

## A Commentary to Norbert Mette: “Love as Evidence for the Truth and The Humanity of Faith: On the Significance of ‘Caritas’ in the Life of the Church”

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*This commentary explains how the ecclesiological significance of charity is linked with the Christian option for the poor. It explores reasons for the obvious division of the church into two more or less isolated organizations (“pastoral church” and “caritas church”) and looks for ways of bringing these two parts closer together. Secondly, the text emphasizes why spiritual formation among people working for Christian charity organizations is so important, and it specifies under which conditions such a formation (formation of the heart) probably can succeed.*

**Keywords:** *Caritas, option for the poor, solidarity, spiritual formation, theology of social work*

### I. INTRODUCTION

As a member of the German “Caritas” and as responsible for pastoral care and spiritual formation among the organization’s staff in one of the big City-Caritas-Organizations with 1,500 professional employees, I can agree with many of the points in Norbert Mette’s article.

My commentary focuses on the ecclesiological significance of charity (i.e., Mette’s introduction) and, secondly, on coworkers’ spiritual formation (i.e., Mette’s 5th section). Both issues have been widely discussed during recent years, especially in German-speaking countries. At issue were the conditions for a true “spirituality of social work” and its foundation within a specific “theology of social work.”<sup>1</sup>

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## II. TWO CHURCHES?

The polls Norbert Mette cites reveal that, in the general public, social institutions like the Catholic “*Caritas*” and the Protestant “*Diakonie*” enjoy a much higher reputation than the corresponding churches themselves. Most of the interviewed people did not even know whether or how *Caritas* and *Diakonie* are linked with their respective churches. As Mette also observes, the high regard *Caritas* enjoys in the public is not always matched within the church. Here, although the “proclamation of the gospel” and the liturgy are seen to be “church services in the narrow sense” (in Mette’s words), social services seem merely an appendix with minor theological relevance. *Caritas* institutions are suspected of reducing the Christian witness into a mere “social religion.” Some Christians even argue that the churches should reserve their social resources for their members, rather than—as the *Caritas* institutions do—care for all who are in need. This juxtaposition of views—the public one and the view within the church—indicate that the (Catholic) church has fallen apart, forming two more or less isolated “organizations.” First, there is the official “pastoral church,” whose staff consists of priests, deacons, pastoral assistants etc., who celebrate holy masses, teach the gospel, or administer the sacraments. Second, there is something like a “charity church” with social workers, nurses, and psychologists, who care for people in need.

At the root of this division, as Rolf Zerfass<sup>2</sup> has argued already twenty years ago, lies a tendency of many Christian communities, with members often belonging to the settled middle class, to repress any memory about the dark sides of life, delegating concern for those “outside” to “professional charity organizations.” The poor, the weak, the shabby, all these are sent away. Along with them also those who care for these outcasts are more and more separated from the “ordinary Christians” and their parishes.

This surreptitious removal of people in need from the “classical parish community” happens on many levels. Once a man has lost his job, he ceases to appear for Sunday mass. Once a woman’s marriage has broken down, she ceases to attend Bible study. Once a youngster has become addicted to drugs, he avoids his youth group. And parents who gave birth to a handicapped child, no longer appear at the parish festivals. There is usually not even a discernible cause, like a reproof from the priest or a decision of the parish council. And usually there is not even a lack of good will on the side of the parish. Nevertheless, many communities have engendered an atmosphere that does not welcome people who are ashamed of their misfortune or their failure. Those who remain are the virtuous, the successful, the righteous Christians—it is they who form the core community to which the pastoral efforts of priests, deacons, and pastoral assistants are directed.

The others, the broken and unsuccessful ones, look for places where they can feel accepted just as they are. The good reputation of *Caritas* and *Diakonie* (as institutions) derives to a great extent from the fact that people assume that they will be appreciated there. People trust that even in their failures, they will be acknowledged and welcomed.

The following sections go beyond Mette's account in addressing (The Church and Its Turn to Poverty) the theological untenability of such a split within the church and (The Gospel's Reduction to an Ethical Message) its conceptual presuppositions. The next two sections turn to the theological resources for (Caritas as Response to the Encompassing Sense of Poverty) overcoming that split as well as for (Solidarity for All) the need to extend Christian charity beyond the confines of the church.

