It would be as if the person at the church picnic just begins to make an assumption that some criminal activity is taking place and advocates for better policing when the entire time a bridge is broken. Similarly Charity without Justice leads to an unending cycle of service and ministry and at some point the community will either become exhausted or callous to the suffering.

The founder of the Passionist Community, St. Paul of the Cross illustrates the use of the two feet during an episode in the 1730's when he and his community found themselves in the middle of a battle between the Austrians and Spanish in the town of Orbetello. In addressing the sufferings of the wounded soldiers St. Paul tended and ministered to the needs of the wounded from both sides. This shows his use of charity to the victims of the battle. During this same episode he became aware of the Spanish General's intent to

bombard the town. He appealed against the bombardment and as a result the Spanish General opted for a blockade which brought an end to the battle. This shows his use of justice to advocate against any further suffering.

The Church has traditionally placed more emphasis on charity over justice. In his recent encyclical Pope Benedict XVI states “It must be admitted that the Church’s leadership was slow to realize that the issue of the just structuring of society needed to be approached in a new way.”<sup>3</sup> In this encyclical Pope Benedict maintains that the Church by its very nature is required to promote charity. Politics and the State on the other hand have the responsibility to administer justice, although the Church is deeply committed to the “promotion of justice through efforts to bring about openness of mind and will to the demands of the common good.”<sup>4</sup> The Gospel and social tradition of the Church offer moral principles that promote the values of justice. Yet in the pluralistic global society that we live in we cannot expect nor want our Church to be legal authority behind the establishment of the just social order.

However because the Church’s mission is the promotion of the Gospel we must expect the institution, and us as members of that institution, to participate in the global order by assessing justice or the lack thereof and offering guidance and assistance as individuals or as Non-Governmental Organizations especially where States either cannot or do not take responsibility with policies that fly in the face of the Gospel and the teachings of the Church. “In today’s complex situation, not least because of the growth of a globalized economy, the Church’s social doctrine has become a set of fundamental guidelines offering approaches that are valid even beyond the confines of the Church.”<sup>5</sup> With her orientation towards charity, the Church seeks to humanize and personalize secular and public institutions that otherwise may not meet the total needs of those they seek to serve.

Pope Pius XI reminds us however that “charity will never be true charity unless it takes justice into constant account... let no one attempt with trifling charitable donations to exempt himself from the great duties imposed by justice. Both justice and charity often dictate obligations touching on the same subject-matter, but under different aspects.”<sup>6</sup> In a recent letter Pope Benedict echo that same thought in a letter to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences:

*The Church’s conviction of the inseparability of justice and charity is ultimately born of her experience of the revelation of God’s infinite justice and mercy in Jesus Christ, and it finds expression in her insistence that man himself and his irreducible dignity must be at the centre of political and social life.*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, Encyclical Letter, Vatican, 2006, article #27

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, article #28, a

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, article #27

<sup>6</sup> Pope Pius XI, *Divini Redemptoris*, Encyclical Letter, Vatican, 1937, article #49

<sup>7</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Letter to the President of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, April 28, 2007