

THE APOSTOLATE OF SOCIAL SERVICE

FROM AMBIGUITY TO DISCOMFORT: THE UNEQUIVOCAL APOSTOLATE

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TO ENTER INTO a discussion of the apostolate of social service may seem at first sight to be entering into a discussion of the obvious. The history of social service is an account of the apostolic work of feeding the hungry, of housing the homeless, of healing the sick, of visiting the imprisoned, and of giving sanctuary to the oppressed. Most contemporary accounts of the development of the social services begin with a brief ritual acknowledgement of their origins in the charitable functions of organized christianity, especially in the work of the monasteries. This tale usually unfolds into a somewhat fuller account of the charitable responses made by the religious philanthropies of the nineteenth century to the problems occasioned by an emerging industrialism.¹ After which, so the story goes, religion leaves its charitable and merciful works in the far more capable hands of an increasingly compassionate State with an increasingly expert band of professional carers.

In general, it may be held that the response of the christian Churches to this fairy tale has been one of enfeebling acceptance. That acceptance has frequently led christian people to experience an alienation from their capacity to engage in corporal and spiritual works of mercy. It has led to a frustration that culminates in a despairing lack of confidence that there is anything practical left for christians to do. To some extent this can be seen in the role of confusion and deprivation that some priests and religious appear to experience. It can be seen in the way that laypeople often tend to leave the care of the needy to 'those who know better'. Compassion and mercy have become the prerogatives of the professionals. One writer puts it in this way:

More and more functions which used to be considered properly religious are taken over by government agencies or by private organizations without any definite religious affiliation. Although the churches continue

¹ See for example E. Younghusband, *Social Work and Social Change* (1966), pp 15ff; and K. Woodruffe, *From Charity to Social Work* (1962).

to run hospitals, schools and charitable societies of their own, they are faced with more and stiffer competition in these fields. Some feel that the sacred dimension of life is receding to the point of eventual non-existence.²

It is possible to discern three kinds of defence amongst christians against this loss of confidence in their capacity for social service. The first is an adaptation of the usual rationale for the existence of voluntary social agencies. It says that there will always be a place for voluntary response to *ad hoc* social problems, and that it must be accepted that these responses can later be permanently resourced and controlled by the State. The church charitable organization or voluntary group thus becomes a kind of sensor for the State, in quickly perceiving where the social costs of modern life may fall. The second kind of defence views the development of the public welfare services as evidence of the increasing humanity of society. A sign that the christian virtues of care and compassion are embedded in the structures of the welfare state and that the Church's humanizing mission is somehow carried on in this manner. The third category of defence is that which fully accepts the public and professional organization of social service activities. It then becomes the task of christians to equip themselves professionally and to be a christian 'presence' within the social services. It is not suggested that these defensive responses are without intrinsic goodness or truth in their own context. Indeed, Rahner would say that the welfare society creates 'the objective conditions in which an unrecognized grace can be embodied'.³ Even so, they remain adaptations and accommodations to the State's virtual monopoly and control of social service. In other words, the Church has lost an important initiative in an area of human activity which is an essential locus of its apostolic mission. The first defence relegates the social apostolate of the Church to a kind of gap-filling activity; the second provides a theological rationale for inactivity; the third displays a far too ready acceptance of the theoretical frameworks and operational techniques of conventional social work and counselling activities. This latter defence is by far the more serious in its implications, for it probably suggests not only an excessive anxiety to be accepted by the caring professions on their own technical ground, but also a failure to apply a radical theological critique. This may be so precisely because the 'theology of earthly realities' is barely in its initial stages.⁴

² Dulles, A.: *The dimensions of the Church* (1967), p 70.

³ Rahner, K.: *Theological Investigations*, vol x (1973), p 362.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p 356.

This brief analysis of the contemporary christian engagement in the work of the social services does not detract from the actual help that has been given to individual persons nor from the integrity of individual christian social workers and counsellors. However, the analysis does seem to suggest that the christian involvement has been of a kind that has unwittingly obscured the real issues facing a corporate apostolic mission to the social conditions that prevail in contemporary Britain.

