

Class 11: Social Justice as constitutive of the preaching of the Gospel

Class Goals

- To help students grasp the Church's understanding of social justice and the basic teachings of it;
- To hear and understand that Social Justice is an integral part (that is, "constitutive") of the evangelical message of Jesus;
- To comprehend how the concerns of social justice and compassion flow directly from WHO our God is;
- To realize that the compassion and demands of social justice flow from the central sacrament which best express our incarnate God – the Eucharist;
- To help people shift from seeing social justice as a mere option (as in "optional"), to the understanding that the practice of social justice (as faith-in-action in a church-for-others) is a call for every baptized person;
- To grasp that to be a disciple of Jesus means that one lives out the Gospel in the social realm.
- To be open and explore how I am called to live out my discipleships in the social realm in ways that fit my situation in life
- To reflect on the action for social justice based on the Gospel and the teachings of the Church on social matters through the analysis of a few selected issues on the border region in connection with the Millennium Goals (<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>).

Overview

A common comment we hear among the faithful in our parishes is "Why is the Church involved in politics?" This way of thinking betrays an understanding of Religion and Church as concerned only with "spiritual" things but not with social things (political and economic matters) or "matters of this world!" It is also connected with a misunderstanding of the relationship or separation between Church and State, as originally intended by its creators. Vatican II advanced a theology and an ecclesiology that affirms the call of every baptized person and the church community to engage the world. The Council reaffirms the teachings that the Gospel is concerned with everyday life and human dignity; that the Gospel is profoundly social; and that the community of believers, the Church, has a responsibility to engage in transforming the world into a more just place enlightened by Gospel values (*Gaudium et Spes*).

Following the theology of Vatican II, the document from the 1971 Synod of Bishops "Justice in the World" (JW) affirms that the church has a mission which involves defending and promoting the dignity and fundamental rights of the human person (JW, 37). Therefore the church has the right and the duty to proclaim justice on the social, national, and international level, and to denounce instances of injustice (36). The Church mission demands that we should courageously denounce injustice, with charity, prudence, and firmness (JW, 57). It also demands that the Church be present in the heart of the world by proclaiming the Good News to the poor, freedom to the oppressed, and joy to the afflicted (JW, 5). Pope Benedict XVI, in his 2009 encyclical "Caritas in Veritate" (CV), says that "love (*caritas*) is an extraordinary force which leads people to opt for courageous and generous engagement in the field of justice and peace." (CV, 1).

The human person, as created by God, has a personal and a social dimension that together forms the whole of human existence and interacts to complement each other. Therefore, the Gospel message must permeate and inform the totality of human life, including the personal dimension. The Christian practice of faith must be expressed in the social dimension as well. When human living is not informed by the Gospel, the practice of faith, which is the faith of the Church, becomes incomplete.

The objective of this class is to help the students to see social justice not as a marginal activity of some, but a call for everyone to engage through the concerted effort of the faith community; to perceive social justice not as an activity the Church must stay away from or a simple question of charity, but instead as a central ministry of the Church to impact institutions and laws with Gospel values (see Lk. 4.17-30; Mt. 25.31-46).

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Core Content

1. Social Justice is rooted in WHO our God is

- **We believe in the TRINITY. THAT is who our God is!! A community!**
 - Our God is a Unity of Three Persons. One same nature in three distinct persons.
 - What does that have to do with social justice?
 - The answer is simple: to say that our God is Trinity, is the same as saying that our God is a Community (of Love). Love is the bond of unity between the persons. They are an eternal unity and interplay of actions and missions. In other words, Our God is a profound COMMUNION of Love and in Love. Our God is COMMUNION!

- Love, Communion, Community – God’s being is profoundly social; God is profoundly relationship and relational. This is the foundation for understanding social justice as an essential vocation of the Church and the faithful.
- The entire creation is thus formed for communion and relationship. Everything is in relationship and relationship is the essence of all creation.
- **We believe in the doctrine of creation and incarnation**
 - That **every human person** is created in the *image of God*, as *Imago Dei* (Gn 1:27), with **inherently invaluable dignity (the basis for “human rights”)** and that God has entered human history through the Son, taking a human body and thus God has divinized us humans.
 - Another implication of us being created as *Image and Likeness of God* is that we are created for communion and relationship (intrapersonal, interpersonal, and social).
 - Therefore, being social is inherent to who we are. To deny the social dimension (as in any individualistic ideology) is to deny who we are in essence.
 - Because we are inherently social beings, and our social dimension has been created by God, God must be present in that dimension as well. Thus to believe that God has anything to say about our sexual dimension (because it has been created by God) and believe that God has nothing to say about our social dimension is a contradiction in terms! Now, just as procreation and sexual activity is a consequence of our being sexual, political and economic activities are a consequence of us being social. So, if God would have us order our sexual lives according to Gospel values, then God also would have us order our social lives, that is, our political and economic lives (institutions and organizations) according to gospel values.
 - A fundamental reason why the church is called to practice social justice is to **fully** respect and promote human dignity. When persons are affected by social ills and cannot raise to their full potential, their human dignity is threatened and disrespected. And when that happens, the whole of society is impoverished.
 - The Church takes up social issues because of the theological claims presented above that every single person who ever existed, does exist, and will exist is endowed with the same dignity. No one, in their most profound being, is superior or inferior to any one else.
- **JUSTICE and COMPASSION are another name for the SALVATION (i.e., liberation, JW, 31) and new life that God intends for all creation.**
 - Sin affects the shalom—the peace and holistic harmony of relationships that brings true peace—that God intends for the entire universe.
 - All the relationships are affected and damaged: socially there is violence and greed because our social relations are no longer centered on God, but on sin.
 - So the work of salvation is the work for justice (personal and social) and the work for justice is the work for salvation. This work is central to the Kingdom and as such begins on this earth but is not completed here (JW, 6).
- **The holistic, all encompassing, Shalom of God, is at the core of the Covenant God has made with His people and is the guiding principle behind every Prophetic teaching and action in the Old Testament**
 - Justice and compassion were profoundly rooted in the theology of the Old Testament. They are present in the laws and institutions of the people of God (Israel) as a way to help them to strive for the shalom community.

