

# On Charity

(For Manuel)

By

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“And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these *is* charity”

--Saint Paul (1 Corinthians 13:13)<sup>1</sup>

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It was a bitterly cold February afternoon. I was thirteen. As my youth group filed out of the inner-city church where we had just finished our soup kitchen duties, I noticed a young man we had served leaning against a nearby red brick wall. He pulled the collar of his thin, worn denim jacket up against the freezing wind, alone and, like so many of the neighborhood's homeless men, filling the hours as best he could until evening, when he would be able to get a cot in the church's gym-turned-homeless shelter.

I remembered his name, Manuel, and called out to him in greeting, waving, as he returned the gesture. I walked over to him, and we began to exchange pleasantries—the first of a series of conversations at the church that, over time, turned into a meaningful friendship. Thus it was Manuel (the funny, gentle man who showed such dignity in the face of adversity) who first granted me the privilege of truly understanding the joy of charity.

The virtue of charity is the sacred union of benevolent empathy and action which St. Thomas Aquinas described as “the friendship of man for God” that “unites us to God.”<sup>2</sup> In my life, charity has found expression in many forms (both secular and religious), the three most notable of which have been: (1) volunteerism through religious organizations, (2) animal-focused non-profit work and (3) the donation of material goods.

The first (and most extensively undertaken) charitable practice in my life has been volunteerism through the United Methodist Church (or UMC). I've been a member of this Protestant denomination since the age of twelve, shortly after I heard the bells ringing at my local church and decided to stop in and see what it was all about. I began checking the

weekly church bulletins for volunteer opportunities as often as I could, and was soon lending a hand wherever possible. Though I was from a dysfunctional family, enrolled in a demanding academic program and struggling with a learning disability, I strove mightily to find the time and energy for these charitable endeavors. For even in these early days, there was a dawning realization growing in me that a Christian's most sincere obligation (even above one's own personal concerns) is to help others.

I quickly discovered that food ministries formed the bedrock of the church's outreach programs, and that serving food was the most direct method to care for those in need, both in body and spirit. For as St. Vincent de Paul said, "It is not enough to give soup and bread... you are the servant of the poor, always smiling and good-humored."<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, every week, I boxed, bagged, labeled, chopped and stirred, producing care packages and meals in the kitchens and basements of the many affiliated churches with the facilities to aid the hungry with as much good cheer as possible.

Happy to be behind the scenes, the most difficult part of these activities always arose when it was time to face those I was serving. The reason was straightforward: throughout my childhood I'd suffered from amblyopia, and, having been bullied about this disorder all of my life, my self-esteem was so low that I was unable to look anyone in the eyes. However, according to the policy a food ministry director had set: "If you can't look these people in the eye, go home." Determined to comply in order to afford the people at the food ministries all the welcome and cheer they deserved, I soon learned a newfound lesson: "Smiling in your brother's face is an act of charity."<sup>4</sup>

My charitable activities reached a new level during my youth group's outreach trips to Epworth Church (which served as both a soup kitchen and homeless shelter) in Edgewater,

a Chicago neighborhood with a high rate of crime and poverty. There I met Manuel, and encountered homelessness and want on a scale that first overwhelmed me, then spurred me to greater effort. Due to being raised in a single parent household in which the ends never quite met, I knew these people (women and children in particular) were in circumstances from which my family members and I were only half a step removed. Silently, I'd pray for their welfare, knowing how easily so many of us could find ourselves in a similar situation given a run of bad luck and lack of resources. My custom of volunteering at food ministries has stayed with me throughout my life, including here in New York, where I help serve a largely transient population to whom I am very grateful to be of assistance.

The second way I have practiced the virtue of charity has been via giving my time to various non-profit animal welfare organizations. I first started as a teenager, volunteering at an Equine Therapy program that fostered the emotional and physical growth<sup>5</sup> of children who suffered from a variety of mental, physical and emotional disorders. My role was twofold: to look after the horses and to help the children as they interacted with the animals. I began by brushing, washing, saddling, and warming up the horses, followed by greeting the children and guiding them through a series of interactive tasks and therapeutic riding initiatives. It filled my heart with joy to see children who began the program anxious and withdrawn slowly come out of their shells until—eventually-- they began smiling.

During this time, suffering the fallout of a childhood full of abuse, I began to struggle with clinical depression. However, I soon found that spending my free time engaged in such a worthy cause put my own issues in perspective, and I was surprised to discover that I too

was receiving many therapeutic benefits from being part of the program. As Abraham Lincoln said, "To ease another's heartache is to forget one's own."<sup>6</sup>

After moving to New York City I began volunteering for Brooklyn Animal Resource Coalition (or BARC), a no-kill animal shelter in Williamsburg. Laid off from my job, I decided to donate my newfound free time to helping the dogs there, most of which had been rescued from circumstances of abuse and neglect. Several times a week, I walked the dogs in nearby McCarren Park, noticing happily as they became calmer and, in many cases, ready for adoption. During this challenging time in my life, these dogs—with their wagging tails and feisty resilience-- gave me a reason to get out of the house each day. Through my continued affiliation with BARC, I hope to keep giving back to the wonderful animals which have done so much for me.

The third charitable practice that has been especially meaningful in my life has been the donation of material goods, including furniture, funds and, most particularly, clothing. Over the years I have donated all of my unused or outgrown clothing to charities such as the Salvation Army and, lately to the St. Margaret's House thrift shop. I have organized clothing drives among my friends and neighbors, and consequently have had the privilege of being able to donate a vast array of clothes to these organizations. My amazing friends have been great partners in these endeavors, and with their help, I look forward to seeing many more smiles on the faces of clothing donation supervisors when we walk through their doors laden with bags of clothing and our best wishes.

All in all, my efforts to put into living practice the virtue of charity have paid me back a thousand fold. In addition to deriving personal satisfaction from these endeavors, I have also found a professional path: I plan to become a licensed clinical social worker, and to

spend my career as an advocate for those who are disadvantaged. I hope to be like the many well-organized and proactive charitable supervisors I have known who aid those in need with an open door and open heart. One day, I hope to meet Manuel again, and to thank him for being the one who showed me the way. This essay is dedicated to him.

## Works Cited

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- 4.) Saabiq, Sayyid. *Fiqh-us-Sunnah*. Volume 3, Number 98.
- 5.) "EAAT Definitions." Path International. <http://www.pathintl.org/resources-education/resources/eaat/193-eaat-definitions>
- 6.) Lincoln, Abraham. "To ease another's heartache is to forget one's own." Public Quotes. <http://publicquotes.com/quote/32798/>