

## SOCIAL JUSTICE

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*There will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain.  
The old things have disappeared.*

*- Revelations 21:4*

Social justice is not a matter of individual morality, nor is it the exercise of individual charity. These are necessary just to make the world livable. Social justice transforms the world and helps bring about the kingdom of God on earth.

Social justice is about effecting improvements, not forming committees, taking stands or issuing statements. Through social justice the institutions of society are structured to be more responsive to human needs.

The object of social justice is improved institutions, not better individuals. As Vatican II taught: “It grows increasingly true that the obligations of justice and love are fulfilled only if each person, contributing to the common good according to his own abilities and the needs of others, also promotes and assists the public and private institutions dedicated to bettering the conditions of human life.”<sup>1</sup>

It is simply too much to expect an individual to be just in every transaction. “On the whole,” said George Orwell, “human beings want to be good, but not too good, and not quite all the time.”<sup>2</sup> Each moral act is conditioned by one’s environment, and good environment supports virtue. A society is called good because of its good social habits, its institutions. As a theory of individual justice needs to appreciate individual habits, a theory of social justice needs to appreciate social habits.

Religious institutions aren’t the only ones that promote virtues. All institutions that conform to justice are sources of grace. They do not have to be explicitly Christian institutions, nor do any of the members of the institution have to proclaim their faith publicly. Those who maintain good institutions by doing their work competently are *ipso facto* contributing to social justice.

Conversely institutions can become so far removed from the purpose of advancing humankind that they can metaphorically be sinful; the people who support those institutions also sin. The challenge of social justice is to reform or replace such institutions. This can sometimes be done in a radical, prophetic manner. It can as often be done by those inside the institutions themselves.

The practice of social justice can be out of the ordinary. One immediately thinks of such modern American religious activists as Molly Rush, Mitch Snyder and Martin Luther King, Jr. Social justice can also be performed under the auspices of the institutional church: the pro-life campaign, the sanctuary movement, some aspects of the civil rights movement.

But the very fact that the church in preparation and reflection only extols these extraordinary examples confuses the laity and implies that there is no *ordinary* form of social justice. The ordinary practice of social justice needs clarification and proposition.

The term social justice has gained wide currency in the church in preparation and reflection in the last 20 years. A few years ago the few Catholics talking about social justice obtained a national reputation. Today a social justice committee is associated with almost every parish and diocese in the country, with little observable increase in effective practice of the virtue.

Most renewal and educational programs sponsored by the church in preparation and reflection include a social justice component. The Archdiocese of Chicago sponsors a lay ministry training program with three parts: interpersonal, theological and organizational skills training. Social justice is taught during the organizational trimester.

A vice-president of a large Chicago bank, a graduate of the lay ministry program, taught one of the organizational trimesters. He presented social justice through a long, hypothetical case study of a parish's efforts to close a porno movie theater in its neighborhood. The lay ministry instructor concluded by urging his students to start social concerns committees in their parish to tackle other such situations, thereby, promoting social justice. Those attending the seminar were left with the distinct impression that social justice is about starting another parish committee.

What if the banker had spent the session discussing the difficulties in promoting social justice in the banking industry and had urged the participants to consider their own daily lives as proper arenas for social justice? Suppose the seminar had dealt with how to communicate to parishioners that their entire work lives - on the job, with the family, in the neighborhood - were opportunities for advancing social justice? Instead of advocating the formation of another parish committee, the instructor might have proposed ways a parish could support the laity's ordinary work in the world. Such an approach might broaden the responsibility for social justice from a few specialists on a social action to all Christians.

