

Characteristics of a Regional Peace and Justice Commission Chair

Many Secular Franciscans are interested in peace and justice issues, but not all interested persons want to be or should be Regional Peace and Justice Commission Chairs. The person chosen as Regional Peace and Justice Chair should want to help other Secular Franciscans live more fully the peace and justice aspects of our rule.

When speaking of the Rule of the Friars Minor, St. Francis called it “the book of life, the hope of salvation, the marrow of the Gospel, the agreement of a perpetual covenant.” (Celano, *Second Life*, #208) Peace and Justice Regional Commission Chairs should feel the same passion for our Pauline Rule.

A Regional Peace and Justice Commission Chair is living a Franciscan spirituality in which the world truly is a cloister, as it was for Francis. He or she is curious about every aspect of the world, constantly evaluating what is seen and heard according to Gospel values.

Understanding that we are “bearers of peace,” a Peace and Justice Commission Chair knows any true peace, whether between individuals or nations, must be united with other realities: justice, development, truth, love and liberty. There can be no peace without reconciliation, without mutual forgiveness.*

The person chosen as Regional Peace and Justice Commission Chair must be able to lay aside political opinions and personal justice issues when working with fraternities. The person should understand the basic principles of Catholic social teaching and use them in his or her work. Reading a summary of the main points of Catholic social teaching is not enough. The person must care enough about the vision of a just and peaceful society envisioned in Catholic social teaching to want to read at least some parts of the documents that are posted on the Internet.

A Regional Peace and Justice Commission Chair should know his or her Region well. He will have to decide many times what material will be sent out to his Region. As important as the material is the attitude of loving respect with which it is given. It is deciding together, working together, asking and receiving help from all levels of the Order that will build a strong apostolate in a fraternity. According to our Rule 22 it is the local Fraternity that becomes the basic unit of the whole Order, and “the privileged place for developing a sense of Church and the Franciscan vocation and for enlivening the apostolic lives of its members.”

These are not superhuman requirements. They are what we all do everyday as we relate to the people we love in our families. We extend this same desire to support and encourage without controlling to persons in the Fraternities and Regions we serve.

* Fr. Jose Rodriguez Carballo, OFM
Minister General of the Order of Friars Minor
Christmas Message December 25, 2003

Unique Aspects of the SFO Peace and Justice Commission

The Peace and Justice Commission rests on three foundations: our Rule, Franciscan spirituality, and Catholic social teaching. Legislative advocacy is a tool that the Peace and Justice Commission uses to bring our understanding of peace founded on justice to the wider world.

Our Rule

Some sections of our Rule have specific implications for the Peace and Justice Commission.

- Rule 6 tells us to live in full communion with the pope, bishops, and priests “fostering an open and trusting dialogue of apostolic effectiveness.” The Peace and Justice Commission looks to our Church leaders for guidance on the difficult moral choices our society faces today.
- Rule 13 refers to life in community with all others in the world. “A sense of community will make them joyful and ready to place themselves on an equal basis with all people, especially with the lowly for whom we strive to create conditions of life worthy of people redeemed by Christ.”
- A natural consequence of a sense of community is service to others. This is expressed in Rule 14. “Secular Franciscans, together with all people of good will, are called to build a more fraternal and evangelical world so that the kingdom of God may be brought about more effectively.”
- Rule 15 directs us toward living a just life and toward legislative advocacy. “Let them individually and collectively be in the forefront in promoting justice by the testimony of their human lives and their courageous initiatives. Especially in the field of public life, they should make definite choices in harmony with their faith.”
- Our role as peace-makers is expressed in Rule 19. “Mindful that they are bearers of peace which must be build up unceasingly, they should seek out ways of unity and fraternal harmony through dialogue, trusting in the presence of the divine seed in everyone and in the transforming power of love and pardon.”

Franciscan spirituality

Francis was more than an instrument of peace. He was also an instrument of justice. He did not speak of social justice in the terms we use today because the areas of knowledge with which we are familiar, such as economics, political science, social welfare, and criminology, did not exist in his day. During the Middle Ages all social questions were part of theology and under the direction of the Church. Francis brought about social change through his actions.

