



Social justice for dummies

By Joe Sullivan |  Print |  Share
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Includes bonus information on:

- The easy way to know the difference between justice and charity
- The pitfalls that lead to "fringe-ism"
- What's in it for you

"He's on the Social-Justice Committee," she said, a sound of fear, wariness, even a little contempt in her voice. Here, in the middle of a parish potluck dinner, that phrase came up again. *Social justice*.

How is it that the concept of justice -so central to both the Bible and Catholic theology-has gotten such a bad name in many parishes? With a little education, it doesn't have to be that way. Let's take a look at what social justice is. The U.S. bishops refer to social justice as part of a larger umbrella of activities called *social ministry*. This broad term includes direct services that most Catholics would call charity: food pantries, clothing drives, and homeless shelters. Our faith calls us to respond immediately to the requests of individual families by providing them with the temporary assistance they need: a bag of groceries, a winter coat, or a place to sleep. But it is only one part of social ministry.

The other part is the social-justice side. This includes actions aimed at resolving the root causes of injustices. Here, the key question is, Why? Why can some people afford to buy food, clothing, and shelter, while others cannot? Perhaps the cause is low-wage jobs or a rent system controlled by a handful of landlords. In any case, social justice involves working for change that is focused on systems (the economic system, the health care system) and institutions (banks, schools, governments) rather than addressing the specific needs of individual families. The goal of social justice is to transform public policies to be more responsive to human needs over the long-term.

In their 1993 pastoral letter "Communities of Salt and Light," the U.S. bishops reminded Catholics that they are all called to participate in both kinds of social ministry activities:

Catholic social teaching calls us to serve those in need and to change the structures that deny people their dignity and rights as children of God.

Service and action, charity and justice are complementary components of parish social ministry. Neither alone is sufficient; both are essential signs of the gospel at work.

Causes for concern

If both charity and justice are important, why are there so many charitable activities in Catholic parishes but considerably fewer actions for justice? In the parishes that do have active justice committees, why are the members avoided or discussed with disgust at parish gatherings?

Part of the explanation for such reactions may lie in the controversial nature of social-justice issues. Take a look at the contrast between charity and justice activities. Most people will sing your praises if you volunteer at a homeless shelter. However, suggest to a land developer that not enough affordable housing is being built in your community, and you are likely to get a scowl. Brazilian Archbishop Dom Helder Camara put it succinctly: "When I gave food to the poor, they called me a saint. When I asked why the poor had no food, they called me a communist."

Tinkering with a system-whatever system that might be-has its price. If you attempt to fix an unjust system that provides certain individuals with rewards, those who benefit will likely resist any change. This is the case with many decision makers in business, law, government, and other institutions. It hits even closer to home when we are the beneficiaries of an unjust system. For instance, would you be willing to sell your stock in a well-performing company if you found out the firm paid its workers less than a livable wage?

"Communities of Salt and Light" acknowledged that there are "difficulties and dangers" in the implementation of parish social ministry. A number of specific problems can cause social-ministry efforts, especially justice efforts, to be ultimately ineffective. However, parishes who keep these things in mind and adjust accordingly are proving that social justice is an important part of bringing our faith into the marketplace.

Who should do social justice? Everyone seems to have an answer to that question. There is a tendency to delegate the responsibility of doing social justice to anyone except oneself. A common complaint of social-justice leaders is the lack of vocal support from pastors and clergy. They believe nothing is as effective as a call from the pulpit-and from the pastor in particular-to participate in specific justice actions. Many lay leaders feel that homilists regularly miss opportunities to highlight justice themes found in the lectionary readings. Some believe these omissions are intentional, not accidental.

Most pastors believe that for justice efforts to be successful, the issues and responses have to come from the average parishioners. "*They* have to be the leaders, not me," says a pastor of a suburban parish near Atlanta. "Legislators want to hear from taxpayers and business people, not from priests."

There is also the staffing dilemma. In an effort to develop a more structured and effective social-ministry effort, many parishes hire a staff person to coordinate charity and justice activities. Too often, however, the staff person becomes the "designated doer." This lets the rest of the parish-laity and clergy alike-off the hook. "Communities of Salt and Light" has this to say about the question of who should do social justice:

The most serious danger is for parish leaders to act as if the social ministry of the Church was the responsibility of someone else. Every believer is called to serve those in need, to work for justice, and to pursue peace. Every parish has the mission to help its members act on their faith in the world.

