

A SOCIAL INVITATION



Paul begins his first letter to the Corinthians by urging that there be no divisions, but that they “be united in the same mind and in the same purpose.” He instructs them that they not engage in rivalries among them by reminding them that they are united in Christ. Thus begins the foundation for the principles of community and the common good.

A fundamental tenet of Catholic teaching is that we are created to be social – how we organize our society in economics and politics, in law and policy directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community. We are created to be in community.

The natural consequence of the call to be in community is that we seek the good of all, not just a protected class. The common good. The significance of this obligation to be in community is that we seek justice not only for the individual but also for the community. It is time to put the SOCIAL back into social justice.

Our first step is to be social. To see every person as an individual; to celebrate the dignity of every human person; to accept the company of each individual. Do we sit alone at mass? Do we greet the same friends during coffee and doughnuts? Are we members of our parish community – the Church – or do we belong to a parish clique?

Second, if your parish is splintered then it’s time to unite in Christ and re-create community: knit it, weave it, listen to it, and belong to it. It is time to create a welcoming community. Move past welcoming only some individuals. But welcoming the community. That’s what welcoming looks like. Here within the welcoming community we listen and learn the personal story that colors each individual.

Although we can learn one’s personal trials and triumphs, it is harder to empathize with the story of an entire class. Difficulty does not absolve us of our responsibility to hear the collective story and achieve collective justice.

Third, because we belong to society we assume responsibility for its sins and ensuring community justice. “The presence of social sin in policies, laws and social practices results in the failure to respect to enhance the human dignity of certain groups in society. ... The real responsibility for social sin lies with individuals” (Pope John Paul II, *Letter on Reconciliation and Penance*). For example, individuals who take refuge in the supposed impossibility of changing the world.

The institutions of society are not morally neutral; they reflect the values and the biases of those who create them and maintain them. Social sin resides within a group or a community or a nation of people; it exists within any structure in society that oppresses human beings, violates human dignity, stifles freedom, and/or imposes great inequity.

While personal sin is freely chosen, social sin is collective blindness. When, as one person, we fail to see the individual before us, we have personal sin. When, as a community, we fail to see the individuals before us, we have social sin.

We make amends for social sin by following the three steps outlined above (socialize, create community and recognizing responsibility) and then endeavoring to address the evil condition. The ultimate destination is to achieve a social justice and be in community, united in Christ, with each other.

We desire not just food but to eat food in community. If we desire God’s kingdom, the crescendo is not food stamps; it is community.

(Readings for Third Sunday of Ordinary Time)



Office of Life, Justice, and Peace