### The Church and Its Turn to Poverty

If people in need do not feel at home in their pastoral church, then this is, ecclesiologically speaking, disconcerting. The much-conjured "option for the poor," after all, does belong to the essentials of Christianity. Without it the church would lose its identity. "Poverty" here is an existential term. It signifies more than lacking financial resources, even more than material deprivation. Poverty can permeate all dimensions of human life. A person is poor even if he suffers from a lack of opportunities for life. Or if he lacks, as it is expressed today, opportunities for self-realization.<sup>3</sup>

"The Spirit of God is upon me. He anointed me to bring the good news to the poor, He sent me to announce to the captured ones their liberation, to the blind ones a new vision, to send the broken ones into freedom and to call out a year of grace from God" (Lk 4:18f.). With this programmatic speech, Jesus stepped onto the stage of his public life 2000 years ago. This speech until today is the *Magna Charta* of the Christian option for the poor. With this Gospel, Jesus addresses people whose resources are insufficient to secure them a good, happy, and fulfilled life. During all his life, Jesus sought contact with those poor, with those who are lame, blind, ill, hungry, homeless, downcast, possessed, or dead in heart and soul. Some of these he would help in their concrete plight, he would heal, or liberate them. But the crucial point lies elsewhere: He assures every human in need of the divine compassion. He proclaims, if we may express it thus, that God himself pursues the "option for the poor." This option finds its most poignant image in the final judgment scene of the Gospel of Matthew (Mt 25:31–46), where God identifies with the hungry, those in prison, the sick, the broken ones (*I was ill, I was hungry, I was in prison ...*). It is an image in which people in need can find their own cause being taken up—all those who suffer—from whatever it may be.

The Christian option for the poor reveals a basic decision: the option for life in its fullness (John 10:10). Christianity encourages us to expect from life

nothing less than fullness, perfection—that is, theologically speaking—salvation. Even more, it conceives of such “life in fullness” not in terms of a happy accident, which every now and then may occur. Rather, it understands life in fullness as what every human being has a claim to.

If a Christian takes this fullness of life as his starting point when considering peoples’ life histories, he will first and foremost take any person’s felt need very seriously. He will not try to console another, who suffers from his own life, by arguing that things are not that bad after all. He will not tell a person who feels “poor” in what concerns the essence of his being (e.g., in feeling cut off from opportunities for life) that from the standpoint of Jesus he belongs to the rich. No Christian would try to talk someone into giving up his hopes for a successful life and instead be content with bits and pieces. A Christian will not betray the criterion of “fullness of life,” even if reality suggests otherwise.

It is especially Pope Benedict XVI’s second encyclical “*Spe salvi*” that emphasizes this life in fullness as the proper horizon for all human existence.<sup>4</sup> The Pope here uses various terms: he speaks about “true life,” “the essential life,” and “eternal life.” There is implanted in man a special kind of “knowledge” concerning such a life; a knowledge which the Pope calls with Augustine “a certain knowing ignorance,” a *docta ignorantia*: “We do not know this ‘true life’, and yet we know that there must be something we do not know towards which we feel driven.” (*Spe salvi*, 11).

In knowingly unknowingly placing himself into the perspective of life in fullness, Christians derive a two-fold motivation for their own lives: energy for the here and now and hope in view of the whole. A Christian will devote all efforts to protecting and furthering whatever is profitable in the here and now; he will struggle against what is unprofitable as much as he can. But sometimes he is reduced to helpless compassion, for in our world there are ills that human help cannot remove. At the very least at this point, the Christian will turn his glance upward: Life in fullness, after all, is a *Divine* promise, and this promise must be valid even in the face of a poverty and need which literally cry to heaven. With his own “option for the poor,” God has bound himself to relieve the poor, the suffering, and the downcast.

The attitude with which a person does what is humanly possible and hopes to God for what is beyond human powers can be described as humility. For Christian charity, humility is a virtue of first importance.

There are times, when the burden of need and our own limitation might tempt us (i.e., the helpers, JR) to become discouraged. But precisely then we are helped by the knowledge that, in the end, we are only instruments in the Lord’s hands and this knowledge frees us from the presumption of thinking that we alone are personally responsible for building a better world. In all humility, we will do what we can, and in all humility, we will entrust the rest to the Lord. It is God who governs the world, not we. We offer him our services only to the extent that we can and for as long as he grants us the strength (*Deus caritas est*, 35).

## The Gospel's Reduction to an Ethical Message

If the poor, in all their different forms of need, form the centre of the Gospel, if they are the first addressees of Jesus' good news, then how could it happen that they often do not feel welcome in our "standard" parish communities? This alienation of the broken ones from the Christian communities, so it seems to me, might result from a deep change in perspective that in many places has affected our view of the Christian message. Somewhat provokingly one might speak of a totalizing ethical perspective: to a greater or lesser extent, the Gospel of Jesus Christ has been reduced to an ethical appeal. This has serious consequences for potential recipients. The basic question of ethics, as Immanuel Kant has summarized it, is: What should I do? This is a question for those who can freely decide, command the relevant resources, and have access to the relevant options. Biblically speaking, these are the powerful and the rich. Many Christians, when they hear biblical accounts of the poor and the sick, automatically respond by "yes, I know, I ought to help." Such Christians place themselves on the side of the rich and powerful and regard the poor as imposing on them an obligation to act.