The line of argument can usefully be developed by examining some aspects of social work, especially as it is the activity which articulates the citizen to so many facets of the social services. Social work has traditionally seen itself as concerned with human subjectivity, and as a carrier of compassionate concern for individuals in an increasingly uncaring and competitive society. This stress on individuality and compassion has been well expressed in classical social-work literature as a series of casework principles, such as acceptance without judgment, client self-determination, and the importance of feeling.⁵ These principles centre on the empathetic use of the relationship with the client as a person of human worth who must not be coerced into the treatment objectives. This work has generally been carried on in a medical and psychological framework as a kind of inward-looking interpretative relationship between the client and the social worker.⁶ It is the faith of the counsellors. A faith, as Halmos has remarked, in which there is a double vision in that the client at one and the same time is held to mean what he says but does not know what he means.⁷ It is a faith fraught with ambiguity.⁸

This view of social work has very largely prevailed in the professional training of social workers and others in the 'caring professions', despite some provision for community-work training.⁹ Social workers have been provided with a professional culture which somehow renders the awkward occupants of the world less awkward; with a body of knowledge which will ensure that the socially deviant and deprived stay within the institutional definition of reality.¹⁰ Such facts as poverty, truancy, theft, drunkenness, and the like are seen as merely presenting problems whose real and deep individual meaning is known by the

⁵ See for example Fr Biestek, *The casework relationship* (1961), and M. Ferrard and N. Hunnybun, *The caseworker's use of relationships* (1962).

⁶ Cf M. Ferrard and N. Hunnybun, *op. cit.*

⁷ Halmos, P.: *The faith of the counsellors* (1965), pp 160ff.

⁸ Pearson, G.: *The deviant imagination* (1975), pp 126ff.

⁹ P. Parsoloe et al., 'Social work as taught', in *New Society*, vol 35, no 700 (1976).

¹⁰ Bean, P.: *Rehabilitation and deviance* (1976), p 13.

expert carer, for he sees the world as it really is. Such an approach is dehumanizing because it denies the person's own sense of meaning.¹¹ As the king says in *Alice in Wonderland*, 'If there is no meaning in it, that saves the world a lot of trouble'. A saving of trouble because one does not have to take note of the challenge to our own realities.

It is the continuing crisis and ambiguity of social work, that, by stressing the individual and a way of understanding him largely derived from psychoanalysis, it has obscured the larger social dimension. It is ironic that the increasing attempts of clinical psychologists and social workers to be more equally involved in psychotherapy is in large measure the result of a more radical and humanistic psychology.¹² Although social work has experienced an underlying uneasiness about this ambiguity, it has still very largely failed to face up to the societal factors involved in human misery and need. In its theory and practice there is an almost total disjunction from the fundamental political and social issues involved in the eradication of social injustice and need. The 'psychiatric deluge', as it has been called, does not provide social work with an adequate equipment to reflect upon and articulate the relations of clients' problems to the conflicts and contradictions within the larger society. For so many people it has been a palliative, and a mechanism for binding them ever more closely to the prevailing arrangements of society.

It is endemic in a great deal of social-service work, christian or otherwise, that the client becomes *sui generis* the cause and consequence of his own ills. He has come to signify the maladies of society. This has exacerbated the ambiguity between viewing the client as someone to be appreciated and viewing him as someone to be corrected and controlled.¹³ It has very largely prevented social service workers from adequately accounting for the political and social implications of their world. In short, social work has lacked a larger perspective and a reflexive critique of praxis. To the extent that christians have seen their social work in this way, so also have they emasculated their capacity for carrying through a coherent and radical apostolate.

Recent years have witnessed the development of a more radical stance in social work which has provided to social workers an explicit reflexive critique.¹⁴ This critique has rendered more explicit the ways

¹¹ Szasz, T.: *The manufacture of madness* (1971), p 123.

¹² Bull, Br.: *psych. Soc* 28 (1975), pp 10-21.

¹³ Matza, D., *Becoming deviant* (1969), develops this idea in a sensitive way.

