

question in the abstract, as a political, social, or economic problem, and ignore the human tragedy involved. Pope Pius XII noted that many persons are misinformed about poverty: "Persons of good faith who have only inadequate knowledge of the matter believe that the majority of those who live in slums or who must be satisfied with an income below the essential minimum are there through their own fault or negligence, and that welfare organizations are capable of helping anyone in need of it" (address, May 3, 1957).

Secondly, the church asks us to form a Christian conscience about the dignity of each person and our own responsibility to do all within our power to help them. When our Saviour was asked to illustrate the law of love of neighbor, He gave the parable of the good samaritan as His answer. Compassion is the mark of the Christian. Christ's description of the last judgment is clear and simple. The Lord confronts the just with these words: "I was hungry, and you gave me to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me to drink; I was a stranger and you took me in." And the just asked in astonishment when they did these things to the Lord. He replied: "As long as you did it for one of these, the least of my brethren, you did it for me." (Matthews XXV, 34-40). On the day that all men as sinners shall ask mercy, they will receive it to the extent that they showed mercy toward their fellow man.

Thirdly, we must realize that the best form of help, as was said over seven centuries ago by the great Jewish physician, Moses Maimonides, is to help people to help themselves. Giving food to the hungry, clothing to those who shiver in the cold, and shelter to families that lack decent housing is important, but it is only a first step.

Much more necessary is intelligent concern over the causes of indigence and destitution. To cite one example, racial discrimination is widely considered as an important source of poverty. The Catholic bishops of the United States noted in their 1958 statement on discrimination: "It is a matter of historical fact that segregation in our country has led to oppressive conditions and the denial of basic human rights for the Negro. This is evident in the fundamental fields of education, job opportunity, and housing. Flowing from these areas of neglect and discrimination are problems of health and the sordid train of evils so often associated with the consequent slum conditions." Certainly no Catholic with an informed conscience will remain aloof from the struggle for civil rights which is today one of our first domestic problems. Indeed, we Catholics must go beyond civil rights and be sensitive to human rights, whether or not these fall in the province of civil law.

While we give wholehearted support to civic projects for the relief of poverty, we do not feel that our Christian duties end with such endorsement. It is not enough to vote for sound policies, to pay taxes, and to contribute to charity. The dedicated Christian must be always ready to give of himself. As Pope John XXIII noted: "Tragic situations and urgent problems of an intimate and personal nature are continually arising which the State with all its machinery is unable to remedy or assist. There will always remain, therefore, a vast field for the exercise of human sympathy and the Christian charity of individuals. We would observe, finally, that the efforts of individuals, or of groups of private citizens are definitely more effective in promoting spiritual values than is the activity of public authority. (Mater et Magistra, No. 120)

The list of possible personal projects to aid the poor and the unfortunate is long. In many of our cities, college students have formed tutoring groups to aid children in slums. Retired teachers have volunteered to give their evenings to help the illiterate to acquire at least a minimum of reading and writing. There are settlement houses and neighborhood projects to bring hope and incentive to those who seem to have no future. One can visit the bedridden poor, clean their rooms, and shop for them. Adults can act as substitute parents for children who have no real home life. Such children can be invited into their homes to study and to have a warm evening meal. Many religious groups have free summer camps for deprived children. There are parish interracial visitations programs, for the purpose of promoting better understanding among the races. Some Catholic groups have established halfway houses for former prisoners, to ease their transition into normal community life.

Such programs are many and diverse, but they have one point in common. Each calls for personal involvement. Each demands the most exquisite form of Christian charity, since each requires that we respect and honor the human dignity of the person who is poor and unfortunate. Such charity is strong and healing. It does not demean or degrade, as sometimes happens with badly planned gifts of material goods alone.