



Catholic
Charities
USA®

10 Ways Catholic Charities are Catholic

by Fred Kammer, SJ

Across this nation there are literally hundreds of independent organizations involving thousands of programs that make up the Catholic Charities network. In 2004, more than 48,000 staff and 213,000 volunteers served more than 7.1 million people. They were the face and hands and heart of Catholic Charities. And despite the incredible variety of people – of many faiths and none at all – who make Catholic Charities a reality, certain essentials make us Catholic Charities.

1. Our ministry is rooted in the Scriptures.

The work we do has its roots deep in the Scriptures. In the Jewish Scriptures, at the heart of the biblical concept of *justice* was the care of the widow, orphan, and stranger. Responding to their needs was a special responsibility of the Jewish people, and this justice was the gauge of whether they understood their relationship to God and to one another.

Ironically, the contemporary work of Catholic Charities worldwide continues to be primarily these same groups: women who are poor; children who are poor; and individuals who are marginalized because, literally, they are foreign workers, immigrants and refugees, they are racially different, or they have a disability, HIV/AIDS, or some other condition that sets them apart. How these people are

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treated tests our society’s justice, and whether or not we understand that we are children of one God who is passionately concerned for the least among us.

This was the teaching of Jesus as well. In the famous judgment scene in Matthew 25, Jesus tells his followers that the world will be judged by how they treat him, found among the hungry, homeless, sick, imprisoned, and poor. This teaching is reinforced in the great scene in the 13th chapter of the Gospel of John when Jesus washes the feet of his disciples and charges them to do so for others. It is an expression of the servant model of the Church underscored in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council.¹

2. This ministry has been an integral part of the Catholic Church for 2,000 years.

As the apostolic Church formed, the Apostles faced a challenge that threatened to tear apart the new Christian community. The charge brought by the Greek Christians was that their widows were not receiving a share of the community’s goods. The apostles appointed the seven deacons whose first ministry was to make sure that justice was reflected in the life of the community, and that poor widows and children were cared for.

This ministry of caring for the needy was institutionalized in the great monasteries of the first millennium as the religious cared for orphans, the sick, the elderly, travelers, and the poor. From the monasteries, the ministry of caring was carried back into the cities by women and men religious who established orphanages, homes for the sick and elderly, hospices, and many other centers for health and social services. Later, lay and religious associations, such as those begun by St. Vincent de Paul, expanded and deepened this work.

Many other great saints were known for their ministries to the poor and vulnerable: St. Francis of Assisi, St. Clare, St. Peter Claver, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Martin de Porres, and St. Elizabeth Ann Seton.

These traditions were carried to the New World to become part of the institutional and parish life of the Catholic Church here. The first such foundation was the orphanage, home for “women of ill repute,” and health care facility begun by the Ursuline Sisters in New Orleans in 1727. By 1900, more than 800 Catholic charitable institutions existed in the United States. Now, staff and volunteers—serving almost seven million individuals a year—care for infants with fetal alcohol syndrome, sponsor group homes for people with mental disabilities, provide high-rise apartments for the elderly, resettle refugees, counsel troubled families, offer hospice to individuals with HIV/AIDS, feed hungry families, and shelter homeless people.

3. Catholic Charities promote the sanctity of human life and the dignity of the human person.

The ultimate rationale for our services is our belief in the sanctity of the human person and the dignity of human life. This is reflected, for example, in adoption services that are among our most traditional, and the care for sick and elderly people, which is a hallmark of our work.

While society may exclude some people because they are sick, disabled, poor, or racially different, Catholic Charities reach out to them with respect for their human dignity, which is at the root of Catholic social teaching. While society may reject some people because they are in prison or undocumented, we work to enhance their dignity, improve their lives, and meet their needs. Jesus Christ rejected no one

from his healing touch and was known for his fellowship meals with tax collectors and sinners. So too, Catholic Charities accept even those whom political majorities would ignore or punish.

Because of the theological and philosophical traditions of this faith community, at the heart of which are human sanctity and dignity, Catholic Charities have certain values and ethical standards that shape our work.² Among these is the preferential concern for the poor articulated by Pope John Paul II and so many others that is played out in the nature of our services, the locations of our offices, the use of sliding fee scales, and our advocacy for social justice.

