ISSUE: What is the virtue of charity? How can I better live it in my life?

RESPONSE: Charity allows us to love God above all else for His own sake, and to love our neighbor for the love of God (cf. Mk. 12:29-31; Catechism, no. 1822).

DISCUSSION: In our world today, we suffer many evils. In some places, those in authority ignore human rights and the dignity of the person. In other places, authorities actually attack the rights of individuals. Abortion, euthanasia, wars, and genocide are some of the more serious evils that attack human dignity. The more common effects that virtually everyone experiences include loneliness, fear, aggression, divorce, and an absence of hospitality. These effects are serious in themselves, as they contribute to the loss of souls. Jesus linked the conversion of the world to charity when He instituted the “new commandment” to love as He loves (cf. Jn. 15:9-10). As He promised, if we love as He loves, we will achieve union with God, even as God knows union with Himself (cf. Jn. 17:20-21).

Recognizing the need for conversion in our world today, our Holy Father devoted 1999, in preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, as the year of charity. In his apostolic letter Tertio Millennio Adveniente (On Preparation for the Jubilee of the Year 2000; “TMA”), he wrote:

It will therefore be necessary, especially during this year, to emphasize the theological virtue of charity, recalling the significant and lapidary words of the First Letter of John: “God is love” (4:8, 16). Charity, in its twofold reality as love of God and neighbor is the summing up of the moral life of the believer. It has in God its source and its goal (no. 50, original emphasis).

Love Never Ends

To properly understand the virtue of charity, we must understand it in relation to the other theological virtues and the fruits of the Spirit it inspires. The theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity are infused by God at Baptism and adapt man’s faculties for participation in the divine life of the Blessed Trinity (cf. Catechism, no. 1812). These virtues are bestowed with sanctifying grace, which works through the virtues to conform us to Christ (cf. Catechism, no. 1999). Thus, by the work of the Holy Spirit within us, the theological virtues animate our actions and make us capable of living as children of God and meriting eternal life (cf. Catechism, no. 1813).

Faith precedes hope. It provides knowledge, which arouses hope for the things known but not gained. Hope precedes charity in that hope desires the goal which charity attains. Ultimately, this goal is God Himself. Thus, the nature of charity is to fulfill the works of faith and hope. For by faith we are justified “and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God” (Rom. 5:2). In charity, we are sanctified and our hope is fulfilled, “because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5; cf. Catechism, no. 2001).

Charity is the new commandment of Christ and the greatest of the virtues. Our Lord gave a new command to “love one another as I have loved you” (cf. Jn. 15:9-10). As He only commands what is possible, the infused virtue of charity gives us the ability to love like God. It constitutes friendship between God and man. Because charity embodies union of God with man, it must be the focus of the spiritual life. It directs the other virtues toward God for love of Him. This love renders the practice of all other virtues meritorious of eternal life (cf. 1 Cor. 13:1-13). Charity not only fulfills faith and hope, but it fosters a deeper faith and renewed hope, and thus grows itself as that renewed hope is attained (cf. Catechism, no. 1827).

Bearing the Fruits of the Spirit

The source of charity is the Holy Spirit dwelling within us after Baptism. He moves us to live our lives in charity as worthy sons and daughters of God. When we respond to His movements within us, we reap the harvest of our good works. The fruits of this harvest are the fruits of the Holy Spirit (cf. Gal. 5:22-23). The fruits particularly associated with charity are joy, peace, and mercy (cf. Catechism, no. 1829). These are not emotions, but rather dispositions of the soul that allow us to take delight in the Lord irrespective of our earthly fortunes. They are the spiritual health of the soul and con-
tinually renew hope. As a consequence of renewed hope, the fruits of the Spirit encourage continued acts of charity, which in turn atone for sins (cf. 1 Pet. 4:8). In this way, a life of charity is a life of joy and peace that enjoys the mercy of God.

**The Greatest Commandment**

The primary object of charity is love of God. This love is expressed both positively and negatively. As positive expressions of love for God, we must actively pursue good for the sake of God. We must foster a strong spiritual life of prayer, frequent the sacraments, and assist others in their need. As negative expressions, we must avoid occasions of sin and sin itself in every form (cf. TMA, no. 50).

Love of God is not authentic unless we love others. As St. John writes, “[I]f we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us” (1 Jn. 4:12). The more we love others for the sake of God, the more our love is perfected within us. We love our neighbor with charity when we love the divine goodness actually or potentially present in his soul, and perform acts of charity or works of mercy by which we aid our neighbor spiritually or materially. One’s neighbor includes angels, saints, souls in purgatory, and all those living in the world. Even the worst sinners in this life deserve to be loved with divine charity because while they live they may repent and so share in the glory of God (cf. 1 Tim. 2:4). Only the damned can never participate in the divine goodness.

Because God made man in His image and likeness for the purpose of union with Him, love of God and love of neighbor are fulfilled in the salvation of souls. In our salvation, we find union with God. If we remember this, we will learn to love the divine goodness in all men and grow in our respect for the rights of others. All acts of charity are directed to this.

All we have is a gift from God. We should imitate God in giving generously to those in need. By the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, we provide for the welfare of others. Instructing, advising, consoling, and comforting are spiritual works of mercy, as are forgiving and bearing wrongs patiently. The corporal works of mercy consist especially in feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead. Among all these, giving alms to the poor is one of the chief witnesses to fraternal charity (cf. Catechism, no. 2447).