- One central example of that attempt is the jubilee tradition. The legislation of the jubilee was designed to help Israel bring its society back to a balance and closer to the model proposed by the call to be a shalom community.
- The entire prophetic tradition understood that and is an example of the tension between working for the shalom community and the damages caused by sin.

2. Jesus' Ministry and Message as foundation for Social Justice

- **Jesus' ministry follows in the Great Prophetic Tradition.**
 - Luke 4:16-21 describes how Jesus saw his own ministry and how he was fulfilling that anointing. By connecting himself with the Prophetic Tradition (through Isaiah in Lk. 4), Jesus connects himself with the Jubilee Tradition.
- **The Jubilee Tradition** stated that during the jubilee year:
 - **The land was not to be cultivated;**
 - **Outstanding debts (between Hebrews) were to be cancelled;**
 - **Hebrew slaves and indenture servants were to be freed;**
 - **Everyone's property was to be returned and the land not to be sold.**

Linthicum explains that "simply put, jubilee was a legislated reversal of fortune. It was Israel's most radical vehicle to redistribute wealth so that society could be rebalanced and neither wealth, nor political power could accumulate in the hands of a self-selected few. That was what Jesus was proclaiming when he read Isaiah 6 -- "In essence, Jesus was proclaiming the message that the wealthy and powerful of Israel, are also to keep the entire jubilee and not just one regulation! By saying that the Isaiah 61 passage has been fulfilled in Him, Jesus is saying that no one will be rich, no one will be poor and all will live in shalom with each other. This description of the kingdom as the reverse of his entire society at his time and this condition of Shalom, which the jubilee intended to foster, is what Jesus meant by the Kingdom of God. This message was extremely dangerous in on all counts. And this is a reason why some in the synagogue where Jesus proclaimed Isaiah 61 wanted to kill him while some were joyful about his message.
- **Two Biblical stories** of jubilee salvation. The story of the rich young man (Lk. 18: 18-25) cannot be understood apart from the story of Zacchaeus (Lk 19: 1-10). We all know both stories well. In the Gospel of Luke they are placed side by side on purpose, but we seldom read them in this jubilee context and in connection one with the other.
 - **The Young Rich man.** Jesus is speaking in the light of the jubilee tradition: "there is only one thing that stands between you and your God, your money" And the rich man could not give away his money, so he could not fully encounter God. It is very interesting that in the Gospel of Luke Jesus links the gaining of eternal life with money four times (Lk 10:25-37; 16:19-31; 19:1-10 and 18:18-25).
 - **The Transformed Rich Man (Zacchaeus).** This story is the exact opposite of the young rich man. Zacchaeus listens to the Lord and is converted . He gives half of his money to the poor and pays back four fold those he robbed. So the jubilee salvation finds a place in his life.
- **The Beatitudes.** Compare the beatitudes in Luke (begins in this world) and in Matthews (more spiritualized). Luke's approach is so because he is following the jubilee tradition.
- **NOTE:** some people might complain and reject this reading of Jesus and His ministry as too materialistic and reductionist. However, it is fundamental to remember the Jewish mindset where spiritual and material realms are distinct but not separated one from another. To speak on matters of this world is to speak on matters of the spiritual world and vice-versa, because

one has an impact on the other, especially the spiritual on the material; they are profoundly connected in Jesus' mind, as he was a Jew. God is the creator of everything, thus every realm of existence comes from and is maintained in being by God. God is present and rules every aspect of life! To exile God to the spiritual realm alone is not a trait of the ancient mind (Paul, Jesus, and Israel-Rome in the time of Jesus), but a trait of the modern deistic mind (beginning in the XVI-XVIII centuries). Such isolation of the spiritual realm is the true reductionism, not the other way around.

