

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

February 28, 2011 at 9:28am

The poor need justice, not charity

by Rich Heffern

Eco Catholic

My wife's career for many years was in social work. Among other jobs, she staffed a downtown day center for the homeless and later ran an inner-city food pantry. She finally retired from such endeavors, weary of what she called the "charity game."

At the pantry, for example, her clients, most of whom were working but employed at minimum-wage jobs, ran a bureaucratic gauntlet that demanded proof of income, expenditure records and other documentation before they could receive a couple of bags of macaroni and cheese dinners, a jar of peanut butter, cans of corn and peas and maybe, if they were lucky, a frozen chicken.

The documentation, of course, was to allay concerns that someone might be scamming the system out of a few bags of stale, donated food.

In the 1980s, President Reagan cited a Chicago "welfare queen" who had ripped off \$150,000 from the government, using 80 aliases, 30 addresses, a dozen social security cards and four fictional dead husbands. The country was outraged; Reagan dutifully promised to roll back welfare, and ever since, the "welfare queen" driving her Cadillac has been a key figure in American political folklore.

At the time, journalists searched for this welfare cheat in the hopes of interviewing her, and discovered that she did not even exist.

The myth served its purpose, diverting attention from insider traders in their limousines to Cadillac-driving, inner-city chiselers, even though the former were stealing amounts far beyond the ambitions of a few poor people with cheating on their mind. In the early 1990s President George H.W. Bush bailed out the Savings and Loan industry with \$500 billion of taxpayer money, enough to fund 20 years of federal welfare programs. The federal budget proposed for this year continues the slashing of efforts to combat

poverty.

The mother of all corporate welfare recipients, Archer Daniels Midland Corporation, has received billions in recent years. ADM is well known to viewers of news programs as the "supermarket to the world," but a more apt name might be "outstanding corporate welfare queen." ADM is a big agribusiness that receives a motor fuels tax exemption for ethanol, a gasoline additive. ADM controls half the market for ethanol, and thus benefits from the tax break far more than any other company. ADM donated \$700,000 to political campaigns in one recent year, which may help explain its favored status.

But ADM isn't the only wealthy agribusiness to benefit from corporate welfare. The U.S. Department of Agriculture admits that two thirds of federal farm subsidies go to the richest 15 percent of agricultural enterprises, not small family farms with a garden and chicken coop out back.

What the poor need is not charity, but justice. The poor deserve not to be poor. The basic means necessary to secure quality of opportunity are owed to the poor in the name of justice. They should not be forced to feel grateful to their deliverers.

What's more, faith-based organizations probably cannot solve wide, ingrained social problems like the lack of decent education, child and health care provided to the poor. Churches are usually in the business of either proselytizing or giving direct aid to their own members or neighborhoods. Systemic change is what is needed.

The teaching of "justice, not charity" is deeply rooted in the Catholic tradition and Christian scripture.

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Pope John Paul II has written: "Every citizen also has the responsibility to work to secure justice and human rights, through an organized social response. In the words of Pius XI, "Charity will never be true charity unless it takes justice into account." Let no one attempt with small gifts of charity to exempt himself from the great duties imposed by justice." The guaranteeing of basic justice for all is not an optional expression of largesse but an inescapable duty for the whole of society."

We are duty-bound as Catholics to inaugurate action directed at the root causes of social justice, activity that promotes social change in institutions, steps that respond to long-term needs. Instead of just dropping a few cans of tuna into a pantry collection box, we also need to participate in legislative advocacy, changing corporate policies or practices, congregation-based community organizing "a whole array of efforts that make a real difference in the lives of the poor and needy.

Seeking justice is part of the "Great Work" that Fr. Thomas Berry wrote about.

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