

FOR JUSTICE WITHHELD

“Charity is no substitute for Justice withheld.”

- Saint Augustine

Again we turn to the expressed wisdom of the Saint; and in this turning, attempt to apply his wisdom to our circumstances and experiences. A dangerous and risky proposition – since the mark can be missed, and err committed in understanding the man and his message. It is sometimes risky taking such statements *out of context* – as the basic theme can be missed altogether; still, we learn from our mistakes however unintentional this err be. Don't forget, that even a Saint has to live in a fallen world – but can be light in our path both through his own mistakes and his learning...wisdom.

To begin, what is charity? We recognize its basic description of giving something away – like money, food and basic necessities; but what of the action or basis. Well, at its core, charity comes from **compassion**, and compassion is love; it is sensing the suffering of others and, though not possibly a part of the suffering, having feelings as though it were you – or the person who is being compassionate.

When Christ looked on the multitudes, he had compassion on them and – through the power of God the Father – fed the thousands from a basket of fish and bread. When he traveled to visit the gravesite of his friend, Lazarus, he had compassion on the sisters, Mary and Martha, and raised his friend from the dead. Christ was compassionate toward all mankind - in this sense of their suffering in a fallen world, and he gave himself as the atonement for their sin – thus enabling salvation as a gift.

With the basic description of charity and its foundation, compassion; what of the expression that “charity is no substitute for justice withheld”? Charity is, after all, a tremendous outpouring of compassion or love; it clearly is what Christ instructed and exemplified in his ministry...and life. Yet, the Saint states that this deep and direct act of humanitarianism is “no substitute...”

Was Christ also the bearer of justice? Didn't he say that he came to bring the truth? Do you understand that without truth, there is not justice? In its basic sense, justice is **fairness**. Of course, the next likely question could (or can) be, “what is fair...or fairness?”

One person may disagree with another as to what is fair; moreover, a **conflict** or dispute by its definition may render the concept of fairness to be in contention – or without any resolved sense of what is fair or equitable.

Consider that charity does not necessarily resolve what is fair either; but acting on the basic goodness of a recognized or perceived need, results in some assistance or help. Those who are charitable are acting on compassion without resolving justice or fairness. Whether suffering or wanting is fair is not the question; rather, suffering is understood as well as the basic need to reply or respond with help.

Besides having compassion, was Jesus also just...or fair; is God the Father also of justice? From the New Testament, the gospel of Matthew tells us in chapter 12, “...**he’ll decree justice to the nations.**” This scripture continues, “...**Before you know it, his justice will triumph.**” Evidently, fairness or justice is not yet...but is coming...as is Christ.

Continuing in the New Testament, the epistle of 1 Corinthians instructs believers in chapter 6 not to use or engage in “man’s court” in matters of conflict or dispute. The basis for this instruction – even warning – is delivered or spoken by Paul:

I say this as bluntly as I can to wake you up to the stupidity of what you’re doing. Is it possible that there isn’t one levelheaded person among you who can make fair decisions when disagreements and disputes come up? I don’t believe it. And here you are taking each other to court before people who don’t even believe in God! How can they render justice if they don’t believe in the God of justice?

These court cases are an ugly blot on your community. Wouldn’t it be far better to just take it, to let yourselves be wronged and forget it? All you’re doing is providing fuel for more wrong, more injustice, bringing more hurt to the people of your own spiritual family.

If God (or Christ) is justice or fairness, than what is man? Well, according to Paul, speaking to the church at Corinth, man (to include his courts) cannot be truly fair or just; but as long as man excludes himself (or his institutions) from God as Lord, he will be relegated to injustice and unfairness – he (or they) will be reduced to a singular desire to protect, defend and exalt only themselves. In the end, man (and his courts and other institutions) can never measure-up to or

otherwise resemble the justice and fairness of God; it is simply impossible. Hence, Paul is telling believers not to use or employ man's court to resolve conflict or other matters of the church.

Perhaps what Saint Augustine was saying is that charity and justice cannot be substituted one for the other; both charity or compassion and justice or fairness is needed – as in the life of Christ.

Charity occurs sometimes because of the sense that justice is missing or has been ill-applied; and justice (or fairness) may be attempted in lieu of charity, compassion, or **mercy**. Compassion and fairness begin with love – and love begins by dying to ourselves, our wants and even needs – and giving of ourselves to others whom we sense needs us. When we love others (because we are loved), charity and justice are the result or product (s). When we don't love – even to the extent of not loving ourselves – we do not extend, let alone understand, justice and charity. Paul calls this behavior or condition, **stupidity**.

Charity does not *make-up* for justice withheld; when unfairness or inequitable treatment occurs, compassion won't make-up for it. Fairness or justice must rely on truth and thus, cannot co-exist with lies and deception. An old German proverb says that charity sees the need, not the cause. Justice, on the other hand, sees the cause.

If the "cause" is just (by examination), than it well deserves attention – even action; and in the examination, should be the desire for truth – or what is true. Paul knew that truth (or God) was not central to man's court – which is why he discouraged the church for using it. What is just begins with truth, and what is true begins with God.

For the believer, the church and community is *the call* to seek the truth ("seek and you will find...") and, in that, to come ever closer to justice. To begin however is to recognize both its source and the certainty of faltering along the way. Just as we may blindly overlook the needs of others (or charity), we may also overlook or skirt the truth because to recognize either (the needy or the truth) can be painful. Love hurts whether it involves recognizing (and hurting) for a need or the needy, or discovering the truth – about you and about others.

The journey was never intended to be easy – but to set us free!