- **Jesus, incarnation, passion, death, and resurrection.** According to Luke's Gospel Jesus links eternal life and salvation with the jubilee and prophetic tradition that deals with money, property, economic and political power. It is in this context that the incarnation, passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus acquires its full meaning— much more so than in a spiritualized, disconnected version of his salvific action for us. In this light, Jesus death and resurrection not only indicates, but also sustains the call to live out social justice as a sign of full redemption and salvation in God.
- **Jesus proclaims the Kingdom (Reign) of God.** Jesus' message of the kingdom is the embodiment of the jubilee (shalom) tradition. Mt 25: 31-46 can be understood in this perspective. In the Gospel of Mark Jesus begins his public ministry by announcing that the Kingdom is at hand (Mk 1:15). The people who heard him understood immediately what he meant by "The Kingdom," it meant the Jubilee and Shalom Community (note: the kingdom of God is not the same as "heaven"). Unfortunately we are the ones who have been disconnected from that meaning and that perspective of religion and life. The documents of the Second Vatican Council seek to retrieve and restore the full meaning of the mission of Jesus and the reign of God.

3. The Eucharist – The sacrament of God's presence – points to justice of the social kind

- The Eucharist, as the sacrament of communion with God and with each other, fully embodies the jubilee (shalom community) tradition reinterpreted through the person of Jesus.
- In the Eucharist, Jesus is given to us as visible sign of the foundations of the jubilee and shalom community, that we are bidden to achieve more fully.
- Participation in the Eucharist without engagement in social justice empties the Eucharist of its fullest meaning.

4. Social Justice goes beyond Charity (Direct Service).

- Charity is understood as direct service – the giving out of a donation or service to respond to an immediate need that is recurrent and will need another donation or service response in the near future.
- Justice is understood as the action of the community to address root cause of social ills, so they will be solved and not be recurrent. It is long term ministry and requires -changes in social structures, such as institutions and legislations.
- Both direct service and action on behalf of social justice are required, the work of social justice goes further and addresses social ills more effectively. Ministry on behalf of social justice more fully respects the dignity of each person. It promotes human development and helps people help themselves, moving them away from dependency into interdependency.

5. The practice of social justice is primarily a task of the Faith Community

- Because social justice is the living out of the Gospel values in the social realm, it must be the work of the community and not of isolated individuals alone. To only have individuals engaged

in social justice actions, instead of the faith community as a community engaged in it, is an incomplete form of action on behalf of social justice in the Church.

- As explained above, social justice is a response of the Gospel to social injustice. Working for social justice is to carry on the mission of Jesus, and it is God's will for God's People. As such, it must be the response of the faith-community acting together, because it is the community that is the People of God, not the individual alone in isolation.
- Thus, even when someone may be perceived as acting alone in an action of charity or justice, that action must be understood in the framework of the community of faith, that is, the People of God.
- An action of social justice today is an extension of Jesus' own ministry. Today, Jesus is present in the world through his Body, which is the faith-community. That is another reason why the work of social justice must be the concerted effort of the faith community and not of isolated individuals (cf. GS, 17).

6. The Basic Principles of Catholic Social Teaching

- Human Dignity is the first and foundational principle of Catholic Social Teaching.
- The entire body of social teachings in the Catholic Tradition is extensive and based on several core principles. The various texts and writing of CST use these principles, as fundamental values to be achieved and to guide the work of social justice by the Church.
- These other principles are:
 - Stewardship of Creation
 - Social Nature of Human Beings
 - Community and Participation
 - Common Good
 - Subsidiary
 - Universal Rights and Responsibilities
 - Option for the Poor
 - Dignity of Work and Rights of Workers
 - Solidarity
 - Justice: commutative, distributive, social
 - Peace

7. A few pressing issues on the Border and the Millennium Goals

- **Poverty & Hunger**
- **Immigration**
- **War & Violence**
- **Environment**
- **Political Participation**
- **The Millennium Development Goals:**
 - Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
 - Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education
 - Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women
 - Goal 4: Reduce child mortality rates
 - Goal 5: Improve maternal health
 - Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases
 - Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability
 - Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development

Questions for Discussion

1. What is the relationship between religion and politics in the Shalom community?
2. How do you interpret “This is what God asks from you, to act justly and to love kindly, and to walk humbly with God”
3. How does Jesus message of Salvation propose social justice?
4. Comment “The Kingdom of God is not a matter of food or drink, but of justice, peace, and joy in the Spirit” (1 Cor 4: 20).
5. Now, how do you respond to the question: “why is the Church getting involved in politics instead of doing only what it is supposed to do, that is, to serve the spiritual needs of people?”
6. Why is it important that social justice be a mission and the organized work of the parish, more so than of individuals alone?
7. How would the Church (Diocese/your parish) be different if it followed Jesus’ work for the transformation of both people and their society?
8. How would the Church in your city be different if it saw itself as working with Christ for the building of your city’s shalom?
9. What is understood by charity and by justice, and what is the relationship between them, according to the social teachings of the Church?
10. What is meant by Catholic Social Teachings and where one finds them?
11. Since my primary experience of the Church is what happens in my parish, what can we do at the parish level to advance CST?
12. How do you see the relationship between the millennium goals and the social reality here at the border region?