

IS BREAD ENOUGH?



Years ago, my wife and I were sitting at lunch with our new pastor of our new parish discussing the new Social Justice Ministry, when I asked one of those dumb questions that in retrospect I am glad I asked because it changed the course of my life.

“Why aren’t we calling it the ‘Social Concerns’ Ministry?”

Father explained that he and the Administrative Council chose “Social Justice” because the focus of the ministry was to work towards changing “the economic and political structures to create a just society” so that we don’t end up relying on charity as a response to the problems of society.

(Aren’t we called to charity? In today’s first reading, the Israelite community grumbled that they would die of famine. In response, the LORD rained down bread from heaven to eat.)

Father’s response was an aha moment. During my four years at Notre Dame, social justice as a requirement of our Catholic faith was mentioned often. Every homily, every speech by Father Ted Hesburgh, President of Notre Dame, contained a call to work for social justice. I just don’t recall hearing it explained as a concept distinct from social concerns — charity — or explained as, as Pope Benedict XVI wrote, “Justice is the primary way of charity or, in Paul VI’s words, ‘the minimum measure’ of it.”)

Jesus did say that we will always have the poor among us. He did not say that we need be resigned to this state. He did not say that we would have constantly increasing numbers of poor and, as a result, we needed to learn how to manage an equally increased charitable response.

During these bleak economic times the food pantries are graciously receiving more and more hungry brothers and sisters. We would be heartless if we were to ignore them. At the same time our Catholic faith calls us to advocate for economic justice. In today’s Gospel reading Jesus tells those looking for food, “Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life... “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger...” Jesus is our bread for eternal life. For our earthly lives, we must respond to the call to ensure that everyone who hungers has bread.

God knows that we need a communal spirit of good will to staff, donate to, and advocate for, food pantries and soup kitchens. The sharp rise in the number of hungry guests they serve underscore this. Is it the goal of a food pantry to increase the number of people it serves? Or is society better served if the food pantry aspires to put itself out of business?

We are instructed to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, to welcome the stranger, to clothe the naked, to shelter for the homeless and to ensure birth to the unborn. (Cf Mt 25: 35-36)

As we mature our hearts lead us to advocate to end hunger through safety nets and food policies; to work for water that is clean and universally accessible; to welcome the stranger through immigration reform and immigrant rights; to end homelessness through policies creating affordable housing and treating mental health; to ensure that our government does not pay for elective abortions and society funds systems that support our financially-challenged mothers.

Mankind needs to be more than simply concerned, not content with providing bread alone. We must seek justice. Social Justice.

We undertake this work not out of the goodness of our hearts. We do this as builders of the Kingdom of God here on earth. For through this work we come to imitate Christ and to know Jesus, who is bread for eternal life.

(Readings for 18th Sunday of Ordinary Time)



Office of Life, Justice, and Peace