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St. John Vianney and Charity

- Introduction
 - In the Gospel, Jesus speaks clearly about the most important thing each of us needs to do in life. What is the most important thing in the law?, he was asked. He said, to love God with all our mind, heart, soul and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves. So great was the love of neighbor that Jesus made his “new” commandment to love others as he has loved us. Not love ME as I have loved you, but love others as I have loved you. Peter after the fall, when asked if he loved the Lord, was told to show it by feeding his sheep, and tending and feeding his lambs. The test of Peter’s love for the Lord would be his care for those very sheep and lambs, those men, women and children, whom the Good Shepherd had entrusted to his care. It’s the same way for us. Our real love for the Lord is shown by our sharing his love for all those who are his brothers and sisters.
 - Many in the world, including many Catholics, have watered down the expectations they believe God has of us. They think that God only wants them to be a “good person.” God wants much more than that. He wants us to be holy. He wants to become saints. He wants us to be, as Jesus says emphatically, “perfect as [our] heavenly Father is perfect.”
 - Many of the pagans, Jesus was saying, were good people. They loved those who loved them. They greeted those who greeted them. They loved their neighbors and hated their enemies. Jesus did not want it to be this way among his disciples, among those who followed him. He wanted them to live by his standard. He wanted them to learn how to love other as he loved them first.
 - That’s why he told them what I think is probably the single most revolutionary command of the Gospel: “Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you.” In this Jesus, of course, was not merely saying, “Do as I say,” but rather, “Follow me.” He was the one who loved those who had made themselves his enemies all the way to the end on the Cross, where he prayed for his persecutors, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!”
 - We were made in God’s image and likeness. God is love, and we were made to love as he loves. We show ourselves to be his children, chips off the old divine block, when we love in this same way. The way we are called to imitate the father is through the perfection of charity.
 - Because love is the point of human life, because love is the means of sanctity, it’s not surprising at all that St. John Vianney excelled in love. We could spend a whole retreat focusing on what he said about the love of God. In this conference, however, I would like to focus on what he lived and taught his people about the love of neighbor. His whole mission as their pastor was to help them become saints, to help them become perfect after their heavenly father, to help them to love like God loves. And he succeeded with many of them. Today we ask him to help us.
- Context
 - Today people put more trust in witnesses than words and the most compelling witness of all is charity, particularly toward those for whom no one else cares. The complete generosity underlying this attitude and these actions stands in marked contrast to human selfishness. It raises precise questions that lead to God and to the Gospel. It’s the reason why Saint Mother Teresa had such an important role in evangelization. It’s one of the reasons why Pope Francis has captivated the world, because he exudes love for those so often ignored.
 - The separation in people’s hyperpoliticized mindset contrasting fidelity on doctrine, which they label “conservative,” with fidelity on charity, which they label “liberal.” But we’re called to be 100 percent faithful in both. To a skeptical world, however, if we’re going to get them to see that the truths the Church proclaims for Christ are a loving gift to them, we first need to show that we’re consumed with love through deeds of charity they recognize.