This is not just a theory. If you look at parishes where social justice is effective, it is at the center of parish life and is practiced by many parishioners. Social-justice actions do not just happen—they take careful preparation and coordination. Successful parishes have a core team of leaders who coordinate activities that engage all parishioners in the long-term solutions to social problems. Given the controversial and complex nature of social-justice issues, promoting social justice is a tall order.

And one common stumbling block to good leadership of parish social-justice committees is "The Lone Ranger" syndrome. This occurs when one or two leaders get involved in many peace and justice activities but fail to involve other parishioners. These heroes and heroines are usually passionate, knowledgeable, and articulate—but they act alone. Most of the time they get frustrated because they simply do not have the people power necessary to effect long-term social change.

Paul Woolley, director of the Social Justice Resource Center in Oakland, California, says, "The best parish justice leaders—the ones who don't burn out—get lots of other people doing social-ministry work. They see their role as coordinators, not doers." Successful justice leaders involve the inexperienced in advocacy work, even though it might be quicker and easier to do it themselves. They explain issues in plain language, avoiding unnecessary jargon that might intimidate others from taking action.

The best justice committees are made up of people from different income groups and with different life experiences. Many committees are too homogeneous.

"You have situations where a few, self-selected people get together, form an only-people-like-us group, get a bit too self-righteous, and talk about how they're way ahead of the rest of the church," says Polly Duncan Collum, director of Parish Social Ministry for Catholic Charities USA. "This occurs at both the parish level and within a diocese, where one or two parishes become the social-justice 'hotbeds,' attracting activists from around the region."

In "Communities of Salt and Light," the bishops warned against the tendency of social-action leaders to isolate themselves and treat the parish "as a target rather than a community to be served and empowered."

Generally his tendency toward "fringe-ism" shows up in two areas: 1) the issues the social-justice committee chooses to focus on, and 2) the relationships the justice committee often fails to build, maintain, or strengthen.

What's in it for me?

Community-organizing schools emphasize the concept of self-interest: the idea that people will only get involved in a campaign if they see how they are personally affected by an issue. This simple concept is often overlooked by parish leaders. Problems occur when the justice committee—frequently made up of six to twelve people—decides what issues the parish ought to work on for the next year and how people ought to respond.

Case in point: one social-justice committee in Minnesota had a parishioner who was concerned about human rights abuses in Guatemala. Try as it might, the committee could not get the rest of the parish to care much about this problem. The committee tried speakers, videos, pamphlets, and other educational tools. This suburban parish was not full of uncaring people, committee members simply had not articulated why parishioners should care—why, in fact, it was in their self-

interest to care. Once members explained that a local company produced a shoe glue that was sniffed by poor Guatemalan street kids, people started listening. That company was their employer, a firm in their city, and a member of their Chamber of Commerce.

"The best issues to work on," according to Collum, "generate activities that are based on the real needs of parish neighborhoods. The justice committee doesn't decide the issues, rather it facilitates a one-to-one visiting process that surfaces the issues most on the minds of the community, even if it takes more time."

But it is not always easy to figure out what makes for a good issue. Successful social-justice committees make a distinction between a problem and an issue. Problems are chronic, broad, vague, distant, and unwinnable. Issues are different; they cut an unmanageable problem down to a size where the average person can make an impact.

Good issues are immediate, not forever. They have an end in sight and get people interested because the timing is limited. Successful issue campaigns have clear goals and specific decision makers identified who can make the necessary changes. Justice committees that succeed are realistic; for example, they might not be able to solve the global pollution problem, but they can make a difference in how their county disposes of toxic waste.

Leaders in parish social justice also tune in to topics discussed at restaurants, debated in newspapers and on talk radio, and hashed out at family gatherings. Justice issues often are about lack of opportunity and access to resources and inequalities. They almost always involve money, politics, policies, procedures, large numbers of people, and power. Because of all these elements, there is a certain complexity to social-justice issues that scares away many Catholics.

Parish social-justice committees can overcome people's fears by building relationships. Remember, this is social change. Every issue has positive and negative consequences for different groups of people. Effective parish social-justice committees look at a system, institution, or public policy and ask questions about people. Who benefits from this law? Who opposes this change, and why? What is the impact on the poor and most vulnerable people if this policy is approved? Social justice is all about the rights and relationships between different groups of people.

