I

In its most general sense, charity may be defined as the act of giving to each one what he lacks.

That is to say, in the last analysis, to put each thing in its place, which would result in the establishment of the supreme justice upon earth.

Such is the theory, but in practice charity could be considered as the path men ought to follow in their groping advance towards justice.

For, in his present state of evolution, man is incapable not only of realising justice in his earthly abode, but also of conceiving it as it is in its absolute essence. Charity is the living acknowledgment of this inability.

Indeed, in our ignorance of true justice, the justice which is one with perfect harmony, perfect equilibrium and perfect order, our wisest course is to take the path of love, the path of charity which shuns all judgment.

This is what justifies the attitude of those who always set charity against justice. Justice is, in their eyes, rigorous, merciless, and charity must come to temper its excessive severity.

Certainly, they cannot speak thus of divine justice, but more rightly of human or rather of social justice, the egoistic justice which is instituted to defend a more or less extensive grouping of interests and is as much opposed to true justice as shadow is contrary to light.

When we speak of justice as it is rendered in our so-called civilised countries, we should call it not rigorous and merciless but blind and monstrous in its ignorant pretension.

So we can never make too many amends for its fatal effects, and there charity finds an opportunity to apply itself fruitfully.

But this is only one side of the question and before delving deeper into our subject, I would like to remind you that charity,
like all other human activities, is exercised according to four
different modes which must be simultaneous if its action is to be
integral and truly effective. I mean that no charity is complete if
it is not at the same time material, intellectual, spiritual or moral
and, above all, loving, for the very essence of charity is love.

At present charity is considered almost exclusively from
the external standpoint and the word is synonymous with the
sharing of part of one’s possessions with life’s rejects. We shall
see in a moment how mean this conception is even when confined
to the purely material field.

The three other modes of action of charity are admirably
summed up in this counsel given by the Buddha to his disciples:

“With your hearts overflowing with compassion, go forth
into this world torn by pain, be instructors, and wherever the
darkness of ignorance rules, there light a torch.”

To instruct those who know less, to give to those who do
evil the strength to come out of their error, to console those who
suffer, these are all occupations of charity rightly understood.

Thus charity, regarded from the individual point of view,
consists, for each one, of giving to others all they need, in
proportion to one’s means.

This brings us to two observations.

The first is that one cannot give what one does not have at
one’s command.

Materially this is so evident that it is unnecessary to insist
upon it. But intellectually, spiritually, the same rule holds true.

Indeed, how can one teach others what one does not know?
How can one guide the weak on the path of wisdom if one does
not tread the path oneself? How can one radiate love if one does
not possess it within oneself?

And the supreme charity, which is integral self-giving to the
great work of terrestrial regeneration, implies first of all that one
can command what one wants to offer, that is to say, that one is
master of oneself.

Only he who has perfect self-control can consecrate himself
in all sincerity to the great work. For he alone knows that no contrary will, no unexpected impulse can ever again come to impede his action, to check his effort by setting him at variance with himself.

In this fact we find the justification of the old proverb which says: “Charity begins at home.”

This maxim seems to encourage every kind of egoism, and yet it is the expression of a great wisdom for one who understands it rightly.

It is because charitable people fail to conform to this principle that their efforts so often remain unfruitful, that their goodwill is so often warped in its results, and that, in the end, they are forced to renounce a charity which, because it has not been rightly exercised, is the cause of nothing but confusion, suffering and disillusionment.

There is evidently a wrong way of interpreting this maxim, which says, “First let us accumulate fortune, intelligence, health, love, energies of all kinds, then we shall distribute them.”

For, from the material standpoint, when will the accumulation stop? One who acquires the habit of piling up never finds his pile big enough.

I have even been led to make an observation about this: that in most men generosity seems to exist in inverse proportion to their pecuniary resources.

From observing the way in which workmen, the needy and all the unfortunate act among themselves, I was forced to conclude that the poor are far more charitable, far more prepared to succour their fellow-sufferers than are those more favoured by fortune. There is not enough time to go into the details of all that I have seen, but I assure you that it is instructive. I can, in any case, assure you that if the rich, in proportion to what they have, gave as much as the poor, soon there would no longer be a single starving person in the world.

Thus gold seems to attract gold, and nothing would be more fatal than wanting to accumulate riches before distributing them.
Words of Long Ago

But also, nothing would be more fatal than a rash prodigality which, from lack of discernment, would squander a fortune without benefiting anyone.

Let us never confuse disinterestedness, which is one of the conditions of true charity, with a lack of concern that springs from idle thoughtlessness.

Let us learn therefore to make judicious use of what we may have or earn while giving the least possible play to our personality and, above all, let us not forget that charity should not be confined to material aid.

Nor in the field of forces is it possible to accumulate, for receptivity occurs in proportion to expenditure: the more one expends usefully, the more one makes oneself capable of receiving. Thus the intelligence one can acquire is proportionate to the intelligence one uses. We are formed to manifest a certain quantity of intellectual forces, but if we develop ourselves mentally, if we put our brains to work, if we meditate regularly and above all if we make others benefit by the fruit, however modest, of our efforts, we make ourselves capable of receiving a greater quantity of ever deeper and purer intellectual forces. And the same holds true for love and spirituality.

