

## Charity as Cliché

Christmas is making its annual inexorable advance, and even before the post boxes get jammed with cards, the appeals from charities have already probably peaked.

The form and contents of an appeal from a large charity is as rigidly defined as an income-tax return. The envelope must have an eye-catching slogan and preferably a picture. Inside there must be a number of sheets of paper, not just a formal letter explaining a need. That letter must be there, but enclosing a leaflet. People are supposed to respond better to individual cases, so it is necessary to give personal accounts of the sufferers and if possible in their own words, or those supplied for them by the charity. The typography is designed to suggest something personal, whether by way of handwriting or old-fashioned typewriter script. A freepost reply envelope must be enclosed along with a form telling you what certain specified sums of money, which must not be round figures, will do. Just as the income-tax form permits variations as to which parts you need to fill in, or whether you need additional forms, some alternatives are possible in the charity appeal, the main one being a gift to the potential donor, not compulsory but very frequent. One variation on this variation is the charity (e.g. the Lifeboats) that asks you to take raffle tickets, so that money is raised but you have a chance of getting something back. Another is a questionnaire with some bearing on the aims of the charity, and in this case the gift is a biro, to answer the questionnaire. (The idea of course is that you will be ashamed to return the questionnaire without a donation.) The more sophisticated charities use flat bios so that they can get into the envelope without exceeding the Post Office's maximum thickness for letter post, 5 mm. But the gift may be peel-off self-addressed labels (British Heart Foundation and others), or blank cards useable for birthdays or condolences (Red Cross). The Diabetes Research Wellness Foundation even sent me a well-made umbrella.

I used sometimes to reply in the reply-paid envelope that I never give to charities that begin by giving to me, but in some cases (not the DRWF) I did want to support the charity and so overcame scruples.

Big charities, like big political parties, are not much interested in why people donate, as long as the money comes in. The point of these circulars is to generate cash for the charity, and the form has evolved into its present rigidity because professional fund-raisers have either discovered or been trained to think that it works. But if, as we are told, it is more blessed to give than to receive, one may still ask whether these circulars do the donors, actual or potential, any good. At best, giving to a large charity is only enabling others to do the charitable acts.

Helpful deeds are of course done all over the world, and many of them out of charity, but the concept of charity is a Christian one which, with the fading of Christianity locally, is less generally understood.<sup>[1]</sup> "For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: naked, and ye clothed me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me." It is *obviously* good to feed the hungry: the hungry will benefit. But how is his good deed good for the Good Samaritan?

Not by way of the pleasant sensation of having done a good deed. According to the Homilies, good works proceed from faith and are not in themselves a credit entry in the moral balance. (This is not incompatible with the passage just quoted, but let us not go into that just now.) A charitable deed is an act of love, and a sign that at least momentarily we have shown ourselves in accord with the will of God, who is love, in loving him and our neighbour. The first

and principal part of charity, says the Homily, is to love God, but charity is also “to love every man, good and evil, friend and foe”.

If a donation to a charity is an act of love it is charitable, if not, not. For instance, a charity I am happy to support is the Macmillan Cancer Support, having evidence that their work can be really charitable, not just the filling in of a hiatus in the NHS. But the cancer research charities, and the others that research into diseases: does not self-interest come in, and not even in the aspect of loving oneself? (One old, old man invited to give to the Lifeboats replied, after weighing the matter up, “Well, my dear, I don’t suppose I shall ever need them now.”) To prolong life is not necessarily charitable. Herefordshire Primary Care Trust made the national media (11 November 2008) by trying to compel a teenage girl, a leukaemia patient, to have a heart transplant. I doubt whether the attempted compulsion was an act of love.<sup>[2]</sup>

Now: does the standard charity appeal encourage us to be charitable? It has become a cliché. The use of individual examples sometimes works, perhaps because they come more naturally to some appeals. I am glad to respond to the Star and Garter appeal that was able to mention as one of the residents the most decorated woman combattant of the Second World War. The appeal for superannuated Gurkhas also works and would do so, I hope, equally for pacifists and those who think mercenaries are always evil. But the efforts to be individual rather than general have themselves (in general) become generalised. They give a *rhetorical* immediacy which like all rhetoric misfires when its use becomes routine. It doesn’t *sound* sincere even if it is, and the effect is either to set off a stock response or to put the reader off. The understanding of charity is consequently blunted.

The public good in all this, if any, is for us all, donors, recipients and organisers. As we noticed in an earlier column, no. 14, the Charity Commission demands proveable public benefit before recognising a charity. The real benefit is the increase of charity itself—which the cliché circulars make harder.

The charity whose appeals I find most irresistible is Barnabas Fund, which helps persecuted Christians. They are very unusual in their steady understanding of why their activities are charitable, and are one of the charities to issue a prayer diary. To pray for somebody is charitable though no money or action is involved.

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## NOTES

1 The specifically Christian charities allow for this by doing their best to make the charity comprehensible to a utilitarian (or, much the same thing, the Charities Commission: see column 14). Christianity is not to be mentioned. Sometimes a change of name is necessary. What was the Church of England Children’s Society is now just the Children’s Society. If the name is retained its significance can be played down. The Salvation Army could hardly change its name, but the latest circular nowhere mentioned salvation. The YMCA does not explain what the initials stand for. The Church Army, the only aim of which is evangelism, ran for some years the motto “Making a difference”, without saying *what* difference or acknowledging that a change can be for the worse. Its present one is “Making Jesus Famous”. All fame is a good thing? At least it wasn’t “Making Jesus a Celebrity”.

2 Sky News Health correspondent, Thomas Moore, said: “It’s heartbreaking isn’t it? Most 13-year-olds are thinking about pop music and boys and here’s a girl who’s considering how to die with dignity.” Given that choice, who of sound mind would not opt for eternity? (The courts sometimes get into unnecessary difficulties about the perfectly clear distinction between refusing treatment and acting to end one’s life. In this case they got it right.)