- In his inaugural homily Pope Francis said, “Jesus Christ conferred power upon Peter, but what sort of power was it? Jesus’ three questions to Peter about love are followed by three commands: feed my lambs, feed my sheep. Let us never forget that authentic power is service, and that the Pope, too, when exercising power, must enter ever more fully into that service which has its radiant culmination on the Cross. He must be inspired by the lowly, concrete and faithful service which marked Saint Joseph and, like him, he must open his arms to protect all of God’s people and embrace with tender affection the whole of humanity, especially the poorest, the weakest, the least important, those whom Matthew lists in the final judgment on love: the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those in prison (cf. *Mt 25:31-46*). Only those who serve with love are able to protect!
- One of the most iconic moments in Pope Francis’ papacy was his Nov. 6, 2013 embrace of Vinicio Riva, full of neurofibromatotic tumors.
- Charity begins within.
 - The word “almsgiving” is derived from the old English *aelmesse*, which comes from the Greek word *eleemosyna* for mercy, as in *Kyrie, eleison*, “Lord, have mercy.” Almsgiving refers principally not to the giving of goods to the indigent, but to the Christ-like compassion that leads us to do all we can for those in need.
 - There’s an obvious material dimension to giving alms, since many suffer in various forms of material need. Genuinely sacrificing our money and possessions — giving not just something but giving to the point that we ourselves go without something we need for someone who needs it more — is one of the greatest ways to ensure that we don’t worship the ancient golden calf. Many of are tempted to serve and place our faith, hope and love in mammon instead of God. Our spiritual growth is impeded because we, like the Rich Young Man, won’t let give what we have to the poor to follow Christ more fully.
 - We notice, however, that the Gospel doesn’t list many material benefactions of Jesus. His principal alms was the gift of himself. On various occasions, the evangelists say that his “heart was moved with pity” and as a result he taught, healed, fed, forgave and resuscitated.
 - Almsgiving involves not just giving food to the hungry, clothing to the naked and welcome to strangers, but also visiting the sick and imprisoned, teaching and counseling those in need, forgiving and calling people from sin, praying perseveringly for the living and the dead and other personal acts.
 - Many of those who come to see me for spiritual direction live according to a vow or promise of poverty and so their almsgiving can seldom take on the form of giving money or possessions. I often encourage them in Lent to give of themselves and their time, making a commitment each day to give at least 15 minutes reaching out to care for someone whom they know to be in need, to pray for that person and to visit, make a phone call, or write a letter or an email. Those who do this have learned that once one intentionally begins to dedicate an extra 15 minutes a day to this type of almsgiving, one’s charity doesn’t stop at the quarter-hour, but begins to mushroom through life.
 - That experience points to an important truth: to plan one’s charity. Random acts of kindness ought to be encouraged but are not enough. Just as prayer ought to be scheduled rather than spontaneous, the same goes for charity. It’s not sufficient to wait for someone in need to come to us. When we know there are those who are suffering and that Jesus personally identifies with them (*Mt 25:31-46*), we need to go out in search. We need to plan. Charity is too important to Christian life and the spreading of God’s kingdom for it to remain happenstance. Christ’s charity toward us, after all, was planned from before the foundation of the world.
- St. John Vianney always taught principally by his example.
 - Charity began at a very young age.
 - During the French Revolution, there were thousands of poor and displaced families. Even though the future saint’s family was not particularly well off, they did have a farm. On any

given night, the Vianneys took in over 20 mendicant families, with the women and girls sleeping in the house and the men and boys sleeping in the barn. The young John Vianney would often share the little food he had with the boys his age who often had gone for quite some time with no food at all.

