

“As I Have Done For You...”

Bishop John F. Kinney's Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teachings

Introduction

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

(Mt. 25:37-40)

In Jesus' parable of the last judgment (Mt. 25) the righteous were surprised at the king's reply.

The surprise was not in hearing that they would be judged by their acts of love, mercy and justice. Rather, they were surprised at where these acts of mercy and justice were to be done: among those who were hungry, thirsty and in need of clothing; among strangers, prisoners and the sick; among those who lacked the basic necessities of life; among those who were least able to return the kindness. In John's Gospel we read of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples (13:1-11). Jesus then tells them that they should do to one another as he has done to them (v. 15). A little later (v. 34) Jesus tells his disciples:

I give you a new commandment that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

The Gospels could not be clearer. To be followers of Jesus Christ -- to be Christians -- means above all that we love one another, precisely because God has loved us. To love as Jesus loves calls us to serve anyone in need -- without questioning, without judging, without expecting a reward:

Do to one another as I have done to you.

Our Catholic Church always has taught that we have a special obligation to those who are poor, to those in our community and around the world who are most in need. Pope John Paul II often reminds us that this obligation calls for more than charity. He challenges us to do more, to go beyond charity, to examine who are the poor and why they are poor. The pope challenges us to change whatever it is that causes or tolerates poverty in our own country and throughout the world. (1) As your Bishop I offer this pastoral letter as a continuing reflection upon our Holy Father's challenge. I believe we are a generous people. My three years in the Diocese of St. Cloud convince me that the people of central Minnesota do care about their neighbors and are willing to help one another. I also believe we could do more -- as individuals and as parishes. I invite every parishioner to reflect with me upon Jesus' ministry to the poor and what it means for us in the Diocese of St. Cloud. I ask you to join with me in seeking a better understanding of the needs of persons within our diocese and how we might best respond.

Our Diocese: its changing face

The needs of individuals and families in central Minnesota are many and varied. Some are recurring with every generation; others seem to accompany the growing diversity of this geographical area. In either case, it is helpful to identify specific areas of concern and need to which both parishes and individuals can respond.

Our heritage

Ours is a diocese with a rich history that continues to enhance the church today. People of deep faith built both communities and churches. It was this same faith that directed our predecessors to look out for one another. Extended families and limited mobility made it easier to experience community, belonging and the love that each of us needs. A predominantly European population made it easier to recognize and respond to one another's needs. Some parishes were established as ethnic or national churches to better care for an immigrant population. From the earliest days of our diocese we note how parish life, programs and organizations were set up to meet the total needs of the parishioners.

Our diocese is often characterized as stable and with a relatively homogeneous population. In recent decades that has been the case. But the earliest years found settlers arriving from many different European nations with different languages, foods and customs. A history of the diocese shows that for many years the various ethnic groups -- especially German, Polish, Irish and French Canadians -- struggled to get along together. (2) Today we again experience the richness of growing diversity and with it the challenge of truly being the "People of God."

Growing diversity

The sixteen counties of the Diocese of St. Cloud represent communities undergoing changes in populations and in economics. These changes lead to an increasing diversity among the people, the parishes, and the towns -- a diversity that creates both opportunities and challenges. Some of our counties (such as Sherburne) are among the fastest growing counties in Minnesota. Other counties, notably on the western side of the diocese, experience net population losses. Rural areas more distant from St. Cloud struggle to maintain a stable population, while resort and recreational areas see significant population growth. Some communities have a high percentage of elderly citizens; others observe the steady departure of young adults. Regarding economics, we note that when our diocese was founded in 1889 the vast majority of the people in central Minnesota made their living through farming. Today only about twelve percent of the working people in this diocese are involved in agriculture. Manufacturing, retail, health services, education -- each count more employees than agriculture. (3) Even within agriculture we see a continuing movement towards fewer but larger farming operations.

Changes within the population of central Minnesota and within its economy offer exciting opportunities for each of us to respond to Jesus' command:

Do to one another as I have done to you.

These changes, creating their own new needs, provide each of our parishes with rich opportunities to be more fully the church. Individual Christians and local faith communities are well-positioned to recognize and respond to these needs.

Indeed, the growing diversity within our diocese can be viewed as a challenge to each of us and to all of our parishes. It is a challenge that asks how well we carry out the social implications of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Do we welcome new residents into our parish or community? Do we hear the cries of our young people in a confusing and frightening world? Do we help persons of racial minority groups feel welcome in our communities? Do we appreciate the gifts that elderly persons can offer to both communities and parishes? Do we try to understand and respond to the needs of the poor? Do we recognize how economic changes affect people and communities?

