

## Reflection

### CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING AND UNJUST STRUCTURES

One view is that religion is primarily an instrument of personal conversion. If institutions are shaped and managed by morally sensitive leaders, then such institutions will positively contribute to the good of people, of society, and of the world. This viewpoint represents a very popular notion of religion within the United States and surfaces under various guises. During the welfare debates of 1996 there were calls for less government (an institution which exists to promote the general welfare) and for more reliance on individuals within faith-based communities to solve problems associated with poverty, a reflection of an individualistic spirituality.

However, Catholic Social Teaching declares that individuals are not the only ones who need conversion. Institutions do, as well. Institutions are the structures through which people, their values, and their activities are organized. If organized unjustly, or if they function unjustly, the institutions should be considered unjust. In some ways, unjust institutions pose a greater threat to human dignity than individuals who act unjustly. Such institutions structure and thus perpetuate the injustice.

Some would limit the role of religion to one of fostering individual conversion. We can apply this logic to slavery, which is fundamentally an economic institution. Would anyone really want religion to be a force to develop morally sensitive slave owners on the one hand and to comfort the afflicted slaves on the other? As absurd as this seems, this very kind of spirituality was an influential force in the formation of the United States. The architects of the Declaration of Independence called for a nation which promised “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” for all people. Yet they permitted the institution of economic slavery, based on race, to be given the protection of law in a significant part of the new nation. The spirituality of Catholic Social Teaching would challenge the moral assumptions on which slavery or any evil system is based.

Catholic Social Teaching is used to describe official documents of the magisterium of the Catholic Church

which address any structured aspect of society that puts humanity at risk. It looks not just at individual behavior, but at the social context through which behavior is structured. This body of official teachings began in 1891 with the publication of *Rerum Novarum*, the encyclical of Leo XIII on the rights of labor. A treasury of such teachings addressing issues critical to human well being and to just social structures now exists. *Economic Justice for All* lies at the heart of this mainstream body of teachings which brings the power of social analysis, based on biblical revelation and religious tradition, to bear on societal problems.

In fact, *Economic Justice for All* is not the first official social teaching of the bishops within the United States on economic matters. The Wall Street crash of 1929 triggered a worldwide economic depression, with unemployment rampant. The unemployed poor were the majority in this nation. Unemployment could not easily be blamed on individual behavior. It was a recognized result of the failure of the marketplace as structured at that time. The problems of the poor were the nation’s problems. And the problems had to be solved through structured intervention and institutional change, not by fixing the unemployed.

In 1940, under the leadership of Karl Alter, then bishop of Toledo, the bishops addressed the economic conditions of the Great Depression in a pastoral letter. In light of the Milwaukee conference’s discussion of the appropriate role for religion in economic matters, the final paragraph of the 1940 document is worth remembering. It unequivocally takes umbrage with a spirituality of individualism in such matters:

Our economic life then must be reorganized, not on the disintegrating principles of individualism, but on the constructive principle of moral and social unity among the members of society. In conformity with Christian principles, economic power must be subordinated to human welfare, both individual and social; social incoherence and class conflict must be replaced by corporate unity and organic function; ruthless competition must give way to just and reasonable state regulations; sordid selfishness must be superseded by social justice and charity. Then only can there be a true and rational social order; then only can we eliminate the twin evils of inefficiency and



insecurity, and establish the divine plan of a human family united under the (providence) of God.

These teachings, as all other documents of Catholic Social Teaching, rely on other heritages of the Faith as well. Social teachings about society and its institutions have roots in the earliest stories of the Bible. The people of God were forged as a people in a cauldron of unjust political and economic social arrangements. Consider the Exodus story of Israel's conversion experience, which led to the discovery that they were to have a special role in this world mandated by God.

The story opens with the people—the entire Hebrew people—enslaved in Egypt. Their liberation will become symbolic of the freedom from every oppression which God wills for all people. God did not send Moses to make the Pharaoh a more morally sensitive person. God's plan was for all to be free. Moses was not to tinker with the plan, but to implement it! Remember how, after several disrupting plagues, Pharaoh decided it would be better to let the men go, but keep the women and children to ensure future generations of slaves. He sent for Moses and Aaron and asked: "Who will you take on this journey?" (Exodus 10:9) The reply: "We will take our sons and our daughters, our young and our old, our flocks and our herds!" The mission was nonnegotiable. Redemption was for everyone. In the desert, a covenant with God was codified. Through this, the Hebrews would be God's people, "through whom all the nations of the world would be blest." How were these people to be recognized as God's people? By their institutions, by their social arrangements, especially those which safeguarded the poorest and weakest among the people. And when the people failed, punishment was not given to individuals. The conquests and resultant exiles of the Hebrews reveal God's wrath at the betrayal of the Covenant by the people, not just by individuals. Thus we see that the earliest teachings of Judeo-Christianity focus on the community and its institutional arrangements.

The other heritage of Catholic Social Teaching can be traced to those visionaries who were immersed in the lives of those most adversely affected by the new realities of the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries. They brought the lived power of the gospel (praxis) to bear on the signs of the times. These witnesses to Christ's love included the founders of the modern activist religious orders and lay associations. They challenged the assumptions of why some participated in the goods of society and why some were excluded. Specialized service was often the chosen method of intervention, but the value of this service was transcendent.

An example will make the point. An assumption of eighteenth-century France (and of Europe in general) was that the poor could not, or should not, be educated. St. John the Baptist de La Salle (as well as many others) rejected that assumption. He organized a group of men (the Christian Brothers) to teach poor boys. Relatively few boys directly benefited from his service. Yet, as a result of these efforts, France, and its counterparts throughout the industrializing world, made the right to education a universal right. Thus private educational undertakings for, and with, the poorest forced a public awareness that education had to be restructured. It was a matter of justice. And with restructuring, all of society benefited by having an expanded pool of educated workers and leaders.

The new realities of a globalized marketplace demand new responses today. At a conference sponsored by the Center of Concern and Marquette University, the participants produced a document that echoes the moral imperatives coming from *Economic Justice for All* and other recent documents. After detailing some of the signs of the times which cry out for a more just world economy, they wrote—

Deep attention to the presence of the unifying Spirit of God can draw people of diverse religious traditions together in ways that foreshadow the truly humane global community God wills for all humanity. It will lead to mutually sustaining relationships with one another and with all creation, encountering a God who lives among us and honoring that Presence by our treatment of the other with justice and compassion, with love. This renewed spirituality will feed our hunger for meaning and temper culturally cultivated temptations to excessive individualism, to consumerism, to



# JUST AND UNJUST STRUCTURES

control, to greed. It will shape our vision of the future and critique proposals for getting there. It will inspire new social structures of justice and breathe passionate life into them. The tradition of Catholic Social Thought can help sustain this spirituality and shape the social structures.

*Text adapted from "Economic Justice For All: An Appeal to Transform the World's Economic Institutions", by Thomas Harvey, Center Focus, Issue #137, September 1997.*

