

On this October 1st afternoon, with the federal government partially shut down and the Affordable Care Act beginning its implementation, I invite your consideration of care of a somewhat different sort. Most of what follows comes from “Two Kinds of Charity,” an essay by Natalie Carnes and Jonathan Tran of Baylor University, and published in the Spring 2013 issue of *Christian Ethics Today*.¹ While I cannot claim a great deal in terms of having lived fully into what the authors propose, I am challenged by these thoughts, and I do have a proposal at the very end

The authors compare “worldly charity” with “Christian charity,” noting that “worldly charity,” while far from being a negative thing, is still “a model of goodness based on American ideals, not a model of goodness based on what the church is called to.” The authors illustrate “worldly charity” with a woman who raised \$100 to help two unemployed men, while illustrating “Christian charity” with Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserables* (I thought it interesting that they didn’t [couldn’t?] illustrate “Christian charity” using a real person . . . keep reading!).

The article identifies several worthy characteristics of “worldly charity”:

1. Worldly charity requires that we see the poor as worthy of moral consideration and that we think of the presence of the poor as something that requires our attention.
2. Worldly charity requires that we do something to involve ourselves in the situation of the poor.
3. Worldly charity requires that the something we do is practical and helpful, like giving money for rent or jackets against the cold.
4. Worldly charity requires something of the giver: time, energy, attention, and money.
5. Worldly charity requires encouraging others to join you in helping the poor.
6. Worldly charity requires that we understand poverty and need as systemic, as larger than just the particular people of whom we’re aware.
7. Worldly charity requires and results in self-examination: Am I living a purpose-driven life? Do I really need jackets I don’t use? Do I really need all my money? What would Jesus do?

While all this is laudable, the authors point out that while worldly charity does require sacrifice, it doesn’t require *much* sacrifice, and certainly doesn’t require *self*-sacrifice. Worldly charity allows us to keep our lives intact during and after our encounters with the poor.

The authors argue that while worldly charity requires compassion for the poor, it also assumes that if the poor are allowed to overwhelm and undermine our economic system, there will be no rich to help the poor: “never should such giving be done in a way that jeopardizes the system that produces riches.” According to these authors, worldly charity assumes that the systems of market capitalism and its global spread over the earth are fundamentally sound and morally beneficial and that the best thing we can do for the poor into incorporate them into its infrastructure.

In counterpoint, the authors highlight Victor Hugo’s story of the fictional Bishop Charles-Francois-Bienvenu Myriel, better known as Monsignor Bienvenu. Receiving a stipend from the church equivalent to \$265,000, the Bishop gave away 93% of it to help the poor. As Hugo put it, “Like water on dry soil, no matter how much money he received, he never had any.”

¹ You can subscribe to this journal for free at www.christianethicstoday.com.

Although the poor loved the bishop, those better off were not as enthusiastic. It was rumored that he had remarked at one wealthy home, “What beautiful clocks! What beautiful carpets! What beautiful dishes! They must be a great trouble. I would not have all those unnecessary objects, crying incessantly in my ears: ‘There are people who are hungry! There are people who are cold! There are poor people! There are poor people!’”

The bishop’s one luxury is his treasured silver dishes and candlesticks. Although he eats only meagre soup if he has no guests, the bishop still finds it difficult to give up his silver dishes. And so comes Jean Valjean, an ex-con, to the bishop’s door. After sharing the evening meal, the bishop goes to bed, and Jean Valjean makes off with the dishes.



Valjean is soon arrested and brought back; and sensing the situation, the bishop tells Valjean in the presence of the police, “You forgot to take the candlesticks I gave you!” As Valjean turns to leave, the bishop tells him, “Do not forget, never forget, that you have promised to use this money in becoming an honest man.”

Valjean, who had no recollection of having promised such a thing, remained speechless, and the bishop continued, “Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I buy from you; I withdraw it from black thoughts and the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God.”