We may view these as opportunities or challenges. Either way, as followers of Jesus and as communities professing faith in Jesus Christ, we are called to reach out to those in need:

Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

Areas of concern

In every geographical area there are individuals with particular needs. Sometimes patterns develop and we speak of certain population groups with more pressing needs than others. Individual Christians involved in the day-to-day happenings of their communities know where these needs are. Parishes serious about breaking down barriers to community strive to address the needs of such groups. Within the Diocese of St. Cloud I believe there are certain groups deserving particular attention: the elderly, the youth, women, racial minorities, and persons affected by HIV/AIDS. I also think we must look at what is happening to many small towns and rural communities. Finally, if we are to love as Jesus loves, then we have to recognize the poverty that exists in our communities.

Population groups

Mary Ann lives in a small house less than a block from her parish church. Her health is not good and, at 78, she feels fortunate to be within walking distance of daily Mass. But she is less able to meet other needs since the grocery store, pharmacy, post office, cafe and other services in her town have all closed down. Her children long ago moved out of the area. She rides a Tri-Cap bus each week to the "city" about fifteen miles away. It is her opportunity for shopping, visits to the medical clinic and perhaps having pie and coffee outside of her home.

In all parishes, towns and open countryside there are persons of older age who have special needs. Most have lived their entire lives in these communities. Some have serious medical needs; many face financial problems. Some have retired from farming, settling into nearby towns where they have worshiped, shopped, and socialized throughout their lifetime. Loneliness accompanies many, as does the confusing experience of seeing their gifts and wisdom unrecognized and unappreciated.

John will soon graduate from high school and is uncertain about his next move. He has thought about staying in the town where he grew up, near his family, among his friends. He knows, however, that the jobs here are not very attractive. As with youth in many other rural communities he sees jobs with low pay, minimal health benefits, little advancement and not much security. Whether he goes to college or not, John is beginning to realize that he will have to move away.

Our young people are a special concern in the Diocese of St. Cloud. Too often we take them for granted, failing to recognize and include their gifts in the life of our community. Too often we overlook the unique challenges confronting every generation of teenagers and young adults. Rising rates of violence, addiction and suicide are dramatic signals that the youth in central Minnesota need our love and attention.

Jane and her husband have three children and operate a dairy farm in Stearns County. They work hard, putting in long hours to keep their family farm going. While Jane helps with farm chores she also holds a part-time job at a mail-order company in a nearby town. At times Jane is not sure who she is -- wife, mother, farmer, housekeeper, employee. She often feels the strain of the many expectations placed upon her, as well as her own doubts about how well she is doing in these many roles.

Today, more than in the past, the role of women in the family, the church, and the community must be examined with care. Women -- as wives and as mothers -- are taking on an ever larger role in securing income for the household. Almost half of working-age women are employed outside the home. (4) We must recognize this and let go of past stereotypes that serve neither the family nor the changing needs of women. Women also are taking on greater responsibilities in civic leadership as members of city councils as well as school, township and county boards. In spite of these encouraging developments, some women face age-old problems. One example is the tragic reality of domestic abuse. Problems of this nature are especially difficult in small communities where some family issues are not easily confronted.

Maria and her family have lived in town about five years. Her husband works at the local poultry plant and their three children attend the public school. Maria speaks fairly good English, but living in a different culture and communicating in a second language has made it difficult for the family to feel a part of this community. A year ago Maria and her family joined a fundamentalist church in another town about thirty miles away. Leaving the Catholic Church was not easy, but the Evangelical congregation made her family feel welcome. Maria and her husband felt they had to make the change.

It hardly needs saying that among the more serious areas of concern in our diocese is that of racial minority population groups. The total racial minority population here is relatively small. But the numbers are changing, and as they change they challenge us to examine carefully our own feelings and attitudes about persons from different racial groups. In recent years public attention has focused upon undocumented workers of Hispanic background as well as the fishing rights of Native Americans. While the issues involved are always complex, the tone of the public debate surrounding them often reveals a not-too-subtle racism. In recent months the City of St. Cloud has witnessed overt acts of racism directed toward members of the African-American and Asian communities. We must be clear on this point: Christianity does not condone racism and discrimination in any form -- neither the actions themselves nor the silent acceptance of them within the majority population. To be a Christian means that we speak out against such behavior within our own communities. Let us recognize that among the needs of minority groups in central Minnesota none is greater than the need to be accepted, respected, and treated as people of dignity.

At age 29, Fred has come home from Chicago to live with his parents in a small central Minnesota town. Already weakened by AIDS, Fred hopes to live his final years among family and friends of his hometown. But some people in the community are fearful of AIDS and resentful that Fred has brought it to their town. Fred understands their fear but not their unwelcoming actions and quickness to judge him.

