

# Agape demands that we think and act

By MARK G. ETLING

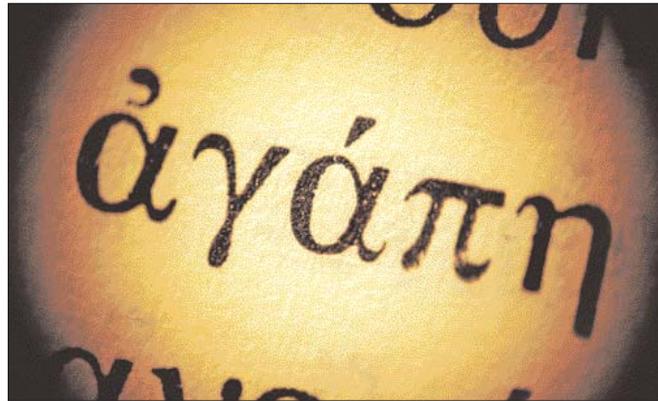
My parish, St. Vincent de Paul in St. Louis, is in the midst of a two-year program to familiarize ourselves with Catholic social teaching. Through bulletin inserts, a website, small-group presentations, and even “movie nights,” we are reflecting on the principles of the church’s social justice tradition.

St. Vincent’s is already deeply committed to our mission “to serve the poor and oppressed.” The parish sponsors several outreach programs for the poor people in our neighborhood. Many of our parishioners have jobs that involve direct service to persons in need.

So why do we need to be educated about social justice?

The social teaching initiative at St. Vincent has caused me to study and reflect on the question of the relationship between charity and justice. My research led me to the book *Excavating Jesus* by John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed. Crossan and Reed make a profound point about the Christian understanding of the reign of God, having to do with the meaning of the word *agape*:

We Christians usually translate the New Testament word *agape* as “love” and interpret it to mean charity or almsgiving. It would be better to translate it not as the rather vague term “to love,” but as the much more precise term “to share.” That is, of course, “to share” on the presumption that we are not so much generously sharing what is ours as equitably distributing what is God’s. And that means, very simply, that justice in the Christian Old Testament is exactly the same as *agape/love* in the Christian New Testament.



Crossan and Reed point out that Jewish creation theology affirmed that God owns the world, and that the Owner intends an equitable and widespread distribution of land. This view was reflected in laws pertaining to everything from usury to the forgiveness of debt to the jubilee year ideal that land was to revert to its original owner every 50 years.

Jesus’ reign of God movement shifted the focus of *agape* from land to food. According to Crossan and Reed, Jesus believed the reign of God called for “the redistribution of eating and healing, of the material and spiritual bases of life, from the bottom upward.” For Jesus, shared meals and open healing were the primary manifestations of *agape* on earth.

Over time, the meaning of *agape* has been domesticated, stripped of its linkage to justice. We have become accustomed to thinking of *agape* only as charity — the donation of time, talent and treasure to meet the immediate needs of the poor:

By saying this, I don’t mean to denigrate in any way the work of charity. That work is appropriate, needed — and virtuous.

But it is not enough.

*Agape* demands much more of the disciples of Jesus. It is about envisioning, advocating for and sacrificing for a world in which each and every person is valued in

absolute terms as a son or daughter of God, in which the basic rights of all are secured, in which each person has the opportunity to live out her or his calling and to make a contribution to the world.

In our personal lives, *agape* demands that we examine our habits of spending and consuming, of saving and investing, of keeping for ourselves and sharing with others. It demands that we be brutally honest with ourselves about what part of town we want to live in, and where

we choose to send our kids to school.

*Agape* also demands that we think and act on the big issues — human rights, the sacredness of life, the distribution of wealth, the morality and immorality of capitalism, immigration, the use of violence to achieve peace, the universal common good.

*Agape* is about feeding the hungry. But it’s also about working to eradicate hunger. It’s about providing shelter to the homeless. But it’s also about working to put an end to homelessness.

*Agape* does not allow us to tolerate the status quo. It is about changing the world within — our hearts and minds. It’s also about changing the world without — our laws and institutional structures.

*Agape* is difficult, uncomfortable, challenging. It is often a bitter pill. But it is a necessary pill for disciples of Jesus to swallow if the world is to become what God has intended from the moment of creation: a world owned by God, and shared by all.

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