

Two Kinds of Charity

Natalie Carnes & Jonathan Tran,
Baylor University

In a world of poverty, what does the Gospel require of those of us who call ourselves Christians? Two immediate options arise, and we want to name them so we can take them off the table. First, we could choose to do nothing. I could choose to turn my head the other way, bury it in the sand of my nicely manicured suburban lawn, barricade myself from the world's desperation and figure out how to hole up in some version of the gated community and pretend nothing's wrong. This is a wildly popular option among both poor and rich alike. Another option: we might try to figure out how to get rich off the desperation. I could look around at the world in all its desperation and say, "How can I make money off of that?" As crude and even rude as that sounds, it is one very attractive way to go. More people are asking, "How can I get rich off the desperation" than "How do I serve the desperate?" Since those two options are not viable for those who seek to follow Jesus, let's take them off the table.

So let's say we go the way of discipleship as the church has traditionally understood it, then, what would be demanded of us? In the following, we offer two answers to this question and point to the one we think must be the answer for those who take seriously Jesus' Lordship on the amazingly important issue of what Christ described as "doing for the least of these." (Matthew 25:44-46)

Worldly Charity

The first option we will call "worldly

charity." By calling it worldly charity, we do not mean to belittle this kind of charity. We do not mean "worldly" as in "sinful". We simply mean charity according to the world; worldly charity may be worldly, but, for us Americans, it is charity nonetheless. Rather than belittle worldly charity we mean to take it as seriously as possible. The only reason we call it "worldly" is that: 1) It is what most people in America take to be charity, and 2) It is a model of goodness based on American ideals, not a model of goodness based on what the church is called to. The fact that most Christians view worldly charity as appropriately Christian charity tells us everything we need to know about how confused we Christians are on this question. (How readily American Christians replace "Christian" with "American!") The fact that we Christians tend to applaud this kind of charity, that we tend to aspire to it, shows that we are worldly, if by "worldly" we mean resembling, not distinguishable from, everybody else in the world, including those who do not consider themselves Christians.

A telling example of worldly charity ran on a Christian publication recently. On the cover of this particular publication is the photo of a young Caucasian woman with two jars of coins, a smile that could light up a room, and a headline lauding her charity. There is no better way to get at this understanding of charity than to quote the article, which is not very long. Note that the reason this story is on the cover of a Christian publication is because it is largely what we Christians tend to take to be the model for how we are to relate to the poor. Not only do we have a model of charity here, this model is being held up as an example of what Jesus calls us to:

Bethany Jones led an effort that raised more than \$100 in a single day for two unemployed men whom

she and a group of friends met in a Wendy's restaurant parking lot a few weeks ago.

Although the group hasn't yet decided exactly what resources it will purchase with the money raised, Jones said she wants to use it to help the two re-enter the workplace and establish a stable source of income, rather than spending it to satisfy their immediate needs.

"I really have emphasized wanting to get them support so they can stand independently," Jones said, pointing out it was a difficult decision to avoid addressing their short-term needs. "If there's any way for them to have some stable income by the time I move out of the city, I would be really happy."

Jones met the two men after she attended a Christian worship conference that inspired her to reach out to the less fortunate.

"At the beginning of the year I went to the conference, and my real focus was to live like Jesus did in a really practical way," Jones said. "One of the big things that I had been thinking about a lot was serving the poor."

Jones said she felt compelled to provide extra jackets to needful strangers, "We look at our closets and we see all these clothes that are not being used..." Jones later came up with the idea to hold a coin drive to raise money for them. "I guess my idea initially was if we raised enough money maybe we could help them," she said. "I was thinking to help them get out of that house and that we could help them get a deposit on an apartment. ... As I was talking to them they said they preferred to stay there ... and I didn't think that was going to be best for them."

Jones's fundraising efforts consisted of asking fellow members of her

life group and church to contribute pocket change toward their efforts. Instead of just coins, she said, many life group members gave larger donations.

Fellow life group member Robert Smith said the efforts to help others made him and the rest of the group stronger in their Christian faith.

"Once you step out and love someone who really needs it, you grow so much," Smith said. "You really feel like you're living for a purpose, and the purpose is to give glory to God."