HIV/AIDS is a disease. Anyone affected by HIV/AIDS deserves the same love and care we show to persons suffering from any other malady. Our society and Church are becoming more effective at responding to these needs and at supporting AIDS ministries. In some communities, however, it can be more difficult to show that support, to set aside stereotypes, to refrain from judging.

Rural communities

Any number of small towns could stand as examples of what is happening to many rural communities in our diocese. Historically dependent upon farming, they now try to adjust to the dramatic changes occurring in American agriculture. Contract farming arrangements involving poultry, or large-scale hog confinements give rise to problems and controversies not previously experienced in these communities. In some areas the numbers of farms surrounding the town is decreasing, while the size of these farms swells. As families leave the land, local businesses and services face a shrinking market population.

It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between social change and social loss. Economic changes can result in losses in other areas. Throughout Minnesota moderate-sized family farms are disappearing at the rate of almost two each day. In parts of our diocese rural communities are experiencing what can only be defined as loss -- population loss and a spiraling cycle of further losses in the farms, businesses, community services, and the churches our small towns have treasured for generations. Elderly persons retiring to these towns now find themselves in communities without the services they had always expected to be there. Young people find little reason to set down roots in their home communities.

Poverty

Two persons living in St. Cloud represent a fairly typical though unnoticed form of poverty within our diocese. Bill works full time throughout the year at wages that keep him at or slightly above the poverty line. He lives with his wife and two children in a very modest home with no luxuries and very little spending money after monthly bills are paid. Sometimes he takes a second job when extra money is needed to pay off medical bills or replace an old car or buy Christmas gifts. At entry level jobs paying minimum wage and minimum health benefits, the prospects of Bill and his family moving a comfortable distance from the poverty line are not good.

Louise is a single mother only two years out of high school, with a small child. She works when she can but the cost of child care prevents her from working full time at the kind of jobs her limited education can bring her. Louise is very dependent upon public assistance and at this moment does not see how she might move in a different direction.

Poverty has many faces and touches all of the people and communities mentioned in this reflection. In a geographical area so blessed with natural resources and so rich in employment opportunities, it is difficult to picture a serious poverty problem. Yet perception is part of the problem. In an area like this, economic poverty is not easily seen, but it is present in alarming percentages. Approximately 12 percent of the people of our diocese live in poverty. In some communities the rate is much higher.

Central Minnesota is not immune to some of the more alarming aspects of poverty found anywhere in the United States. One in five children lives in poverty. The fastest growing segment of the poverty population is single parent families headed by women. The nature of poverty in rural areas increasingly resembles that found in inner cities: The rates are rising and it is persistent.

People find themselves in poverty for many reasons. Lack of work or adequate income from one's job, a health crisis, a major financial setback, a divorce, lack of education, and the list could continue. Very few persons are economically poor because they choose to be so. The most common form of economic poverty in our diocese is that found among people who are working. Many of these adults, like Bill, work full time at minimum wage and still remain below the poverty level. Others, like Jane or Louise, receive no benefits in their part-time employment, leaving them and their families vulnerable to even minor illnesses. Many employers have shifted from full-time to part-time employment, leaving large numbers of low-paid workers without health insurance.

While I focus upon economic poverty, I also recognize that poverty has many other forms and people have many other needs. Some of these we find particularly difficult to acknowledge and to receive into our communities -- persons with mental illness or with chemical dependencies, individuals or families who are homeless, farm laborers without legal immigrant status, former prison inmates now on parole. These too we must include in the vision of the Last Judgment:

As long as you did it to one of these, the least of my sisters and brothers, you did it to me.

The Church's social teaching

The Church has a vital interest in these areas of social concern. The joys and sorrows, the hopes and fears of the People of God relate directly to the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus proclaimed the Good News to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed (Lk. 4:18-19). Throughout his ministry Jesus addressed the daily physical needs of people -- especially those who were poor, those who were struggling in any way, those who were vulnerable. The Church that Jesus founded also reaches out, as part of its central mission, to people with these same needs.

It is not for the Church to resolve complex problems facing individuals and communities in central Minnesota or anywhere else. But the Church can offer guidance to individual Christians and to Catholic parishes that are themselves in positions to respond to needs in their areas. For the past one hundred years the Church has been developing its teaching on social, economic and political issues. (5) This teaching offers fundamental principles about the human person and about society. (6) From this teaching we in the Diocese of St. Cloud can draw valuable insights on how we might respond to the areas of concern already mentioned -- the elderly and the youth, women and minorities, persons affected by HIV/AIDS, the plight of many rural communities, and those who live in economic poverty.