Our temporal possessions are of three kinds: those necessary for our lives and those of our dependents; those necessary for maintaining our station in life; and superfluous goods/expendable income. When our neighbor’s need for necessary goods exceeds his ability to provide, charity demands that we assist him from our superfluous goods/expendable income. In cases of grave necessity, when this is not enough to satisfy his needs, we should not hesitate to share even from goods necessary to maintain our state in life. However, even superfluous goods need not be given in exceedingly large quantity.

Fraternal correction is spiritual almsgiving and at times is obligatory (cf. Mt. 18:15). Charity demands fraternal correction (cf. Catechism, no. 1829). However, corrections made to those who don’t know or respect you will probably not help. In fact, they could make the situation worse. One is bound to admonish the sinner under the following circumstances: one is certain a mortal sin has or will occur; it is probable that the sinner won’t amend on his own; it is probable that the correction will be fruitful; it will not expose one to great risk; and the time is ripe. As Our Lord’s example to the Samaritan woman shows, we must first be known and respected before our testimony will bear fruit (cf. Jn. 4:1-42).

Charity also compels us to show common signs of respect toward our enemies, such as saying good morning, cooperating respectfully at work, and providing for their needs (cf. Mt. 5:38-48). If we fail to do this for a long period of time, our action may be seriously sinful. However, we need not show our enemies special signs of respect, such as inviting them to dinner or celebrating their birthdays.

By charity we must seek our own salvation and not linger in serious sin hoping for the grace of final conversion. Every mortal sin destroys charity (Catechism, no. 1855). We have an obligation, therefore, to make acts of charity or perfect contrition for our sins. Great emotional intensity is not necessary. What is necessary is that one repent of all mortal sins and recall that one is sorry for his sins because he has offended God who created and redeemed him—“who art all good and deserving of all my love” (Act of Contrition). Similarly, charity impels us to use ordinary medical means to preserve our bodily health and life.

The order of charity is respected when we love God more than any creature. At times one may have a more intense emotional bond with some creature in this life than with God. It is not emotional intensity but an act of the will that is impelled by charity. Abraham may well have loved emotionally his son, Isaac, more than he loved God. But with his whole mind, heart, and will he proved his deeper spiritual love of God in preparing to sacrifice his son. Similarly, Jesus demanded that a new disciple follow him immediately rather than bury his father. In these instances, charity was demon-
strated in single-minded acts of obedience to the will of God despite the intense family bonds.

**Avoiding Scandal**

Sins against charity include indifference, ingratitude, lukewarmness, spiritual sloth (acedia), and hatred of God (cf. Catechism, no. 2094). Scandal is also a sin against charity. It is an attitude or behavior that leads another to do evil. It is evil in itself. It is always sinful to intentionally lead another person to sin by one’s bad example. It is sinful to give bad example even if one does not wish others to follow one’s bad example. Scandal is seriously sinful if one foresees that another will commit a mortal sin as a result of one’s bad example, even if one’s own sin is only venial. “Scandal takes on a particular gravity by reason of the authority of those who cause it or the weakness of those who are scandalized” (Catechism, no. 2285; cf. Mt. 18:6).

One is not necessarily guilty of the sin of scandal if one performs a good or indifferent deed, which under the circumstances may appear evil and might, thereby, lead others to sin. So, a priest may go into a house of prostitution to administer the last rites to a repentant sinner in imminent danger of death, even though someone might misunderstand his deed and be scandalized.

Those in public office have a special responsibility to avoid scandal. Therefore, a legislator could only vote for a bill that permitted abortion in cases of rape, incest, and to save the life of the mother, if such a bill would have the effect of decreasing the current number of abortions and provided his “absolute personal opposition to procured abortion was well known.” Otherwise, he would cause scandal by voting to keep some abortions legal—as though the killing of innocent children is justified in some circumstances. Under no circumstance may a political or social leader establish sinful customs, laws, or structures and then wash their hands of the scandal they caused by claiming they were “personally opposed” to the sinful practice they helped to legitimize (cf. Catechism, no. 2286).

**The Heart of Social Justice**

Charity is at the heart of the Church’s social teachings. She has made this clear in every document pertaining to social justice, including Vatican II’s Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes), Humanae Vitae, and the Charter of Rights of the Family. Charity informs the virtues of solidarity, social justice, and conjugal chastity and explains why contraception is wrong. Charity, the love of God within the Trinity, is eternally life-giving and unitive—begetting the Son, conceiving the Spirit, returning to the Father a mutual love. Contraception denies the divine image within the human person by willfully withholding a complete gift of self, one that is both life-giving and truly mutual, at the very moment of the deepest personal intimacy (cf. Catechism, no. 2369).

This fundamental disorder within the family contributes to the disharmony in the world. As a corrective, Pope John Paul II referred to charity as described in 1 Corinthians 13 as “the Magna Carta of the civilization of love.” A civilization of love rests upon “the understanding of man as a person who ‘finds himself’ by making a sincere gift of self” for others. This worldview, perfected by divine charity, will lead all peoples to true peace and union with God. Let us contribute to the conversion of society and the world by living lives of charity, loving God first, and our neighbor for love of God.

1 St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, Ila Ilae, 43, 2.
4 Ibid.
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