(We have generalized names and details and omitted the title of this publication because this story is indicative of so many instances of what we are calling worldly charity and the positive attention it draws.)

Now we could start by criticizing this picture, but we want instead to take it seriously as a possibility for Christian discipleship. After all, Jones names Jesus as her inspiration and it is her desire "to live like Jesus did in a really practical way" and her Christian faith was made stronger by the experience. If we were to imagine discipleship like this then what would it involve? In examining this example, we come face-to-face with the prevailing understanding of what charity is, what faithfulness is, what loving the poor is.

If this is a picture of worldly charity, then what does worldly charity require of us? First, it requires that we see the poor as worthy of moral consideration. It requires that we think of the presence of the poor as something worth thinking about, not something we can easily disregard. This picture of charity doesn't allow us to go to Wendy's without taking into consideration the homeless man sitting in front of Wendy's. When we see poor people, we need to take notice.

Second, it requires that we do something. Our noticing someone is our noticing that we need to do something in regards to that person. It requires that we involve ourselves in that person's story, which presumes that person has a story. Jones, in this story, helps us to humanize the person, as a person in need who comes across our path and so intersects with our lives.

Next, it requires that the something we do is something helpful, practical, something like giving money for rent, getting a jacket for the cold. Worldly charity doesn't ask for cheap sentimentalities, serving in principle or in the abstract. Worldly charity isn't limited to telling poor folks Jesus loves them, but rather requires great lengths, that you show them through your actions, through your money, your jacket, your effort, that Jesus loves them.

Fourth, this helpful and practical something you do, this service to the poor, will require something of you. In this story, this woman gives of her time (that could otherwise be spent working), her energy (that could otherwise be used at her church), her attention (where she could otherwise be watching television), and of course her money (which she could otherwise use). In giving of her time, her energy, her attention, and her money, she gives.

Fifth, it requires that you gather and encourage others to participate in helping the poor. Worldly charity necessitates that you see the problem as requiring others to join in, and so you will have to mobilize (as she does with her life group and church) group action. The article talks about a larger purpose, and so helping this person is a collective enterprise, her and her friends doing this thing together.

Sixth, it requires that you see the

problem as systemic. In this case, Jones recognizes these two men need jobs, need work, have needs beyond the "immediate" needs they are asking for; and so helping them will require some recognition of their needs beyond those immediate needs. In this article, it means helping them get jobs, which necessitates their getting cell phones, which Jones and her friends help arrange: "I really have emphasized wanting to get them support so they can stand independently," Jones says, admitting that it was a difficult decision to avoid addressing only short-term needs. "If there's any way for them to have some stable income by the time I move out of the city, I would be really happy." And by this she shows she understands that the problem is bigger than this encounter outside Wendy's.

Finally, worldly charity requires and results in self-examination: How am I living a purpose-driven life? Do I need all my coins? Do I need jackets I don't use? What does it mean to really help someone? What would Jesus do? The ultimate benefit here is not for the two homeless men, but more so how the two homeless men benefit us, the rich person, toward self-realization, self-actualization, deepening of one's relationship with God. Worldly charity is part of one's bigger personal journey toward goodness.

As a picture of what it means to relate to the poor, worldly charity is pretty intense; it requires a lot of us. We can say as this publication was obviously saying by featuring this story so prominently, that worldly charity is laudable; it is commendable. We can say that if everyone lived like Bethany Jones, the world would be a better place; or at least we can say that even though not that many people regularly act like Jones, people should act like her.

We can also say that many of us have had situations just like the one

Jones faced outside Wendy's, and many of us have acted commendably, just like Jones. And when we volunteer worldly charity, many of us feel good about it. In the cases I don't give away my jar of coins, because I'm too selfish, or too rushed or too scared, or whatever, still I think I should.

And finally we should observe that if you live like this, if much of your life looks a lot like worldly charity as expressed in this article, you're bound

This picture of charity doesn't allow us to go to Wendy's without taking into consideration the homeless man sitting in front of Wendy's. When we see poor people, we need to take notice.

to get on a few covers. You're bound to be applauded, and esteemed and held up as exemplary. You'll be seen as a model for what charity and even Christian faithfulness looks like.