Dignity/sacredness of the human person

Every human being is created by God, redeemed by Jesus Christ and called to communion with God. (7) For this reason every person has a sacred dignity. Each of us has a special place within God's creation. Each of us is so loved by God that the only possible response we can offer is to love God in return and to love and respect all that God has created.

In this sacred dignity all humans are equal. Respect for the dignity of others allows for no distinctions or discrimination based on gender, race, language, religion or social conditions. Respect for the dignity of others is not compatible with oppressive economic and social differences within God's human family. The dignity of the human person means that all life is sacred. Christians respect the lives of all humans and extend this respect to all of creation. Life is a loving gift of the Creator. Our response -- always and everywhere -- must be to show loving respect for such a gift. The dignity of the human person is the foundation of the Church's teaching about people and about how we organize our society.

Rights

Today we hear a great deal about individual rights. Many of us are quick to claim personal rights against the claims of others, sometimes even against the good of the community. Catholic social teaching offers a balanced view of individual rights. Human rights flow from our God-given dignity. They belong to us precisely as humans and they belong to all people. Mary Ann riding the Tri-Cap bus has the same rights as a young millionaire commuting on a Lear jet. Rights are not optional. They are not granted by human laws or by individual accomplishments. They are part of what it means to be a human person.(8) Human rights surround and protect the dignity of each person.

The most fundamental right we can name is the right to life. From conception to natural death people have the right to live their lives as fully as they can. Catholic teaching condemns abortion, euthanasia and assisted suicide as grave sins against the Creator of all life. The Church is becoming increasingly clear on its condemnation of the evil of capital punishment. Another fundamental human right is having the means necessary to live our lives in dignity. The right to life means that each and every person on this planet has the right to a share of earthly goods sufficient for one's self and one's family. Every person has the right to adequate food, clothing, housing, health care, education, employment and a safe environment. It is not enough to speak of the right to life without acknowledging the right to live that life in the dignity reflective of creatures made in the image of God.(9)

Responsibilities

Discussion of individual rights is never complete without talking about the responsibilities that come with these rights. Rights and responsibilities always go together. It is especially necessary to balance individual human rights with community responsibilities. Every time we claim an individual right, we must consider the impact of that claim upon the larger society. As an example, ownership of private property must never be regarded as an absolute right. (10) Establishment of a large-scale poultry or hog facility must respect the environment and the neighbor's right to clean air and safe water. The right to own carries with it a responsibility to use one's property in a manner that respects the neighbor, in a manner that contributes to the common good.

Christians understand that responsibilities derive from love of neighbor. We have responsibilities to one another, to our families, to our communities, to the larger society. Our response to God's love for us must itself be a loving concern for people around us and for the communities and societies we build. As Christians we must never focus solely on our own needs, on claiming our own rights without asking how our actions affect the larger community.

Charity and justice

Humans are social beings. We realize our dignity, exercise our rights, and live out our responsibilities in relationships with others. Our full human development, our movement towards God takes place in a social context -- in our families, among friends, in the workplace, in our communities. Our families are especially important settings for us to realize our dependence upon others. Families are where we first experience how much we are loved and how we are to love in return. It is in families also that we learn moral principles and how to contribute to the building of community.

Communities also shape an individual's growth as a responsible and loving human person. Cultural norms and expectations, laws and public policies can influence that development. Even the way our economic system works -- great for some, poorly for others -- can promote or threaten the dignity of each person. When people live in poverty or have to struggle for basic rights it is difficult for them to realize their dignity, to grow as responsible and loving persons, and even to contribute to their communities. (11) We need to be as clear as possible on this point: There is nothing good about involuntary poverty; there is nothing good about discrimination. If Maria experiences discrimination, if her family does not earn enough for a modest and dignified life, if they do not feel welcome in the town or parish -- then it is more difficult for them to grow as sharing and caring persons. Then too it is difficult for Maria to place her own gifts and talents in the service of the community.

People in any kind of need deserve our help. We know that as Christians we are obligated to practice the corporal works of mercy. Acts of charity, helping people meet their immediate needs is a necessary way of living out our faith. It is a test of our faith. But it is not enough! While charity is essential, it is not a sufficient response to the poor and the needy within our diocese or anywhere else.

"Our faith calls us to work for justice; to serve those in need; to pursue peace; and to defend the life, dignity and rights of all our sisters and brothers." (12)

The more we are aware of economic poverty, the more we should be asking why it is that so many people are dependent upon our charity. Why do we continue to read in the newspaper about homeless persons in St. Cloud? Why do we see a continuing rise in the numbers of individuals and families seeking food from local food shelves, or meals at congregate dining services? This questioning should lead us to ask what changes we might support in such areas as housing, education, health care, employment or public assistance that would help people meet their basic needs. What changes can we support that would help people become less dependent upon the charity of others, that would help people live in the dignity appropriate to persons created and loved by God?