If you don’t know the rest of Hugo’s story, you’ll have to read it or watch the film; but our authors go on to point out that “Christian charity means not giving away old jackets but wearing jackets even when they are shabby so that more people can be clothed, as the bishop did. . . . Where worldly charity preserves the shape of one’s life, Christian charity, with its outpouring of compassion, does not. It will inconvenience your life; it will trouble you. It does not ask what spare change you have, but rather, *how have you lived in such a way that you have so much spare change around!?!?*”

And our authors point out that, like the bishop, Jesus also throws in His lot with the poor: “Jean Valjean is like Jesus in his needfulness, in his hunger, his homelessness, and even, let’s not forget, his criminal status. . . . Christian charity acknowledges God as the one made poor for our sakes. . . . In Christ, God lived with the poor, and God died with the poor.”

Finally, the authors ask, “Are we haunted by the Cross? When we pass the many crosses most of us encounter in churches and jewelry and home decoration, do they call out to us, ‘There are poor people! There are poor people!’? If Jesus gave His body and blood, the Church and the Spirit, that we may no longer suffer poverty, what are we called to give?”

“The answer is not as easy as worldly charity. It will cost everything. It will run you against the grain of this world, against that brutal cross. Giving away your last luxury, being counted among the least of these, throwing your lot in with the weakest against the most powerful, all these will run you against the grain of the world. And yet, laid up against the grain of this world, we live with the grain of the universe. For Christ’s cross identifies lives poured out as the very grain of the universe, the very meaning and identity and purpose of all things.”

As our government and our world lurch from crisis to crisis and from violence to violence, I am reminded of the words of President Eisenhower in a famous speech on April 16, 1953. I fear that we have not learned very much in these sixty years

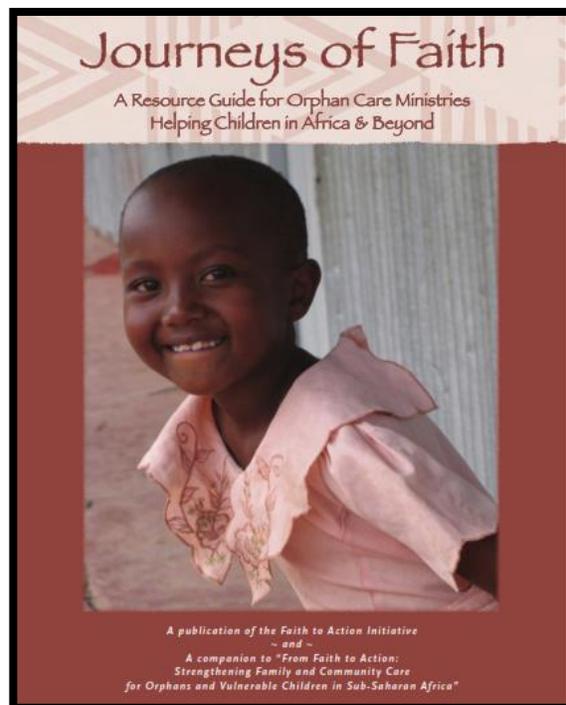
Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children.

The cost of one modern heavy bomber is this: a modern brick school in more than 30 cities. It is two electric power plants, each serving a town of 60,000 population. It is two fine, fully equipped hospitals. It is some fifty miles of concrete pavement. We pay for a single fighter with a half-million bushels of wheat. We pay for a single destroyer with new homes that could have housed more than 8,000 people. . . . This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.²

Well, here is my very small proposal about a response to poverty that might also shed light on our congregational direction for the next chapter of our life together. The proposal comes in the form of an invitation from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (www.thefellowship.info) to participate in a pilot study of resource material related to ministry with orphans and vulnerable children in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Participation in this study would involve being a member of a small group that discusses the material over a six-to-eight week period, starting as soon as we could get organized. In order to participate, we'd need at least eight people in the group (ideally, of various ages). If that sounds interesting to you, please let me know!

Dave



² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chance_for_Peace_speech. I suspect that the numbers today would be far worse.