The best social-justice committees are constantly talking with people. They meet one-on-one with the winners, losers, and decision makers to get different perspectives on the issue. Then the justice leaders engage people in two specific ways.

They ask: "Do you know anyone, personally, who is affected by this problem?" and "What do you see as possible solutions to this problem that would respect the human dignity of poor and vulnerable people?" This engages others by "rehumanizing" the issue and invites them into the solution-making process with an eye toward the poor.

Building relationships begins within the parish. "Sending a flyer from the priest doesn't work," says Ruth Rogers Martin, coordinator for Parish Social Concerns in Fort Worth, Texas. "Justice leaders need to make the rounds, spend some time building relationships with parishioners. I'd suggest two or three visits a month by leaders." According to Martin, relationships cultivate possibilities. Like collecting puzzle pieces, these visits by justice leaders help them assemble a picture of the root causes of a social problem and, more important, an indication of what solutions might be most effective.

When parish social-justice leaders invest the time into building relationships, they can often overcome the resistance that occurs when issues polarize groups within a community. Just ask Joe Coudriet, social-justice minister at Our Lady of Good Counsel Parish in Endicott, New York. Back when the Jimmy Carter administration reinstated selective service, Coudriet researched and informed his parish about the Catholic position on conscientious objection. He was met with resistance from veterans in his parish who thought that this activity refuted their military service. Imagine their surprise when they learned that Coudriet himself was a four-year Korean War veteran. Once they understood where Joe was coming from with this informational campaign, they were less hostile to both him and the effort.

"Social justice is misunderstood because of stereotypes about peace and justice people," says Thomas Garlitz, director of the Peace and Social Justice Ministry with the Diocese of Joliet, Illinois. "The image many Catholics think of is a group of activists spilling blood across missiles. That frightens people."

Political pitfalls

The antidote to "fringe-ism" is a careful process of choosing the right issues and then building the relationships within and outside of the parish to make a difference on those issues.

Sounds easy. But we all know how tricky relationships can be. Even within our own families, discussions about solutions to poverty bring out vast differences of opinion. These differences are magnified at the parish and neighborhood level. And in the political arena, where many decisions about social justice are made, parties intentionally pit one group against another. In the U.S. bishops' words: "We need to make sure our faith shapes political action, not the other way around."

Politics can be the single greatest relationship-breaker for justice committees if not handled properly. The most significant error occurs when a group aligns itself too closely with one particular party. Some examples? To assist parishioners in choosing candidates who are consistent with Catholic social teaching, the justice committee takes the step to endorse a particular person. This could be a Democrat who is seen as more sympathetic on poverty issues, a Republican who is more prolife, or a Green Party candidate who is more sensitive on environmental issues.

Many times the social-justice committee thinks it is helping Catholic voters. Its members may have even researched Catholic social teaching and used it to support their positions and their endorsements. But the error lies in making the endorsements themselves, whether the committee does this in a blatant or subtle manner. Again and again, the U.S. bishops have said that as Catholics, we advocate for social justice based on our moral principles, not power politics:

A significant challenge is to avoid divisiveness; to emphasize common ground among social service and social action, education and advocacy, prolife and social justice, economic development and environmental commitment. We need to work together to reflect a comprehensive concern for the human person.

Parishes can handle controversial issues without the discussion degenerating into ideological camps by using the model of National Issues Forums in the Catholic Community (NIFCC). NIFCC provides discussion guides that give facts, figures, and stories about a current issue, such as the health-care debate or capital punishment. For Catholic parishes, the church's social teaching on the topic is also examined. A combination of small and large group discussion, led by facilitators who follow NIFCC's rules for civic discourse, can make for an interesting adult

education event.

Leaders in learning Successful parish social-justice leaders seem to share an insatiable desire to always learn more-about Catholic social teaching, about a specific issue, about the way a governmental board makes public-policy decisions. This quest for education on social issues is not limited to just activist types, says Mary Heidcamp, coordinator for the Peace and Justice Office with the Archdiocese of Chicago. "Most Catholics really want to understand the theology behind justice. They are hungry to know how actions for justice connect to their faith lives."

