

Reflections on The Grace of Giving

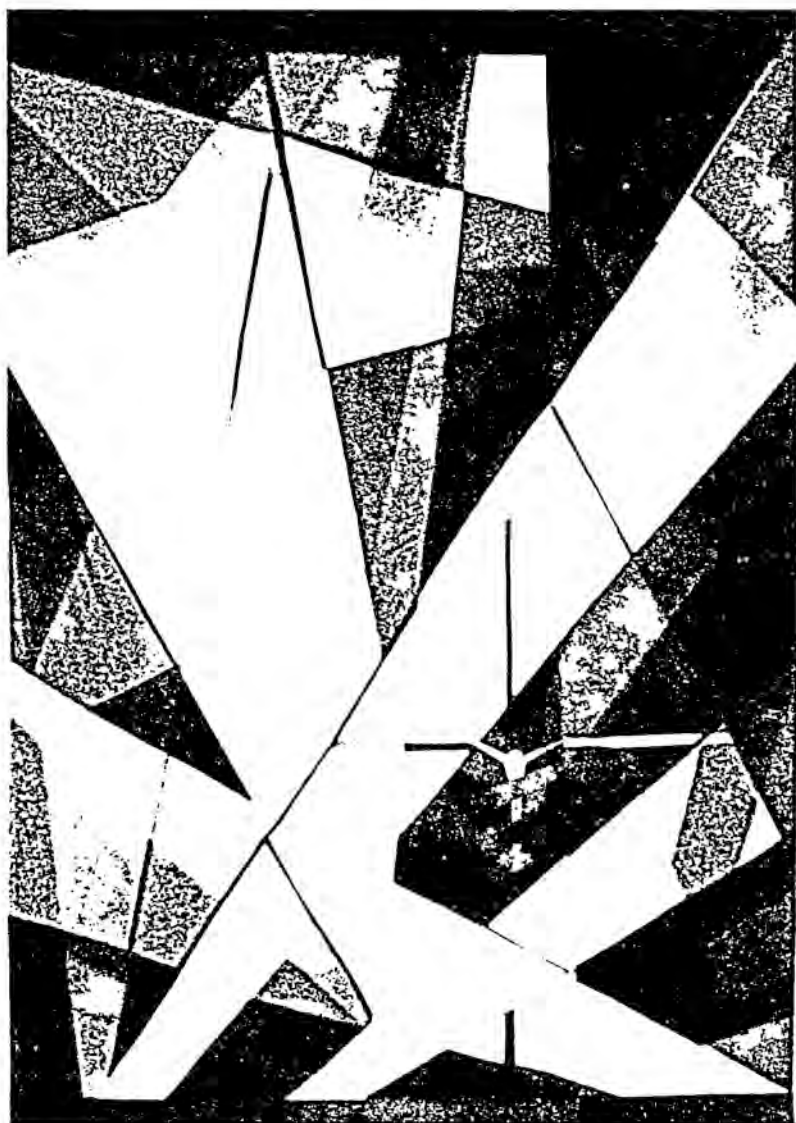
READINGS

Zosima is a small, pretty Filipino woman. When we met her first she was living in one of the worst slum areas of Washington with her husband and seven bright-eyed children who seemed as yet untouched by the misery around them. Thelma Rutherford, a member of our church, was the family's social worker. She had put Zosima in touch with Dorothy Cresswell, who with several other church members was leading a study-and-prayer project in Zosima's neighborhood.

When it was the time of our annual Christmas party we needed someone to serve in the kitchen with Lizzie, and Thelma told us that Zosima needed the money and that we could count on her to be there.

The party was just getting started in a fairyland setting of silver and gold when Zosima arrived. Gordon greeted her at the door and from then on she was passed warmly from person to person with the brief explanation that she was from the Southwest Project, which everyone knew to be the area where a little mission group was engaged. When Dorothy arrived several hours later she was surprised and delighted to see Zosima and whisked her off to the second floor where there was more food and more punch and lights and "beautiful people."

While all this went on poor Lizzie issued loud complaints



Christ Hymn. (Philippians 2 5-11) Tapestry by Catherine Kapikian, artist in residence, Wesley Theological Seminary.

from the kitchen. Our small efforts did not compensate for the help that had not arrived. When we finally discovered that Zosima was that help, we reluctantly brought her the news that she was needed by Lizzie. To make up for it we kept dropping in on her and generally assisting.

Thelma told us later that when Zosima got home that night, she was so excited that she woke her husband and all the children and with sweets left from the night had a Christmas party for them, while she said over and over, "They really wanted me!"

This is all that we hope to do; to build the structures which will give the poor of our city the spirit of a party that they may come to know Him who can change their lives, that they may come to know that love is real and that they are wanted.