And this is important. Why? Because worldly charity requires, as we said, sacrifices, and we are a people who need our sacrifices noticed, applauded, and even rewarded. Having our worldly charity lauded encourages us toward greater worldly charity.

All this makes worldly charity look really good. But is it Christian? There is no doubt that it involves giving of ourselves, that it is moral, that it's of benefit to ourselves and others, that it is worthy of moral praise. (It is after all on the cover of a Christian publication.) But is it Christian? Well, we won't know until we unpack what Christ requires on these matters. We won't know what following Jesus is like until we turn our attention to Jesus and examine his life.

Even before we do that though, we can already get a sense of the things worldly charity isn't asking of us, the sacrifices it does not require, the

picture of goodness it isn't pushing. Worldly charity requires sacrifice, but not much sacrifice, sacrifice but not self-sacrifice, not sacrifice of our selves. Worldly charity allows us to keep ourselves; it allows us to keep our lives as is; to, in the encounter with the poor, keep our lives intact. So in this case, Jones gives away coins, not her bank account; she does not do as the Good Samaritan who says to the innkeeper, "Here's access to my money, take care of him, give him whatever he needs, whatever it takes" (Luke 10:35). She gives coins. Her stuff remains hers. She helps these people, on the way to whatever else she was doing, to wherever else she is going; her well-laid plans remain the same. Remember, she says, "If there's any way for them to have some stable income by the time I move out of the city, I would be really happy" such that the goal is that, by the time she moves, they will have jobs—what is assured in this equation is that she will move, not that they will have jobs. The non-negotiable is her future, not theirs. It is an entirely different thing if she says, "I will not move, I will not leave the city, until these men have jobs. So deplorable is this injustice, so great their need, that I will tie my fortune to theirs."

The second is embedded in the first: Worldly charity requires we have compassion for the poor, but that compassion cannot overwhelm us. This is a basic principle of capitalism as Adam Smith devised it. It was not that Adam Smith did not have compassion for the poor or that market capitalism doesn't allow for compassion and care for the poor. It does; it's just that compassion is granted its place and cannot overwhelm the system. The system is to stimulate an economy that will first make us prosperous and secondly take care of the poor; but notice, there can be no taking care of the poor, the thinking goes, if there are no rich, if the poor are allowed to overwhelm and

undermine the system. The poor are thought about but as an afterthought. Giving to the poor our coins is the logical conclusion of the system we live in; there is nothing radical about it, only the natural result of lives of excess. Our system produces excess, excess riches and excess poverty, and those with excess riches should give of their excess. But never should such giving be done in a way that jeopardizes the system that produces riches.

A third implication: Worldly charity doesn't ask you to live differently than the world. It encourages you to live in and of the world, to do as the world does. We know worldly charity is extolled in this world; that's why instances of it end up on magazines and newspaper headlines. We hear stories all the time of worldly charity in all the ways we've just described, and those stories are almost always paired with adulation, extolling the virtues of worldly charity. To live this way allows you to live with the grain of the world.

And this relates to the next suggestion: Worldly charity assumes God is on our side, the side of the rich. God is the inspiration for the rich to do good things with their riches. We do these things because we want to be like God, assuming God is like us... affluent and able to give away God's stuff. We do these things because it strengthens a relationship with God which we can be certain of, even in the midst of our riches. Worldly charity assumes God is not offended by our riches, that God is happy to be in company of our money. It assumes God does not mind sharing Lordship with mammon. The poor are the godless and what we do is bring God to them by bringing our money to them. This isn't to say we don't have anything to learn from the poor, but we aren't gonna' get God from them; their god is untrustworthy. How do we know? Because they are poor. If their god were trustworthy, they

would be like us: that is to say rich.

This feeds a final implication: Even though it produces poor people, the larger system we live in is just and should be promoted, and we promote this system to a significant degree by trying to get the poor involved in it. Worldly charity assumes that the systems of market capitalism and its global spread over the earth are fundamentally sound and morally beneficial and the best thing we can do for the poor is incorporate them in its infrastructure. That's why it's so important to get these two homeless men phones so they can get jobs, because if we can get them to be participants, not just recipients, they will lead productive lives, furthering the system. They, we think, want to be just like us -- rich. We help the homeless person because we see in him a rich person trying to get out, and it is our job to help that happen. Never is the justice of the system—the meritocracy that requires some to be poor and some to be rich, that encourages consumerism, hoarding, humiliating disparity between rich and poor—put into question. The poor person we encounter is not meant to force the question, “What is wrong with this world that she has to live like that?”

