



VOLUME 2 NUMBER 4  
JULY 2013

# Teaching the Faith

A PUBLICATION OF THE  
FELLOWSHIP OF CATHOLIC SCHOLARS

ISSN 2166-1146

Elizabeth Shaw, Editor

## *Witness to Charity*

By Gerard V. Bradley

*Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, July 14, 2013*

*Readings: Deuteronomy 30.10-14;*

*Colossians 1.15-20; Luke 10.25-37*

Last November an Arizona tourist snapped a cell-phone picture in Times Square, capturing one moment of a New York City cop's encounter with a ragged-looking man. A couple of weeks later she posted the photo on Facebook. Within two days the image had been "shared" 133,000 times, and "liked" by more than 400,000 people. It was, according to the *New York Daily News*, an "Internet sensation."

What did the photo show? Not what you might expect. It did not depict a violent confrontation between the men, or even the bedraggled man's arrest. It showed, instead, a simple act of kindness. It showed the 25-year-old policeman kneeling beside the seated, apparently homeless man, helping him put on the new winter boots that the officer had just bought for him. Officer Larry DePrimo explained later: "It was a very, very cold night. I looked over and someone was laughing at this elderly gentleman who had no socks and no shoes. You could see the blisters from a distance." The cop went to a nearby Skechers store and asked for some boots "that will last a while." He told the salesman: "I don't care what the price is." The store manager chipped in with his employee discount. By all accounts Officer DePrimo had no idea that anyone was observing, much less photographing him.

The picture went – as they say – *viral*. Why? Simple acts of kindness are treasures. But they are not rare. They can be viewed at Saint Vincent de Paul or at Goodwill any day. Still, something about this particular act of kindness hit a popular nerve. Was it the aesthetics? The photographic image is indeed haunting, a beautifully composed portrait of a winter cityscape, redeemed by the serene pose of the two men. But there are lots of arresting photos on Facebook, so something about this act of kindness was especially moving. What was it? I might suggest that the raw incongruity of the encounter invested this act of kindness with extraordinary force.

Here was a uniformed, armed agent of the state, someone often deployed to confront and subdue the sort of man he was encountering, extending one night a gentle, helping hand. The Times Square photo is an iconic contrast of love and power. It's not quite the lion lying down with the lamb, but it's close.

### *Expanding Our Idea of 'Neighbor'*

Officer DePrimo was, in other words, a very unlikely neighbor, just as the Good Samaritan in today's gospel reading is. The great commandment of love with which that reading opens is rooted in the Old Testament, in the Pentateuch – as today's first reading indicates. In the Old Testament, however, one's neighbors were one's fellow Israelites, and perhaps also those who sojourned among them. The priest and the Levite are unmistakable exemplars of this limited, parochial "neighborliness." Alas, they have descendants today: No doubt, many people walked right on by that shoeless man last November, and I daresay most of us would have done exactly the same.

Jesus repeated on several occasions the Old Testament commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself. Anyone can see that the Good Samaritan parable is meant to expand our understanding of who counts as one's "neighbor": *everyone* does. Even the total stranger in need. Even our adversaries, as were Samaritans to the Jews. Even when it is inconvenient. Even when we have places to go and schedules to keep.

Luke wrote his gospel for a predominantly Gentile audience. It is especially interesting, then, that he recalls Jesus answering a question posed by a "legal scholar," a figure meant to be understood by his listeners to mean a Jewish lawyer. Luke's lawyer initially asks: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" After describing the Samaritan's many kindnesses, Jesus tells him: "Go and do likewise."

Now, look more carefully at Jesus' answer to the lawyer's second question, "Who is my neighbor?" Our Lord answers this question with a question: "Which of the three was neighbor to the robbers' victim?"

The lawyer answers by identifying not the priest or the Levite who passed by, but “the one who treated him with mercy” – that is, the *Samaritan!* So the longstanding mutual nemeses – Jews and Samaritans – are joined together as “neighbors” in a circle of loving service.

### ***The Church’s Deepest Nature***

In a special apostolic letter, “On the Service of Charity,” coincidentally promulgated just three days before the Times Square incident, our pope emeritus Benedict XVI taught that charity is not the calling of the few, or even of the many. It is not an optional undertaking for the Church.