But if, as was argued above, Jesus' central message does not concern the powerful and the rich, but the poor, then the question "what should I do?" is irrelevant because the poor mostly experience themselves as incapacitated. It is here that the other Kantian question becomes relevant: "What may I hope for?" What may I hope that it will happen to me? What may I hope that God will do for me? The joyous character of Christ's "good news" seems to me to lie in God's promise that he will do something for me, thus transforming my longing into healing.

Later in this essay, I shall say more about "spiritual formation." But already here, it has become clear that it is always good for a Christian to regard himself as a person who is not only rich and powerful but also poor and in need of help. In this way, we can receive the gospel in a different way—as a promise, not as an appeal.

"Blessed are those who are poor before God," says Jesus in his sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:3). Those who are poor before God are people who trust in their own longing for life. Those who are not content with a self-fabricated happiness because they expect more of life. These are people who feel in their hearts a lack of life, of love, and who suffer from that lack. Such people—presenting themselves in their deep existential poverty—come before God and trust that he will transform their "lack of realization" into his life in fullness.

## Caritas as Response to the Encompassing Sense of Poverty

How does poverty relate to the *caritas* of the encyclical? Simply put, *caritas* is the proper response to poverty. *Caritas* is, so to speak, the internalized "option for the poor." *Caritas* begins when someone recognizes another's

need, or even his own, and when he sympathizes with the one suffering from that need, with the poor one. And *caritas* continues with everything that leads from sympathy to action.

Thus, if the poor are the primary addressees of Jesus' message, then his gospel is from the very start diaconic, it consists in *caritas*. When the church continues Jesus' mission in the world, everything it does will somehow have a diaconic character or will realize in some way *caritas*. It is important to emphasize this. Essentially, *caritas* is not only a field of service provision but rather a basic dimension of the church. It frames whatever the church does.

I fully agree with Norbert Mette when he concludes that, theologically speaking, the diaconic service offered by the church ultimately amounts to witnessing to the love of God. This witness goes beyond a mere information about God and his relationship to the world. At stake is a witness that changes reality. In his second encyclical *Spe salvi*, the Pope has made that very clear: "The Christian message was not only 'informative' but 'performative'. That means: the Gospel is not merely a communication of things that can be known—it is one that makes things happen and is life-changing." (*Spe salvi*, 2).

The inseparability of proclamation, liturgy, and *caritas*, each of which refers to the other two, has an impact on how the charitable work of the church differs from purely secular ways of offering social support. The one specific difference of church charity is, as Mette argues: Christians recognize that they are loved by God. Charity is a way for them to pass on that love of God. And in addition, Christian *caritas* realizes that there is a meaning to what it offers that transcends the sphere of human achievements. Such charity is conceived as integrated into a greater context, the context of a "love story between God and man." (*Deus caritas est*, 17).

If poverty extends to all dimensions of humans' "lack of self-realization," if all humans are "poor in the face of God" in a deeply existential sense, and thus dependent on their being transformed, what then is the meaning of efforts at alleviating quite basic forms of human need? What meaning, theologically speaking, is there to establishing drug counseling services, offering care for the aged, and founding warm-up rooms and womens' houses? Or to put the matter differently: What is the meaning of such down-to-earth *caritas*, as offered by the different social services and ultimately by the social institution that bears the name *Caritas*, as perceived in the horizon of the gospel?

The answer lies in Christian anthropology.<sup>5</sup> This essay is not the place to address that subject systematically. But it is important to remember that Christianity views man as a unity of body and soul. As the second Vatican Council formulated: "As unity of body and soul, man in his incarnation unifies the elements of the material world: in him these elements achieve the height of their vocation and raise their voice in a free praise of the creator.



Man should therefore not despise his bodily life; on the contrary, he must regard his body as divinely created and called to be resurrected at the end of times, and thus as good and worthy of honour.” (*Gaudium et spes*, 14) From a Christian perspective, man is neither merely material body nor is he “pure spirit,” who as it were resides only accidentally in a body. Man is really incarnate in his life world. He was created by God as a unity, in which all dimensions, the spiritual and the material, have their place.