We are not saying that worldly charity is not good. It is good. We just don't know that it's particularly Christian. Nor are we saying people shouldn't commit to acts of worldly charity. As we said, the world would be a better place if more people did. We are saying that when we do worldly charity, we should not have overmuch confidence that what we are doing is Christian.

Christian Charity

Worldly charity requires sacrifice but not deep sacrifice; compassion, but not overwhelming compassion; a global consideration of poverty with out a global indictment of systems

that create poverty. Worldly charity allows us to believe that God is on the side of the rich and that we can continue living in the same general patterns that we have always lived.

But as Christians, we are not called to worldly charity but to Christian charity. The difference that “Christian” makes is illumined by a character in Victor Hugo’s novel of revolutionary France, *Les Misérables*.

The character is a minor one, a bishop who is serving a church seen as out of touch with the life of the common people. Soon after he assumes his post as bishop, the bishop realizes that his palace is adjoined to an overcrowded hospital, which has barely enough room for the 26 beds it contains.

After visiting the hospital, the bishop insists that there has been a mistake: The sick must have his palace, and he will live in the small hospital. So against protests that a bishop cannot possibly entertain and fulfill his duties as bishop in such a small and modest place, he moves into the hospital.

Then he draws up his budget.

Bishops, being prelates of the state, did pretty well for themselves in eighteenth-century France. The bishop in our story made £15,000, equivalent to about \$285,000 today. Yet he gave away everything but £1,000. That means he gives away 93% of his salary, or about \$265,000, so that he lives on \$20,000. Yet this is not a worldly charity, but a Christian one, and so goes even further. After giving away almost all of his salary, he takes the money allotted to him for travel expenses, and he gives it all away. All this charity attracts others. Learning to see him as a trustworthy man, people entrust him with more and more money. And he simply gives more and more away. Victor Hugo describes it like this, “Like water on dry soil; no matter how much money he received, he never had any.”

When the bishop visits the villages in his see, he walks or goes by donkey since he has given away his travel funds. And rather than preach at people, he talks to them, holding up to them the examples of their neighbors. “Look at the people of your neighboring village! They have given to the poor, the widows and the orphans the right to have their meadows mown three days before everyone else. They rebuild their houses for them freely when they are ruined.” It is always the justice and righteousness of neighbors, never of himself, that the bishop elevates. He ends up on no local newspapers. If people ask about him, he points to others.

The tiniest details of the bishop’s life are described. There is a whole chapter devoted to the way the bishop wears his robes for too long and has to conceal its shabbiness with a cloak. As his clothes are shabby and uncomfortable, his meals are modest, even meager. Unless there is a guest to entertain, he eats boiled vegetable-and-oil soup. He gives all excess away to the poor, and they love him --love that draws him into yet more giving.

But not everyone loves the bishop. The rich find him off-putting. It is rumored that at one rich person’s house, he remarked, “What beautiful clocks! What beautiful carpets! What beautiful dishes! They must be a great trouble. I would not have all those unnecessary objects, crying incessantly in my ears: ‘There are people who are hungry! There are people who are cold! There are poor people! There are poor people!’” He got an early ride home from that party.

The bishop cannot quite give away All his excess. There is one luxury that the bishop indulges. He has six silver knives and forks and a silver soup-ladle and two large candlesticks, which he has inherited from a great-aunt. He cannot seem to give them away. And he says more than once, “I

find it difficult to give up eating from silver dishes.” And so he eats his meager meals in his modest home on fine silver. It is his one luxury.

This bishop represents for Victor Hugo something more than worldly charity. The bishop, after all, is a Christian figure who constantly talks about his life in terms of the gifts of God and Christ. The bishop, that is, thinks of all his possessions as gifts from God, gifts with which he is entrusted to give to others. They are not his possessions (lest they come to possess him), but gifts to be held as they are received, with open hands. His charity stems directly from his understandings of God’s charity to him. So out of this charity, the bishop gives up his nice beautiful home for a small one, eats a simple daily diet, wears shabby clothes, and renounces what is due him.