—Elizabeth O'Connor, in *Call to Commitment*, pp. 176-177¹

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There are a lot of problems with the use of this money. Take the special buildings erected to the glory of God. One of my favorite religious places is the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York. It is not yet finished, and millions of dollars already have gone into its construction. It is absolutely magnificent, and when I wander in I am carried to a kind of ecstasy as I see visually what is meant by the magnificence of God. Down the hill lies Harlem in all its human misery. Granted that all the money in the cathedral would not have solved all the problems in Harlem, it would still have gone a long, long way in the relief of human misery. Critics of the cathedral have flogged its builders with that sentiment for several decades now, pointing out that people become too attached to their religious buildings and sink much too much money into them. I have often concurred in such sentiments, having watched what all pastors watch as people idolize the building and forego the human ministries to the people that Christ called us all to carry out.

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But would any ministries become reality without the building? Some would, there are always a few people for whom the sanctuary is low in priority. However, human experience seems to tell us that, for most people, the building is a necessity before human ministries become incarnate. It is unfortunate that such is the human situation, and the best the professionals can do is to work constantly to keep the use of the money in some kind of realistic proportion between the building and the ministry. There is no magic formula for this division, though I sometimes wish there were; all we can do is to be keenly aware that the building must not become an idol and that the human situation must receive its share. That is a difficult fight, because the building is tangible and it also stands for a lot of things in its tangibility. Ministries to the poor, the victimized, the powerless, and the hopeless will always have to fight the uphill battle for the religious dollar, while the debate goes on endlessly about how money can serve God most effectively.

—Allen Hollis, in *The Bible and Money*, pp. 106-107¹

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One of the most colorful chapters in religious giving has been written by the Mormon Church. "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" is the cornerstone of its program. In acknowledgment of the supreme possession so declared, the great Landlord requires of His tenants a rental of their time and substance. In acknowledgment of their relation as tenants to Him as Owner, church members are commanded to devote specifically one-seventh of their time, one day in seven, to His exclusive service. Of their substance and the increase thereof, the Lord calls for a tenth, the tithe. Thus the Latter-day Saints profess to be observers of the law of the tithe. This requirement is not directly based on the tithe-paying included in the Mosaic code, but on that law as reestablished in the Mormon Church. In the *Book of Mormon* is found this admonition and promise:

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But before ye seek for riches, seek ye for the kingdom of God. And after ye have obtained a hope in Christ ye shall obtain riches, if ye seek them; and ye will seek them for the intent to do good—to clothe the naked, and to feed the hungry, and to liberate the captive, and administer relief to the sick and the afflicted (Jacob 2:18-19)

Motivated by the tenets of their faith, the Mormons have developed a Church Welfare Plan so extensive and effective that they are able to assist any of their people in need wherever they may be.

—James A. Knight, in *For the Love of Money*, p. 138¹

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There is joy in giving
when no restraint is used
there is growth in giving
when sacrifice is made
there is worship in giving
when God is praised
there is love in giving
when "others" is the theme
there is freedom in giving
when self is dethroned
there is security in giving
when eternal treasure is stored
there is honesty in giving
when selfish intent loses its charm
there is power in giving
when the purse no longer corrupts
there is an example for giving
in the God who gave
the best He had

Lois Shank Hertzler²

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QUESTIONS

1. Paul suggests that our giving to others provides a way for God to give more generously to us. What evidence can you find to support this idea? In what ways does it relate to the teaching of Jesus?

2. What are some specific acts of obedience which demonstrate the authenticity of your Christian faith? In what ways is giving generously to the poor an especially effective act of obedience?

3. It has been reported that the majority of Christians do not leave bequests for their church or for charity in their will. How do you account for this?

4. In what ways can the church help us be more generous in giving to those in need? How can we keep this from getting confused with "supporting the institution"?

5. Do you think of yourself as an "hilarious" giver? What could be done to make it possible for you to experience more joy in your giving?

MEDITATION

"... for God loves a cheerful giver." (2 Corinthians 9:7)

Lord of life, enter my deep mind and secret heart in this time of prayer. Let what you find good and constructive be magnified, and what you find unloving or destructive be diminished.

Bless the church, its members, and its leadership with a climate of love, trust, honesty and joy. Work in and through it to bring your good news to the world.

Bless the countless people of good will everywhere whose example and accomplishments mean so much. May all your children discover the peace and freedom of real communion with you. Let joyful giving be part of our response to the marvelous gifts with which you surround us. May we give

what we have to give gladly, and receive graciously, remembering how freely you are giving to us. In the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord, savior and friend, I pray

Silent prayer

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