

RETHINKING CARING AND COMPASSION

Susan Fani, the editor of *Catalyst*, recently told me that in her first week of law school she heard a lot of students talking about how important it was to be caring and compassionate, especially toward the needy. No phony sentimentalist, Susan was not impressed. Neither was I.

“To feel concern or interest” is how my dictionary defines caring (as in caring about others). Compassion is defined as “sorrow for the sufferings or trouble of another or others, accompanied by an urge to help.” Now notice the one thing that both caring and compassion have in common: neither requires any work. Having the right feelings, or an “urge” to help, is good enough. But is it?

To those in need, results are what count. To be sure, it is preferable that those in need be serviced by those who care, but what matters most is that the needy be helped. Care unaccompanied by action delivers nothing, save the facade of caring, and that can only lead to self-righteousness. Better not to care about the needy and make their life less difficult than to care about them and do nothing. Here’s an example.

If you were unemployed and were looking for a job, would you prefer to live in a city that had a caring mayor and a disastrously high corporate tax rate—the effect of which would be invite businesses to leave, taking their jobs with them—or would you prefer to live in a city that had an uncaring mayor and an attractive corporate tax policy, one that attracted jobs? Similarly, would you prefer to go under the knife with a competent but uncaring surgeon, or with a caring but incompetent one?

When I was in college, I remember a class discussion that

centered on how uncaring the wealthy workers from Westchester were. They were said to be uncaring because they allegedly didn't look out the window when their train passed by Harlem. Now had they done so, that apparently would have mattered. To whom, I'm not sure, but that's exactly what they said.

Similarly, when in graduate school, it was not uncommon to hear students complain how nobody cared about the poor. Except them. So one day in class I invited my caring and compassionate colleagues to volunteer their time on weekends by tutoring the black and Puerto Rican students that I taught during the day in Spanish Harlem. No one spoke.

Bread for the World is an organization that advertises itself as a group that helps the poor. A number of years ago, I heard Father Robert Sirico, the brilliant economist-priest, mention that Bread for the World did nothing but lobby for more money for the poor; according to Father Sirico, the group operated not one soup kitchen in the entire nation. I was astonished when I heard this and felt the

need to verify this charge with one of my fellow faculty members. When I asked him about what Father Sirico said, he grew indignant, saying that Bread for the World was needed because they were a caring and compassionate organization. He then admitted, however begrudgingly, that they did nothing to actually help the poor.

Mitch Synder led the battle for the homeless. But he also left his family on the verge of homelessness by refusing to provide for them. An ex-con, he grubbed money from his wife, lied to the nation about how many homeless persons there were (he admitted lying about the statistics before the Congress) and did little, if anything, about the plight of the homeless. Indeed, he often stood in the way of progress.

The Somocistas were greedy businessmen in Nicaragua who ripped off the poor. They were replaced by the Sandinistas who were

greedy socialists who ripped off the poor. The Somocistas wore suits and the Sandinistas wore fatigues (except that their leader sported Gucci glasses). The Somocistas lived in palaces, the very same ones the Sandinistas came to live in. But the Somocistas were seen as bad guys and the Sandinistas were seen as good guys. Why? Because the Sandinistas talked about caring and compassion and the Somocistas did not.

I could go on. For those who are impressed with events like Holding Hands Across America and singing songs like "We Are the World," caring and compassion is all that counts. But to those in need, it means not a fig. It is results they want, not rhetoric.

Let's remember, however, that there are many nuns, priests and brothers who have made good on their caring and compassion, and in the process they have helped many of the needy. The same is true in the lay community, especially among laywomen. They are a model for us all, especially for those who've been seduced by empty platitudes about caring and compassion.