- As a priest, his greatest alm was making God’s mercy available, but he was accustomed to sacrifice everything, his time, money and possessions as well.
 - On many occasions, he would exchange clothes with the poor.
 - In 1823, his fellow priests gave him a pair of velvet trousers, to last and keep him warm. On his return to his own parish one Saturday, he found a poor man who was shaking in the cold. “Wait a moment, my friend,” he said and went behind the shrubs and brought him his pants. When his brother priests asked about the pants a short time later, he thanked them for them. “I put them to fairly good use; a poor man has borrowed them for an unlimited period.”
 - One day, on the way to the school, he met a barefoot poor man. He gave him his shoes and went to la Providence trying to hide that he only had socks on. When people gave him a new pair of fur-lined shoes, he gave them away.
 - He would keep only a few shirts in his wardrobe. Whenever he was given new ones, he would give them away. “Put in more,” he would tell Catherine.
 - He would exchange his bread with the poor, giving the food prepared for him to the poor and used to buy from them the crusts they carried in the recesses of their wallets.
 - This was a means by which he sought to remove from the poor the shame of begging.
 - It was also a way that the poor wouldn’t feel inferior to him.
 - “Let’s be happy my friend to eat the bread of the poor: they are friends of Jesus Christ. It seems to me that I’m at the Lord’s table!”
 - He used tact to not offend. To a family that he advanced the funds needed to open a small business, he said, “I do not lend. I give. Has not the good God been the first to give to me?”
- He sacrificed his entire familial inheritance in order to build a school for orphan girls.
- When people would give him money, it wouldn’t last long.
 - He called his cassock pocket *la poche à la navette* (the shuttle pocket) because whatever money was put in there was soon shuttled out.
 - Brother Athanasius recounted, “He confided to me that often, before daybreak, he had already given away in charity over a hundred francs. He laughingly called the pocket of his cassock, in which he carried the money destined for the poor, *la poche à la navette* (the shuttle pocket) because money was continually going in and coming out of it. At night he reckoned up what he called his profits — that is, the few coins that he might still possess. When he found himself penniless he borrowed, for he would not send the destitute away with an alms.”
 - At times, he received considerable sums; they were expended in good works and in relieving the poor. “Such money seemed to burn his fingers,” Br. Athanasius said.
 - The mayor of Ars said, “His heart pitied all miseries. He had a tender love for the victims of misfortune. For them, he stripped himself of everything; he was forever giving, giving. To enable him to bestow alms, he sold all his personal property: his furniture, his linen, any trifle that belonged to him.”
- He readily admitted that his one experience of begging helped to convince him of how difficult it was to beg.
 - Pilgrimage to St. Francis Regis praying for help with his studies. 60 miles each way. He had made a vow not to buy anything on the journey, but to beg for his food. Most people refused him, such that he was eating grass and plants. It was so difficult to be rejected and to be hungry that he asked

the priest at the sanctuary to commute his vow on the way home so that he could buy some provisions as needed. He always remembered this difficulty and so treated those who came to him as he would have wanted to be treated.

- “I begged only one time in my life, and it was awful. It’s then that I know that it’s better to give than to ask.”
- He wasn’t afraid of being exploited.
 - Fr. Raymond was sent by the bishop because he had developed a reputation of being too easily taken advantage of, but it didn’t bother St. John Vianney.
 - The imposters or “casual poor” were treated well, too. Fr. Toccanier said, “There are impostors. It must happen that you are frequently taken in if you give to all comers.” “We are never taken in if we give to God,” he replied.
 - “I prefer to be deceived than to deceive myself.”
 - If he allowed himself to be exploited — and that is the lot of all who practice charity — he placed alms with discrimination. He displayed a larger liberality toward those whose need was the more urgent.
 - “If it’s for the world that you give alms, you are right to complain [about being taken]. But if it’s for the good God, whether one thanks you or not, what does it matter?”
 - He would defend the poor
 - “Some say to the poor haughtily, ‘You are a parasite! You should get a job. You are young, you have strong arms.’ You don’t know if it pleases the good God to have this poor beg for his bread. You are exposing yourself to grumbling against God’s will.”
 - “Some say, ‘Oh, he makes bad use of it.’ The poor man will be judged on whatever use he makes of your alms, but you will be judged on the alms itself that you could have done but didn’t.”
 - He was in fact happy when the poor came to him.
 - He always addressed the poor as “my friends” with great tenderness. “How happy we are,” he said, “that the poor should thus come to us; if they did not come we should have to look for them; and for that there is not the time.”
- He was kind even to those whom the world would have not expected him to treat well.
 - One woman stole linen from the orphanage and money from the sacristy. She was arrested and imprisoned, despite Fr. Vianney’s pleas for leniency. When she was released, she appealed to him again and he gave her clothes and money.
- He sought whenever possible to give alms anonymously
 - He used to love to tell the story of how St. Nicholas provided the dowry secretly to the three young women at risk for being sold into prostitution on account of their father’s poverty. He used to refer to it as a model for charity.
 - He loved a blind woman, Mrs. Bichet, who lived near the Church. He could give her alms without her knowing who had done it.
- The extent of his charity
 - Toward the end of his life, he was paying the rent of at least 30 families, either at Ars or in the surrounding district. He became “miserly.” Every year, at the beginning of November, he began to save, “I must pay for my farms,” he used to say. Many households received fuel and flour from him. Every week, the mother of a family came to him from a distance to beg bread for her children
 - One of the Ars residents said she was sent as far as Lyons to give money to a family in need. When he couldn’t give enough, he often found out where they lived to be able to send more.
 - “My secret is simple: give everything and retain nothing.”
 - “The dentists ask five franc per tooth. If someone would give me five francs for each of the dozen teeth that remain, I would freely take them out for the poor.”
 - “I would even sell my cadaver in order to have money for my poor.”