This unity in man makes it impossible to discount his material needs in favor of his spiritual needs. There is, theologically speaking, no second class poverty. Not to take hunger or physical pain seriously would be to disregard bodily life, and this would in the end amount to disgracing man as a whole. Whatever burdens him, it is always the whole man who suffers. The encyclical says so very clearly:

The entire activity of the Church is an expression of a love that seeks the integral good of man: it seeks his evangelization through Word and Sacrament, an undertaking that is often heroic in the way it is acted out in history; and it seeks to promote man in the various arenas of life and human activity. Love is therefore the service that the Church carries out in order to attend constantly to man’s sufferings and his needs, including material needs. (*Deus caritas est*, 19)

Accordingly, helping a person in a concrete need is always a service to that man as a whole. And to serve man as a whole is always theologically significant because man, just as he is here and now, is the image of God.

### Solidarity for All

Let us now turn to the assumption that the church should save her social energies for her own members. From a theological point of view, this would mean a serious violation of a fundamental principle of Christian (social) ethics: solidarity. “Solidarity,” on the one hand, is a central concept for individual ethics. As such, it concerns a certain inner disposition of individual persons. This individualist impact is patent in formulations such as “behaving in a solidaric manner,” “acting solidarically,” “being solidaric,” “to solidarize with,” etc. Yet solidarity can also be used for social ethics. Here, it describes a certain quality of social structures. In this connection, one often speaks of the “principle of solidarity,” which is one of the three pillars of catholic social doctrine.

Both meanings root in the Christian view of man’s “social nature.” Here, man is regarded as characterized by needs and as dependent on others—mainly on other people. As the second Vatican council claimed: “Man is from his innermost nature a social being; without relationship to others he can neither live nor unfold his gifts.” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 12) Solidarity is a particular way in which one deals with this essential human relatedness. The “classical” formulation of this way can be found in Pope John Paul II’s 1987 encyclical “*Sollicitudo rei socialis*”:

It is above all a question of interdependence, sensed as a system determining relationships in the contemporary world, in its economic, cultural, political and religious elements, and accepted as a moral category. When interdependence becomes recognized in this way, the correlative response as a moral and social attitude, as a “virtue,” is solidarity. This then is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all. (SRS, 38)

This conviction that “all are responsible for all” finds its first biblical expression in a negative presentation: in the story of the fratricide between Cain and Abel (Gen 4:1–16). The question, which is posed by God to Cain after the murder, is not “what did you do,” but “where is your brother?” And Cain answers with a counterquestion: “Should I be the keeper of my brother?” Neither the question nor the counterquestion thematize the act itself, but the responsibility.<sup>6</sup> In the formula “Am I my brother’s keeper” one discovers the deeper question: “Do I have to know where he is?” And God’s—unexpressed—answer is: Yes, you have to know, where he is, because your brother depends on your respect and your care. Your brother has a claim on you—and this is why you are responsible for him. Christians discern in this answer a universal statement. Because all humans are created as “man and woman” and because they are related to one another as “corresponding helpers,” humans’ responsibility for one another is valid forever and for all.

The New Testament specifies this conviction in its parable of the charitable Samaritan. Here, it becomes clear how the fundamental responsibility of all for all is transformed into a concrete demand for action. The very moment in which I encounter someone in need renders my responsibility for him concrete. To be sure, the extent of my responsibility depends on my resources. But there is no human encounter that takes place in a space which is devoid of all responsibility. At the very least, the recognition of the other’s need, the acceptance of the other’s dependence on help, is what I owe my neighbor.

Solidarity becomes concrete in the recognition of need, in partisanship for the alleviation of need, and in concrete social help. Whenever the church becomes socially active, this constitutes no reward for membership, nor a strategy for strengthening membership. It is exclusively an expression and form of solidarity, which is recognized as obligated in view of human need. Therefore, the encyclical takes a strong position against any claims to the contrary in affirming the fundamental decision that Caritas organizations are open for all.

The Church is God’s family in the world. In this family, no one ought to go without the necessities of life. Yet at the same time caritas-agape extends beyond the frontiers of the Church. The parable of the Good Samaritan remains as a standard that imposes



universal love toward the needy whom we encounter by chance (cf. Lk 10:31), whoever they may be (Deus caritas est, 25).

### III. SPIRITUAL FORMATION

The first encyclical letter of Pope Benedict XVI, as Norbert Mette mentions, sets a strong accent in favor of the church's diaconic mission. It repudiates any one-sided preference of worship and preaching, emphasizing the importance of *caritas* as a substantial part of church life. This is a signal for the church. It is also a signal to the general public, as well as to the many thousands of employees in *Caritas* institutions, who recognize it as an appreciation of their work in the past and as an encouragement for the future.