It is from this perspective that we speak of social justice. Our Catholic tradition sees two elements in social justice. First, individuals must be active and productive participants in society. Second, society must enable individuals to participate in this way. (13) Thus, seeking social justice often implies working for structural change -- calling for changes in economic and social institutions that will make it easier for everyone to care for themselves and contribute to society. An example of such change might be the provision of affordable child care services so that persons like Louise can afford to work and support herself and her family.

Option for the poor

The Catholic Church always has shown a special concern for persons who are poor and vulnerable. The Hebrew prophets remind us that fidelity to God is tested by our attitude towards the weaker members of society. (14) Jesus' parable of the Last Judgment teaches us that Christian discipleship requires caring for those in need, especially those in economic poverty. Over the past century papal and episcopal documents have named this obligation the "preferential option for the poor." (15)

This option for the poor does not mean that the Church should neglect the many needs of those who are not poor. Rather, it is a helpful way of understanding how we should respond to anyone in need -- John's need for support and guidance as he struggles to find his path in life; Jane's need for direction in balancing the many roles she has as wife, mother, employee and farmer; Fred's need for love and compassion in his final struggle with AIDS. Yet it does call us to give particular attention to the needs of persons who are economically poor.

The preferential option for the poor means that as individuals and as parishes we address these needs in our communities and beyond. It means that we strengthen, not diminish, already existing programs such as food shelves, parish-sponsored meals for needy persons, shelters for the homeless. The option for the poor means that when we contribute to programs or to individual needy persons, we do so out of our substance rather than from the spare change in our pockets. (16) It means that parishes regularly contribute a share of their income to the poor.

This preferential option for the poor means that we not only respond in charity to the needs of the poor through our contributions of money and time, or through programs we initiate. It also requires that we bring about changes in our society -- in social and economic institutions, laws, public policies -- that will make it easier for people who are poor to move out of poverty. (17) It could mean legislation on wages to ensure

that Bill and other workers do not work full time and still remain in poverty. It could also mean striving for changes in our health care system that will guarantee every person's right to basic medical treatment. This preferential option for the poor is not an easy principle to live out. It means that we support legislation as well as programs and public policy changes that are of particular benefit to those who are most in need, even when these changes might not benefit ourselves. This is a serious test of our Christian faith and love --

As long as you did it to one of these, the least of my sisters and brothers, you did it to me.

Making global connections

As Catholics we know what it means to belong to a universal church. Our experience of Church comes primarily through our local parish. Yet we know that through our diocese we are connected to all other Catholic churches in central Minnesota. Through our Holy Father we are united with the Church throughout the world.

Solidarity

In that same way we must see our connectedness to all members of the human community. We are one family, regardless of our national, racial, ethnic, economic and ideological differences. Whether it is our neighbor next door or our neighbor across the globe -- we all share the same Creator; all of us are redeemed in Jesus Christ; all of us are called to communion with God. We all possess the same dignity as God's children and the same rights and responsibilities that protect this dignity. Pope John Paul II asks us to be in solidarity with all people and to work for a just social order, where goods are fairly distributed and the dignity of all is respected. This solidarity crosses national and regional boundaries. It recognizes that the denial of dignity and rights to people anywhere on the globe diminishes each of us. It seeks connections between ourselves and the poor, through our charity and our support of international assistance programs. It also calls for economic relationships and trade agreements that benefit the poorest nations. Our Holy Father reminds us that solidarity "involves sacrificing the positions of income and of power enjoyed by the more developed economies." (18) A practical step in that direction could be the cancellation of debts to nations burdened by excessive poverty.

Our global ties

We in the Diocese of St. Cloud have many ties to people in other parts of the world. Our population historically grew with immigrants arriving from Europe. In more recent decades the population of central Minnesota has grown and diversified with persons coming from less developed nations. These recent immigrants add a deeply enriching character to what has been a relatively homogeneous population. They also connect us with their homelands and with the needs of the people they left behind. These newer immigrants remind us of our ties to people all over the world. They remind us that we are members of one human family and that we share in the responsibility to help build one global community where the terms "First World" and "Third World" are obsolete.

