

Thoughts about Catholic Social Justice Teaching (CSJT)

This year, when we are asked to think about the concept of our stewardship of the time, treasure and talent which God has given to each of us, is an especially fine time to think about the concept of Catholic Social Justice Teaching, something at the heart of Catholic tradition, and central to the agenda of the late Pope John Paul II, yet often misunderstood by the laity.

Catholic Social Justice Teaching is rooted in that human nature which a compassionate God has given us, as we are created in His image and likeness. We humans are not, normally, people who can observe need and suffering in others calmly, without a very strong impulse to relieve or prevent it.

Catholic Social Justice Teaching is also rooted in scriptures. That God will look with favor on the merciful is a constant message in the Old Testament. Perhaps Catholic Social Justice began when Jesus gave what we now call "The Sermon on the Mount." When Our Lord is asked to name the greatest commandment, He says, in Matthew 22, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it:" Love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang the whole law and the prophets too." Then He offers the parable of the Good Samaritan to lead us into a meditation on the definition of neighbor.

At any rate, the concepts of Catholic Social Justice Teaching, no matter how they have developed over the years, began with the Man who gave the Great Commandment to love God with all one's heart and love one's neighbor as oneself, with the Man who said, "Whatever you do to the least of my brethren you do unto me." Jesus identifies himself with the poor and suggests that only those who are aware of and respond to the poor and marginalized can know and respond to Him.

Corporal and Spiritual works of mercy are also embedded in our Catholic traditions, but only within the last hundred and fifty years or so have popes and bishops begun to issue encyclicals and similar documents dealing with specific social justice issues, and expressing the idea that more than merely giving charity, we must try to correct the underlying structures that cause it to be needed.

All CSJT is grounded in the idea of the value of each individual human person. God has created us in His own image and this gives each of us an inherent worth which can never be taken away, regardless of our circumstances. This understanding had led us to a "consistent ethic of life," sometimes called "the seamless garment," the realization that, in the spirit of the Peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, we must protect life whenever it is threatened whether by unjust war, the arms race, abortion, poverty, racism, capital punishment, euthanasia or any other threat.

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Our dignity as human beings is something which exists in a social context. We exist in relationships with one another, relationships which reflect, very much, our relationship to our Creator. This social context is not only for each of us individually, but also for the larger communities we develop. Our entire social organization should reflect the justice to which we are called. This is especially important in the light of the way that the least empowered people are treated. We Catholics are the mystical body of Christ. We cannot neglect the good we are called to do without injuring the whole. We are supposed to be a light for the world, leaven, salt. We are individually called, by name, to this work. Of course, no one person can do it all, and no one will probably even see the completion of the small part of the work on which he or she labors, as Bishop Oscar Romero very beautifully said.

We cannot do it all, but we must try to educate ourselves about what needs to be done, and work on some part of it. Every person, each child of God, has a right to life and to the practical necessities of life such as food, clothing, shelter, work, health care, and education. And each has a responsibility to help this be accomplished for one another, for our families, for our nations.

Concerning economic questions, Catholic Social Justice Teaching is clear on the idea that the economy exists for the people and not the people for the economy. This belief is somewhat at variance with the ideas afloat in current popular culture. CSJT does not consider it right, for instance, that some people should be billionaires and others lack the basic supports of life. It is not a given that capitalist globalization automatically brings social justice. We are supposed to promote governments which ensure justice for all.

Some CSJT is surprising or even controversial to those who have been unaware of it. But as Catholics we have a responsibility to educate ourselves in these fundamental ideas of our Church. For instance, CSJT speaks out strongly for stewardship of God's creation. We are responsible for helping to spread the idea that humans are stewards, responsible for the well-being of the earth, and not just users of it. CSJT has very stringent tests for whether a war is just or unjust. Catholics are enjoined to work for peace! And Pope John Paul II wrote, "Peace is not just the absence of war."

"Knowing the Church's Social Teaching is an indispensable part of living a fully Catholic faith." –S.J. Brust

An excellent online link to Catholic Social Justice Teaching is <http://www.shc.edu.theolibrary/cst.htm>