- People often complained that he was “too” charitable, but he would always reply that we could never love God or others enough.
 - Ars became a center where the indigent converged. Some of the townspeople complained. When the mayor confronted the pastor about it, he said, “Did not our Lord say, the poor you shall always have with you?” He insisted that none be driven away.
 - St. John Vianney didn’t know how not to love. He would often quote St. Augustine, who taught, “Love doesn’t know how to remain without action.”
 - “You’ll never be able to find a true love that doesn’t show itself in deeds.”
 - “I’ve never seen someone ruined by doing good works!”
- He also preached and taught about charity.
 - It wasn’t enough, however, to give himself and all he had to and beyond the limit. The patron saint of priests also wanted to inspire and train his people to live the type of charity to which Christ calls us all. The Curé of Ars knew that, if we will be judged on deeds of love, that the *grappin* would stop at nothing to sow darnel in the souls of his people; if the devil couldn’t seduce them to be selfish and avaricious, he would at least try to poison them with the notion that all God asks of them is that they give the eleemosynary minimum before tempting them toward pride at how good they should feel in giving what was truly superfluous. So Fr. Vianney coupled his words to his example in order to show the people the truth of what God is asking as well as to give them suggestions about how to help them with God’s grace achieve it
 - He would preach about the fact that when we give to the poor we give to Christ.
 - He preached often on the corporal works of mercy, which Jesus states in St. Matthew’s Gospel will be the criteria of our judgment. We will be numbered among the saved or damned on the basis of whether we loved or stiffed Christ in the person of the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, imprisoned and stranger (Mt 25:31-46).
 - He focused on the Lord’s words about our judgment, that when we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and welcome strangers, we do each of these things for the Lord.
 - He very much saw the Lord in the poor. He openly repeated in his catecheses how often Jesus often appeared as a beggar.
 - He taught, for that reason, that we should always try to see God in the poor. “When we give alms, we should think that it’s to the Lord and not to the poor that we’re giving.” He loved to tell the stories of the saints who literally saw Christ in the poor. He would regularly recount the story of St. Martin of Tours, a Roman soldier who upon seeing a shivering, barely-clothed beggar at the gate of Amiens, dismounted his horse, evaginated his Roman lance, split his military cape in two, and covered the poor man with half of it; later that night, the Lord Jesus appeared to Martin in a dream wearing that part of Martin’s cape. He would also tell the story of St. John of God whom a poor man approached for help. As he was reaching into his pocket, St. John looked down and noticed the man’s bare feet, each of which bore stigmata. “Often we think we’re giving to a poor man,” Fr. Vianney concluded, “but we find it’s the Lord.”
 - He told the story of St. John of God who saw a beggar with stigmata in his feet.
 - “Often we think we’re giving to a poor man but we find it’s the Lord.”
 - He would openly say, “When we give alms, we should think that it’s to the Lord and not to the poor that we’re giving.”
 - Whenever we care for the poor, the pastor of Ars reiterated, we care for Christ; and whenever we harden our hearts to those in need, we do so to the Lord as well.
 - He would discuss how much care for the poor pleases God
 - “The poor are friends of God and the friends of the poor are friends of God.”