Our solidarity with the poor throughout the world is fostered through various economic ties. Perhaps no area of our economy better connects us so directly with the rest of the world as does agriculture. Minnesota farmers are among the most productive in the world. So blessed are we with natural resources and with farmers able to produce abundant crops! For many decades the fruit of Minnesota farms has fed people in other nations. Yet we know there are countless people who do not have enough to eat each day -- millions actually facing starvation! This tragic reality should remind us that it is not our task to feed the world but to help people in other nations produce what they need to feed themselves. May we also learn from farmers elsewhere such values as small-scale agriculture and caring for limited and precious resources.

The universal church

The Diocese of St. Cloud and each of our parishes are part of the universal Catholic Church. Under the unity and direction of Pope John Paul II we are one church, focused especially on our local parishes but aware of our connections and responsibilities to the Church around the world. In our diocese we are reminded of these connections by the many priests, religious and laity who have served the church in different nations. This diocese for many years has had a ministry presence in Maracay, Venezuela. People from our diocese have carried the Good News to all parts of the world. Through their experiences we share in the mission of the universal church. Through their experiences, also, we become aware of human suffering and needs around the world.

My own work on the board of directors of Catholic Relief Services has taken me to many countries where basic needs of people have been unimaginably great. Living in central Minnesota makes it difficult to believe that so many people in so many countries suffer so greatly from unmet human needs -- hunger, disease, homelessness, illiteracy, political repression. In the face of such tragic scenes I am encouraged by the efforts of Catholics and other Christians who so generously offer their talents, time and money to help relieve the suffering of their sisters and brothers around the world. Many from our own diocese have dedicated a great part of their lives to this work.

To be a Christian means that we love our neighbor both near and far. Love of neighbor includes doing what we can to ease one's suffering. It means giving what we can to meet someone's immediate needs. It also means trying to understand why people today have such serious unmet needs. It means acknowledging our own contribution -- as individuals and as a nation -- to the suffering of others. It means, finally, acting to change whatever causes people to be dependent upon another's charity. This love, and this action, must be shown to people in need here in our own diocese and throughout the world. For this is what it means to be a Christian, to be the Church, to be a parish.

What can parishes do?

Effective parishes make it easier for individual Catholics to join in Jesus' ministry to the poor. The most important commitment parishes can make to this task is to be the church as fully as they can be. Each parish can realize in its own setting the mission of the Church: to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to celebrate the presence of Christ among us, to develop faith communities, and to be in service to people both near and far. I believe there are three ministry areas where parishes could do more to guide individual Catholics in actions on behalf of persons most in need. These areas are: liturgical celebrations, religious education/faith formation, and parish social ministry.

Liturgical celebrations

Our liturgies, especially our Eucharistic celebrations, are the most important moments in the life of parishes. It is here that we come together to publicly proclaim our faith in Jesus Christ, to celebrate and give thanks for what has happened to us through the life, death and resurrection of Christ, and to acknowledge that we are one in Christ. It is in these liturgical celebrations that we commit ourselves to eradicating from our lives and our society anything that may cause tension and divisions. Poverty and human suffering caused by greed, oppression or any other form of injustice must be targets of that commitment.

Our liturgies, therefore, must not be moments when we forget about what is happening in our lives and in the world. Rather, through our public worship we are called and empowered to go out and work for a society and a world in which God's love is more easily recognized. The proclamation of the Word, the preaching, the prayers of the faithful, even the environment within the church -- all should help us see that our faith leads us to reach out to anyone in need. I ask pastors and liturgists to examine how parish Eucharistic celebrations might draw us into this ministry to persons in need.

Religious education/faith formation

Our parish formation/education programs are also moments when Jesus' ministry to the poor must be presented as our ministry. Religious education, schools, adult faith formation, RCIA, youth ministry -- all such programs provide opportunities to learn how rich and challenging is the call to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. These structured faith formation efforts help us to realize that being a Christian means putting our faith into action every day and everywhere.

All parish education programs can help us to live out the social implications of our faith. These programs are incomplete if they do not help participants to know who the poor are and how we might respond to their needs in faithfulness to the Gospel. The bishops of the United States are asking that Catholic social teaching be incorporated creatively into all forms of Catholic education. I ask Catholic educators to develop strategies to make service and justice a concrete component of every parish education and formation program. I urge all Catholic educators to develop models of adult education and formation to enable participants to grapple with the complex issues of poverty and structural change.

Social ministry

Each parish has opportunities to become directly involved in helping persons meet their material needs, persons within the parish itself and others who have no direct connection with the parish. The Church does not exist for itself. It lives to proclaim Jesus Christ to the world. It does this through preaching and teaching, and through acts of justice and mercy in the world.

