

Avoiding 'narcisschism' in service



Addressing the deep divisions in our country and our Church was the focus of a recent gathering of Catholic leaders in Washington, D.C. Hosted by The Initiative for Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University, the invitation-only event brought together prominent Catholics from across the ideological divide and gave participants a chance to pray and worship together, as well as debate and discuss the many issues that separate us.

A major theme of the meeting was how Catholic Social Teaching (CST) could both address social problems and heal divisions within the Church. CST represents the body of Church teachings that offer Christians guidance for how to respond to social problems like life issues, immigration, poverty and economic injustice.

Being prophetic

One of the roundtable discussions I participated in explored questions such as, "Why does CST exist and what does it compel us to do?" As the discussion unfolded, it became clear that at least one very important point about CST is often lost even on its practitioners: Namely, Catholic Social Teaching isn't primarily about solving social problems. Instead, it's meant to teach us how to be prophetic in the face of social problems. What does that mean?

CST is different from social work in that social work is concerned with solving a problems in the most legal and expedient way possible. CST, by contrast, is about being prophetic; that is, it's about addressing problems in a manner that asserts the God-given dignity of the person being served

and invites the world into a deeper relationship with Christ.

It's easy to forget this. The more we get involved in some kind of ministry or charity work, the more we tend to get caught up in the feeling that, "This problem is terrible! I must do something about it now!" We can, understandably, get so caught up in the pain around us, so moved to do something, that instead of remembering to step back and ask God, "How can I respond to this problem in a manner that glorifies you?" we wonder, "How can I fix this as quickly as possible so I don't have to feel bad anymore?"

Self-centered service

Our desire to serve others quickly becomes focused on doing things that make us feel better, whether or not those actions actually provide people with an authentic encounter with Christ (rather than an encounter with a savior who, coincidentally, happens to look just like me).

When we give into this temptation, despite our intention to be peacemakers, we actually exacerbate the divisions we are hoping to cure. We commit what one participant (who asked not to be named) called "narcisschism." Although narcisschism begins with a genuine Christian impulse to serve others, it ultimately creates serious conflict in the Church.

If I am a narcisschist, despite what I may tell myself, I'm simply not as interested in bringing Christ (as the Church has encountered him) to the world through loving service. I'm much more interested in finding solutions to a problem that matters to me in a way that appeals to me.

When we give into narcisschism, our compassion is real, even inspired, but our focus is flawed. We become all too happy to throw both natural and supernatural truths under the bus if these inconvenient realities dare to complicate my desire to end the problem that occupies my attention.

Narcissists are often celebrated because they often take big risks and make grand gestures that really do call our attention to important issues. But their actions ultimately create political and religious division because people end up arguing over the narcissist's personality and behavior, instead of actually being inspired to address a problem in a faithful, effective way.

Humble response

Being prophetic in the face of social problems – as CST calls us to do – doesn't just require us to ask, "How can I make this problem go away in a manner that makes sense to me?" It demands that we wrestle with the question, "How can I respond to this problem in a way that reflects the 2,000-year-long conversation the Church has been having about who Christ is and what being his disciple really means?"

If we want to end division in the Church, especially in light of the social problems every Christian must be concerned with, we need to renounce narcissism. We must remember John the Baptist's words: "He must increase; I must decrease" (Jn 3:30).

We must remember that our mission as Christians isn't to foment arguments about how to solve particular social problems but to challenge each other to be Christ in the presence of those problems. If we can do this, new, creative, godly solutions will emerge as a result of our Christian witness – instead of in spite of it.

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