Sadly, a chance was missed by the way in which the encyclical letter was addressed. Here, only "the bishops, priests and deacons, men and women religious and all the lay faithful" were mentioned. In the systematics of ecclesiology, of course, the address is correct. But why not explicitly mention social workers, nurses, street workers too? Although many more people work for the "Caritas Church,"<sup>7</sup> the public view of "Church" is restricted to the clerics. This view is also shared by most of the *Caritas* workers themselves. They understand themselves mostly not as Church. If they do, they see themselves not seldom as "second class" church staff. It would probably have had an enormous psychological effect, had the encyclical been addressed explicitly to social workers too, and had it named the many *Caritas* employees also and thus included them in the official church. Both sides would be reminded of the fact that they are two dimensions of a whole. Neither of them is complete without the other, even if it will probably take a long time until they reach a firm common ground to work together as equals.

In the course of aiming at such a goal, *Caritas* workers' spiritual formation, as addressed toward the end of Mette's essay under the heading of "The qualification of coworkers," is of crucial importance. The following sections will discuss (Conditions for Coworkers' Spiritual Profile) the role and nature of *Caritas* staff's spiritual formation, (Pastoral Care for Coworkers: Becoming More Human through Work) its methods, and (Church Membership of Caritas Employees?) the issue of church membership.

#### Conditions for Coworkers' Spiritual Profile

At least in Germany, the "specifics," the "spiritual profile" of Christian charity organizations is widely discussed. One reason may be the growing competition in social markets: The different organizations stake their claims, and the Church-sponsored ones try to set their spiritual, Christian, Catholic flag. In these discussions, qualification of the staff has moved more and more into the focus. Employees are reconceived as "capital of the *Caritas*" (Rainer

Krockauer)<sup>8</sup>. The organization's spirituality is hoped to take shape through the spirituality of employees. Thus, spiritual formation gains in importance. And here the encyclical gives a valuable impulse.

In addressing *Caritas* coworkers' qualifications, the Pope summarizes (i) conditions for competence among those who pursue the church's mission in view of the latter's social task. At the same time (ii) he indicates which formation is to generate and nurture such competence. Both aspects deserve closer scrutiny.

The first condition for competence concerns professional knowledge and ability. "Individuals who care for those in need must first be professionally competent: they should be properly trained in what to do and how to do it, and committed to continuing care" (*Deus caritas est*, 31). This emphasis on professionalism, as also confirmed by Mette, responds to tendencies within the church to discount professionalism in favor of the Christian mission. Frequently such tendencies are supported by reference to God's undisposible grace, which is supposed to render any quest for efficiency and effectiveness, for professional methodology, technical skills, and worldly quality criteria unnecessary. But as scholasticism affirmed, grace presupposes nature (*gratia supponit naturam et perfectit*)—and this also holds for work within the church. Especially in the field of social work, which in modern societies has attained the rank of a highly respected profession, the church can simply not afford to weaken the impact of its message through diletantism. This is why the church must give high priority to the professional expertise of *caritas* workers.<sup>9</sup>

But the Pope also demands that professionalism be supplemented by a turn of the heart.

While professional competence is a primary, fundamental requirement, it is not of itself sufficient. We are dealing with human beings, and human beings always need something more than technically proper care. They need humanity. They need heartfelt concern. Those who work for the Church's charitable organizations must be distinguished by the fact that they do not merely meet the needs of the moment, but they dedicate themselves to others with heartfelt concern, enabling them to experience the richness of their humanity. (31 a)

Unlike Norbert Mette, I do believe that the basic capacity to turn his heart to another person can be expected of an applicant for work within *Caritas* and that this capacity can be included among hiring conditions. But I agree with him in conceding that such a demand requires certain framework conditions, the provision of which lies in the responsibility of the church and of the *Caritas* organization. Let me clarify.

As Mette points out, Pope Benedict describes the educational means for the generation of a turn of the heart to the other in terms of "a formation of the heart." But what does that imply for the training of coworkers? As the Pope emphasized, formation of the heart must derive from an experience of the love of God. But then the required training must involve something very different from development of empathy, a course in pastoral care or in

theology. At issue is not the acquisition of a competence in any theoretical or practical sense. Rather, what is required is a guidance that can disclose an experience that people—in this case *Caritas* coworkers—really have or have had. They must be brought to consciously realize something that really touches them. Moreover, if such an experience is to “form the heart,” it must be an experience of love. Thus, all times and places at which a heart is formed can be recognized as times and places at which a person realizes his being loved. This is why I propose to begin spiritual formation with a warm-hearted glance onto one’s own life and to investigate where one has in fact experienced and still experiences love. Such—completely human—experiences of being loved can prepare the ground for one’s encountering even God’s love in one’s own life.

