

Catholic Conversations

The Distinction between Charity and Justice

The terms “Charity” and “Justice” refer to distinct ideas and actions:

- “Charity” responds to the immediate wound (often because some injustice has been dealt a person).
- “Justice” tries to get to and un-root the cause the wound.
- Justice deals with unjust structures – it works for “systemic change”.
- There can be people who are charitable but not just and people who are just but not charitable.

A fundamental premise of Catholic Social Teaching is that being individually “good-hearted” is not enough. Our response to the issues posited in Catholic Social Teaching must include both charity AND justice.

Based on the talk “God, Christ, the Churches and the Poor – Knowing our Tradition” by Ron Rolheiser OMI at the Religious Education Congress in Anaheim California, March 22, 2019.

A Village on the River

There was once a village down the bend on a river. One day, children playing on the river bank saw 5 bodies floating down the river. The children ran to alert the adults of the village.

The adults quickly pulled the bodies from the river. Two are dead so they bury these two. One is a child so they find a home for the child. Another is sick so they put him in a hospital. Another is a woman who needs work so they find her a job.

This event happens every day and each day the villagers recover the bodies and attend to their needs: The villagers find foster homes for the children, feed those who are hungry and care for those who are sick. And this goes on for years.

But, after all this time, no one in the village thinks to travel up the river and around the bend to find out why five bodies float by the village each day.

Charity is attending to the bodies which are floating by but justice is addressing what causes these bodies to be floating by each day.