

Are you being served? Christ said he came not to be served but to serve. Francis of Assisi used the word, servant, 159 times. This indicates how important this value was to him. When we minister to others, when can they really say: I have been served! It is good to take time to reflect on our ways of serving others, using the wisdom of our contemporaries who serve the needs of others, the middle class, etc., but especially the poor. The following are summaries of their reflections.

A. DIRECT SERVICE TO THE POOR:

Direct service of the poor requires serious, consistent self-examination, deep prayer, and willingness to be converted. No one serves perfectly, gives completely or works flawlessly. Basically it is important that a person knows and experiences his or her ministry as a call from the Lord. We are loved by God and called to live a life of service. Our call to service is a preeminent experience in our lives of God's love for us. We do not serve simply because it is good to do, or because it is the liberal agenda, or that it will prove our goodness. We serve first and most purely because in love we have been called and our response is to choose to return love. We serve because it is the Lord's call.

We are created in love, called to life in service of others. In the poor, in those we serve, we see and know the Lord. We see the

crucified, suffering Christ more often in the person of our brothers and sisters broken by unemployment and enforced idleness; struggling to feed, cloth and house their children with little income and constant challenge. Those suffering from mental illness, bound by addictions or the loss of dear ones, mirror the sufferings of Jesus. In faith what we see leads not just to fear or revulsion, anger or pity; in faith what we see leads us to love. As we love the crucified, so do we love our brothers and sisters in whom we see that Lord. Our service is sometimes halting, fearful, always incomplete, but as we serve, we discover the Lord and our call. Our opportunities to love are ever present and our love grows deeper.

The Signs of Genuine Service:

- 1. Compassion: We try to see the suffering, hurting, needy Christ in our brothers and sisters but we cannot romanticize this experience. This is so because often listening to the unconnected and mindless ramblings of a mentally ill person or the aberrations of an alcoholic or drug addict, etc., can mask the humanity of a person. Human weakness, wasted talent and willful neglect can make us feel sad and reluctant to be with the person. But compassion helps us to see, however dimly and haltingly, Jesus, broken, hurt and in need. If we are not afraid to keep looking, no matter how searing or overwhelming the vision may be, we will be moved in compassion to see that our lives join some way or other; our**

2. hurts are shared, for we stand together. We join together to comfort, to relieve, to listen, to confront, to help in some way. If we see only deprivation and not our common humanity it is too hard to believe we are brothers and sisters.

3. Acceptance of one's own limits: One who serves others has to realize and accept the fact that he too is weak, not so strong that he does not need anything or anyone or can always help, always know what is right or always have the resources and energy available. No one is so perfect or has everything that he does not question what he is doing or at times hurt inside. How can I be open to suffering and pain if I do not know it myself?

Often a life of service with its demands can overwhelm. Trying to be clever, wise, powerful and resourceful and gentle and kind at all times is not possible. We need to look first to the God who empowers us as we are and gives us what we need to serve in this broken world. A servant doesn't do everything, solve everything; a servant serves and trusts. In weakness he strains and struggles to help, to console, to change, to forgive, to wait, to hope. A servant cannot be afraid of weakness or limits for he knows the Lord gives what is needed at the time. A true servant does not despair.

Serving the poor sounds very romantic, until you spend a lot of time around poor people. Some of them can be lazy,

manipulative, addictive, like all of us can. They can even steal your shoes. After getting burned a few times it is easy to stay at a distance from some people and judge them as too lazy, too irresponsible to help themselves. Also if you are serving the poor because you are waiting to get positive feedback from them, you are going to be disappointed. So to persevere in service with total trust in God for the effects, one must have courage.

4. **Courage: Are we courageous enough to serve? Are we ready to begin what may well fail, or show no measurable or discernible results? It takes courage to risk in this way. To begin something we cannot control and to trust that there will be a way to find in the madness, life, healing, wholeness requires enormous courage. We often try to do only what we know we can and then refer people to others who might be able to help. Service to those whose lives are marked by deprivation is risky; deprivation can make life seem mad, senseless and out of control. If we try to help one person, three more call. This demands energy, wisdom and resources. What do we do when we cannot change anything, when as on Calvary only love and presence are there and listening.**
5. **Commitment to smallness: Service to the poor especially means doing ordinary things, with people noted as ordinary. This often requires a certain stripping, a painful changing, being ready to give up doing meaningful and professional things so as to listen, to feed, to shelter, to be with the poor who may not have your level of education and experience.**

