

3 Reasons to Give to the Poor

I think it is always better to err on the side of generosity.

I confess it's an area where I often fail. I try, diligently enough, but I know that I'm also sometimes too rushed, preoccupied with problems, threatened by too many people to deal with or just plain careless.

The failure I'm talking about is to implement a decision I made a few years ago to try, on every occasion when asked, to give money to a beggar, unless he or she is quite obviously young enough and physically sturdy enough to find work easily. (I realized the decision would not work in India or other places with massive poverty.)

I know that from some quarters where this is being read there will be immediate howls of disapproval: "Those bums (even middle-aged or older) ought to get a job," or "They'll only spend it on drink or drugs," or "You're making the problem of vagrancy worse by rewarding it," or (this from the left) "By thinking in terms of individual charity you're distracting people from solving the social root causes of poverty," and so on.

Of course, there is truth in all these objections. Some of the cash given to panhandlers surely will be used to buy alcohol or drugs. To avoid that outcome, the clergyman who led me to Christ many years ago in England (who often was approached by beggars because he wore a clerical collar) would accompany them to a fast-food restaurant and buy them a meal.

As to the argument that jobs are the solution, there may indeed be positions available to middle-aged people who are prepared to apply for them, but that possibility is far from always self-evident. As to the argument that we must solve the "root causes" of poverty, well, regimes of the left have sometimes alleviated mass destitution, but only by a leveling-

down approach that has all but destroyed freedom in the process. Even then they have not always been successful—as in Sweden, where there are proportionately more people below the poverty line than in the U.S.

Despite these considerations, I persist in my only partly successful practice. I have strong reasons for doing so.

First, God seems especially tender to the poor. Maybe He's trying to teach us something through this.

Why else would Jesus have said publicly that He was sent specifically to preach the good news to the poor (see Luke 4:18) or have informed the disciples of John the Baptist that through Himself the good news was being preached to the poor (see Matt. 11:5).

Or why would He have encouraged people to sell their possessions and give the money to the poor or ordered His servant to invite the poor and lame to a banquet (see Luke 14:21) or spoken so warmly of Zacchaeus after that tax collector had announced he would give half his possessions to the poor (Luke 19:8)?

Second, I try to give to the poor because I think it is always better to err on the side of generosity than parsimony. Who knows why the bum is on the street? Who can authoritatively cast judgment on all the circumstances of his life? Would he be the same person had he not somehow slipped through all the family and social safety nets available?

Finally, I try to give because I am aware I need desperately to keep being humbled, to keep being reminded of my dependence on God and on the need quite often to be inconvenienced by God.

Stopping in the street long enough to give money to someone who desperately needs it is a way of giving him or her, however momentarily, the dignity of personal attention. I try

to look the person in the eye and smile, and not just throw a few coins at him as if he were an annoying social problem that a few coins could get rid of.

Sometimes when I have passed by a poor person without giving anything to him the Holy Spirit has convicted me so strongly that I have had to turn around and go back.

I claim no virtue at all for this rather eccentric practice, which occasionally has embarrassed fellow Christians walking with me. I'd rather embarrass another Christian than be taken to task by God for my lack of charity.

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