Help others help ourselves

God Knows There's Need: Christian responses to poverty
Susan R. Holman
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“N”eed” is the reason for Christian giving, and the basis of the Church’s social teaching: a just wage, after all, is decided not by the operations of a free market, but by (in Leo XIII’s formula) what a working man needs to pay for his family and a roof over their heads. “God knows there’s need,” says the author, echoing her title, “because God took on need.”

This is an essay on early church responses to poverty and injustice which seeks to bring those ancient voices into the contemporary conversation about welfare reform and poverty relief. The whole book, in fact, can be seen as a reflective breathing space, a retreat between hard covers for those whose response to need is too often reduced, perforce, to filling in a local-authority grant application. Here, from the fourth century, come the powerful voices which see meeting the needs of the poor as leitourgia, the Greek word from which we get “liturgy”, which means both “worship” and “service of the needy”. Liturgy is a transfiguring of pain, which begins with sensing need, moves to sharing the world, and ends with the embodiment of the kingdom. This is the threefold paradigm which structures this thoughtful and thought-provoking text – a pattern of salvation which begins with “sensing need”.

Hearing the cry of the poor and meeting Christ are simultaneous. The empathy, or “sensing need”, which the fourth-century Cappadocian bishops were so good at awakening, is too often absent from modern-day “reactive volunteerism.” It was better understood in the fourth century than now that there is a point to the poor. Tending to them is not noble oblige, but an act of restorative restructuring of a world fractured by sinful division. The fourth-century Cappadocian bishops, whose poverty sermons undergird the early part of this book, lacerate the wealthy for their blindness to suffering; they are refusing not just the needs of others, but their own salvation. “If we wish to heal the wounds by which our sins have afflicted us, wrote Gregory of Nyssa, “heal today the ulcers that have broken down their flesh.”

“He is part of you,” writes Gregory Nazianzen of a “disfigured” poor person, “even if he is bent down with misfortune.” In their basic needs for food and water, the poor reflect Christ wanting to heal us of our sins; in being healed through relief of the needs of the poor, our whole community is restored, for the benefit of all. Beneficence is “an act of obedience between fellow travellers on a journey”, lightening the load for each on a shared journey to redemption.

Giving to the needy was seen as the best signpost to the way God acts: not preferring one group over another, or attempting to decide who “deserved” charity, but giving recklessly and indiscriminately, indifferent to class or race. Christians “are merciful to everyone, even strangers”, Pachomius, a pagan teenager conscripted by the Romans, was told. Seeing it was true, he was led to faith.

The patristic writers differed, as do people today, on the degree to which caring for the poor should involve a divestment of wealth. The Pelagians preached complete impoverishment, and were considered heretical; most writers emphasised detachment and compassion. But all agreed that the humility involved in meeting need was vital to spiritual profit. John Chrysostom, Bishop of Antioch, describes teenagers raised in comfort and tended by slaves who chose now to live in coarse garments and sleep on leaves, eating one meal a day and spending their days tending to sick women. “Many of them even cook, so great is the power of the flame of Christ,” he writes.

One interesting lesson from the early Church is that the most effective responses to need and injustice rise organically from within the communities in which they occur. Not only is it easier to “sense need” when it is close to you, but the nature of the response is more likely to be conditioned by authentic solidarity: “the destitute poor are entitled to relief precisely because they are vital members of the human family on whom the spiritual survival of the rich depends.” To ask an awkward question: can giving to Catholic orphanages replace tending to those who live on our streets? Can we “sense need” from a photo of a distant African child? Is it leitourgia?

Yes, but only if we really do live in a global village. This idea of organic interconnectedness – humanity as a single body – is the sacred kingdom towards which compassion points. The needy are not “other”, but within. And the needy in society are vital players in an economy’s success, for you can no more have a successful economy without losers than you can have a sacrificial cult without sacrificial victims.

Losers are vital to the success of winners; the rich need the poor; the needy heal the prosperous. Only an expansive, extreme model of hospitality, embodied in Christian liturgy and carried out in social action, is capable of teaching that truth to a world hurrying by on the other side.

Austen Ivereigh

Ethiopia, 1984–85, by Sebastião Salgado, from My Brother’s Keeper: Documentary Photographers and Human Rights, edited by Alessandra Mauro (Contrasto, 320pp, £30)

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