- 6. Are we ready to let go of our privilege, learning, position, and accept the small and ordinary and in faith see dignity and show respect? Can we give up quick and tangible rewards for our efforts? Sometimes our service seems to be so much band-aid help, helping little and changing nothing. Often that is all we are capable of doing in the situation. Are we willing to be stripped of better hopes and dreams, those wants and desires that keep us from seeing full and real life with the poor? We can miss seeing the poor and their needs at the present moment; we can miss hearing their call for support and compassion if we are too worried about our need to succeed.**
- 7. Humility: If we have served our whole life we can be tempted to a hardness of heart. We live with evil; we hear about it every day. The real and destructive effects of poverty, racism and injustice are all around us. We are not starry-eyed youths, not bleeding hearts. We can grow hard, hard and smart and cynical. And it is this hardness of heart born of experience that must be stripped or we cannot serve with the life and love of Christ. Our hearts can be troubled, discouraged, angry. We can know the touch and power of evil but we are called to love. True servants are people who stand for what is right and who constantly and consistently call that forth in others. They are people who love and trust, forgive again and again, accept the harsh and dreadful truth of the cross and believe and wait for the new life that Christ promises. Thus enlivened they**

bring service that will not be measured or hard on those in need.

- 8. Are we open to be loved and challenged? Are we loved enough and filled with life that can flow out of us to others? Do we see God's love reaching and touching us. True love of self allows others to love us. Too often dedicated people allow their spirit and drive to dry up because they do not know love. We can cherish who we are, who we can be and allow the love of others to strengthen us, console us, teach us to laugh, weep, not take ourselves too seriously. Will we stand alone or will we stand with others. Our sisters and brothers in the body of Christ touch us, change us, soften us and call us forward with their love. Do we allow the ones we serve to love and respond to us as they are able? When we are worn and tired, pulled by too many needs and demands, by endless stories of sadness and sorrow, who takes care of the caretakers? Must we always be the givers? Often we image the poor as always being in need. They may not be able to give what we give, or precisely what we need at any given moment. We must be careful not to create structures that keep any reciprocity of care at bay. They do give to us if we look for it and are willing to see the other as real, as Christ for us and if we are willing to accept what they can give. Often the acceptance of their own sufferings and their courage to keep going and their faith in God can make us wonder who is the servant here?**

9. Are you visionary enough to serve? Are you able to operate not so much with answers or even promising programs, as necessary as they may be, but with vision, with hopes and dreams? Life soon enough teaches us the gap between hopes and reality, but the servant of the poor never agrees the gap cannot be bridged. We are always in process of building the kingdom and persons of vision lead us to where we must go. We cannot be lost in the brokenness. Visionaries draw us together and lead us forward. A servant without hope cannot endure. Friends who dream and hope with us, who share their vision can invigorate us and keep us going. Can we endure the criticisms of the poor and their self-defeating behaviors and again and again call for justice, when everyone thinks we are foolish, unrealistic and unsuccessful. Still we speak of what might be if we live what we believe about what one day God's reign might bring, even when our efforts seem to go nowhere, help no one, change nothing. We work and work well and our reward is simply more work. The challenge here is trusting that some things only God can change and only in God's time and way. We may plant and water and never see the growth. Can we trust and keep on going?
(Source: James Cormack, Reflections on Service to the Poor, Spirituality Today, Spring, 1991, vol. 3, n. 4)
10. Joy in serving: when we see or meet someone in need and we sense what is called for, have a good idea or the right word and it turns out just right, we experience joy not only in what we did but how we did it and that it really helped

someone. In caring for another we sometimes get a glimpse of our true nature as images of God, as brother or sister to another. We come out of ourselves, just to be there with the other and say a few good words, listen, or provide for a need. We are reminded of who we really are and what we have to offer one another. All this is a source of joy in service. (Ram Dass and Paul Gorman, *How Can I Help?* Knopf NY, 1987, p., 7)

But sometimes the experience of serving is not a source of joy because we do not know exactly what to do, how to handle the situation, we do something and do not know the results, or we are exhausted and compassion fatigue has set in, or people seem ungrateful. How then can we persevere in joyful service? We have to serve in faith. God emptied himself in Christ. He became human for us and by doing this he showed us the way to joy. Joy to the world was announced when He gave up everything for us. It is only in complete self-surrender, self forgetfulness that we can ever find the courage that is joy. God shows us that joy consists of complete selflessness: this can be made real only when we are face to face with our fellow human beings. Our neighbor does not really exist for us, until we serve him or her. We experience joy in giving joy. Our lives are genuine when we give up everything in an action that serves and is not subject to the mood of the moment. Our self-surrender is visible evidence of God's presence in the world and of his power

over people's hearts and minds. (Source: Ladislaus Boros, *Meditations*, Doubleday, NY, 1972, pp. 16-17)

B. SERVICE TO THE MIDDLE CLASS

The Middle class tends to be ignored theologically. This was due originally to the call for commitment to and preferential option for the poor and the challenge to immerse oneself into middle class struggles was neglected. There was a conscious effort among theologians not to be middle class, not to think middle class, and not to act middle class because it was seen as insensitive to the suffering around us.