Committees sometimes distract the laity by mistaking church activity for effective action in the world. Too often these committees assume that elevated

consciences and correct intentions will yield a just social order. Ian McCrae has pointed out the fallacy of thinking of social justice as a matter of good intentions:

In gatherings of church activists one hears with increasing frequency the comment, "Our task is to be faithful, not successful." If the statement is intended to mean that in the pursuit of bringing a social action project to a successful conclusion, one should not act in ways which could be labeled "unfaithful," then the comment belongs in the "of course" category. But if as seems often the case, the remark implies that the religious actor will perform according to some divine ethical standard caring not whether the goal of the activity is achieved, then such a statement is patent nonsense.<sup>3</sup>

One would think that with all the talk about justice by the church in preparation and reflection, with all the church agencies which subscribe to that talk, with the prevalent teaching of the pope and bishops on the matter, the church would be a more effective agent in the quest for social justice. Unfortunately, it often seems that the church does not care about effectiveness at all.

To explain the term *social justice* some Catholic moralists contrast it with commutative justice and distributive justice.

Commutative justice is exercised when an exchange between two parties is on an equal plane. If a salesperson charges a customer a fair price and the customer pays the bill, the obligation of commutative justice has been fulfilled. If an employer exploits workers by paying too small a wage, or if a union demands an exaggerated pay scale, commutative justice has been violated. Fair prices, debt payments, just wages all are regulated by commutative justice. Obviously, no one argues with this concept in theory.

Distributive justice recognizes that there are relative differences among people. Rather than a strict *quid pro quo*, distributive justice makes compensation for these inequalities. An exceptional child, for example, needs more of society's resources than a normal child. Distributive justice is the obligation of an authority, perhaps a parent or a president, to distribute benefits to people in proportion to their abilities and their needs. Distributive justice is the primary responsibility of government. There will always be loud arguments about how much compensation or affirmative action is fair, but most Americans have accepted the concept of distributive justice in fact if not in theory.

Social justice is not as well understood or accepted as commutative and distributive justice. It is often defined as the opposite of charity or social service. The Campaign for Human Development, for example, by addressing the causes of social problems, distinguishes itself from Catholic Charities, which treats the individual victims of social ills. Perhaps this distinction was helpful at a time when the church in

preparation and reflection was neglecting the teaching of social justice. Such a limited understanding of social justice, however, does not sufficiently empower the laity to sustain and improve the world. The challenge of social justice, rather, is how to structure daily life. It is concerned with institutions because they establish the rules and standards (written or unwritten, formal or informal, highly visible or taken for granted) that govern how people act at various facets of life. Institutions can make living correctly either easy or difficult, for they are a necessary part of the environment in which people operate. The virtue of social justice aims at creating new institutions or changing old institutions so that the practice of all other virtues will be possible. Here is an example from neighborhood living:

Garbage is a problem in every community. Only a few years ago, St. Paul, Minnesota had no mandatory garbage collection. Each resident was allowed to hire or not hire independent collectors. Some people were too poor and other too lazy to dispose of their garbage properly. It is one thing to exhort individual residents to package and dispose of their garbage. It is quite another thing to establish regular and diligent garbage collection across an entire city at a reasonable cost to each resident. When those responsible in St. Paul organized to pass sanitation laws and set up systems to monitor just enforcement of those laws, they performed the act of social justice.

Many romanticists, including many well-intentioned church people, are very weak on the importance of institutions. Social justice for them becomes equated with a prophetic stance aimed at a change of heart in individuals, rather than dealing with institutions, which is more ambiguous. In fact, social justice seeks not so much to change people's internal feelings as to control the external effects of those feelings.

People can be virtuous, but only if they don't have to wake up every morning and make every moral decision all over again. We all need social reminders: laws, schools, media, trade organizations, consumer groups. These social reminders of virtue are called organizations, and social justice is about the creation, operation and ongoing reform of institutions.

The virtue of social justice sees to it that the obligations of commutative justice and distributive justice do not have to be thought out by every individual in each new situation.

Perhaps the best explanation of the distinctive virtue of social justice was provided by William Ferree, a Marianist priest who wrote in the '40s and greatly influenced American Catholic social thought. Ferree gave an example. A businessman called the *Catholic Hour*, an old radio program. "I am trying to be a Christian at work, but the tide is running against me. Business ethics has been reduced to 'everybody's doing it.' If I don't do some questionable things, my competitor will and I'll be out of business. I have a family to support, a home to maintain, food and clothing to buy."