- Francis’ rejection of money was a challenge to the economic system of emerging capitalism that placed profit above all other ends.
- When Francis made his order one of lesser brothers, he refused to participate in the social class structure of his day in which social class was determined by birth. There can be no hierarchy if all insist that they are at the bottom.
- Francis became one with the poor and the lepers to serve them rather than serving in the paternalistic manner of his time.
- Francis was a peace activist. He went to Egypt to talk with the Sultan and bring about an end to the war. He was not successful, but he earned the respect of the Muslims.

- Francis refused to let his followers bear arms. So many Secular Franciscans did as he asked that the pope was not able to mount another crusade.

Catholic social teaching

Catholic social teaching consists of a group of documents issued by popes, bishops and councils beginning with *Rerum Novarum* (On the Condition of Labor) by Leo XIII in 1891 and ending with *Centesimus Annus* (One Hundred Years) by John Paul II in 1991. They were written with the assistance of the Holy Spirit and are part of the authoritative non-infallible teaching of the Roman Catholic Church.

It is important to remember that the documents referred to as Catholic social *teaching* are *not* the entire social message of the Church. Each document was composed as a response to particular political and economic conditions at the time that it was written. Together they form a vision of the kind of society that God wishes for men to create. It is a world in which all of God's children can be happy and productive living in community with one another. The social teaching documents do not develop all of the moral aspects of life in this world. That complete collection of documents, of which Catholic social teaching is a part, is called Catholic social *doctrine*. Catholic social doctrine is part of the foundation of all of the Apostolic Commissions, not just Peace and Justice.

Certain basic principles about the nature of man and the characteristics of a good society are in all of the documents of Catholic social teaching.

- The innate dignity of all persons comes from the fact that people are created in the image of God. People are by nature social. They are born into a social group and live out their lives and work out their salvation within the context of a social group
- The purpose of the state and of all laws within the state is to promote the common good. The common good is considered to be the good of every person both as an individual and as a social being in relation to the others. There is a universal common good of the entire human family
- Within a state the economy is for the people, and the goods of the earth are to be shared by all persons. Private property always carries a social mortgage. No one has the right to excess when others have nothing. Workers have a right to a just wage and to belong to workers' associations. Wealthy nations must help developing countries to achieve self-sufficiency by sharing knowledge and technology with them. A preferential option must be given to the poor. The poor are the economically disadvantaged and powerless whose needs receive special attention from God.
- Peace is the fruit of justice and is dependent upon right order among humans and among nations. An effective international organization is necessary to promote peace among all nations.

All of the information about our social world that the National Peace and Justice Commission sends to the Regions is in accordance with the principles of Catholic social teaching. Much of it is sent out over the SFOPJNetwork that is an interactive list serve on Yahoo groups. Not all of the information on the SFOPJNetwork is of equal value or importance. It is up to the Regional Chair to decide if the information is appropriate for his or her Region. The SFOPJNet is for very current information and legislative alerts. It is also for discussion among the members of the

network. Information that should be sent to all of the fraternities in all of the Regions is sent directly to the Regional Chairs, not through the SFOPJNetwork.

Not all Regional Chairs have chosen to join the SFOPJNetwork. The National Commission urges all Regional Chairs to at least give it a try. Naturally, the National Commission Chair cannot know the particular peace and/or justice issues in each Region. The most valuable kind of action can be based on the circumstance in a specific Region. Some Regions have chosen to work primarily in the area of another Apostolic Commission, and some Regions have chosen a single issue on which they prefer to concentrate. That is perfectly understandable and acceptable. For all Regions, however, the National Peace and Justice Commission stands ready to help with information and ideas, if called upon. Regional Ministers are invited to subscribe to the SFOPJNetwork. It would give them an idea of the range of issues with which the National Commission is concerned. To subscribe, send an e-mail to colburn@sonic.net.

Legislative advocacy

For the Peace and Justice Commission, legislative advocacy means that we try to influence our lawmakers and executive branch members to adopt policies and pass laws that are in conformity with the basic principles of Catholic social teaching. The most effective advocacy is a personal letter written by a registered voter to a legislator representing the writer's district. The letter should be original and the writer should be correctly informed about the legislation under discussion. The writer should clearly state what he or she wants the legislator to do. The letter should be sent to the local office of the legislator, not to Washington DC. Such letters are read and the contents noted whether or not the writer receives a reply.