¹⁴ For an interesting account of this view, see R. Bailey and M. Brake (eds), *Radical Social Work* (1975).

in which the social services have not provided equalities of opportunity, nor produced equalities of result. It has rendered more explicit the ways in which social-work techniques contribute to controlling and restraining the poor, the oppressed, the disaffected and the useless.¹⁵ This radical school of thought argues that the conceptual categories of social workers in labelling certain groups of persons as social problems defuses them of their political implications. A defusing which is possible because the definition of a social problem is related to agglomerates of personal pathologies rather than to the power of structures of society. To prevent a personal recognition of immiserization is to prevent an active personal involvement in the social and political struggle to eliminate the conditions of misery. In this view the welfare state 'is nothing more or less than officially recognized pauperism . . . State charity is especially illustrative of the relations of capitalist exploitation, of the brutal, misanthropic nature of capitalism, of the hypocrisy prevailing in capitalist society'.¹⁶ Radical social workers would thus deny the received casework and counselling techniques and replace them by an advocacy on behalf of the client.¹⁷ The social worker will thus act as a catalyst to the client's own political involvement in changing the conditions of which both he and the social workers are victims. The emotional bonds of the casework relationship are replaced by the social solidarity inherent in the common struggle. Those who adopt this stance see themselves as restoring to the client his dignity as an agent of his own destiny. They have helped to free him from the essentially false and stigmatizing client role. They seek to expose the place of institutionalized and professionalized social work in bolstering up an unjust society. This is in clear distinction to those social workers who espouse 'a group of psychological theories which would appear to place severe limitations on the capacity of individuals to change'.¹⁸ However, it must not be overlooked that there is within psychology the stirrings of a more existential and reflexive approach: an attempt to counteract the freudian denial of the terms in which individuals make sense of their lives.¹⁹ It is no accident that many of those committed to the approach of radical social work are marxists. After all, theirs is

¹⁵ Cf V. George and P. Wilding, *Ideology and Social Welfare* (1976), pp 85ff.

¹⁶ Cf I. Nazarenko, 'The Welfare State — fiction and facts', in *International Affairs* (May 1962), pp 39-45.

¹⁷ Cf G. Mungham and P. Thomas, 'Lay Advocacy', in *New Society*, vol 27, no 587 (1974).

¹⁸ Cf N. Timms, *Social Casework* (1964), p 61.

¹⁹ Interesting examples of this approach are P. Salmon, *A psychology of personal growth*, and G. Kelly, *Psychology of personal constructs*.

a commitment that has not lost sight of its perspective and a commitment that provides a well-worked critique of praxis. Suenens has noted that point well:

Marx's analysis and appreciation of the significance of (the Industrial Revolution) preceded any significant papal document on the same subject by nearly a century. One of our difficulties is that we seem always to be present to life in a negative way.²⁰

Mainstream social work defends itself by saying that the radical stance overlooks the day by day 'moral hustle' in social work. The daily grind of caring for the immediate needs of clients.²¹ There is truth in this, but it remains, so often, a piecemeal, first-aid operation. It defends itself by criticizing the imprecision of the advocacy role and the lack of a worked-out technique. It must be conceded that the new radical stance is weak in praxis and has a tendency to view the client as a pawn in the larger struggle — it is a commitment to the coming kingdom. Yet it has the commitment of perspective and a method of critique lacking in conventional social work. It is contended here that the Church, in its participation in social service activities, has too readily assimilated the theoretical bases of conventional social-work practice. By doing so it seems to have espoused a particular deterministic view of behaviour which, when set in the larger perspective, is man-denying and underpinning of social injustice. It is further contended that the urgent task of apostolic mission is to restore a radically christian perspective to caring activities, and to provide an effective theological critique of social service. An unrecollected concern with the daily particulars of care and compassion can obscure the Good News and the building of the Kingdom . . . 'by cultivating the earth we prepare the material of the celestial realm'.²² We need a view of heaven.

It is of considerable significance to the present discussion that christians have often developed their most effective social-service apostolate in relation to 'marginal people' — the so-called misfits of society. A variety of projects directed to the needs of tramps, vagrants, the homeless, ex-prisoners, the strangers in the city, and strange people, have frequently been explicitly christian in their orientation and commitment. They can, of course, be interpreted in terms of the first kind of defence mentioned earlier. The more so as they lie low in the

²⁰ A. Ramsey and L. Suenens, *The future of the Christian Church* (1970), p 70.