4. Catholic Charities are authorized to exercise their ministry by the diocesan bishop.

Whether founded by a diocese, parish, religious congregation, or lay activists, Catholic charitable works and institutions have their formal Catholic identity in relationship to the Church and the diocesan bishop.

The bishop is charged in Church teaching and canon law with responsibility for the apostolate within diocesan confines. However organized in

terms of canon and civil law, Catholic Charities have responsibilities to operate consistently with the teachings and values of the Church. While there is great organizational variety, the diocesan bishop ordinarily is positioned within the civil law structure—even of a separately incorporated Charities—to allow him to exercise his canonical responsibilities for the apostolate.

5. Catholic Charities respect the religious beliefs of those we serve.

Many people are surprised to learn that Catholic Charities serve people of all faiths. They may be even more surprised to learn that most agencies do not even keep statistics on the religious affiliation of those who come to us.

This is not an accident of history or a result of receiving funding from the United Way or government entities. Instead, it reflects a determined position to serve the entire community, a custom

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going back as far as the fourth century and, in this country, to the Ursuline Sisters in New Orleans in 1727. In the pattern of Christ Jesus, our response is to families and individuals in need—the hungry, homeless, depressed, troubled, frail—regardless of their religious beliefs. We see this in Jesus' own ministry, where he cured the daughter of the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15 and the Centurion's servant in Luke 7.

This decidedly ecumenical approach is simultaneously Roman Catholic. It reflects our respect for human dignity, religious liberty, and the ecumenical sensitivity promoted by Vatican II. Many people come to Catholic Charities for particular needs: a hot meal, a safe place to stay, a voucher for prescription medicine, resettlement in a new nation, and resources to rebuild after a natural disaster. They do not seek or need religious proselytizing, nor would our staff and volunteers offer it.

We would find it strange to preach Catholic beliefs to a devout Muslim family being resettled from Bosnia, a Buddhist Vietnamese grandmother coming to our senior center, a Baptist elder to whom we deliver a meal at home, or a Lutheran father entering a job-training program. We are Catholic precisely in our respect for others' religious beliefs. As Pope John Paul II told our members meeting in San Antonio in 1986, "for your long and persevering service—creative and courageous, and blind to the distinctions of race or religion—you will hear Jesus' words of gratitude, 'You did it for me.'"

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On April 18, 1997, the pope addressed the Pontifical Council "Cor Unum" on the role of charitable activity. As reported by Catholic News Service, charitable activity is an eloquent means of Catholic evangelization because it witnesses to a spirit of giving and of communion inspired by God who created all men and women, the pope said.

But the primary motivation for Catholic giving is to serve Christ in the poor and suffering and to promote the justice, peace, and development worthy of the children of God, he said.

"Actions of aid, relief, and assistance should be conducted in a spirit of service and free giving for the benefit of all persons without the ulterior motive of eventual tutelage or proselytism."

For a variety of reasons, however, Catholic Charities also may sponsor particular programs for the Catholic Community, including marriage preparation and counseling, parish outreach and training, Catholic school counseling, or other more specific services. These are usually funded by the Catholic Church, used primarily by Catholics, and have a more explicitly Catholic content where appropriate.

6. Catholic Charities recognize that some services require attention to physical, mental, and *spiritual* needs.

In some services, it is appropriate and necessary to recognize and respond to the physical, mental, *and spiritual* needs of those we serve. Addiction treatment programs, marriage and family counseling, grief ministries, and other services call for attention to all the integrated facets of human beings.

We do this in many ways consistent with our respect for the individual's religious beliefs. For example 12-step programs have a distinctive spiritual component essential to their success. Homeless shelters often provide opportunities for sharing faith and hope, prayer of all

kinds, and expressions of belief in a higher power. Senior centers and residences may provide opportunities for chaplaincy service of various denominations, depending on the desires of those served. And marriage and family counseling often must attend to the spiritual beliefs and values of those involved and how those beliefs help or hinder movement toward healing within the family. Counselors recognize and affirm the importance of this spiritual dimension of those they serve, again without imposing religious beliefs upon those involved.

7. Catholic Charities have a special relationship to the Catholic diocese and to Catholic parishes.

In more than half of U.S. dioceses, Catholic Charities agencies have formal programs through which the agency supports and encourages parishes in their ministry to the community and its needs. In many agencies this relationship also exists, although more informally.