- “You desire to pray to God and pass your day in the Church, but you dream that it would be better to work for some poor people you know and who are in great need: that’s more pleasing to God than a day passed in front of the holy tabernacle.”
 - He said that the poor were God’s gift to us to train us in holiness.
 - He said, “We should never reject the poor.” Many of us do, thinking we’re justified. Repeating phrases he heard from some of his parishioners, which still echo today, the Curé noted, “Some say to the poor, haughtily, ‘You are a parasite! You should get a job.’” Basing himself, however, on Christ’s words that “the poor you will always have with you” (Jn 12:8), Fr. Vianney intimated that one reason for endemic poverty is to unleash love and move us to become Good Samaritans. “The poor man is an instrument that God uses to make us good,” he said. “When we give a small bodily alms to the poor, they give us a great spiritual alms” in return. If there were no people who were poorer than we are, we would never have an opportunity to learn how to give.
 - “Never lose sight that alms erase our sins and preserve us from committing others.”
 - He tried to help them learn how to give with a cheerful and generous heart and not to pretend that they had nothing to give. He helped his people see the selfishness behind the many excuses why we claim we cannot give or can only give a little. “You say you don’t have money to give alms, but you have enough money to buy another field!” In our own day, many lament that they cannot give a lot to charity, but somehow they miraculously find money to buy high definition televisions, new cars, make investments and leave sizable inheritances this side of the eschatological eye of the needle. Fr. Vianney’s principle was simple: “If you have much, give much; if you have little, give little; but give — with all your heart and with joy.” For those with more than they need, he taught, “*Your well-being is nothing other than a DEPOSITORY that God has put in your hands*; after taking what is necessary for you and your family, the rest is owed to the poor.”
 - Our salvation depends on it.
 - He lamented that, despite the Lord’s clear words about how important charity is, so many Christians throughout history have not gotten and acted on the message. He often referred to St. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians where the apostle struggled to help the first Christians recognize the true importance of charity. Charity, St. Paul said, involves more than deeds, but deeds given with a generous heart. Even if one were to speak in prophecy, to have faith to move mountains, and hand oneself over as a martyr, St. Paul taught, he would gain and be nothing unless he did it with love (1 Cor 13:1-3). Basing himself on this passage, Fr. Vianney vigorously exclaimed:
 - “Dear Lord, *how many Christians are damned* through lack of charity! No, no, my dear brethren, even if you could perform miracles, you will never be saved if you do not have love. Not to have charity is not to know your religion; it is to have a religion of whim, mood and inclination. ... Without charity, you will never see God, you will never go to heaven!”
 - On the other hand, “Whoever possesses charity is sure that Heaven is for him!”
 - He taught that charity takes many forms
 - “Charity is not entirely done with money.”
 - He would teach clearly, following the words of Jesus in the Gospel, that we are simply not good Christians unless we sacrificed heroically for others. For a Christian who wants to be saved, charity is not optional
 - “All of our religion is but a false religion and all our virtues are mere illusions and we ourselves are only hypocrites in the sight of God if we have not that universal charity for everyone, for the good and for the bad, for the poor people as well as for the rich, for all those who do us harm as much as those who do us good.”
 - He added that excelling in Christian charity ought to be the most important priority of our life. “The obligation we have to love our neighbor is so important that Jesus Christ put it into a Commandment that he placed immediately after that by which he commands us to love Him with all our hearts. He tells us that all the law and the prophets are included in this

commandment to love our neighbor. Yes, my dear brethren, we must regard this obligation as the most universal, the most necessary and the most essential to religion and to our salvation. In fulfilling this Commandment, we are fulfilling all the others.”

- He knew how charity pleases the Lord and enriches the giver. “To receive much, we need to give much,” he said. That’s why he was so rich, and why his people eventually became spiritually prosperous as well.
- The great lesson by which he would learn how to be so generous and encourage others to do the same was at Mass each day, when he would receive the most incredible alms ever given, the pearl of great price, the treasure buried in the field, Christ Jesus himself in the Eucharist. The poorer in spirit he became, the more he was able to be filled with this richness. Later today when we go to Mass we’ll have the same privilege. But this great treasure comes with a cost, a price-tag that St. John Vianney well knew. It’s to “do this in memory” of the one we receive. After having received Jesus’ body, blood, soul and divinity, we’re called to say to others with the gift of our life, our sweat, our efforts, our time, our money, “This is my body, this is my life, this is all I have, given out of love for you.” This is the plan of holiness, the path to perfection, the path to heaven.