

THE POWER OF LOVE

A Pastoral Letter by Bishop Victor Galeone

When the power of love overcomes the love of power, the world will know peace.

1 How do we achieve authentic social justice in a world torn asunder by so much greed and suffering? The parable of the Good Samaritan could well serve as a blueprint for achieving the peace and justice that everyone so anxiously desires. The details of the parable are quite familiar.

2 A traveler on his way to Jericho is assaulted by a band of robbers who leave him by the roadside half-dead. First, a priest and then a temple attendant pass by, who on seeing the poor wretch, continue on their journey. Bear in mind that the actors in the story thus far—the traveler, the robbers, the priest and the temple attendant—are all Jewish. Then along comes a Samaritan, a member of the race of half-breeds that the Jews despised for having committed the unpardonable sin of intermarrying with Gentiles. Yet it's precisely the Samaritan who is so moved at the sight of the dying traveler, that he dismounts, binds up the victim's wounds, mounts him on his very own donkey, and then brings him to an inn for a full recovery (Lk. 10:29-37)

3 The key players in this parable illustrate the three major systems competing to shape reality according to their respective worldviews:

- Radical Socialism (*the robbers*): "What's yours is mine; I take it forcefully."
- Unfettered Capitalism (*the priest / attendant*): "What's mine is mine; I hoard it selfishly."
- Christianity (*the Samaritan*): "What's mine is yours; I share it generously."

Let us briefly examine each of these positions.

Radical Socialism

4 Like the robbers in our parable, the proponents of radical socialism seek to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor by granting the State the monopoly to privately own both the sources of production as well as the means of distribution. Moreover, they would place under state control the chief activities of human life. State control and even state ownership are not necessarily radical socialism; they become so only when they prohibit private ownership not only of natural monopolies, but also of all the sources of wealth.

To paraphrase what Pope John Paul II expressed in *Centesimus Annus*: Radical socialism looks on the human person as a mere molecule in a social organism to which he is totally subordinated. One has no free will and can do nothing on his own initiative. He depends entirely on the state and on those who control it. (No. 13) Pope John Paul was speaking from personal experience, since he spent most of his life suffering the injustices of the Communist regime in his native Poland. Furthermore, those nations with a radical socialist agenda are invariably atheistic as well as hostile to the open practice of religion.

5 Raw socialism has been condemned by the Catholic Church throughout her history for denying two fundamental truths: the dignity of every human person and the right to own private property. Regarding the latter point, some socialists allege that they are merely following the example of the first Christians, who held everything in common, "selling their property and giving the proceeds to the poor." (Acts 2:45) That is true. However, they did so, not from constraint but *willingly*, as Peter pointed out to Ananias: "While you still owned the land, wasn't it yours to keep? And after you sold it, wasn't the money still yours to do with as you wished?" (Acts 5:4)

Unfettered Capitalism

6 Similar to the reaction of the priest and the temple attendant who ignored the plight of the stricken traveler, the advocates of unfettered capitalism turn a blind eye to the suffering of the countless victims of injustice in our world: “*What’s mine is mine; I hoard it selfishly.*” The Church does not condemn capitalism, as such, but only *unfettered* capitalism. Again, as John Paul II explained in *Centesimus Annus*: “After the failure of communism, should capitalism be the goal for Eastern Europe and the Third World? The answer is complex. If capitalism means a *market* or *free* economy that recognizes the role of business, the market, and private property, as well as free human creativity, then the answer is ‘yes.’ If it means a system in which economic, religious, and ethical freedom is denied, then the answer is ‘no.’” (No. 42) The last sentence is an apt description of unfettered capitalism.

With the burgeoning Industrial Revolution, capitalism entered its first phase which was *labor*-driven. The workers were reduced to a commodity to be exploited by their employers for however low a wage they could get away with paying. Many workers were reduced to a state of quasi-slavery, barely able to support their families. Even underage children were caught up in this unjust scenario, as poet Sarah Cleghorn expressed with this poignant verse written in 1916:

*The golf links lie so near the mill
That almost every day
The laboring children can look out
And see the men at play.*

7 Some 60 years ago capitalism degenerated into its second and even more insidious phase, which is *consumer*-driven and truly unfettered. Advertising was instrumental in this shift. Advertisements were used to lure consumers to base their purchases not so much on their *needs* as on their *wants* in order to satisfy their vision of a good life, filled with luxuries. I quote Pope John Paul’s reflection on this situation: “On the one hand, the almost exclusive orientation towards the consumption of material goods robs human life of its deepest meaning. On the other, work often becomes an alienating experience, a constraint for man...The most sacred principals that were a sure guide of individual and social behavior—the sanctity of human life, the indissolubility of marriage, the true meaning of human sexuality, the upright use of material goods made available by progress—are being displaced by false pretexts of freedom.”