But what about people who lack the experience of having been loved? Or where that experience is very weak? In that case, the first step might be to help a person in his struggle toward faith in his being worthy of love, even as the person he is. God’s promise that he loves me can here become an “argument” for the justification of self-love and self-respect. Romano Guardini speaks about “accepting oneself,” as based on God’s word, as the fundamental task of Christian existence. “Only on the basis of an acceptance of self can one find a way into a real future—for each his own. Because growth for humans does not mean to wish to transcend oneself. To behave in a moral way does not mean to give oneself up. We are to criticise ourselves, but we must do so in a spirit of loyalty in view of that which God has founded. Even repentance must never go so far as to abandon the self (...) Man’s respect of himself must in fact be re-discovered. It roots in a widely forgotten truth, namely that God himself respects us.”<sup>10</sup>

Pope Benedict has intensely studied Romano Guardini’s writings. In many of Benedict’s works, one finds references to them. Sometimes these even extend to the title formulations. Thus, it is not surprising that in “Deus caritas est” one finds an allusion to the “acceptance of self.” In Chapter 34 Benedict writes:

My deep personal sharing in the needs and sufferings of others becomes a *sharing of my very self* [accent J.R.] with them: if my gift is not to prove a source of humiliation, I must give to others not only something that is my own, but my very self; I must be personally present in my gift. (34)

The ability to share oneself presupposes the ability to accept oneself. Only after I have received and accepted myself—from the hand of God—can I share something of myself as a person with others. The experiences I make in pastoral and spiritual accompaniment have taught me that serious reflection of one’s own life and acceptance of oneself are not as widespread in social work as they could be. Most employees are well trained in caring for others. But not few of them have heard for a long time “Don’t take too much care for yourself! The other is much more important than you.” This may be one main reason for the “amount of exertion from employees which exceeds

the latter's physical and psychic resources," that Norbert Mette bemoans in his article. I want to underline firmly Mette's admonition: "These employees are entitled to being treated on the basis of the same human and Christian rights which they themselves are expected to respect among their clients." There is a need of broad support to employees. Sometimes it will take a lot of encouragement until they trust in their own value as persons.

#### Pastoral Care for Coworkers: Becoming More Human through Work

As previously stated, a formation of the heart can be achieved in an atmosphere of unconditional respect and appreciation. This also holds for the work place. The church and *Caritas* bear an institutional responsibility for the atmosphere of their houses. They are responsible for coworker's opportunity to develop their soul.

Slowly, some of the great *Caritas* organizations are beginning to recognize that the pastoral and spiritual accompaniment of their coworkers—on all levels—is a necessary task. As one of the first of these organizations, *Caritas Stuttgart* instituted a special position for "pastoral care and spiritual formation for coworkers."<sup>11</sup> Here, different kinds of exchange and accompaniment for individual coworkers or for teams are offered. Beyond that, the point is to create and nurture a business culture in which coworkers are to be recognized and supported not only as work force but also as persons.

To thus place the coworker at the centre is a novelty for many Christian social institutions. One is accustomed to always focus on the occupants or clients. It is surely common knowledge that coworkers profit from pastoral work and spiritual formation. But should such commitments be pursued as ends in themselves? Would one not always have to asseverate that such commitments will also improve coworkers' professional performance?

At this point we must turn to the Christian understanding of work. Christian enterprises typically derive the value of their efforts not alone from those efforts' outcome for others. Here, one might point to Pope John Paul II's 1982 encyclical "Laborem exercens," a most significant theological treatment of the Christian understanding of the essence and value of work. This text aims at establishing a (new) work ethics that reflects the personal dignity of working humans.

John Paul starts out with the tradition of the church, which anchors human work in man's biblical call to "dominion" over creation (Gen 1:28):

Christianity conceives that call in terms of a vocation to frame the world in an encompassing sense. With 'work' referring to any kind of human intellectual or bodily production, man is seen as sharing in and further developing Divine creation. The world of nature is thus humanized; it is transformed in persons' life world.

