

Ministering in Love

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The term “social service” has come to refer to all the services of charity performed by the Church. Of course, the term "service of love" sounds more beautiful because it reflects the Christian character of this type of outreach. But the predominance of worldly language over spiritual language is evident here.

What is the difference between the two terms? When the word love is used, the Christian quality of service is kept, at least in theory, as well as the purpose and motivation of this ministry, and thus the reminder of the keeping of the spirit of Christian love remains possible. When the Christian term “love” is replaced by the secular term “social,” then love could be forgotten. It is then easy to remove personal love and render service incomplete as merely a performance or a function. Even if the social service is highly skilled, it does not penetrate the human soul and can even harm it.

The love of Christ for “the least of his brethren,” that is, those with great needs, is supposed to be the first and fundamental motivation for the service of Christian love. Otherwise, "social work" prevails at the expense of Christian spirituality.

The Lord's first and great commandment is the Christian starting point in the service of love. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind... The second commandment is like this: Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:36-39).

The Christian understanding of love, according to this evangelistic standard, is directly linked to the love of God, which finds its highest expression in the love of creation and humanity. Through the love of God, our love becomes lasting, enduring, patient and sacrificial, seeking not what is for ourselves, but what is for others. At the same time, the act of loving others shines in the loving person as purification, cleansing, endurance, and patience. Thus, that person increases in openness of heart and rootedness in the love of God.

The love of God is linked to the love of humanity, and vice versa. The first epistle of St. John the Evangelist states: “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar... This is Christ’s commandment to us: whoever loves God must love his brother also” (1 John 4:20-21).

St. Dorotheus of Gaza depicts this relationship in a very expressive geometric image: a circle, with the center symbolizing God, and the points on the perimeter symbolizing humanity, with each point symbolizing a person. The radius represents the path a person takes to God. The closer the radii are to the center, the closer they are to each other. Conversely, the further they are from each other, the further they are from the center. Such is the relationship between the love of God and the love of humanity.

Likewise, Christian love is concerned with the inward, not the outward. Not every action that appears outwardly good is truly a testament to love. Not every good action, in and of itself, is necessarily an expression of Christian love. In other words, not every action that appears good from worldly perspectives is good from a Christian perspective.

Christ looks at the heart, not at outward actions. He condemned the Pharisees for their concern to show off their "good" deeds while they were not good on the inside. "You are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but inside are full of dead people's bones and all sorts of filth. You appear righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness" (Matthew 23:27-28). "You Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and plate, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness" (Luke 11:39).

A person may do good, but what matters most, according to the Bible, is the underlying motive of that good deed. If pure love drives you to serve others, your service will be complete and sound, and will resonate in the other person's heart, even if it falls short of his or her material needs. However, if the motivation is personal (seeking a favor), professional (seeking a transaction), social (seeking status), etc., the others may have their needs met, but they will feel manipulated.

How necessary it is for both clergy and laity working in the fields of service and ministry in general - and in the Church in particular - to be alert and aware of the importance of the continued presence of the Christian spirit of service and ministry in their hearts, behavior, and interactions with those in need.

Those who serve and minister to others often fall into the trap of limiting their outreach to what they deem sufficient. They no longer care about listening to what the Holy Spirit says and drawing inspiration from the Church's teachings in carrying out their ministry. They prioritize form over content, quarrel among themselves,

and compete with other organizations. There are many other pitfalls. Isn't all of this at the expense of those served, for whom the ministry was originally created?

Likewise, the primary focus must be on the person being served, not the technology that serves him or her. The person is the goal and the means. Concern over the continuity, development, and advancement of the service, both materially and formally, leads to the temptation of following purely worldly constructs and principles without baptizing them with the spirit of the gospel. There is, of course, no harm in drawing on the successful experiences of others, utilizing media, communication, and contemporary sciences in management, accounting, and organization. However, the danger lies in becoming absorbed in these areas at the expense of neglecting the role of the served and God in blessing and developing the service.

God is our reference point when we consider the plans, proposals, and offers presented to us, not the other way around. If, after examining them with the light of the Holy Spirit, they appear to be in line with our Christianity, we embrace them. Otherwise, we discard them, no matter how important they may seem, lest God's presence in our work becomes form rather than substance. It is easy for God to become a name or a facade for a charitable organization which might betray Him, working against His will. Its members are unaware of the deviation taking place and, on the contrary, revel in the worldly, secular success of their organization.

There are many varied avenues for expressing love in our ministries nowadays. Some of these require modern sciences such as sociology, education and psychology, plus a thorough understanding of the mindset and phenomena of each age or segment of humanity. This, undoubtedly, greatly helps people who minister to understand the conditions and needs of the people they serve, enabling them to use the appropriate language to address them. However, they must not forget that love is the most important language used in this service. Otherwise, the ministry becomes merely social work, and regardless of its advancement and generosity will be unable to provide the “good portion” necessary for those who are served.

Mother Gavrilia¹, who dedicated her life to healing all people for free, was asked how many languages she knew (she spoke several), and she replied: “The languages of touch, the eyes, and the heart!”

¹ She served in Greece and many other countries, spending many years serving the poor and the lepers in India. In her old age, she became a nun. The Ecumenical Patriarchate declared her a saint in October 2023.