The economic downturn today is the result of the loss of a sense of moral values. The crisis is a *moral*, not a financial one. In 1985 then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger correctly stated that an economy without any ethical or religious foundation is destined for collapse. I am reminded of Oliver Goldsmith’s couplet from *The Deserted Village*:

“Ill fares the land to hastening ills a prey,
Where wealth accumulates and men decay.”

Christianity

8 What is the solution to this dilemma? How do we extricate ourselves from the all-consuming quest for power and instant gratification that can result from radical socialism and unfettered capitalism? The Samaritan of the parable serves as our model. When he came upon the wayfarer despoiled of all his goods and hovering at the brink of death, he reached out in love to share what he had. Jesus told this parable to answer the question from the expert in the law, “And just who is my neighbor?” The short answer is that our neighbor is anyone who is in need. An Early Church Father, Origen, wrote a commentary where he compares Jesus to the Good Samaritan, who came from a far country—his heavenly home—to restore mortal man, stripped of all his dignity by the robber-baron Satan. Jesus set the example that he wants us to follow.

9 Just how are we to follow the Lord? I began this pastoral letter with the quote, “When the power of love overcomes the love of power, the world will know peace.” The first time I heard that saying, I thought it originated from a great statesman or even a pope. I later learned that its actual author was Jimi Hendrix. Irrespective of its source, it synthesizes perfectly the message of this pastoral letter.

At the heart of radical socialism and raw capitalism lies the love of power. And unbridled power has been the source of most of the injustices that have afflicted humanity throughout history. Furthermore, those imbued with the love of power cringe at the possibility of sharing power with those who are weaker. Consider, for example, the frequent occurrence of the president of a struggling country as he nears the end of his tenure, forcing the parliament to rewrite the constitution or rigging the election in order to continue his rule indefinitely. Is this not a case of the love of power? Or consider those nations which have stockpiled enough nuclear weapons to destroy our planet many times over, and yet almost automatically attribute ill and threatening motives to smaller nations who seek to join the nuclear club. It is not due to any inherent right that the larger nations maintain their nuclear arsenals, but rather because of the love of power, writ large upon the world stage.

10 Jesus warned his disciples of the danger associated with power when James and John requested to be seated on either side of him. On hearing this, the other ten disciples became indignant, for each one felt that he should be the recipient of that honor. Gathering the Twelve around him, Jesus admonished them: “You know that among the pagans their rulers lord it over them, and their high officials make their power felt. That must not happen to you. Instead, whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must become the slave of all.” (Mk. 10:42-44)

Like the Samaritan in the parable, Christians must be motivated by *love*, not power. Among the final thoughts that Jesus shared the night before he died, far more than any other theme was that of love. “A new commandment I give you, love one another just as I have loved you.” Indeed, love is how his followers are to be identified—it’s their ID card, so to speak: “Everyone will know that you are my disciples by the love you have for one another.” (Jn. 13:34-35)

Two Fundamental Issues

11 Two main issues which are intimately linked with Christianity’s response to the dilemma of pursuing power and instant gratification involve attempts to redefine both marriage and the right to life itself. In addition to being foundational regarding any discussion of social justice, they speak to the fundamental ways in which the power of love manifests itself in any society.

The first case of a so-called injustice is defining marriage solely as the union between a man and a woman—thereby denying two men or two women the right to marry. There is no injustice here; for the institution of marriage predates both the Church and the state. It was instituted at the dawn of creation by God Himself: “*Male* and *female* he created them... For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be united with his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” (Gen. 1:27 & 2:24)

So essential is marriage to all human society that it cannot be redefined to include same sex unions anymore than the chemical make-up of water (H₂O) can be redefined. So-called “OO water” could no more extinguish a fire than “HH water” could cook noodles! So to apply the concept of marriage to same-sex unions is an exercise in absurdity.