For a deepened understanding of human work, the encyclical offers a crucial further difference between its objective and subjective meaning. Its objective meaning consists in what the work produces, as its object, that is

in goods and services. Speaking in terms of the New Testament, one could also invoke the “good fruits” (e.g. Mt 7:17) which derive from a person’s work and which are useful for others. But in a Christian perspective, this “objective sense” represents neither the only nor even the most important meaning of work. There is also a subjective sense which work has for the worker himself. For him, work is a way of realizing his personhood. “As a person he works, he performs various actions belonging to the work process; independently of their objective content, these actions must all serve to realize his humanity, to fulfill the calling to be a person that is his by reason of his very humanity” (LE II:6). The Pope addresses this second meaning with the lovely phrase: “becoming more human through work”: “Work is a good thing for man—a good thing for his humanity—because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfilment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes ‘more a human being.’” (LE II:9)

This “humanizing” impact of work is contingent on external and internal freedom. It presupposes that man is the master over his own work. Especially today, it is not superfluous to emphasize this requirement. Far too often allegedly, external (material or psychological) constraints’ turn one’s work into one’s master. As important as a person’s career, economic success, or balance sheets may be, their value is always relative to humans’ personal development. Modifying Jesus’ comment on the meaning of the sabbath (Ex 20:8–11; Dtn 5:12–15) John Paul has formulated:

The primary basis of the value of work is man himself, who is its subject. This leads immediately to a very important conclusion of an ethical nature: however true it may be that man is destined for work and called to it, in the first place work is ‘for man’ and not man ‘for work’. (LE II:6)

Even social work is often dominated by allegedly external constraints that introduce the danger of coworkers’ hidden instrumentalization. Accordingly, the history of church-based *Caritas* shows periods during which a “spirituality of self-exploitation” (Isidor Baumgartner) defines the dominant work ethics. The seemingly charitable commitment embodied in this understanding of *Caritas* work, that is its orientation to those in need, who are to profit from such work, has for a long time veiled the underlying destructive impact of that understanding. But it never was really a Christian understanding. On the contrary, it constitutes a subtle idolization of (social) work. The encyclical uses harsh words for making clear that no utility, not even any social utility, can justify workers’ wear out:

Independently of the work that every man does, and presupposing that this work constitutes a purpose-at times a very demanding one-of his activity, this purpose does not possess a definitive meaning in itself. In fact, in the final analysis it is always man who is the purpose of the work, whatever work it is that is done by man. (LE II: 6)

Accordingly, the encyclical pays attention not only to the external demands but also to the inner attitude, that is to the way in which someone

“subjects himself” to his work. We often speak of high performance, of top achievers who manage an above-average workload, or in a quite old-fashioned manner of “diligence.” And especially in social work, there clearly is a certain kind of ethos which expects of employees that they “do a little more” or “do not count the hours.” Yet from a Christian perspective, high workload is not by itself a virtue. The achieved results are only one part of what counts in the final evaluation—the other part is what happens on a human level in the achiever himself. Christian enterprises bear a special responsibility in protecting coworkers against the danger of permitting their dedication to disintegrate through self-exploitation:

All this pleads in favor of the moral obligation to link industriousness as a virtue with the social order of work, which will enable man to become, in work, “more a human being” and not be degraded by it—not only because of the wearing out of his physical strength (which, at least up to a certain point, is inevitable), but especially through damage to the dignity and subjectivity that are proper to him. (LE II:9)

So what follows from all this for coworkers’ pastoral care and spiritual accompaniment? Such efforts must be devoted to advocacy in view of the subjective dimension of work. It must be emphasized again and again that the Christian profile of a social institution is not limited to the good fruits. Christian enterprise pursues as second and equally important goal that coworkers—and that includes all of them, from trainee to the director—should become more human. Such continuous reflection about whether and to what extent one becomes “more human” requires opportunities for pausing as well as times and places for the deliberate withdrawal, so as to be able to look at oneself. The spiritual culture of a charitable institution will not the least become manifest through providing space for such “healing breaks,” during which coworkers’ humanity can be thematized.

#### Church Membership of Caritas Employees?

One final point that should be addressed is the question of church membership among *Caritas* employees. This question is violently discussed on one hand—and more or less a strict taboo on the other. It is absolutely right, of course, that—at least in Germany’s big cities—it would be unrealistic for *Caritas* organizations to try and hire only Catholic employees. In my organization in Stuttgart, a major part of our staff belongs to other Christian confessions, and a growing number of employees are not Christian at all. A remarkable percentage, coming from East Germany or Eastern Europe, is even more or less atheists. The situation is similar in other big city *Caritas* organizations. Yet “official” documents about *Caritas* employment fail to take account of this well-known fact. Membership in the Catholic Church is often simply assumed. If other possibilities are mentioned, this seems to be envisaged as a temporary problem that requires temporary solutions. As a



result, non-catholic employees feel insecure concerning whether they are really welcome. Even when they have worked in the organization for many years, they retain a feeling of deficiency. Matters get worse when non-catholics become members of the board. It must be painful for them to see the last work paper by the German Bishops Conference dealing with *Caritas* organizations explicitly demanding, if ever possible, a “catholic socialization” for leading positions.<sup>12</sup> But what is more important: matters of “socialization” and “official membership”? Or instead the actual work such non-catholics do? Could the variety of religious experiences and the plurality of spiritual homes of our employees not be an enormous enrichment for social work and an opportunity of facing the growing spiritual plurality of our clients?<sup>13</sup>