Parishes can participate in local food shelves, shelters for the homeless, referral services, safe houses for persons who suffer abuse, congregate dining sites and many other forms of direct service. It is not for parishes to duplicate existing services. But it is the challenge of every faith community to call its members into service of those who are in need. Helping to open doors to such services is an appropriate task of the parish. Catholic Charities offices in the diocese can be helpful to parishes seeking ways to involve parishioners in this ministry. Parishes also can work with other agencies and churches, especially where resources are limited.

Each parish must also work for changes in our society and the world that will enable persons of greater need to pursue their lives in freedom and dignity. This is the justice dimension of social ministry. Love of neighbor calls us to seek justice for the neighbor. It is never enough to offer charity when unjust policies or social structures cause persons to be in need. Unjust wages, lack of health care, inaccessible child care, discrimination, unfair farm prices and policies, unaffordable housing -- these and many other wrongs must be confronted on a policy level. Parishes can participate in this effort by working with the Minnesota Catholic Conference, formed by the Catholic bishops of Minnesota to address issues of social justice at the Minnesota State Legislature.

An effective way for parishes to carry out this social ministry is to create within the parish structure a Social Concerns Committee. This committee can provide leadership for the parish and for individuals to engage in both service and justice actions. Committee members can be valuable social ministry resource persons to pastors and to leaders of parish liturgy and religious education programs. Every parish should initiate some effort in social ministry. Where resources are limited or parishes are very small, let two or three parishes work together.

The Catholic bishops of the United States, through their Communities of Salt and Light program, provide support to any parish that is willing to take up this ministry. Within the Diocese of St. Cloud the diocesan Social Concerns Office has been established to help parishes and individual Catholics become more engaged in this ministry. I urge all parishes to turn to this diocesan office for support and direction in carrying out this important ministry.

Conclusion

The Diocese of St. Cloud is initiating a more formal social ministry effort than we have had in the past. In these pages I have indicated some of the areas of concern that this ministry might address, both across the diocese and within parishes. These are not the only areas of human need that call for a response from faith communities. Parishes themselves can best determine what issues and needs they will address. Each parish can determine how it will carry on Jesus' ministry of justice and mercy. I ask that in each parish a Social Concerns Committee take on the task of identifying needs and developing strategies for individuals and families to engage in social ministry.

I offer encouragement especially to priests and deacons whose leadership in this diocesan social ministry effort is essential. This ministry will bear fruit only if it is rooted in the life of each parish. All parish leaders and staff members are necessary to the success of this ministry. I ask the pastors with their parish councils to consider how they might initiate this effort in their parishes. I encourage the clergy to reflect on how their preaching can help build faith communities committed to love and justice.

To the young people in our diocese I say that you have a special reason for becoming more active in social service and social justice. This is your Church. Your Church is not focused only on rules and obligations and warnings against various behaviors. Your Church is especially concerned about building a better world -- a world that more closely reflects the reign of love and mercy and justice that Jesus Christ proclaimed. Your Church needs you in this effort. I beg you to become involved and let us all benefit from your fresh perspectives and unique gifts.

Finally, I ask every Catholic in the Diocese of St. Cloud -- and every person of good will -- to reflect upon the biblical text with which I began this pastoral letter. In Jesus' parable of the Last Judgment the Son of Man tells those awaiting judgment that he stood before them every day of their lives:

*For I was hungry and you gave me food,
I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,
I was a stranger and you welcomed me,
I was naked and you gave me clothing,
I was sick and you took care of me,
I was in prison and you visited me. (Mt. 25:35-36)*

A lesson of this parable is that Jesus is present in the suffering, the hurts, and the everyday needs of people around us. Another rather harsh lesson is that some of us see these needs and act, and some of us don't. Perhaps the most important lesson in this parable is that to be a Christian -- to be a disciple of Jesus Christ -- means that we serve everyone in need -- without questioning, without judging, without expecting a reward. Catholic social teaching can help us live this critical lesson of the parable in our own time and setting. That teaching shows us how to reach out in our communities and around the world today to all who are hungry

and thirsty, to all who are strangers or in need of clothing, to all who are ill or in prison. Our diocesan Social Concerns Office is ready to help parishes and individuals respond to that challenge of our faith. As Christians we are called to love one another as Jesus has loved us. This love must show itself in daily acts of charity and in the more difficult work of justice. May all of us take up the wonderful challenge to do for one another as Christ has done for us.