Agencies assist parishioners in the exercise of their baptismal commitment to the poor and needy.³ They provide professional resources, training, support, and encouragement to parish-based ministries such as food pantries, outreach to the frail elderly, community organizing, and even legislative networks working for social justice. By so doing, agencies help pastors and parishes to carry out their responsibilities to form caring faith communities. They also expand agencies' own ministry through the hands and hearts of many thousands of parishioners

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and even enlist parishes in joint ventures such as community-wide soup kitchens, sponsorship of refugee families, and prison visitations.

Catholic Charities also cooperate with diocesan leaders by operating or collaborating with diocesan offices and programs funded largely by the Church. These include the Campaign for Human Development anti-poverty program, family life and respect life programs, youth organizations, offices for African-American or Hispanic-American Catholics, and justice and peace offices. In so doing, Catholic Charities assist the Catholic Church in carrying out other related aspects of the Church's ministry within the wider community and help fulfill their own mission to serve people in need, advocate for a just society, and bring people together to solve community problems.

8. Catholic Charities work in active partnership with religiously sponsored charities and the civic community.

Reflecting the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, Catholic Charities express the willingness and even responsibility of the Catholic Church to work hand-in-hand with other religions and other people of good will to serve community needs.

We often support community-wide fundraising for the benefit of Catholic Charities, the charities sponsored by other churches, and other nonprofit organizations, such as fundraising

conducted by the United Way. We build coalitions to address emerging community needs by developing new collaborative responses, community education, and combined advocacy before public and private forums.

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9. Catholic Charities support an active public-private partnership with government at all levels.

The Catholic Church has a long and strong tradition of teaching about the responsibilities of government in promoting the common good and protecting the least among us, and the responsibilities of Catholics as citizens and taxpayers to support those roles and actively participate in civic life.

In light of these teachings, Catholic Charities have sought and accepted partnerships with cities, counties, states, and the federal government in which we receive government funding to provide services to the wider community that we judge to be consistent with our own mission. These payments may take the form

of contracts to deliver particular services, such as foster care; voucher payment from individuals paid by government, such as Medicaid; and government funding of construction, such as housing. Government provides funding; we bring additional funding, volunteers, efficiency, values, community credibility, and dedication to the service of local communities and their needy families.

Catholic Charities have alliances with diverse agencies, organizations, and institutions that share the vision of a more just and humane society.

— *Vision 2000*, Strategic Direction II⁴

10. Catholic Charities blend advocacy for those in need and public education about social justice with service to individuals, families, and communities in need.

Throughout the last century, the Catholic Church has been increasingly outspoken about the need for economic and political change. This change is consistent with the obligations of social justice in order to meet the needs of the entire community, with a special concern for the poorest and most vulnerable.⁵ This is in addition to the obligations of individuals to reach out to those nearest to them in charity and justice.

Catholic Charities, following the lead of the Vatican and the U.S. bishops, have made working for a more just society an integral

part of our understanding of our mission. It is not enough to feed more and more hungry families; we also must raise the public question about why so much hunger persists in this wealthy nation and how that condition might be changed by individual, community, business, and government action. Local Catholic Charities understand that advocacy, empowerment, and work for justice is an intrinsic part of their mission of caring for individuals, families, and communities in need.

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Notes

1. See Walter M. Abbott, SJ, ed. *Documents of the Vatican II*, Chapter IV, “Dogmatic Constitution of the Church,” p. 59. NY: Guild Press, 1966.
2. See, for example, *A Code of Ethics*, p. 9, 12. Alexandria, VA: Catholic Charities USA, 1997.
3. *The Social Mission of the Parish*, p. 8. Washington, DC: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1993.
4. *Vision 2000*, p. 9. Alexandria, VA: Catholic Charities USA, 1997.
5. *Economic Justice for All*, p. 16. Washington, DC: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986.



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Catholic Charities USA is the National Member Service Center for the agencies and staff of Catholic Charities nationwide. By providing networking opportunities, a national voice, program development, training and consultancy, and financial benefits, Catholic Charities USA ensures that its members continue to provide quality social services to more than 7.1 million people in need each year, regardless of religious, ethnic, racial, or social background.



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