I agree with Norbert Mette, that this is not merely a technical but also a theological problem. How could, theologically speaking, the living practice of love be insufficient for Christian *caritas*? In his first encyclical, Pope Benedict offers a consideration that, if taken seriously, demands a radical paradigm change. In Chapter 31, he warns against any attempt to instrumentalize charity as a form of missionizing. In addressing the question of a conscious, explicit Christian witness he says

Charity, furthermore, cannot be used as a means of engaging in what is nowadays considered proselytism. Love is free; it is not practised as a way of achieving other ends. (...) Those who practise charity in the Church’s name will never seek to impose the Church’s faith upon others. They realize that a pure and generous love is the best witness to the God in whom we believe and by whom we are driven to love. A Christian knows when it is time to speak of God and when it is better to say nothing and to let love alone speak. He knows that God is love (cf. 1 Jn 4:8) and that God’s presence is felt at the very time when the only thing we do is to love. (...) Consequently, the best defence of God and man consists precisely in love. It is the responsibility of the Church’s charitable organizations to reinforce this awareness in their members, so that by their activity—as well as their words, their silence, their example—they may be credible witnesses to Christ. (31 c)

The path here indicated by Benedict does not demand any criteria such as certificates of baptism, catholic socialization, or marital status as supposed guarantees for the Christian profile or church attendance of *Caritas* coworkers. He derives no “entitlement” for employment with *Caritas* from such givens. Instead, he emphasizes that wherever love occurs, God himself becomes incarnate.

But what a *Caritas* coworker is not aware of the fact that in what he does he embodies the divine love? If instead he understands himself in a quite different way? Perhaps in the end, it does not matter. It would matter, if being a Christian was only a human reality, say, an active confession, or a legal entitlement which is officially granted. But being a Christian also has another dimension, which comes from God. The encyclical begins with a reflection on how a person becomes a Christian: “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person,

which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.” (Introduction). That is to say, a Christian is a human being who has encountered God—Jesus Christ. This may have happened at any time or place, either consciously or unconsciously. In the end, God alone will be able to judge.

In a Christian perspective, a safe path toward encountering God is certainly the encounter with people in need. In the great scene of Mt 25:31–46, God identifies himself with those in misery: I was sick, I was hungry, I was in prison ... If this is true, than *Caritas* employees are encountering God day by day, in a variety of shapes. Maybe in the end, it is that which counts, nothing else.

## NOTES

1. Typical examples for such discussions can be found in three collections of essays edited by Hofmann & Schibilsky 2001, Lewkowicz & Lob-Hüdepohl 2003, and Krockauer, Bohlen, & Lehner, 2006. Important guidance concerning the role of theology in the academic discipline of social work can be found in Lechner, 2000.

2. Compare Zerfass, 1995.

3. This concept was developed by the Harvard scholar and Nobel prize winner Amartya Sen. He centers his theory on human capabilities, at the same time engaging a very particular understanding of freedom: Freedom signifies humans' opportunity of leading a life for which they have opted on the basis of good reasons and which does not compromise their self-respect. Poverty accordingly is defined as capability deprivation.

4. See especially chapters 10–12.

5. Compare Reber, 2005.

6. Compare Spaemann, 1993, 113–34.

7. Under the roof of DCV, the German Caritas Association, there are nearly 500,000 employees, the pastoral staff consists of approximately 25,000.

8. “Considering that the profile of social caritative institutions increasingly depends on the consciously lived spirituality (...) [of the coworkers; JR], it is important to consider that spirituality as one's institution's crucial ‘capital’ and potential for innovation, which requires being considerate and careful nurture.” (cf. Krockauer, 2001, 35).

9. Connected with this is the discussion concerning the relationship between professional employed coworkers and voluntary helpers. In this essay, we cannot go into that further problem.

10. Compare Guardini, 1993, 24 f.

11. For a short sketch of the project see Reber (2008), 13–15. For an in-depth treatment see Reber (2009).

12. It must be ascertained that “as a matter of principle only church socialized leaders, without whom the Christian profile of an institution cannot be secured, are engaged on the higher management levels.” (Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz, 2007, 21),

13. For example in Wunderlich, 2007, 25–9.

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