

CHARITY



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Chapter One

A School of Charity

As I have loved you, so you also should love one another.

—John 13:35

SINCE THE EARLIEST days of my life I have known about charity. I never studied about charity or read books about it; I simply lived it. I certainly did not know the word, except that it was the name of one of the girls at school, but I experienced the reality in my daily life. For my parents and entire family, charity was simply the ordinary way of life and the primary consideration in all things. Respect and concern for others was my family's way of life. We never thought it could be otherwise. In my home, the measure of a good education was not how much schooling you had had or how many degrees you had obtained, or what schools you had attended. A well-educated person was one who was always respectful of others and concerned about their welfare. The product of a good education was the formation of a loving heart, a heart willing to sacrifice for the sake of others.

My parents had both immigrated from Mexico during very difficult times and at a very young age. My mother had come from Mexico City as a young teenager with her mother, who had been widowed and had lost everything. My dad had come from a very small town in northern Mexico at the age of

thirteen, not knowing any English and seeking to find work so that he could send money back to his starving family in Mexico. My mother learned a bit of English and also learned how to type. She was able to find a secretarial job with a patient lawyer who helped her with the many English words she didn't know. She used to walk several miles to work every day because she could not afford the money for the bus. My dad found an uncle who had always lived in San Antonio and got a job in my uncle's grocery store, but he had to sleep in an outdoor shed because there was no room for him in the small family home. Eventually my parents met, married, and started a new life together. They were survivors, and no amount of difficulty was to diminish their hope for a better life.

Life had never been easy for them in Mexico or the United States, but like many of the poor, struggling immigrants I have met, they never doubted the goodness of God. They truly lived in God's presence. In spite of the many hardships, setbacks, and even racist insults they had endured, I never heard them complain. On the contrary, they never ceased thanking God for what they had and for the privilege of living in the United States. We were not a rich family materially, but we were very wealthy spiritually. My parents were not very churchy people, but they had a deep sense of and appreciation for the loving presence of God in our lives. I don't think they ever read the Bible or studied the catechism, but I have no doubt that they knew God quite well and were on intimate terms with God. My father even loved telling God the best jokes he had heard each day. He used to say: "If God is truly God, he must enjoy a good laugh." I love this image of a laughing God, a God enjoying life and inviting us to enjoy life with him and each other. Sometimes I wonder why we always seem to

portray God as a stern and even mean fatherly figure. Yet laughter is a great gift of God that allows us to rise above the tensions and trials of life in the realization that there are always greater things to come. A good sense of humor allows us to relativize many of the things that we tend to be overly concerned about. Maybe this sense of a loving-laughing God was the source of my dad's laughter. In spite of the many struggles and difficulties, my dad always appreciated humor and had a very healthy laugh.

Even as my father was dying of cancer back in the days when they did not have the care and the painkillers they have today, he never stopped thanking God for God's goodness and generosity. In late October 1964, a few days before his death, he had been in tremendous pain throughout the day. All of a sudden, around nine in the evening he noticed some Halloween decorations in the room and asked what day it was. When we told him, he became very sad because he was keeping the nurses and hospital workers from trick or treating with their children. He asked us to call the family store and get all the candy available and bring it to him right away so that in some small way he could make up for their loss of fun with their children. When the candy arrived, he asked for the hospital personnel to come to the room and he started to pass out the bags of candy. His great generosity in forgetting himself for the sake of others had transformed the pain into ultimate bliss. What the drugs had not been able to accomplish his generosity had been able to bring about. During those brief moments, it seemed like all the pain was gone and his face radiated joy and tranquility. Because of this spirit of loving gratitude, my parents were the most charitable and happiest people I have ever met.

Mom and dad owned a small family grocery store where working to make ends meet was a daily struggle. (A painting of our family store, by artist Jesse Trevino, can be seen at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., under the title *Tienda de Elizondo*.) They had opened the store during the Depression with money my mother had saved by buying her wedding dress from an outlet rather than from a fancy store. My dad used to say that if he had stayed in Mexico he would have been someone's peon, but here he was his own boss. He loved the fact that by developing his own business he did not work for anyone. This in fact meant working all the harder, because if he didn't work well and responsibly, the business would fail. For my dad, creating and developing his own business was one of the great blessings of the freedom and equality that were possible in this country. We all worked at the store, often getting up to go to the farmers market at three in the morning to be able to get the best vegetables fresh from the farms. From early morning to late at night, there was always something to do, whether packing groceries, cutting meat (I became a good butcher and even have a few scars left where I sliced my fingers), unloading hundred-pound sacks of flour, sugar, or beans, waiting on customers or simply visiting with whoever would come in. In many ways, our store functioned as a community center, where family news and gossip were easily exchanged.