²¹ Cf H. Perlman, in G. Parker (ed.), *Casework within Social work* (1973), p 9.

²² *Gaudium et Spes*, 38.

order of priority of public-welfare provision. Rahner would class this kind of work as that which is christian *per se* because it is a specific work of love grounded in faith and hope.²³ The significance of these enterprises lies especially in their openness and in their detachment from institutional and professional controls. It is through these very qualities of christian commitment, openness and detachment, that they hold the key to the development of a reflexive and critical concept of apostolic mission through social service. Indeed these kinds of social work often have the quality of a gift relationship whereby the bringing of christian love and acceptance is returned by a recognition of the Lord. Szasz makes the interesting observation that in St Mark's gospel the first person to recognize Jesus's true identity was a 'madman'.²⁴ It is a relationship of embracing significance with a capacity for creating community. It stands in such opposition to the anonymous and impersonal gift relationships of the social services that it has a very great christian significance.²⁵

It can be the false death of such a project that it becomes permanently resourced and thereby controlled by the public welfare agencies. This is often the aim of the 'stop-gap' approach. It is a death without a resurrection. It can be the real death of such a project when it is no longer used and is disbanded — it met the need when it arose and that is all that matters. There is no professional entrenchment in the problem. The enterprise has become kenotic in the sense of the Cross.²⁶ Like missionary structures, these enterprises have an added-on and experimental quality; of their very essence they forego the power of professionalism and the power of social control inherent in public welfare provision. It is precisely because they can lack articulation to the power and structure of society that they can display the power of the Gospel through their spontaneous and efficient works of mercy.

The prayer and reflection inherent in this mode of christian social work is an historical act that takes place in the Way. It points the way to a more open concept of social service which presupposes a more open notion of the Church. The sadness of the Church's social-service provisions is that they so clearly mirror the provisions and techniques

²³ Rahner, K.: *Theological Investigations*, vol x (1973), p 366.

²⁴ Szasz, T.: *The manufacture of madness* (1971), pp 121ff.

²⁵ Levi-Strauss, E.: *The elementary structure of kinship* (1969), pp 52ff. There is a very sensitive application of this idea to the modern social services in R. Titmuss, *The gift relationship* (1970), pp 70ff.

²⁶ For an interesting discussion of the idea of *kenosis* in relation to the Church and the world, see R. Adolfs, *The grave of God* (1967), ch 4.

of the social services of the State which, in turn, reflect the prevailing power relations of society. To start with an open notion of the Church, rather than with a prior definition, means to work within the hope that where two or three are gathered the Church will happen; it is to work within the promise of Christ's freedom. Gutierrez makes the point well when he says that 'communion with the Lord inescapably means a christian life centred round a concrete and creative commitment of service to others'.²⁷

It is precisely the characteristic of conventional social work and its administration that a large measure of freedom in response is lacking. It has also been a characteristic of conventional religious charity that it is restricted by its excessive attempt to operate within the 'social principles of the Church'.

Free from any excessive calculation (of her own social principles) she can develop initiatives without check or hindrance, give free rein to creative imagination and to the boldness of love, recognize and seize upon tasks with shining eyes and ready heart, tasks which no one else has yet recognized and undertaken.²⁸

The Church's accommodation to a given set of professional assumptions and treatment-concepts militates against the possibility of a theologically reflexive critique. It is not at all certain in the area of social service that a professional formation is the *sine qua non* of apostolic activity. It is not being suggested that the Church should concentrate its effort solely on marginal people, but rather that this kind of work has pointed the way to a truly radical christian engagement in the social and political struggle. 'Only in this way does she also avoid becoming the last religion of our completely secularized society: a religion entrusted indeed with certain therapeutic functions for the individual, but no longer with any power to criticize society'.²⁹ It then becomes possible to act on the manifesto for a christian apostolate of social service that Jesus himself read out in the synagogue at Nazareth:

He has sent me to announce good news to the poor,
To proclaim release for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind;
To let the broken victims go free,
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.³⁰

²⁷ Gutierrez, G.: *A theology of liberation* (1973), ch 10.

