



UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

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EVERYDAY CHRISTIANITY: TO HUNGER AND THIRST FOR JUSTICE

A Pastoral Reflection on Lay Discipleship for Justice in a New Millennium
1998

Introduction

One of the great challenges for Christians is as old as our faith, but it takes on special urgency today as we approach the Third Christian Millennium. How do we connect worship on Sunday to work on Monday? How is the Gospel proclaimed not only in the pulpits of our parishes, but also in the everyday lives of Catholic people? How does the Church gathered on the Sabbath act as the People of God scattered and active every day of the week? How can we best carry the values of our faith into family life, the market place and the public square? How do we love our neighbor, pursue peace and seek justice in everyday choices and commitments?

In these reflections, we highlight one essential dimension of the lay vocation which is sometimes overlooked or neglected: the social mission of Christians in the world. ¹ Every believer is called to serve "the least of these," to "hunger and thirst for justice," to be a "peacemaker." ² Catholics are called by God to protect human life, to promote human dignity, to defend the poor and to seek the common good. This social mission of the Church belongs to all of us. It is an essential part of what it is to be a believer.

This social mission is advanced in many ways -- by the prophetic teaching of our Holy Father; by the efforts of our bishops' Conference; and by many structures of charity and justice within our community of faith. But the most common and, in many ways, the most important Christian witness is often neither very visible nor highly structured. It is the sacrifice of parents trying to raise children with concern for others; the service and creativity of workers who do their best and reach out to those in need; the struggle of business owners trying to reconcile the bottom line and the needs of employees and customers; and the hard choices of public officials who seek to protect the weak and pursue the common good. The Church's social mission is advanced by teachers and scientists, by family farmers and bankers, by sales persons and entertainers.

The Catholic social mission is also carried forward by believers who join unions, neighborhood organizations, business groups, civic associations, the pro-life movement, groups working for justice, or environmental, civil rights or peace groups. It is advanced by Christians who stand up for the values of the Gospel. This mission is the task of countless Christians living their faith without much fanfare or recognition, who are quietly building a better society by their choices and actions day by day. They protect human life, defend those who are poor, seek the common good, work for peace, and promote human dignity.

Working for justice in everyday life is not easy. There are complex and sometimes difficult challenges encountered by women and men as they try to live their faith in the world. We applaud the efforts of all Catholics to live the Gospel by pursuing justice and peace in their everyday choices and commitments.

The Catholic Layperson: Discipleship and the Pursuit of Justice

Being a believer means that one lives a certain way -- walking with the Lord, doing justice, loving kindness, living peaceably among all people. Christian discipleship means practicing what Jesus preached. Discipleship is found in a relationship with Christ and a commitment to His mission of "bringing good news to the poor, liberty to captives, new sight to the blind and setting the downtrodden free." ³

For Catholics, this takes on special meaning today. According to the Second Vatican Council, "It is the special vocation of the laity to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will. They live in the world, in each and every one of the world's occupations and callings and in the ordinary circumstances of social and family life which, as it were, form the context of their existence. There they are called by God to contribute to the sanctification of the world within, like leaven, in the spirit of the Gospel, by fulfilling their own particular duties." ⁴

We welcome and affirm the growing participation of lay women and men in the internal life of the Church. Service within the Church should form and strengthen believers for their mission in the world. With this pastoral statement we are addressing in a special way the demands of discipleship in the pursuit of justice and peace in everyday activity.

Followers of the Lord Jesus live their discipleship as spouses and parents, single adults and youth, employers and employees, consumers and investors, citizens and neighbors. We renew the warning of the Second Vatican Council that the "split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age." ⁵ By our Baptism and Confirmation every member of our community is called to live his or her faith in the world.

Called to Justice in Everyday Life

Catholicism does not call us to abandon the world, but to help shape it. This does not mean leaving worldly tasks and responsibilities, but transforming them. Catholics are everywhere in this society. We are corporate executives and migrant farm workers, senators and welfare recipients, university presidents and day care workers, tradesmen and farmers, office and factory workers, union leaders and small business owners. Our entire community of faith must help Catholics to be instruments of God's grace and creative power in business and politics, factories and offices, in homes and schools and in all the events of daily life. Social justice and the common good are built up or torn down day by day in the countless decisions and choices we make. This vocation to pursue justice is not simply an individual task -- it is a call to work with others to humanize and shape the institutions that touch so many people. The lay vocation for justice cannot be carried forward alone, but only as members of a community called to be the "leaven" of the Gospel.