In spite of their many struggles just to keep the store going, my parents enjoyed helping those in need. Dad would help materially and my mother with good advice — she functioned as the community counselor. No one who asked for help was sent away empty-handed. Often people would come to the store without money. But they still went home with the

groceries they needed, simply writing the amount due on a slip of paper. There were no credit cards in those days nor were there interest charges on late payments. People paid when they could and, of course, sometimes never. That sure does not sound like a way to run a successful business, but somehow or another, we stayed in business, paid for our home, provided for our workers, and ensured that my sister and I had a good Catholic education. And even years after my dad's death, my mother would occasionally receive small amounts of money in payment for what was owed my dad.

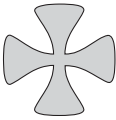
Working and sacrificing for the sake of others was not a burden but a source of joy and laughter. My father's friends used to tell him that he would soon go broke because he was giving away so much, but my dad just kept on being generous. As the Christmas season approached, we would spend hours wrapping Christmas presents so that everyone who came to the store would leave with a Christmas present. My dad used to say that you could never outdo God in generosity and, sure enough, the more he gave, the more opportunities seemed to open up. But the greatest blessing was to end the day knowing that you had made life a bit better, a bit easier, a bit happier for others. My dad used to say that this was the greatest wealth in the world. He had had very little schooling, yet he knew more about the mystery of life than any scholar I have ever met.

My dad ran the store, but my mom was the neighborhood counselor. It is amazing to me today how often I run into very successful persons who tell me that it was thanks to my mother's encouragement and advice that they decided to stay in school and go to college. In the days I was growing up in

San Antonio, many of our public schools discouraged Mexican American youth from advancing in education. They often convinced our children that they were not good enough to even think about the professions. My mother countered this by constantly bringing out the good and challenging them to believe in themselves and go for the top. I have come to learn that this is a profound aspect of charity: not just helping people in material need, but also helping the needy to believe in themselves, to appreciate their dignity, to value their infinite worth, and to dare to achieve what society and its teachers tell them they are incapable of obtaining. Mom was a master at this. This is the deepest root of my preaching and teaching today, for it really pains me to see how many people do not believe in themselves or value their talents and abilities and hence waste their lives away feeling sorry for themselves. At my mother's funeral a childhood friend came up to my sister and me and said: "Memi [as her friends used to call her] was our Mother Teresa."

My parents knew that just helping others in need was not enough. We had to help change the society that made life miserable for our people and excluded us from many of the structures of opportunity. My parents and most of the people in our neighborhood became citizens so that they could vote and take part in the decision-making process. This was a great country but far from perfect, and the exciting thing was that we could take a part in making it better. I remember the great enthusiasm as I went with my dad to meetings of associations for the betterment of our people. Even if it was difficult, we had to work to break down the walls of exclusion that kept so many people in misery. From my earliest days, I remember our involvement in civic and cultural causes. I remember selling

bingo tickets to help elect Henry Gonzalez as our first Mexican American city councilman. He eventually became our first U.S. congressman and one of the most respected members of Congress. Today, his son Charlie Gonzalez has succeeded him at this post. We worked hard to help repeal the poll tax that had been designed to keep poor blacks and Mexican Americans from voting. Civic involvement was collective charity in action. Today this same spirit continues through the efforts of community organizing groups that work for better human conditions for entire neighborhoods.



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We organized local Mexican American merchants to establish our own bank so that we could have a voice in the management of our money. My mom would always dress up with great pride to attend the annual shareholders meeting of the bank. My parents used to say that rather than wasting our time complaining we should devote our energies to creating new structures of opportunity. Complaining makes us bitter and sucks the life out of the soul while creative struggles fill us with life and positive energy.

Merchants organized to help one another. Healthy business was not about competition but about collaboration. The best way for business to prosper was to help others prosper along

with you; there will always be enough for everyone. I remember them saying that the best way of helping people is to make life better for everyone. Thus even in business concern for others was the underlying spirit. This attitude was totally different from today's spirit of uncontrolled avarice that drives the big national chains to drive the small local businesses out of existence. Even in good business, charity can be a guiding principle. Avarice will end up destroying everyone while charity can lead to lasting success for everyone.

But it wasn't just the political and social issues that were important. We were also very involved in celebrating and promoting the best of our Mexican heritage. We started our own Spanish-language radio station and soon after television came to life, we started the first Spanish-language TV station in the United States, which later became UNIVISION. We celebrated the *fiestas patrias* on September 16 (Mexican Independence Day) with our traditional Mexican dances, music, and decorations, often bringing in the best Mexican movie stars to celebrate with us. We might well be away from Mexico but Mexico was not away from us. It was in our hearts and souls, and nothing expressed this better than our traditional songs and dances. I can well remember the huge crowds filling the municipal auditorium with songs of *Viva México, Viva América, tierra bendita de Dios*.

The feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe with the predawn celebrations was the great affirmation of the new life that she continued to bring about. In the early morning chill of December we experienced the warmth of being together as a united people, almost as if we were one body, one soul, and one heart. There were always plenty of flowers, dancers, singers, prayers, dramatizations, and, of course, good tamales

y chocolate — the ancient food of the gods! The other great religious events that brought us together were the annual celebrations of Holy Week with the rich and colorful pageantry of Palm Sunday, Holy Thursday, and Good Friday. If Guadalupe was the celebration of new life, Holy Week was the celebration of the ultimate gift of God's love for us: Jesus who was willing to sacrifice his life on the cross for our salvation. In the suffering of Jesus our own suffering and struggles took on new life and meaning. We are not alone in our suffering because God continues to be with us. Good Friday was the supreme affirmation of life, of the triumph of ultimate love. Today I see more and more the beautiful depth and transforming power of these beautiful traditions that have enabled suffering peoples to be transformed into joyful survivors and creators of new life.

It is amazing how the cultural celebrations of the impoverished and excluded minority have now become one of the main attractions of our city of San Antonio and in many ways one of the chief economic bases. People love to visit San Antonio because they experience the best of Mexico in the United States. Had we given up and let go of our beautiful foods and traditions, San Antonio would not be the great convention center it has become today. By helping our own people to recognize, affirm, and transmit the great treasures of our heritage, we were enriching the entire city of San Antonio.

As you can see, our love and concern for others was not just personal but equally political, social, cultural, and religious. How could we expect others to respect us and treat us with dignity if we did not appreciate ourselves? How could we love others if we did not love ourselves? How could we have something of value to bring to the country that received

us if we threw away the most beautiful treasures of our heritage? There is nothing more destructive and devastating than a deep, often subconscious, self-hatred because of the shame of who we are—a shame in the color of our skin, our body, our name, our foods, our language, our customs, and even our religion. What kept our people alive and well, in spite of the many insults of the dominant society, was the deep, dynamic, and grateful pride because of who we are as a people—children of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the queen of heaven and earth, and descendants of the great civilizations of Spain and ancient Mexico. Who could harm us if we had enjoyed the love and protection of Mary of Guadalupe, the mother of God and our own mother? She had told us, “You have nothing to fear. Am I not here who am your mother?” Her protective and affirming presence has been an incredible life-giving force and a source of great joy and serenity.

Our Catholic faith with its beautiful traditions celebrated through our cultural fiestas was the very ground of our existence, force of our survival, and the source of our joy. We knew that society had to change to make things better for everyone, but this change would begin within ourselves and our communities. We didn’t know the words but our hearts knew that action on behalf of justice was an essential constituent of charity. And justice was not just about civil rights and living wages. Yes, it was this and much more. It is about helping people who have been broken and injured by society become whole by regaining confidence in themselves and their culture; it is about incorporating the excluded into society; it is about recognizing and valuing the talents of every person and culture. The joyful celebration of our cultural and religious traditions was truly an act of communitarian charity, for

in the very celebrations there was a spontaneous acceptance, affirmation, and uplifting of everyone without exception. I don't suppose people ordinarily see fiesta as charity, but a fiesta wherein everyone is welcomed is truly the embodiment of charity itself, for love transcends commonly divisive barriers. And this is what happens in fiesta.

This spirit of joyful, sacrificing love was most evident in our home. The love my parents had for each other was manifested in the way they cared for each other, always putting the needs of the other ahead of their own. As I think back, I remember how each seemed intent on bringing out the good qualities of the other and loved to speak about them to others. They both loved to brag about each other to friends and family. Many years after my dad had died, and even up until the moment she died, my mom kept talking about the great and generous man my dad had been. Their love allowed them to see good qualities and talents others might have ignored, for that is the nature of true love: to penetrate the deepest recesses of the personality of the beloved and to see beauty and value that others might not see.

My mom and dad were very different in many ways and I am sure that there must have been disagreements between them, yet I never recall seeing or hearing them argue or get into a fight. They would patiently discuss matters, truly listen to one another, and gradually come to agreement. As kids, we used to try to put one against the other to get what we wanted, but it never worked, for they always seemed to have a way of silent communication that went beyond our childish attempts at manipulation.

The greatest inheritance my parents left us is the memory of how they loved one another, how they loved us, and how this

love extended to anyone we came in contact with. Charity was not an abstract teaching but the heart and soul of our everyday life. My parents had little, but they gave a lot. They had discovered the secret revealed to us through Jesus: God is love, and we are of God when we love one another. Only in love do we come to fulfillment and only in God who is love does our restless heart come to rest. Only in living a life of loving service to others does our heart find ultimate tranquility, peace, and joy.

I grew up in a wonderful family. I have a lot to be thankful for. And the greatest gift my parents gave me was love.

And of all the lessons my parents taught me, the most powerful one was unspoken, the way they loved one another. My parents taught me the real values in life aren't material, but spiritual. They include faith and family, duty and honor, and trying to make the world a better place.

— Al Gore, 1970