The answer given on the radio program was; “Right is right, even if nobody else does it. Wrong is wrong, even if everybody does it.”

Ferree labeled this a “stupid” answer. The caller already knew right from wrong. What he was looking for was pastoral direction. Ferree mentioned three other inadequate responses that are still given to Christians in this everyday situation:

1. Do the best you can.
2. Go ahead and behave like everyone else. Under the principle of “double effect” it is not your primary intention to perpetuate evil.
3. Quit your job.

The man’s only real hope, Ferree maintained, was to take the situation out of the field of individual ethics. The businessman had to first understand the virtue of social justice and then exercise some calculated Christian courage.

On the basis of business ethics, the man was helpless in insuring justice and counteracting evil. If he were able, however, to organize a group of his fellow businesspeople, either in his own company or in several companies, and if the group was able to agree upon certain codes of conduct (no matter how minimal the restraint), that businessman would have begun to practice the virtue of social justice. In the very act of organizing he might have set in motion an institution that could insure justice for many years and many people. <sup>4</sup>

Social justice is not an optional call to some higher, extraordinary individual morality but a demand to do all that is necessary for the common good. While social justice is related to commutative justice, distributive justice, individual charity and social charity, it has a unique element, which is organization. When like-minded people interested in a virtue-supporting environment organize to create new institutions or reform existing ones, they practice social justice.

John Caron is president of a textile firm. He approaches the problem of plant closings from the point of view of a Christian manager. Although he genuinely tries to weigh the moral implications for himself and his business, it seems that he has to face his predicament alone: “A company cannot compete if the competitor’s costs are inherently lower.”<sup>5</sup>

If Caron could meet with the managers of other companies, however, they might be able to practice social justice. If the group gathered by Caron, small as it might be, could agree on some mutual standards for layoff and closing notification, due compensation, reasonable rates of profit, and so forth, it would have made a major advance in the practice of social justice. The managers would remain competitors and must avoid the temptation of price-fixing and collusion, but they could institute some fair procedures for their competition which would give proper consideration to the

larger community of humankind. The association of fair-minded textile plant owners that they instituted would be the fruit of their virtue.

One phenomenon of the inflation era has been the growth of community colleges. One such college had a population of 2,000 in 1975 and 16,000 in 1985. With the increase of students came new faculty, many part time. In 1975 every teacher knew every secretary by name; in 1985 this could no longer be done. Sometimes the expectations of the teachers, especially those who remembered the old days, were unrealistic. They demanded instant typing or duplication and expected the secretaries to pick up their payroll checks and provide other conveniences.

A group of secretaries got together and formed an informal association. They wrote a humorous job description for themselves. Although the list of “we do” and “we don’t” was funny, its intention was serious and its effect important. That list, created in an organizational act of social justice, is now taped to every secretary’s desk. The faculty is aware of the limits. The college has become a more friendly and efficient; secretaries, professors, administration and students are more content.

Supervisors at a hospital were telling nurses to walk slowly when responding to a code on a certain floor. All the patients were elderly and their conditions were terminal. The supervisors knew that extreme life-saving measures were only prolonging the suffering of the patients and their families.

Some of the nurses were disturbed by this informal directive. They did not want a patient’s death to be their responsibility. The situation became complicated when some nurses walked slowly while others ran. Guilt and second-guessing abounded.

Finally, some of the nurses organized a meeting at a nearby pizza parlor. The discussion continued long into the evening. Some of the exchanges were loud; some tears were shed. The consensus was that there was no consensus. The medical issue was too complicated to yield a principle that would cover each situation. Something did happen at that meeting, however, which exemplifies the key to social justice. The nurses decided that their collective behavior should be consistent. It would be important for all nurses at all times to respond to a code on that particular floor in the same way. Difficult situations were not eliminated, but subjective accusations, feelings of guilt and poor communications among nurses and with supervisors were minimized. Further, the nurses decided to reconvene their group at regular intervals to evaluate their decisions.

