

From Charity to Justice: Walking with Those on the Margins

From NBCC Staff

"Whatever you did for one of the least brothers of mine, you did for me." — Matthew 25:40

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus calls His followers to see Him in the hungry, the homeless, the stranger, the sick, the imprisoned and all those who are vulnerable or forgotten. The Catholic Church has responded to this call through countless ministries that feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, welcome immigrants and refugees, visit prisoners, care for the elderly and advocate for people whose voices are often unheard.

But Catholic outreach is about more than providing assistance. At its best, it moves from **charity to accompaniment to justice**. These three dimensions of Catholic social ministry are not competing approaches. They are interconnected ways of responding to the dignity and needs of our brothers and sisters.

LEVEL ONE: CHARITY

Meeting Immediate Needs

Charity asks: **"What does my neighbor need right now?"**

A hungry family needs food. Someone facing eviction may need emergency assistance. A person sleeping on the street needs shelter. A disaster victim may need clothing, transportation or financial help.

Catholic Charities USA represents one of the most comprehensive expressions of this work. Through its diocesan network, Catholic Charities provides food, housing assistance, emergency aid, disaster response, services for older adults and people with disabilities, assistance to migrants and refugees, and many other services. Catholic Charities also works closely with parishes, helping them respond to poverty and vulnerability in their own communities.

The **Society of St. Vincent de Paul** provides another important model. Vincentian volunteers help people with food, clothing, housing and emergency needs. Yet even when responding to immediate needs, the Society emphasizes the dignity of the person rather than simply the problem. Its national network encourages volunteers to develop personal relationships with people experiencing poverty.

Charity matters because immediate needs are real. **A person who is hungry cannot wait for a solution to poverty before receiving a meal.** Christian charity begins by seeing the person in front of us and responding with compassion.

LEVEL TWO: ACCOMPANIMENT

Walking With People, Not Simply Serving Them

Accompaniment asks a deeper question: **"How can I walk with this person?"**

Catholic ministry recognizes that poverty, homelessness, displacement and isolation are rarely solved by a single encounter. A person may need help finding housing, employment or health care—but may also need someone to listen, encourage and remain present along the journey.

The **Society of St. Vincent de Paul** is particularly strong in this area. Its ministry is built around personal relationships with people in need. Vincentians may visit people in their homes, listen to their circumstances, help them identify resources and continue walking with them. The goal is not simply to provide material assistance, but to offer friendship, hope and human connection.

The **Jesuit Refugee Service/USA (JRS/USA)** provides another powerful example. Its mission is expressed in three words: **Accompany. Serve. Advocate.** JRS accompanies refugees and other forcibly displaced people through programs addressing education, emergency assistance, livelihoods, mental health and psychosocial support, reconciliation and advocacy. In the United States, its work includes accompanying displaced migrants as they navigate complicated systems and rebuild their lives.

The **Catholic Worker Movement**, founded by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, takes accompaniment even further through its Houses of Hospitality. Catholic Worker communities welcome people who are poor or homeless and seek to create communities where hospitality, service, prayer and relationships are woven together. Volunteers can participate directly in these communities throughout the United States.

Accompaniment reminds us that people do not simply need our services. They need our presence.

LEVEL THREE: JUSTICE

Addressing the Causes of Poverty

Justice asks the most challenging question: **"Why is this person experiencing poverty or exclusion—and what can we do about it?"**

Justice does not replace charity. Instead, it asks us to look beyond the immediate crisis to the conditions that create or perpetuate poverty.

Catholic Charities USA intentionally combines direct service with advocacy for a more just society. Its parish engagement efforts encourage Catholics to address poverty and vulnerability while also working for social change.

The **Jesuit Refugee Service** likewise combines service with advocacy. Its work seeks not only to assist displaced people but also to promote policies that protect their dignity and rights. JRS/USA invites people to advocate, educate their communities and organize faith-based efforts on behalf of refugees.

The **Catholic Worker Movement** has long connected the works of mercy with the pursuit of justice. Catholic Worker communities serve people experiencing poverty while also challenging systems and practices that contribute to homelessness, exploitation, racism, violence and other forms of human suffering.

Justice challenges Catholics to ask difficult questions: Why can a person work full-time and still be unable to afford housing? Why are some elderly people isolated? Why do formerly incarcerated people struggle to find employment and housing? Why do immigrants encounter barriers to rebuilding their lives?

Justice moves us from helping people survive difficult circumstances to working to change those circumstances.

A CATHOLIC RESPONSE: CHARITY + ACCOMPANIMENT + JUSTICE

These three levels can be remembered simply:

CHARITY asks: *What does my neighbor need today?*

ACCOMPANIMENT asks: *How can I walk with my neighbor?*

JUSTICE asks: *What can I do to change the conditions that are causing suffering?*

A parish may not be able to operate a homeless shelter or provide professional social services. But every parish can do something.

We can **feed** the hungry.

We can **visit** the lonely.

We can **welcome** the stranger.

We can **mentor** a young person.

We can **accompany** someone returning from incarceration.

We can **stand with** refugees and immigrants.

We can **advocate** for affordable housing, employment, health care and other conditions necessary for human dignity.

And we can **pray** for those who are struggling and for those who serve them.

A CALL TO ACTION

The needs around us can seem overwhelming, but Catholic ministry does not ask each of us to do everything. It asks us to do **something**.

Give financially to a ministry serving people in need. Volunteer your time. Share your skills. Become a mentor. Visit someone who is isolated. Welcome a newcomer to your community. Learn about the issues affecting people who are poor and vulnerable. Speak up when the dignity of another person is threatened.

Most importantly, **begin where you are.**

The person who is hungry, homeless, incarcerated, displaced, elderly, struggling or forgotten is not an interruption to our Christian mission. **That person is part of our Christian mission.**

When charity meets immediate need, accompaniment builds relationship, and justice addresses the causes of suffering, the Church makes the love of Christ visible in the world.

RESOURCES:

Put Faith Into Action

Catholic Charities USA

catholiccharitiesusa.org

Volunteer: Connect with a local Catholic Charities agency to find opportunities in your community. Catholic Charities also works with parishes on social ministry.

Give: Make a one-time or monthly contribution to support people experiencing poverty and vulnerability.

Society of St. Vincent de Paul USA

svdpusa.org

Volunteer: Join a local parish Conference or Council of St. Vincent de Paul. Volunteers can participate in service and personal outreach to neighbors in need.

Give: Make a donation or become a monthly **Everyday Saint**, supporting the Society's work with people experiencing poverty.

Catholic Worker Movement

catholicworker.org

Volunteer: Catholic Worker communities throughout the United States welcome volunteers. Opportunities vary by community and may include hospitality, meals, shelter and other works of mercy.

Give: Support a Catholic Worker community directly; individual houses determine their own needs and receive donations.

Jesuit Refugee Service/USA

jrsusa.org

Volunteer: Explore opportunities such as the JRS Accompaniment Network and community outreach. You can also organize a parish or community initiative on behalf of refugees.

Give: Make a one-time or monthly gift to support education, emergency assistance, livelihoods, mental-health programs and other refugee services. JRS/USA also offers advocacy and educational opportunities.