The bishop, in these ways, models a form of Christian charity deep within the Christian tradition. It is a form of charity that recognizes the common gift of God’s creation, which understands that apart from God, we have nothing; we quite literally are nothing. One response to this common gift is a saying in the Christian tradition that has been largely forgotten: “In need all things are common.” What that means is that the hungry have a proper claim to the excesses of the rich.

Worldly charity allows us to believe that God is on the side of the rich and that we can continue living in the same general patterns that we have always lived.

It is not the privilege of the poor to receive from those better off, but their right to demand from their wealthier Christian brothers and sisters. To give away riches is a Christian obligation. And the charitable Christian is the one who can hear the cries from her

items of luxury, “There are poor people! There are poor people!” Let the one who has ears to hear, hear from one’s cars, one’s gadgets, one’s savings and investments: “There are poor people! There are poor people!”

Back to our bishop. On the doorstep of this charitable man’s home arrives the novel’s hero: Jean Valjean. There is nothing particularly heroic about Valjean at this point in the story; later in the story he will become heroic but only by the charity of others. When we catch up with Valjean, he has served many years in prison for stealing bread and trying to escape. He has been turned out of shelter after shelter as innkeepers discover he is an ex-convict. No one wants to risk being near a criminal. When he shows up at the bishop’s house, Valjean has a “rough...and violent expression in his eyes.” He is, as Hugo describes him “hideous.” He is exhausted and angry. And he is hungry.

Stumbling across Valjean, the bishop invites him for dinner and shelter. Unaccustomed to receiving any hospitality, Valjean “stammers like a crazy man.” He is still more astounded when he is served dinner on precious silver. Replying to Valjean’s astonishment, the bishop replies: “This is not my house; it is the house of Jesus Christ. This door does not demand of him who enters whether he has a name, but whether he has a grief. You suffer, you are hungry and thirsty; and so you are welcome.” During his visit, Valjean can’t believe it; he knows not the source or motivation of the bishop’s unending charity, there is no accounting for it. The bishop, in turn, urges him toward the joyful hospitality of his Father awaiting him in heaven.

If the story ended here, we might have a nice, feel-good tale. The bishop uses his home and silver to make the criminal feel trusted, and in turn, the criminal responds to that trust by

becoming the novel's hero. But the story doesn't end there. This, after all, isn't a story about worldly charity, but Christian charity, which lays bare the thin niceness of worldly charity. Valjean has been treated unjustly, inhospitably, and unkindly for years. He has learned that the world is not a place where he can trust or depend on anyone, bishop or not. His life is determined by habits of survival. And so that night in the bishop's residence, he is haunted by thoughts of the silver on that table at dinner. It torments him. A life empty of charity runs its course: Valjean takes the silver and flees into the night. He takes the bishop's one luxury.

The bishop's housekeeper—who is also his sister—is enraged. She informs the bishop that his one precious item has been stolen. After a pause, the bishop refuses the description of “stolen.” “In the first place,” he asks, “was that silver ours?... I have for a long time kept that silver wrongfully. It belonged to the poor. Who was that man? A poor man, evidently.” And so having already been more kind to Valjean than anyone had ever been, the bishop gives to Valjean his one luxury in life.

Valjean does not get very far with the silver before the authorities arrest him, suspicious looking fellow that he is. They march Valjean to the bishop. Determined to return Valjean to the galleys for life, the authorities are ready for the bishop to expose Valjean's lie that the bishop gave him the silver. They arrive in the bishop's home. Before they can say anything, the bishop sees Valjean and rejoices: “Here you are! You forgot to take the candlesticks I gave you, which are also silver and should fetch you about 200 francs.” With no charge to press against him, the authorities release Valjean and leave. The bishop presses the candlesticks into Valjean's hand. In this gift, the bishop's Christian charity is made perfect. When need

faces luxury, he renounces luxury, no matter how attached he is to it.