However, while the challenge of the middle class is to be converted or liberated from prejudices of race, class and sex and the consumer-wasteful society and to have a greater global and ecological consciousness based on justice, a good theology addresses needs where they are found. Spiritual needs are not the monopoly of a particular class but are found in any class, any sex, and any race. Part of the mission of the church is to recognize those various needs and try to respond to those needs as best it can.

A striking characteristic of today's middle class mentality is loneliness and a search for meaning. They are seeking friends, people who will understand their struggle to make ends meet, pay their bills, save for their children's education, etc. They also seek a transcendent reality which tells them that all this struggle and hardship will make sense someday, partly in the here and now and perhaps in the afterlife; and if they endure, they will overcome. They need a spirituality that enables them to see and appreciate the presence of God in the ordinary of life and to gain a new sense of what life is really about and how to contemplate and reflect on their experiences, to mine the treasures and to let go of the dead wood.

The church itself must reach out in friendship to the lost and lonely middle class, perhaps through small groups, Bible studies, support groups of all kinds, prayer groups, etc., in order to embody the kind of love that God offers in Jesus Christ. But we must also remind them of another deep message that they have the potential, the ability to transform society, the power to create order out of chaos. We need to join together to help each other work for justice, struggle against racism, sexism, agism, and for equal rights, protection of the environment, etc. It is in imitation of Jesus' own altruistic love for others that they may find true meaning and purpose in life. Promoting growth in brother/sister love in a diverse community and working together at a cause for the

common good is the Gospel at its best. (Source: Cynthia C. Datu, Middle Class Redemption.com)

Richard Rohr writes of three levels of social ministry.

- 1. “At the first level, we pick drowning people out of the swollen stream, dealing with the immediate social problems right in front of us: a man who comes to your door and says he is hungry, and you give him a sandwich or even invite him inside. These are hand on ministries, social service ministries, like the proverbial soup kitchen. Such works will always look rather generous, Christian and charitable and tend to be admired if not always imitated. This level of service does not take a lot of formal education, usually just a big heart and a ready gift of your time and often money. Those who are disabled or old to do hands on service, can still write letters to authorities or they can take as their personal mission to pray for a particular ministry of service.**
- 2. At the second level, there are ministries that either help people not to fall into the stream in the first place, or show them how to build their own canoe and to paddle well. These are ministries of education and healing. Most religious orders filled our country with primary schools and hospitals, universities and technical programs whereby we could help people who were going to fall into the stream, give them skills so they won't fall in, or show them survival skills if they ever did. These are ministries that empower you, and give you new visions and**

3. **possibilities for your own life, for your own dignity. There are now more forms of small or large social service agencies that help people get the skills of reading and math, computers, etc., to enable them to get jobs and independence.**

4. **The third level are ministries in building and maintaining the dam that will stop the stream from drowning people in the first place. This is the work of social advocacy, critiques of systems, organization, speeches, letter writing, boycotts and protest and resistance against all forms of organized injustice and deceit. This level surely demands the highest level of education and self-confidence. One has to know how to access the system, how the system works and how to speak the language and understand the maneuvers of those on the inside, to know how to motivate them to change the system.**

Each person must discern at what level they feel called to, have the gift for. Few can do all of these levels. We must do one or two things wholeheartedly: that is all God expects and all you can probably do well. We must use our different gifts to create a unity in the work of service and back one another up, without criticism or competition. When justice work is not charity, then it is not true justice. And when charity work does not promote justice, it is not finally charity.

If you are working on the third level, you won't win a lot of friends and you will have to be ready to bear a lot of criticism.

When you call the systems of this world into question in an honest and just way, the world will not like it. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. taught us that before you go out to witness for justice you had to make sure in your heart that you could love and respect those who disagreed with you. This demands much prayer. Beside social analysis, liberation theology and social critique we need contemplative prayer to keep the balance and to keep love and hope alive. (Source: Richard Rohr, A Lever and a Place to Stand, Hidden Spring, 2011, summary of pages 87-92)

Some questions for reflection:

Are we simply putting all our efforts and resources into merely alleviating suffering and not confronting the structural causes of suffering; merely using our efforts and resources to fulfill immediate needs of food, clothing, medicine and not confronting the structural, political, cultural causes why people do not have access to these basics of human life?

What am I learning by serving and working with others to better their lives? Do I learn about the struggle of ordinary people to make their way in the world? How much do the divisions of race, class, region, culture, education make us unable to comprehend or even be aware of one another? While we may share skills and knowledge with them, how much does your mind grow in response to their everyday experiences? What am I learning about people who are different from myself and how they regard me? How does

being with others who are dirt poor and without schooling help me to learn about my own assumptions, privileges, blind spots, purposes and limitations? Do I help someone just to please him or her or to get them to leave or just to have others look up to me? Am I willing to give another my time and energy to empower him or her to go a step beyond where they are. Do we know the effect our presence has on them? And the effect their presence has on us? Are you being served?