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Q & A: Father Andrew Small

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Distinctly Catholic

We continue the discussion about the distinctiveness of Catholic charitable work with a commentary from Fr. Andrew Small, who is the Director of the Committee for the Church in Latin America at the USCCB.

Small looks at the issue of Catholic identity, which is so integral to the new report issued this morning by the USCCB regarding the work of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development.

The question: What is distinctive about Catholic charitable work?

Fr. Small: Without action, nothing changes. But without identity, the action is not Catholic, regardless of who performs it.

How do activity and identity combine to express the virtue of Christian charity? When the external change of activity carries with it the internal change of religious conversion.

A necessary element in social change is a sense of the self that is structured towards an engagement with others over and against certain obstacles and that seeks transformation. However, such action can equally reveal a view of the world that flows from the Gospel as one that does not. Activism prioritizes external change over internal transformation. The reason for such action is secondary.

Identity, on the other hand, suggests a relatively stable core that can be recognized in times of change. Periods of identity crisis challenge a collective understanding of what constitute the defining qualities of a person or their actions, in light of the dynamic interplay between the internal and external.

As outside pressure impinges on an acting subject, identity that is channeled or manifested in some essential way through observable realities ? mainly through words and actions? becomes open to

interpretation or even reinterpretation. Hermeneutics, then, becomes an essential tool in the identification process.

After the Council, it became popular to distinguish charity from justice, with the latter a more considered version of the former. But, it would be a mistake to view justice as a mature version of charity.

Reading closer, we see how the Council began with and concluded with the notion of charity to ground the nature of the Church's work in behalf of the poor. The notion of charity that emerged from the Council was a more comprehensive vision of the Christian vocation. The globalizing nature of poverty demanded an equally globalizing concept of charity, one that incorporates and surpasses the modern concepts of social justice, solidarity and human development.

In this sense, charity is not distinct from justice, rather charity perfects justice.

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