We are like channels: if we do not allow what they have received to pour out freely, not only do they become blocked and no longer receive anything, but what they contain will spoil. If, on the contrary, we allow all this flood of vital, intellectual and spiritual forces to flow abundantly, if by impersonalising ourselves we know how to connect our little individuality to the great universal current, what we give will be returned to us a hundredfold.

To know how not to cut ourselves off from the great universal current, to be a link in the chain which must not be broken, this is the true science, the very key of charity.

Unfortunately there exists a very widespread error which is a serious obstacle to the practical application of this knowledge.

This error lies in the belief that a thing in the universe may
be our own possession. Everything belongs to all, and to say or think, “This is mine”, is to create a separation, a division which does not exist in reality.

Everything belongs to all, even the substance of which we are made, a whirl of atoms in perpetual movement which momentarily constitutes our organism without abiding in it and which, tomorrow, will form another.

It is true that some people command great material possessions. But in order to be in accord with the universal law, they should consider themselves as trustees, stewards of these possessions. They ought to know that these riches are entrusted to them so that they may administer them for the best interests of all.

We have come a long way from the narrow conception of charity restricted to the giving of a little of what we have in excess to the unfortunate ones that life brings in our way! And what we say of material riches must be said of spiritual wealth also.

Those who say, “This idea is mine”, and who think they are very charitable in allowing others to profit from it, are senseless.

The world of ideas belongs to all; intellectual force is a universal force.

It is true that some people are more capable than others of entering into relation with this field of ideas and manifesting it through their conscious cerebrality. But this is nothing other than an additional responsibility for them: since they are in possession of this wealth, they are its stewards and must see that it is used for the good of the greatest number.

The same holds true for all the other universal forces. Only the concept of union, of the perfect identity of everything and everyone, can lead to true charity.

But to come back to practice, there is one more serious pitfall in the way of its complete and fruitful manifestation.

For most people, charity consists of giving anything to anyone without even knowing whether this gift corresponds to a need.
Thus charity is made synonymous with sentimental weakness and irrational squandering.

Nothing is more contrary to the very essence of this virtue.

Indeed, to give someone a thing he has no need of is as great a lack of charity as to deny him what he needs.

And this applies to the things of the spirit as well as to those of the body.

By a faulty distribution of material possessions one can hasten the downfall of certain individuals by encouraging them to be lazy, instead of favouring their progress by inciting them to effort.

The same holds true for intelligence and love. To give someone a knowledge which is too strong for him, thoughts which he cannot assimilate, is to deprive him for long, if not for ever, of the possibility of thinking for himself.

In the same way, to impose on some people an affection, a love for which they feel no need, is to make them carry a burden which is often too heavy for their shoulders.

This error has two main causes to which all the others can be linked: ignorance and egoism.

In order to be sure that an act is beneficial one must know its immediate or distant consequences, and an act of charity is no exception to this law.

To want to do well is not enough, one must also know.

How much evil has been done in the world in the name of charity diverted from its true sense and completely warped in its results!

I could give you many examples of acts of charity which have led to the most disastrous results because they were performed without reflection, without discernment, without understanding, without insight.

Charity, like all things, must be the result in us of a conscious and reasoned will, for impulse is synonymous with error and above all with egoism.

Unfortunately it must be acknowledged that charity is very
seldom completely disinterested.

I do not mean charity which is performed for the purpose of acquiring merit in the eyes of a personal God or to win eternal bliss.

This utterly base form is the worst of all bargainings and to call it charity would be to tarnish this name.

But I mean charity which is performed because one finds pleasure in it and which is still subject to all kinds of likes or dislikes, attractions or repulsions.

That kind of charity is very rarely completely free from the desire to meet with gratitude, and such a desire always atrophies the impartial clear-sightedness which is necessary to any action if it is to have its full value.

There is a wisdom in charity as everywhere, and it is to reduce waste to the minimum.

Thus to be truly charitable one must be impersonal.

And once more we see that all the lines of human progress converge on the same necessity: self-mastery, dying to oneself in order to be born into the new and true life.

To the extent that we outgrow the habit of referring everything to ourselves, we can exercise a truly effective charity, a charity one with love.

Besides, there is a height where all virtues meet in communion: love, goodness, compassion, forbearance, charity are all one and the same in their essence.

From this point of view, charity could be considered as the tangible and practical outer action determined by the application of the virtues of love.

For there is a force which can be distributed to all, always, provided that it is given in its most impersonal form: this is love, love which contains within itself light and life, that is, all the possibilities of intelligence, health, blossoming.

Yes, there is a sublime charity, one which rises from a happy heart, from a serene soul.

One who has won inner peace is a herald of deliverance
Words of Long Ago

wherever he goes, a bearer of hope and joy. Is not this what poor and suffering humanity needs above all things?

Yes, there are certain men whose thoughts are all love, who radiate love, and the mere presence of these individuals is a charity more active, more real than any other.

Though they utter no word and make no gesture, yet the sick are relieved, the tormented are soothed, the ignorant are enlightened, the wicked are appeased, those who suffer are consoled and all undergo this deep transformation which will open new horizons to them, enable them to take a step forward which no doubt will be decisive, on the infinite path of progress.

These individuals who, out of love, give themselves to all, who become the servants of all, are the living symbols of the supreme Charity.

I invite all of you here, my brothers, who aspire to be charitable, to join your thought with mine in expressing this wish: that we may strive to follow their example a little more each day so that we may be like them, in the world, messengers of light and love.

20 May 1912