The standard procedure adopted at the informal meeting was the outcome of the practice of social justice. Those nurses who organized the pizza parlor meeting discovered the unique act of social justice - organization. By organizing, nurses would no longer harbor unreasonable guilt feelings nor could individuals be singled out as

uncooperative by their supervisors. The discussion was now on the formal, public, institutional level where it belonged.

This does not mean that the work environment at that hospital is no unfriendly. By taking differences of opinion out of the realm of personalities, hospital relationships are now base on mutual respect and the common good. Social justice does not deny or eliminate disagreements or differences, however. The intent of social justice is not to make collective bargaining a merry affair. It is to encourage all parties to operate in the public arena, to recognize the legitimate interests of other sides in a dispute, and to disagree in a predictable, institutional manner.

It is incorrect to maintain, as do some conservatives, that owners have the moral right to make all decisions for a company provided that they act in an ethical manner. It is equally wrong to hold, as do some liberal, that labor has a monopoly on truth provided it is reasonable in its demands. The virtue of social justice, in this case, allows the two parties - labor and management - to organize themselves in order to engage in collective bargaining. Social justice might also involve the organization of arbitration panels, regulatory agencies, or consumer pressure groups. Thus, social justice could be practiced by the participants on either or both sides, by outside mediators, by the government, by churches or other volunteer organizations interested in labor relations, by other companies or unions, by the media, or by any group acting to promote the common good.

These examples have involved practitioners of social justice working inside their normal occupational or life positions. This is not the only way to make a system more humane. At times it is absolutely necessary to goad a system from the outside in a prophetic, sometimes radical protest. Such extraordinary effort, however, should not be the normal method of operation in a good society. And even if outside protest in appropriate, it still takes people within the institutions to make the necessary correctives. For every Martin Luther King Jr. there must be a Lyndon Baines Johnson.

It is necessary to highlight the role of the insider in achieving social justice because so much of the language and practices of the church in preparation and reflection suggests that protest and prophetic witness are the only vehicles for social justice. This was what the signers of the seminal *Chicago Declaration of Christian Concern* were complaining about:

We also note with concern the steady depreciation, during the past decade, of the ordinary social roles through which the laity serve and act upon the world. The impression is often created that one can work for justice and peace only by stepping outside of these ordinary roles as a businessman, as a mayor, as a factory worker, as a professional in the State Department, or as an active union member and thus that one can change the system only as an "outsider" to the society and the system.

Such ideas clearly depart from the mainstream of Catholic social thought which regards the advance of social justice as essentially the service performed within one's professional and occupational milieu. The almost exclusive preoccupation with the role of the outsider as the model of social action can only distract the laity from the apostolic potential that lies at the core of their professional and occupational lives.<sup>6</sup>

The insider is the one who organizes institutions to be responsive to people. While there is a role for the prophetic outsider, most laypeople will be more effective, and therefore more virtuous, by practicing social justice in the ordinary institutions of their lives: job, family and neighborhood.

Yet the church in preparation and reflection is not adequately supporting a confident laity in the quest for social justice. Ed Marciniak charge that the disposition toward social change from the outside and against change from the inside may be deliberate:

Among many church leaders and their staffs there lingers an abiding disdain for those Christians who work inside the political and economic system and a predilection for those who are stationed outside or against the system. Many of the church's civil servants (priests, religious and laity who are full-timers in the parish, diocesan office or the church-related hospital or school) operate with a built in bias. From the periphery of economic and political institutions they tend to stand in judgment and condemnation, not knowing how to commend, encourage or support the insiders, those businessmen, professional women and men, union leaders, who are persons of integrity and allergic to injustice.<sup>7</sup>

New York's John Cardinal O'Connor's treatment of New York Governor Mario Cuomo during the 1984 presidential election campaign was an example of this attitude. We must assume that O'Connor and Cuomo are equally sincere in their Christian faith and in their opposition to abortion. O'Connor, however, acting as the quintessential outsider on the issue, condemned all politicians who did not agree with his means of opposing abortion. A confident layman himself, Cuomo lashed out at "this whole notion that we are somehow 'failed Catholics' because we disagree with the bishops' political judgment. It's not good logic, it's not theologically sound, and it's not true."<sup>8</sup>

What should the church in preparation and reflection be doing to help the church at work in the world strive for social justice?