- Our **families** are the starting point and the center of a vocation for justice. How we treat our parents, spouses and children is a reflection of our commitment to Christ's love and justice. We demonstrate our commitment to the Gospel by how we spend our time and money, and whether our family life includes an ethic of charity, service and action for justice. The lessons we teach our children through what we do as well as what we say determines whether they care for the "least among us" and are committed to work for justice. ⁶

- **Workers** are called to pursue justice. In the Catholic tradition, work is not a burden, not just how we make a living. Work is a way of supporting our family, realizing our dignity, promoting the common good, and participating in God's creation. This means often doing the ordinary well, making the most of our talents and opportunities, treating others fairly and with dignity, and working with integrity and creativity. Believers should be encouraged to choose their work based on how they can best use the gifts God has given them. Decisions made at work can make important contributions to an ethic of justice. Catholics have the often difficult responsibility of choosing between competing values in the workplace. This is a measure of holiness. Associations that enable workers, owners or managers to pursue justice often make the witness of the individual more effective. ⁷
- **Owners, managers, and investors** face important opportunities to seek justice and pursue peace. Ethical responsibility is not just avoiding evil, but doing right, especially for the weak and vulnerable. Decisions about the use of capital have moral implications: Are they creating and preserving quality jobs at living wages? Are they building up community through the goods and services they provide? Do policies and decisions reflect respect for human life and dignity, promote peace and preserve God's creation? While economic returns are important, they should not take precedence over the rights of workers or protection of the environment. Investors should examine ownership, management, and economic decisions in the light of the Catholic call to protect life, defend those who are poor, and seek the common good. These decisions promote human dignity or undermine it. ⁸
- As **consumers**, believers can promote social justice or injustice. In an affluent culture that suggests that what we have defines who we are, we can live more simply. When we purchase goods and services, we can choose to support companies that defend human life, treat workers fairly, protect creation, and respect other basic moral values at home and abroad. We can also make conscious efforts to consume less. ⁹
- All human beings have unique talents, gifts from God that we are called to develop and share. We should celebrate this diversity. People who use their skills and expertise for the common good, the service of others, and the protection of creation, are **good stewards** of the gifts they have been given. When we labor with honesty, serve those in need, work for justice and contribute to charity, we use our talents to show our love--and God's love--for our brothers and sisters. ¹⁰
- As **citizens** in the world's leading democracy, Catholics in the United States have special responsibilities to protect human life and dignity and to stand with those who are poor and vulnerable. We are also called to welcome the stranger, to combat discrimination, to pursue peace, and to promote the common good. Catholic social teaching calls us to practice civic virtues and offers us principles to shape participation in public life. We cannot be indifferent to or cynical about the obligations of citizenship. Our political choices should not reflect simply our own interests, partisan preferences or ideological agendas, but should be shaped by the principles of our faith and our commitment to justice, especially to the weak

and vulnerable. The voices and votes of lay Catholics are needed to shape a society with greater respect for human life, economic and environmental justice, cultural diversity and global solidarity. Catholic involvement in public life and legislative advocacy are important ways to exercise responsible citizenship. Participation in politics is a worthy vocation and a public trust. Believers who serve in public office have unique responsibilities and opportunities to stand up for human life and dignity, to pursue justice and peace, and to advance the common good by the policies, priorities and program they support or oppose. ¹¹

Supporting the "Salt of the Earth"

Church statements, structures and initiatives are important for Catholic formation and action. Social ministry programs and structures provide valuable opportunities for believers to learn to act on the justice demands of their faith. Church social ministry efforts should encourage and complement the vital roles of believers in family, economic and public life. However, there is simply no substitute for Catholic men and women carrying their faith into the world. Everyday discipleship for justice and the Church's organized social ministry can reinforce one another and help shape a more just society and more peaceful world. We hope these reflections can serve as an opportunity for increased dialogue on the demands of discipleship in our time.

