



“We know that we have passed out of death into life,
because we love the brethren” (1John 3:14)

Sep 2014: Reflection: I John 3:10-18

At the heart of generosity is first the recognition that everything we have comes from God who is a provident provider for all his creatures. What have we received that we have not received from God? As St. James writes, “Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (Jas1:17). Often we fall into the error of thinking that the things we have, the wealth and possessions that we have acquired, are wholly the result of our exceptional dedication and work and that we are therefore entitled to it without condition. But with sufficient exposure, we cannot but admit that there are people who are much more hard working than us in other parts of society and yet do not have their basic needs met. If we find ourselves to be successful and “self-made”, we must remember that the family and place we were born into, the various gifts we were born with, the food and resources that have followed us, and the health of mind and body that we enjoy, none of these are things we accomplished but things that were given. We have received these gifts from God’s providence.

This is why Jesus calls us to be *poor in spirit*. We must become keenly aware that we have nothing that we can call exclusively our own; everything we have flows freely and continuously to us from God’s providence. And because all things are at every moment a pure gift to us, those who are poor in spirit are joyfully able to possess things as though they did not possess them at all (cf. 1 Cor 7:29-31). They enjoy tremendous freedom and detachment from

wealth and possessions, never desperately clinging to what they currently have, never anxiously striving to acquire more. As Jesus teaches his disciples, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth... do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on" (Mat 6:19,25).

But if we have received everything freely from providence, this raises the question as to why we have received things that others have not. Why did I receive the privilege of an education while millions of children do not? Why was I blessed with artistic talents or intellectual gifts while others around me lack these? One of the early Church Fathers, St. Ignatius of Antioch, provides a brilliant teaching that helps us to understand how this difference in gifts fits into the overarching plan of God. He bases his teaching on St. Paul's image of the Church as the Body of Christ.

Let our whole body, then, be preserved in Christ Jesus; and let everyone be subject to his neighbour, according to the special gift bestowed upon him. Let the strong not despise the weak, and let the weak show respect unto the strong. Let the rich man provide for the wants of the poor; and let the poor man bless God, because He hath given him one by whom his need may be supplied...

Thus, the rich are given riches for the sake of the poor. And the poor are given poverty so that they might receive aid from the rich. In this way, we see that the human race is meant to become a living body, is invited into the Church, where each organ lives for the sake of the whole body; no organ ought ever to live solely for itself. St. John says, "We know we have passed from death to life because we have love for the brethren." The new life of a Christian is marked by this essential characteristic, that we lay our lives down in love for our brother and sister in imitation of Christ and that we no longer live for ourselves. Thus, the simple answer to the question, "Why did I receive this?" becomes "Because I am chosen by God. I am chosen *for the sake of my brother and sister.*"

Upon those who are chosen, a greater responsibility is laid. Jesus tells Peter and the disciples that if a servant chosen to distribute the food to the other servants of the household is instead found eating, drinking, beating other servants, and getting drunk, that servant will be punished and cast out with the unfaithful, for "everyone to whom much is given, of him will much be required" (cf. Lk 12:41-48). This is why St. Augustine said to the faithful that to be a Christian with them was a grace and salvation to him, while to be their bishop was a duty and a danger for him. Of course, it is an honor and privilege to be blessed by God and chosen for others, but we must always keep in mind that "much will be required." Thus, when we take stock of all that we have received, when we consider *from Whom* we have received them, then we must always go a step further to recognize *for whom* we have received them. When we fulfill this obligation to our brother and sister, we know that we have passed from death into life, that we are a living and functional organ in Christ's Body, and that the love of God abides in us.

St. Ambrose explains this obligation that we have to our brother and sister using a different image. *Since the world and its resources were created by God for all of its inhabitants, whatever I take possession of is not mine in an absolute sense, but I have simply taken it on loan from everyone else on earth. For this reason, I should be eager to pay back my loan by giving to the poor as much as I can.*

It is not from your own possessions that you are bestowing alms on the poor, you are but restoring to them what is theirs by right. For what was given to everyone for the use of all, you have taken for your exclusive use. The earth belongs not to the rich, but to everyone. Thus, far from giving lavishly, you are but paying part of your debt.
- St. Ambrose

*Lord, instruct our hearts. Make us deeply aware that You gave us our wealth and possessions so that we could share them with our brothers and sisters. Help us to give generously to the poor and to store up for ourselves treasures in heaven.
St. Francis of Assisi, pray for us.*