Hearing this story, one might rejoice that poverty is no longer as much a problem now as it was in revolutionary France, and how fortunate that the poor are not so oppressed as they once were. Yet in terms of aggregate numbers there are more poor on Earth now than there has ever been, and we in 21st century America oppress the poor in our own ways: zoning requirements, licensing regulations, unjust labor practices, political exploitation, begging laws, capital flight from exploited lands, and so on. If the cost of charity in revolutionary France was to give away every luxury, trade nice homes for smaller ones, eat simply, and recognize excess as properly claimed by the poor, what is the cost of charity in current day America?

There are deep differences between the Christian charity modeled by the bishop and worldly charity. Where worldly charity requires that we make small sacrifices, Christian charity demands much more painful ones. It requires, not giving a few coins, but giving away sizable chunks of one's bank account. Christian charity means not giving away old jackets but wearing jackets even when they are shabby so that more people can be clothed. It means reconsidering transportation options, sacrificing convenience and comfort to aid those who have no options at all for transportation.

This speaks to the second point of compassion. Where worldly charity doles out compassion in small doses, Christian charity swims in an ocean of compassion that flows from the life of God and floods our lives and choices. The compassion of the bishop so overwhelmed his life that it swept away the bishop's attachment to his silver. And this speaks to a third point about worldly charity. Where worldly charity preserves the shape of one's life, Christian charity, with its out

pouring compassion, does not. It will inconvenience your life; it will trouble you. It does not ask what spare change you have, but rather: How have you lived in such a way that you have so much spare change around? What can “spare” mean in a world where 35,000 children die a day from poverty? While some will love you for it, it will make you seem weird to others and annoying to still others. You may seem eccentric, and you will have a hard time fitting in with the world as it currently stands. You, like the bishop, will be shown an early exit from the party.

Why would a person want to live this way? Why did the bishop want to live this way? The bishop was living in response to the common gift of creation, in imitation of the one who gave us that gift. He was striving to be like Jesus, the one who said: Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God. Like the bishop, Jesus also throws his lot in with the poor. He also gives away the one luxury that he can claim: equality with God. And he has also invited the undeserving to a meal. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus anticipates his second coming, the consummation of all things. He describes the Son of Man sitting on his throne in glory, with all the nations gathered before him. It is time to invite guests to the everlasting banquet, the joyful hospitality of the Father. And he turns to one group and says, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me” (Matthew 25:34-36).

But these righteous folk do not understand. “Lord, when did we see

you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?” The Son of Man’s reply should haunt us. “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:37-40). And those with ears to hear know what words he gives those who did not feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, or attend the prisoners (Matthew 25:41-43). While the bishop is like Jesus in his poverty and his charity, Jean Valjean is like Jesus in his needfulness, in his hunger, his homelessness, and even, let’s not forget, his criminal status.

Jesus is the poor whom we are called to serve. He is God who came to us as a poor man, with nowhere to lay his head, in the form of a servant. There is no way to worship this God without serving the poor. And serving the poor, as Jesus makes clear, is a way of caring for God, whether we know it or not. Here we are coming to the fourth point about worldly charity: where worldly charity assumes God is on the side of rich, Christian charity acknowledges God as the one made poor for our sakes. Jesus is the quintessential poor man, and the needful among us are the poor whom those of us who live in excess and luxury are called to live for. Jesus reveals that God is with the poor, and so the one who wants to be with God should seek God among the poor.

In Christ, God lived with the poor, and God died with the poor. This is where the depth of Christian charity is made known to us: on the Cross with Christ. The Cross, where we crucified Love Incarnate, who came to us as a poor man that we may no longer suffer hunger, thirst, homelessness, and nakedness. For we were

hungry, and Jesus gave us his body; thirsty, and he gave us his blood; homeless, and he gave us the Church; naked, and he clothed us in the Spirit. This is what the church witnesses to when it welcomes the suffering, hungry, thirsty, homeless and naked. This is the way of discipleship: the way of the Cross, the giving of our very selves in imitation of Jesus giving of his very self, so that others may no longer suffer the ravages of poverty. To live this way is not to be more than human or less than human. It is to live into the fullness of our humanity, as that fullness is revealed to us by the Son of Man.