Nor is charity properly understood as a consequence of Christian commitment, as if there were a sequence of cause and effect in play: first, believe in Christ’s teaching; then, and as a result, aid one’s neighbor. In his letter Benedict reminded us that charity *is* Christian commitment. Charity is part of the Church’s “deepest nature,” he declared. It is “a constitutive element of the Church’s mission and an indispensable expression of her very being.” *Constitutive*. Charity is the substance of the faith itself. Benedict wrote that charity is one of the Church’s three essential responsibilities, along with proclaiming the Word and celebrating the sacraments. “These duties presuppose each other and are inseparable.”

The duty to be charitable pertains not only to the hierarchy and to ecclesial collaborations like Catholic Charities. Pope Benedict declared: “*all the faithful* have the right and the duty to devote themselves personally to living the new commandment that Christ left us” – the command to love one another as he loved us.

Many wonder about getting involved with the downtrodden. Isn’t this work best left to the professionals? On television and radio, and often through the mail, we are overwhelmed by countless appeals from corporate charities. These run the risk of distorting the sense of our *personal* duty to be charitable. But if we are to take Benedict’s words seriously, each of us needs continually to ask: *When and where am I being called to be a Good Samaritan?*

Some people today are so financially burdened by their taxes and other bills that they wonder about private charity: Can we afford it anymore? Do we even need to bother, given all the programs we’re already funding with our tax dollars? Aren’t we already caring for the needy in that way?

The example of Officer DePrimo suggests an answer to these questions. Yes, he was an officer of the state, but his job did not call for him to clothe the naked. He was not paid so well that he could readily afford a hundred-dollar pair of boots. He would not have been criticized by his sergeant – or, frankly, by anyone else – if he had ignored that shoeless man. But *exactly these circumstances* made his simple act of kindness so mesmerizing. Officer DePrimo was moved by compassion. He left every other consideration aside. That is what neighbors do.

### ***Distinctly Christian Charity***

Christians are neighbors. Christians must love all, as Jesus loves them. Yet Christians’ charity is more complex than compassion. Pope Benedict gave an important warning: the Church’s charitable activity “must avoid the risk of becoming just another form of organized social assistance.” The baptized must offer “not only material assistance, but also refreshment and care for their souls.” This additional complexity is not so much supplied by Christ. It *is* Christ.

Today’s second reading is, at first glance, a bit over the top. It amounts to saying – as elsewhere in the New Testament we hear it said – that Christ *is all, in all*. Our minds strain to gain some sense of what that could mean. Well, here is part of what it does mean. Peter Maurin, cofounder with Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker movement, once famously said to a homeless man on the Bowery in New York City: “You give me the chance to practice Christian charity. You are an ambassador of Christ. Thank you.” Maurin saw the face of Christ in the beggar.

One might also describe this (a bit awkwardly, I admit) as the receiver’s gift to the giver: the opportunity or occasion to see someone *as Christ sees him*. Likewise, the receiver might also encounter Christ in the giver, who strives to convey the image of Jesus and who makes that very effort an integral part of his actions. So in these ways, through acts of charity, we live interpersonally in the unity of Christ: “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

News accounts do not tell us whether Officer DePrimo acted out of his own Christian convictions. Perhaps he did. He was heard to say that the experience was “humbling.” We are also told that the once-shoeless man said to the cop: “God bless you.” Subsequent reports revealed that this man has a small apartment in the Bronx and receives public assistance of various sorts. Yet his encounter with Officer DePrimo was unlike any of those benefits, for nothing a person receives from his or her government can ever duplicate the sublimity and the power of a simple, personal act of kindness.

### ***About the Author***

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## FOR FURTHER READING

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- *Charity is one of the Church's three essential responsibilities, along with proclaiming the Word and celebrating the sacraments.*
- *"All the faithful have the right and the duty to devote themselves personally to living the new commandment that Christ left us." – Benedict XVI*
- *The Church's charitable activity must not become another form of organized social assistance.*
- *The baptized must offer "not only material assistance, but also refreshment and care for their souls."*
- *No social program can ever duplicate the sublimity and the power of a simple and personal act of kindness.*