²⁸ Rahner, K.: *Theological Investigations*, vol x (1973), p 361.

²⁹ Garaudy, R.: *From anathema to dialogue* (1967), p 125. (Garaudy is citing J, Metz.)

³⁰ Lk 4, 18.

This manifesto means not only a mission to the individual members of society but a mission to society itself. Much christian social work has been one-sided and highly restrictive in its use of the casework and counselling model. Consequently, it has lost sight of its broader and more fundamental mission. Guardini comments that the work of healing can only take place in the confidence of mission; in the confidence of men and women who are sent by God.³¹ It is a matter for careful thought that the beginnings of a recovery of perspective and reflection in social work are to be found in the marxist radical stance. Surely our social apostolate involves proclaiming the 'year of the Lord's favour'. We can hardly do that unless there is significant room for theological reflection and criticism of our social-work enterprises. Then perhaps we will be less worried whether there is any difference between christian social work and other social work, because like Jesus 'we encounter a God who discloses himself through activities that threaten the *status quo*'.³²

There is an anxiety about our clinging to the normative forms of social service which inhibits our capacity to make a spontaneous christian response to the needs of our neighbours. Our anxiety to establish an impeccable professionalism has obstructed our view of man as our neighbour. We have objectivized him as a client. Our stress on individual casework and marginal problems can deflect us from the task of building a world of justice and love. We are paralysed in the security of our social-service structures.

Surely the call to be a servant Church is a call to insecurity. It is a call not to bemoan change but to participate in change, strong in the permanence of the gospel manifesto. These are uneasy and uncomfortable implications, but it was never guaranteed that to draw the implications of theological reflection and prayer would be otherwise. To continue comfortably and uncritically in the way of conventional social work, in the certainty of professional formation, is to lose sight of the revolutionary implications of the Church's mission. 'The men who have made trouble all over the world have now come here'.³³ Hardly a characteristic of the apostolate in our country at the present time! If we were like Paul and Silas, then we might not let the real role of revolutionary go to others by default. A very distinguished teacher of social work remarked that social work

³¹ Guardini, R.: *The Lord* (1956), p 63.

³² Cf H. Cox, in *God's revolution and man's responsibility* (1965), p 103.

³³ Acts 17, 6.

belongs wherever it has the ability to contribute to man's awakening. This you may feel, and rightly feel, is a very beautiful thought, you may remember the old saying about bringing the sleeping Christ in man to life. But remember too how dangerous that is. We are playing with fire whenever we help people to become more alive, so do not let us have any allusions of soft comfort, for this venture brings not peace but a sword.⁸⁴

We will hardly alleviate the real conditions of the poor and the deprived, the lonely and the strange, the oppressed, unless we get into their lives and participate in their struggles. The Church is so comfortable in its accommodations to the welfare state that perhaps it cannot see the real condition of the people at its door. We have bridled our commitment in the safety of a professional apostolate. It is the power of professionalism that we cannot see that we do not see.

The view is firmly offered that what is known as in-depth casework is really on-surface casework so far as understanding man's place in the world is concerned. It denies the political realities behind the social deprivations experienced by so many of our fellow citizens. Effective social service means acting as men and women who are sent with a message. Bonhoeffer had no doubt that we should get out and obey Christ, for in that way we reflect on our mission by doing it. To reject our comfortable professionalism is to suffer. It does make the world awkward. To be at the place of conflict is to be threatened by it; it is also to be at the place of greatest need.

It is in such a life that we throw ourselves utterly in the arms of God and participate in his sufferings in the world and watch with Christ in Gethsemane. That is faith, that is metanoia, and that is what makes a man and a christian.⁸⁵ And that is why it may be held that *caritas* is constrained by the boundaries of professionalism in social service. For in its lack of sense of God's purpose in the world, and in its bondage to a highly particular form of meaning, it denies the root-realities of the human condition of those it proposes to help.

⁸⁴ Younghusband, E.: *Social work and social change* (1964), p 115.

⁸⁵ Bonhoeffer, D.: *Letters and papers from prison* (1967), p 169.