Endnotes

1. *On Social Concerns*, 42.1. *On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum*, 28.2; 52.1.
 2. Yzermans, Vincent A. *The Spirit in Central Minnesota: A Centennial Narrative of the Church of Saint Cloud 1889-1989*. St. Cloud, MN: Sentinel Printing, 1989.
 3. 1990 Census: State of Minnesota. Employment Profiles: Employment by Industry. (Data.net. MN PLANNING.)
 4. 1990 Census: State of Minnesota. Employment Profiles: Labor Force Status by Sex. (Data.net. MN PLANNING.)
 5. The papal documents on social justice, from *Rerum Novarum* (1891) through *Centesimus Annus* (1991), can be found in *Proclaiming Justice & Peace*, edited by Michael Walsh and Brian Davies, Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991. Many of these documents can be purchased individually from Catholic bookstores, the United States Catholic Conference, or from the diocesan Social Concerns Office. The latter also are places where one can purchase social documents of the United States Catholic bishops.
 6. This section offers a summary of the core principles of Catholic social teaching. A recent publication of the U.S. Catholic bishops presents these same principles in a longer list that includes "key themes which are at the heart of our Catholic social tradition." That document, "Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions", calls for the inclusion of our social teaching at every level of Catholic education and faith formation.
 7. *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 19; 24.1; 29.
 8. *Peace on Earth*, 9.
 9. *Ibid.*, 32.
 10. *On the Development of Peoples*, 23.
 11. *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 31.1; 63.2.
 12. *A Century of Social Teaching: A Common Heritage, A Continuing Challenge*, p. 1.
 13. *Economic Justice for All*, 71.
 14. Isaiah 1:11-20; 58:1-12. Jeremiah 7:1-7.
 15. *A Call to Action*, 23.
 16. *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 69.
 17. *On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum*, 58.
 18. *Ibid.*, 52.1.
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Resources for Parish Social Ministries

Catholic Social Teachings

A. Vatican Documents

- *On the Condition of Workers (Rerum Novarum)*, Pope Leo XIII, 1891.
- *On Reconstructing the Social Order (Quadragesimo Anno)*, Pope Pius XI, 1931.
- *Christianity and Social Progress (Mater et Magistra)*, Pope John XXIII, 1961.
- *Peace on Earth (Pacem in Terris)*, Pope John XXIII, 1963.
- *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*, Second Vatican Council, 1965.
- *On the Development of Peoples (Populorum Progressio)*, Pope Paul VI, 1967.
- *A Call to Action (Octagesimo Adveniens)*, Pope Paul VI, 1971.
- *Justice in the World (Justitia in Mundo)*, World Synod of Bishops, 1971.
- *On Evangelization in the Modern World (Evangelii Nuntiandi)*, Pope Paul VI, 1975.
- *Redeemer of Man (Redemptor Hominis)*, Pope John Paul II, 1979.
- *Rich in Mercy (Dives in Misericordia)*, Pope John Paul II, 1980.
- *On Human Work (Laborem Exercens)*, Pope John Paul II, 1981.
- *On Social Concerns (Sollicitudo Rei Socialis)*, Pope John Paul II, 1987.
- *On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum (Centesimus Annus)*, Pope John Paul II, 1991.

B. U.S. Catholic Bishops' Documents

- *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response. Pastoral Letter of the U.S. Catholic Bishops*, 1983.
- *Economic Justice for All: Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy. Pastoral Letter of the U.S. Catholic Bishops*, 1986.
- *A Century of Social Teaching: A Common Heritage, A Continuing Challenge. A Pastoral Message of the Catholic Bishops of the United States on the 100th Anniversary of Rerum Novarum*, 1990.
- *Putting Children and Families First. Pastoral Letter of the U.S. Catholic Bishops*, 1991.
- *Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action on the Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching. Pastoral Letter of the U.S. Catholic Bishops*, 1991.
- *Communities of Salt and Light: Reflections on the Social Mission of the Parish. U.S. Catholic Bishops*, 1993.
- *Called to Global Solidarity: International Challenges for U.S. Bishops. A Statement of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops*, 1998.

Collections of Catholic Social Documents

- *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*. Edited by David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992.

- Proclaiming Justice & Peace: The Papal Social Documents. Edited by Michael Walsh and Brian Davies. Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991.

Writings about Catholic Social Teaching

- Catholic Social Teaching: Our Best Kept Secret. Peter Henriot, Edward DeBerri, and Michael Schulteis. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988.
- The New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought. Collegeville, MN: Glazier/Liturgical Press, 1994.
- Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Catholic Social Teaching. Donal Dorr. Revised edition. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992.

Programs for Parishes

Parish resource materials are available from the United States Catholic Conference for the following bishops' statements:

- *Called to Global Solidarity*
- *Catholic Campaign for Children and Families*
- *Communities of Salt and Light*
- *Renewing the Earth*.

Programs and agencies to help parishes in social ministry include the following:

- Catholic Campaign for Human Development
- Catholic Charities
- St. Cloud diocesan Social Concerns Office
- Minnesota Catholic Conference
- United States Catholic Conference.