

Pitfalls of Wealth and Charity

A recent issue of the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* reports findings about charitable giving that are common knowledge among parish ministers: Persons of modest means give higher percentages of their income to charity than do persons of high income and significant wealth.

The hard-boiled cynic might say, who's surprised? It's because they give too much away that persons of modest means have no more than they do. They are the cause of their own failure to get rich!

However, another reported finding sheds different light on this matter. Persons of significant means tend to give higher percentages of their income to charitable causes when they live in economically diverse communities, that is, when they live in close proximity to those who have less than they do! The more isolated the rich are from those who are of ordinary means, the less generous they are in their giving.

I'm not sure what is cause and what is effect here. Do wealthy people who are less sympathetic and less generous toward those who have less deliberately distance themselves from people of lesser means? Or do people of means who happen to become isolated from those with less become less sympathetic and less generous toward them? Perhaps both patterns hold true.

Personally, I'm ambivalent about charity. I believe that meeting human needs, in particular those of the poor and disadvantaged, is primarily a matter of justice, not charity. A just society is one in which the meeting of basic human needs is not left to the discretion of those who have enough to share, but is built into the political structures and economic policies that govern the whole citizenry.

On these terms, we do not live in a particularly just society. Thus, we continue to rely heavily upon charity to fill the gaps and meet the needs that are not adequately addressed by social policies and programs. It's too bad – indeed, quite damnable – that the persons in our society who have the greatest capacity to provide for the needs of others are precisely those who tend to be less generous and less charitable.

There are exceptions, of course! I do not mean to impugn every person of means. But the pattern is clear, nonetheless. And by the traditional standards of scripture and the teachings of such persons as Jesus, this failure of both justice and charity lies chiefly with those who have significant means.

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