



Grace, Empire and Humanitarian Aid

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We Christians often think that “humanitarian aid” is synonymous with love for others. However, the so-called humanitarian response to the most recent crisis in Cuba is one of those examples in which a donation initiative, far from arising from love for those who suffer, lends itself to dominance agendas.

The Caribbean island is experiencing a lack of medicines and supplies. Also, a recent rise in cases of Covid-19 and other complications are affecting the daily lives of Cubans there. Because of that, several media campaigns have requested a “humanitarian corridor” for Cuba. Such a corridor consists of the requirement to the Cuban government to allow the entry of “humanitarian flights” so that Cubans residing abroad can travel to Cuba and deliver basic necessities without any customs procedures or check by Cuban authorities on the island. The Rev. Joel Ortega Dopico, Executive Secretary of the Council of Churches of Cuba, told me in a recent dialogue, “You cannot impose a concept of ‘humanitarian aid.’ It is an undue interference with the sovereignty of the Cuban people. They include the possibility of military intervention against us.”

Much like today, self-interested generosity and government-benefitting ‘humanitarian aid’ were common in the ancient Roman Empire. The Roman Empire promoted clientelism in the sphere of relations between its subjects and citizens. Each favor created a bond of dependence. People were obligated to an act of reciprocity to equal the “blessing” received. All of this created an environment of competition, subjection, and domination between classes and castes, and the competitive culture served the oppressive interests of the Empire.

The Apostle Paul, writing during Roman Empire rule, challenged the church to adopt a different culture – one that defended the dignity and integrity of the human being. Paul responded to his generous Philippian supporters, saying, “I know how to live humbly, and I know how to have abundance; in everything and for everything I am taught, both to be satiated and to be hungry, so to have abundance as to be in need. I can do everything in Christ who strengthens me.”

(Philippians 4:12-13).

Paul described his independence not as a source of pride, but as a liberating value to the gift that the Philippians had offered him. More than self-sufficiency, dependence to Paul did not mean a human pattern but rather generous divine goodness. Paul placed the solidarity of the Philippians in its proper perspective: Paul depended on God, and i God supplied the Philippians for what is lacking (Philippians 4:19).

Amid a crisis like the one Cuba is experiencing, we must call for relationships that emerge from grace. No “humanitarian corridor” that lends itself to the violation of the sovereignty of the Cuban people is needed. Instead, “jubilee grace” is needed to demand that the U.S. lift the economic blockade against Cuba, which has affected the well-being of the island for more than sixty years. Faced with the “humanitarian aid” offered as a Trojan Horse for private interests, I call for loving respect for the sovereignty and self-determination of the Cuban people. Thus, we will surely see the face of God, who calls us to give with grace what we receive by grace.

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