Parishes are essential sources of support and encouragement for Christian discipleship. At their best, parishes help believers prepare and go forth to live the Gospel in everything we do. The Sunday liturgy sends us forth to renew the earth and build up God's kingdom of justice and peace. We encourage our pastors and preachers to listen to their parishioners on the challenges of their daily lives and help bring the insight of the Gospel and the principles of Catholic teaching to these experiences. We affirm prayer and worship which help believers apply the Gospel to everyday situations. Across the country, there are examples of Catholic men and women gathering in small groups to examine the moral dimensions of their lives and work. They enlarge their vision beyond the immediate and the individual experience when they are enabled to examine the structures and processes that shape social life. Catholic schools and religious education programs provide important lessons about living a life of justice and compassion, and promoting participation in civic life. Many parishes participate in legislative networks and community organizing projects that involve parishioners in working for justice. And in thousands of parishes, other social ministry efforts provide valuable opportunities to help believers make choices about their time, money and talents that reflect the justice demands of the Gospel. These parishes are convinced that the mystery of Jesus' life, death and resurrection unfolds within human life.

We applaud these efforts and urge our parishes to do even more. Our culture often suggests that religion is a private matter, to be tolerated as long as it is detached from our lives as workers and citizens. Catholic men and women look to our parishes to find the support, tools and concrete help they need to resist this tendency and instead proclaim Christ's love, justice and peace in everything they do.

The measure of the Church's organized social ministry is not simply the teaching shared, the services offered, the actions taken, but also the support and challenge provided for men and women as they seek to live the Gospel in the world. Our community of faith needs to share its social teaching more clearly and comprehensively so that its principles can help shape the choices and actions of Catholics. Catholics also need to learn and further explore the links between faith and life, theology and ethics, what we believe and how we act every day. Catholics need to support one another as we take up these difficult tasks, helping each other to have the

courage of our convictions, to stand up for what we believe and to practice in our own lives what the Scriptures proclaim. As we approach the year 2000, our Conference is promoting a "Jubilee Pledge for Charity, Justice and Peace" as one concrete way for believers to commit to renewed prayer, reflection, service and action in preparation for the Third Christian Millennium. (See appendix.)

Conclusion

The Word of God calls believers to become "the salt of the earth, the light of the world."¹² The Pope and the bishops are called to teach and lead, but unless the Church's social teaching finds a home in the hearts and lives of Catholic women and men, our community and culture will fall short of what the Gospel requires. Our society urgently needs the everyday witness of Christians who take the social demands of our faith seriously. The pursuit of justice is an essential part of the Catholic call to holiness, which is our true vocation: to live "in Christ," and let Christ live and work in us in our world today.

Christian faith requires conversion; it changes who we are, what we do and how we think. The Gospel offers "good news" and guidance not just for our spiritual lives, but for all the commitments and duties which make up our lives. Living our faith in the ordinary tasks of everyday life is an essential part of what it means to be holy today.

As the Third Christian Millennium approaches, the call to live our faith in everyday choices and actions remains at the heart of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. This call takes on renewed urgency as we approach the Great Jubilee, but it is not new. The task of disciples today was probably best and most simply expressed in the words of the prophet Micah:

"What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness and walk humbly with your God."

—Micah 6:8

Jubilee and the Lay Call to Justice

A Call to Jubilee Justice

Pope John Paul II has declared the year 2000 to be a jubilee year. The beginning of the next millennium is especially significant for followers of Jesus. The year 2000 is a holy year, a time of favor, a reminder that we live and work in a time of special grace between the Incarnation of Jesus and his Second Coming. Amidst all the clamor that will surround the millennium believers need to ask, What does the jubilee mean for us? How should Catholic women and men respond to this call for a jubilee?