Catholic Charities' Collum agrees, but says it doesn't always happen. "When parish leaders do education and formation work, it's often seen as too soft. However, the actions of Jesus and the writings of the apostles contain very deep, very challenging messages."

Youth minister Shawn Phillips of Holy Name of Jesus Parish in Medina, Minnesota finds discussing the differences between charity and justice an effective tool for justice formation among the parish's Confirmation students. Preparatory work like this, says Collum, teaches volunteers how to ask the deeper, systemic justice questions. "It makes a difference in how their service experience gets processed, both for youth and adults. This is attitude-changing work that shapes behavior throughout the lives of people."

When it comes to justice education, most successful leaders recommend a firm foundation in the basics-the biblical stories of justice and the key principles of Catholic social teaching-for all members of a Catholic community. Entrusted with this task are the many Catholic educators at a parish, including homilists, school instructors, religious education teachers, and adult-faith formation leaders.

In many cases, diocesan and Catholic Charities offices are available to assist parishes in improving justice-education efforts. (To find out what resources are available in your region, call Catholic Charities USA Parish Social Ministry Office at 703-549-1390, extension 21.)

Keep it simple

A well-running parish social-justice committee-with balanced leaders who have good relationships with people and know how to work on an issue-can still have problems, if they "bite off more than they can chew," according to Oakland's Woolley. The list of social-justice issues is so huge, leaders must make choices. The U.S.bishops agree:

Another danger is to try to do too much on too many issues, without clear priorities and an effective plan of action. Not everyone can do everything, but the parish should be a sign of unity in pursuing a consistent concern for human life and human dignity.

Woolley says the best justice committees in the Oakland region have an annual planning day or retreat where they develop a one-to-two-year vision focusing on several issues. Having a plan, with goals, objectives, and a time line is an important organizing tool that helps focus group activities. According to Collum, "A plan allows the group to hold each other accountable, to celebrate when things are done well and on time, and to follow up on people if they aren't coming through on a promise."

Good committees make sure that other parish leaders-like the staff, parish council, and

education board members-are not just informed about the plan but add input into the parish social-justice planning process.

While long-term plans and focus are important to effective social ministry, good leaders also need to be flexible and ready to respond when a crisis creates a ready-made issue. The skill in these situations is to be able to spot whether the crisis meets the criteria of a good issue. Social-justice committees constantly face choices and need to set limits by thinking strategically.

As Heidcamp, with the Archdiocese of Chicago, adds, "The team needs to think through the implications on an action like circulating a petition. When that kind of analysis doesn't get done, mistakes get made, and justice people come off as `fringy.'"

Focus is also an important tool in two major activities that a social-justice committee does: communication and conflict resolution. Effective committees recruit strong writers, speakers, and communicators who can explain complex issues and get the message out to the whole parish. They also have leaders who acquire skills in managing conflict and negotiation because the controversial nature of justice issues means that there will always be disagreements among people-including people of the same faith.

In addition to a basic understanding of the church's social mission, the average Catholic should clearly understand the difference between charity and social justice and avoid the temptation to limit his or her involvement to volunteer social service while the roots of a system remain unaddressed. A helpful tool taught by the Christian Family Movement of the 1950s, the pastoral circle, is also worth reviving. The See-Judge-Act method of discernment (see sidebar, right) is still the most practical way for Catholics to apply social justice in their everyday lives.

It helps for those who form the core team for social action to regularly attend review sessions on this basic material. "It's easy to forget our tradition," says one leader, "when you're in the middle of an issue fight. Yet the tradition is our fuel, it's what keeps us going. It keeps us honest and doing justice work for the right moral reasons, not for ego, pride, or personal power." It's a lot of hard work, this social-justice ministry. Perhaps, but there are some clear benefits to the people and parishes who work hard to do it right. Joliet's Garlitz says, "Those people who do get involved in justice find a whole new dimension of their faith. Hearing about Catholic social teaching is very exciting and it spills into their celebration of sacraments. Their faith becomes more fully alive." The U.S. bishops sum it up well in "Communities of Salt and Light":

Effective social ministry helps the parish not only do more, but be more-more of a reflection of the gospel, more of a worshipping and evangelizing people, more of a faithful community. It is an essential part of parish life.

Joe Sullivan is a parish organizer for the Catholic Charities Office for Social Justice in St. Paul, Minnesota. He can be reached at joesulliv@mtn.org [1].

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