12 Another key instance of redefining reality concerns the right to life—the very *foundation* of every other human right. Without it, all other rights are like the walls and rooms of a marvelous mansion—built on *sand*.

Furthermore, the first test of justice is how we treat the weakest in our midst. Measured by that standard, most developed countries fail miserably. Every day, wealthy nations permit the extermination of tens of thousands of innocents in the womb. And for those who object that one cannot tell when human life begins, that objection is resolved by *embryology*, not theology: *Human development begins at fertilization, when a male sperm unites with a female ovum to produce a single cell with its own DNA identity—the beginning of each of us as an individual.* Full development requires only time and nourishment—the same needs of a newborn child.

Worse still, the developed nations force their culture of death on poor countries by linking much-needed aid to quotas of forced sterilizations and other population-control measures.

It should be noted that in his new encyclical, *Charity in Truth*, Pope Benedict XVI reinforces what John Paul II designated as “the culture of life” by forging a strong link between the *life* issues and the *social-justice* issues: “Openness to life is at the center of true development. When a society moves towards the denial or suppression of life, it ends up no longer finding the necessary motivation and energy to strive for man’s true good.” (No. 28) Accordingly, in dealing with the *life* and the *social-justice* issues, it’s not a question of “*either-or*,” but of “*both-and*.”

13 Ever since modern man embraced the culture of death, with the exception of the island of Malta, not a single European nation is replacing its present population. In order for a country to maintain its current population, there must be 2.1 children for every adult couple. Italy, the land of my parents, has a replacement rate of only 1.2 children per couple. If that trend continues, Italy’s current population of 58 million will be reduced to 20 million by the end of this century. I’m not a prophet. It’s simple mathematics.

Conclusion

14 Even those without faith hold Christians to a higher standard. Around the year 200 Tertullian quoted one of the pagans of his day: “See how these Christians love one another, while we pagans hate each other. Christians die for one another, whereas we pagans kill each other.” And George Bernanos, a fervent Catholic, expressed what an agnostic might say if he were permitted to preach from our pulpits:

“Dear brothers, many unbelievers are not as hardened as you imagine . . . [For when] we seek [Christ] now, in this world, it is *you* we find, and only you . . . It is you Christians who participate in divinity, as your liturgy proclaims; it is you, who ever since [Christ’s] ascension have been his representatives on earth. . . . You are the salt of the earth. [So if] the world loses its flavor, who is it I should blame? . . . The New Testament is eternally young. It is you who are so old . . . Because you do not live your faith, your faith has ceased to be a living thing . . . and we no longer see Christ in our midst.”

15 It is through the power of love that we achieve holiness as individuals and greatness as a society, and not through the radical and unfettered “isms” of this world. Towards the end of his life Napoleon remarked: “Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne and I have founded great empires; but upon what did these creations of our genius depend? Upon force! Jesus alone founded an empire upon love, and to this very day millions are prepared to die for him....”

According to a Gallup Poll conducted in 1999, do you know who Americans ranked as the most admired person of the 20th century? Eisenhower? FDR? Gandhi? John Paul II? No—not one of the world’s high and mighty. It was Mother Teresa! How is it that this diminutive nun, wrapped in a simple sari, came to be admired by so many? What was her secret? I’m not certain, but this anecdote from her life might give some indication.

During the question period following one of her presentations, a reporter asked a rather brash question, “Mother Teresa, how does it feel to be considered a living saint?” In her response, she directly involved the questioner: “Sir, you must be holy in your state in life, just as I must be holy in my state in life. And to be holy is not a difficult concept to grasp. Holiness is simply doing God’s Will—with a smile.”

The last phrase is the key to true holiness. It means that we embrace *willingly* whatever God allows to come our way, especially when it entails serious physical suffering, unemployment, or even the loss of a loved one. Here, as in all else, Jesus is our model, as when he prayed in the garden, “Father, if it is possible, remove this cup of suffering from me. Still, not what I want, but what you want.”

16 In closing, I want to point out that Mother Teresa anticipated by a number of years what Pope Benedict emphasized in his new encyclical as a key element of achieving true social justice, namely, fraternity and generosity. Mother Teresa spoke of the need to give as a way of growing closer to God: “We must grow in love; and to do this we must go on loving and loving, and giving and giving until it hurts—the way Jesus did.”

That’s also the role that Jesus assigned to the Samaritan and ultimately, to each one of us, in the parable that he told so many years ago—“Go and do the same.”

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