Education in the principles of justice would be paramount. It is, after all, in the busy world of everyday life that conflicting claims are bartered and systems for delivering human rights and needs are structured. In fact, considering all the socio-



ethical decisions that Christians make every day in the health clinics, council chambers, classrooms, police beats, hospital wards and service agencies, parish social action committees can almost be a distraction. Training in the principles of justice might help Christians understand the ramifications of their daily work.

Social justice is not a weekend committee passing meaningless resolutions. Social justice is more than being aware of the events of the day. It requires moral courage, tact, ingenuity and a knowledge of attainable ends and workable tactics.

There are three basic elements to the successful practice of social justice.

1. *Organized Effort.* The virtue of social justice can be practiced either by forming new groups or by reforming existing groups. Social justice does not happen until people come together to tackle a mutual concern. A single person cannot be heard among the various interest in society: international markets, huge labor unions, giant corporations. It is necessary to get organized to have any voice and to make any contribution to the welfare of humankind. A just social order is not an extension of individual benevolence or individual justice.

2. *Institutional Reform.* It is not enough to fortify each individual. Too often the institutions of workplace, neighborhood and family take on lives of their own with patterns, rules and standards that are unexamined and unquestioned. To suggest, for example, that individuals monitor the content and duration of their television viewing misses the institutional nature of the television culture. There is a strong temptation to blame the individual victim in a situation, when in fact the institutions themselves must be challenged.

3. *Common Good.* The common good is more than the sum of each individual's good. The common good, the end of social justice, is the obligation both individuals and institutions have to structure society in such a way that commutative and distributive justice can be practiced as easily as possible. Social conduct has to be regulated according to some code that fosters the good of all persons in society. While it is good for workers to make good salaries and manufacturers to make record profits, for example, if the needs of consumers in an inflationary market are not considered, the common good will fail. The common good, properly understood, brings about the greatest realization of particular goods, because in the real world the common good is ultimately based on the self-interests of all individuals. As St. Thomas Aquinas said, "Anyone who seeks the common good of a community thereby seeks his own good."<sup>9</sup>

Especially by using Catholic social teaching, the church in preparation and reflection can help the church at work in the world pursue the virtue of social justice. What is needed is not an attempt to make social justice one more church-run lay ministry program but rather specific programs to teach the value and skills of organization, the importance of institutions, and an appreciation of the common good. Social justice will then become the essence of the daily work of all confident laypeople.

### Questions for Discussion

1. What did the term “social justice” mean to you? In what way has that understanding changed after reading this chapter?
2. Think of an example of a corporation or a social group that acknowledges social responsibility through a program that promotes social justice. Why does it support this program? Has the program been effective? If so, why?
3. Reflect on a way in which you can practically and effectively be involved in social justice in your daily life. How effectively can you work within your group or institution? Is there a point at which you believe that a reform effort from outside would be justified?

### Footnotes

1. Vatican II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, no. 30.
2. George Orwell, quoted in *Pocket Pal 1985* (Maywood: Myron Manufacturing Corp., 1984).
3. Ian J. McCrae, “Faithful or Successful?” *Coalition Close-Up*, Winter, 1984, p.3.
4. William Ferree, S.M., *The Act of Social Justice* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1942), pp.69-71.
5. John B. Caron, “Noncompetitiveness Road to Oblivion,” *National Catholic Reporter*, August 26, 1983, p.17.
6. “The Chicago Declaration of Christian Concern,” in Barta (ed.), op. cit. p.23.
7. Ed Marciniak, “Being a Christian in the World of Work,” *Origins*, July 19, 1982, p.137.
8. Joan Barthel, “The Education of a Public Man,” *Notre Dame Magazine*, Winter, 1984-85, p. 13.
9. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theological*, (New York: Benzinger Brothers, Inc., 1947), p.1395.