In order to write an effective letter, Secular Franciscans must keep up with current legislation that is under consideration. This can be done by reading the local newspaper. It can also be done by following legislation on one of the many websites devoted to legislative advocacy. Each Regional Chair should be connected to at least one of these sources.

- All Secular Franciscans should know about NETWORK, a Catholic social justice lobby. Its recommendations are based on Catholic social teaching. It is available at www.networklobby.org. Anyone can sign up to receive the legislative alerts. NETWORK has pre-written letters that can be sent through its webpage. However, identical pre-written letters are often discounted by legislators' assistants who take care of the mail. It is better to use the background information supplied by NETWORK and write an original letter to the legislator sending it to the district office.
- Another excellent source for background information and legislative alerts is the Pax Christi Rapid Response Network. Anyone can sign up to receive the information by going to the Pax Christi webpage, www.paxchristiusa.org. Pax Christi USA is a national Catholic peace movement. Because peace is only possible in a society with a just economic system, Pax Christi includes information about the economy as well as about actions for peace.
- The National Peace and Justice Commission sends out through the SFOPJNetwork all of the information and legislative alerts that come from the office of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops. It is the same information that is sent to the Social Justice Directors in each of the diocese in the United States. The information is based on Catholic social teaching and the statements of our Catholic bishops and of the Holy Father.

Resources for Peace and Justice Commission Chairs

Internet resources

The websites listed here are for reference and will help Regional Chairs and fraternity members develop their own background about the building blocks of our Peace and Justice Commission. This is necessary before we can evaluate specific issues.

- 1) www.franciscansinternational.org Franciscans International (FI) works on behalf of the poor for peace, justice and the care of creation at the United Nations in New York and Geneva. Individuals can sign up to receive free bi-weekly e-mail news briefs.
- 2) www.hnp.org/publications/focus.cfm This part of the Holy Name Province Website has articles written by friars about the death penalty, globalization, immigration, and war and terrorism. It also has resources in Spanish.
- 3) www.osjspm.org/cst/ The Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis has the best information on Catholic social teaching for lay persons. The complete texts of all of the documents are posted with notable quotations from each of them.
- 4) www.thesocialagenda.com The Vatican has arranged the complete social doctrine of the Catholic church according to major themes, such as the human person, the family, the social order, etc. They have posted quotations from the documents that relate directly to the theme.
- 5) <http://newadvent.org/cathen> The entire Catholic encyclopedia is available on line at this website
- 6) www.nccbuscc.org/sdwp/index The Office of Social Development and World Peace of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops has all of the bishops' statements about peace and justice issues.
- 7) www.cacp.org Catholics Against Capital Punishment has a newsletter that gives information about the issue of capital punishment in the various states.

Books Some recent books on peace and justice to build a background of understanding of Catholic thought.

- 1) Cochran, Clarke E. and Cochran David C. *Catholic Politics and Public Policy: Beyond Left and Right*. Orbis Books, Maryknoll NY. 2003 209 pp. Presents all aspects of Catholic political engagement. Contains an excellent presentation on health care.
- 2) Fritz, Mary, CSJ *Just Peace: A Revolution in Progress*. Pax Christi, USA Erie, PA 2000 151 pp. Nine essays by scholars, theologians and activists that move the debate from the "just war" theory to how to build a just peace.
- 3) Grassi, Joseph A. *Informing the Future: Social Justice in the New Testament*. Paulist Press New York 2003 282 pp. Shows relevance of the New Testament for today.
- 4) Himes, Kenneth R. OFM *Responses to 101 Questions on Catholic Social Teaching*. Paulist Press New York 2001 112 pp. A Franciscan friar answers frequently asked questions about Catholic social teaching. An excellent small book that could be used at fraternity and Regional meetings and workshops.
- 5) Hrier Mich, Marvin L. *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements*. Twenty-Third Publications, Mystic CT. 2001 471 pp. Traces many of the major social justice movements in America to their origins in Catholic social teaching.