Here is the fifth point about worldly charity. Worldly charity does not indict the systems of the world. Yet Christian charity is born out of the greatest indictment of all worldly systems: the Cross. Against the seductive logic that global capitalism produces “just” winners and losers, the heart of the Christian tradition is God, Love Itself, crucified by a system that claimed worldly justice as the backside of worldly charity. Christians should maintain a healthy skepticism of political and economic systems, especially those that claim to mete out justice, since such claims to justice crucified the one who is truly justice. This does not mean refusing to use worldly systems, but doing so vigilantly, keeping God’s ends in view.

What does all this mean for those of us today who live comfortably and well? If God suffered death that we might not be hungry or homeless, what are we called to suffer that others might not have a different kind of hunger and homelessness? As we cannot worship the God made poor without serving the poor, neither can we worship the God who gave every thing if we demand to hold on to our things. What does the Gospel require of us, and what would satisfying those requirements resemble? Consider Shelley Douglass of Birmingham,

Alabama, Hugo’s saint in everyday life:

I live in Ensley, one of the poorest neighborhoods in Birmingham, Alabama. For the last 19 years I’ve

There is no way to worship this God without serving the poor. And serving the poor, as Jesus makes clear, is a way of caring for God, whether we know it or not.

been hospitaller at Mary’s House, a Catholic Worker house of hospitality primarily for families. I sleep in what was a sun porch, a small room with lots of windows tacked on to the back to the house...Ensley used to be a bustling little city of its own. Now the brickworks and industrial infrastructure stand idly crumbling, never having recovered from the steel exodus many years ago. The people of Ensley struggle. Young people who have prospered have moved on to better neighborhoods; elders who remain here don’t have the money for repairs – or even for bills. Houses deteriorate, and when the elders die their houses sit empty and unclaimed for years, moldering away amidst weeds and trash. Ensley is full of poor and forgotten folks. Our city schools are wretched, our streets are cracking and decaying, we have blocks of boarded-up stores and a church on every block. With the exception of a few revitalization efforts, Ensley has been left to fend for itself. The people of Ensley get ignored or written off in a city short-hand: high-crime district, dangerous neighborhood, wouldn’t want to live there. I have known parents who wouldn’t allow their children to come for a work-day at Mary’s House, fearing for their safety... As a white person born with the concomitant white-skin privilege, I struggle to see the world through other eyes. As a person convinced that a nonviolent revolution is the only

final answer to the questions of war and injustice in our world, I battle my own lethargy and despair to discover new, Gospel ways of living my beliefs. As a follower of Jesus' way, I try to live his simple teachings about loving the enemy and sharing possessions. I fail often. I hope that sharing these struggles might open some questions for all of us, and perhaps help us to see together a new way forward. (<http://paxchristiusa.org/2012/08/11/reflection-in-birmingham-hope-and-poverty-in-the-belly-of-the-beast/>)

Compare the quoted stories of Bethany Jones and Shelley Douglass, and ask yourself, "What is the cost of Christian discipleship?" It is not the worldly charity of the Bethany Jones in all of us, which allows us to live with the grain of the world and receive its praise and adulation—maybe even magazine covers—and so costs very little. Christian charity calls us to live like Catholic Worker Shelley Douglass, not with the grain of the world, but with the grain of the universe—with the grain of the kind of creatures we were made to be: humans divinized into the life of God. And where do we feel the severity of that grain more deeply than on the Cross of Christ?

Are we haunted by the Cross? When we pass the many crosses most of us encounter in churches and jewelry and home decoration, do they call out to us, "There are poor people! There are poor people!"? If Jesus gave his body and blood, the Church and the Spirit, that we may no longer suffer poverty, what are we called to give? The answer is not as easy as worldly charity. It will cost everything. It will run you against the grain of this world, against that brutal cross. Giving away your last luxury, being counted among the least of these, throwing your lot in with the weakest against the most powerful, all these will run you against the grain of the world. And yet, laid up against the grain of this world, we live with

the grain of the universe. For Christ's cross identifies lives poured out as the very grain of the universe, the very meaning and identity and purpose of all things.

Natalie Carnes and Jonathan Tran both teach theology and ethics in the Department of Religion at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. This paper was initially presented at the 2012 "No Need Among You" Texas Christian Community Development Conference.