The jubilee was an ideal, a reminder that Yahweh, the creator of all, was the true owner of creation and that those who live in a covenant relationship with Yahweh must also seek right and just relationships with all people. The pious Israelite knew that the land was a gift from God. The land and all it signified -- work, material goods, financial security, the practices of economic and everyday life -- were to be understood within the context of one's relationship with God. All gifts of creation, including personal talents and abilities, first of all belong to God. The devout Israelite was a steward of God's goods. Natural resources and human talents were to serve all with a particular concern for the poor and weak.

The "year of the Lord's favor" was a time to proclaim "liberty in the land for all" (Lev. 25:10), to "bring good news to the poor" and "let the oppressed go free." (Is. 61) It was a time to restore freedom and justice among people, to reestablish relationships of equality, remedy the conditions that kept people oppressed (Is.61), and to cancel debts (Deut. 15). The jubilee was intended to relieve the burdens of the weak and give people an opportunity to start anew. There was a clear

social message in the jubilee. The jubilee year was an invitation for people to see their lives from a divine perspective: all that they were and all they did should be in accord with God's will for building a community of justice, mercy, love and peace.

Like the ancient Israelites in their time, Catholic lay persons today ought to see the coming Jubilee as a call to renewed practice of charity, pursuit of justice, welcome to the stranger, and new efforts to permit all to participate in the life of the community. As followers of Christ transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit, Catholics must strive to open their hearts to Christ's truth, love, and justice, and to grow in virtue. Each generation of believers must take up this task. This is an essential part of what it means to be holy today.

As the Jubilee approaches, there are a variety of ways to take up this task. Among the possibilities are the special "Jubilee Pledge for Charity, Justice and Peace" being promoted by our Conference, which offers individuals and families an opportunity to commit themselves to ongoing prayer, reflection, service and action in preparation for the new Millennium (see Appendix). Another opportunity is a Jubilee Justice Gathering in Los Angeles in July 1999 sponsored by a broad range of Catholic organizations to bring together Catholics from across the nation to explore the demands of charity, justice and peace as we approach the Third Christian Millennium.

Appendix

This Jubilee Pledge for Charity, Justice and Peace is being offered to individuals, families and parishes as a sign of commitment in preparation for the Millennium:

Jubilee Pledge for Charity, Justice and Peace A Catholic Commitment for the New Millennium

The Jubilee of our Lord's birth calls us "to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and release to prisoners."

—Luke 4:18

As disciples of Jesus in the new Millennium, I/we pledge to:

Pray regularly for greater justice and peace.

Learn more about Catholic social teaching and its call to protect human life, stand with the poor, and care for creation.

Reach across boundaries of religion, race, ethnicity, gender, and disabling conditions.

Live justly in family life, school, work, the marketplace, and the political arena.

Serve those who are poor and vulnerable, sharing more time and talent.

Give more generously to those in need at home and abroad.

Advocate public policies that protect human life, promote human dignity, preserve God's creation, and build peace.

Encourage others to work for greater charity, justice, and peace.

Signature

Love for others, and in the first place love for the poor, in whom the Church sees Christ himself, is made concrete in the promotion of justice.

—Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 1991

Note: This pledge is being promoted by a variety of U.S. Catholic Conference offices and other organizations as a practical response to the Holy Father's designation of 1999 as "the year of charity."

Endnotes

1. Other major documents address in a more comprehensive way the vocation of the laity (i.e. the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *On the Role of Laity, Called and Gifted, Called and Gifted for a New Millennium*). Catholic teaching also outlines our broader social mission in a series of documents (i.e. *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Justice in the World, One Hundred Years, A Century of Social Teaching, Communities of Salt and Light, Called to Global Solidarity.*)
2. Matthew 25:31-46, Matthew 5:1-10
3. Luke 4:
4. Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, #31
5. *Pastoral Constitution*, #43
6. *On the Family*, Pope John Paul II
7. *On Human Work*, Pope John Paul II, No. 5
8. *Economic Justice for All, A Catholic Framework for Economic Life*, U.S. Catholic Bishops
9. *Economic Justice for All, A Catholic Framework for Economic Life*, U.S. Catholic Bishops
10. *To Be a Christian Steward*, U.S. Catholic Bishops
11. *Octogesima Adveniens*, Pope Paul VI; *Political Responsibility*, U.S. Catholic Bishops
12. Matthew 5:13-14

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