Social Justice

War. Terrorism. Poverty. World hunger. Homelessness. Pollution. Ecological threats to the planet. Does Christian morality have anything to say about these issues? Of course it does. By our very nature, we are social beings, linked to the rest of humanity whether we like it or not. The choices we make affect others, even if we are unaware of it. Even the most private thought or act changes us and therefore has the potential to affect others. How much more effect do our acts have on others when thousands or millions of people are making the same choices? One person driving a gas-guzzling, polluting automobile will have a small impact, but a million people doing the same thing will change the world.

In God’s infinite wisdom, we came into this world dependent on those around us, and we will exit this world having left some great or small impression on the strands of life. We will be held accountable, not only for the things we do but also for the things we do not do. When it comes to the social effect of our moral decisions, the things

**Words to Look For**

- society
- social justice
- social doctrine
- common good
- social encyclical
- human rights
- human dignity
- solidarity
- charity
we do not do may be as important as the things we do. In this chapter we explore how morality is not just about us but about society as well.

**Social Justice**

When we say we are made in the image and likeness of God, it means we reflect what God is like. But what is God like? One way to answer this question is to examine our belief in the Holy Trinity, the three Divine Persons in one God. The Trinity tells us that God isn’t just a lone individual; God is a community of Persons, living in perfect love and charity. If we are to live out our divine destiny, we must treat one another in a way that resembles the unity of the Trinity—the three Persons in one God.

Because every human being is made in the image and likeness of God, each person has infinite value. Our relationship with God calls us to be in right relationship with the beings he created in his image and likeness—that is, other people! It doesn’t matter whether those people are our best friends or our worst enemies. Our love for God must translate into a love for all people and a commitment to treat them justly.

Recent scientific discoveries support this basic religious belief. Geneticists can now chart the DNA of each person’s uniqueness yet also testify to the existence of the common strands of life that link us together. Anthropologists and sociologists know that humans have always been social beings who organize themselves into families, tribes, neighborhoods, and communities. These groups of people that are organically bound together and that go beyond the individuality of any one person are called **society**. God calls society to follow moral principles that defend human dignity by ensuring that essential human needs are met and that essential human rights are protected for all people. We call this **social justice**.

Social justice has deep roots in the Bible. The prophets of the Old Testament were outspoken advocates for justice in society. Isaiah prophesied in the Lord’s name:
Did You Know?

Catholic Service Organizations for Charity and Justice

The Catholic Church in the United States has long been a leader in both works of charity and action for justice. Look for information on these organizations in your parish or diocesan office or on the Internet.

- **Catholic Relief Services (CRS)** assists poor people in other countries with disaster relief. It is one of the largest relief agencies in the world. CRS also sponsors development and self-help projects aimed at the causes of poverty. It educates U.S. Catholics about poverty and provides tools for getting involved in both charity work and the promotion of justice.

- **Catholic Campaign for Human Development** addresses the root causes of poverty in the United States, through grants for community self-help projects. These projects have helped create jobs, provide affordable housing, and organize communities to address local injustices. People being helped are involved as decision makers.

- **Catholic Charities** is the largest private network of social services in the United States. A range of direct services is offered, such as counseling, adoption, drug abuse treatment, prison ministry, and refugee assistance. Services are often provided through agencies with names like Catholic Social Services. Justice is addressed through social-policy advocacy.

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house? (Isaiah 58:6–7)

And the Prophet Amos condemned those who “trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain” and who “afflict the righteous . . . take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate” (Amos 5:11–12).

Jesus, however, was the prophet who most exemplified the values of social justice. He told his disciples: “When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection” (Luke 14:13–14). He also told the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, the poor beggar who sat at the rich man’s door. When the rich man died, he was sent to Hell because he had ignored the needs of poor Lazarus (see Luke 16:19–31).

Finally, when Jesus describes the Last Judgment in Matthew 25:31–46, he tells how he will separate those who were charitable and just from those who were not. Those who were charitable and just will go to Heaven and those who were not are destined for Hell. Those who are being sent to Hell do not understand why:

“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell
you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” 

(Matthew 25:44–45)

Jesus is telling us that ignoring social needs is just the same as causing them.

Reflect
As a person who is concerned with social justice, what problems do you see in your own community that trouble you? Which global problems most concern you?

Catholic Social Teaching Principles
Catholic social teaching, also known as Catholic social doctrine, is based on some key concepts. By applying these concepts to different social issues, the Church makes judgments about the correct direction to follow. In this chapter we look briefly at the following four key concepts. In the chapters that follow, you will see how these concepts affect social issues raised by the Ten Commandments.

The Common Good
It seems that every day in the news, we hear stories about murder, theft, child abuse, and war. We need to remind ourselves that human beings are essentially good. Consider the outpouring of love and concern that engulfs the world in the days after a major terrorist attack or a devastating natural disaster. Strangers donate their blood and their money, family members take stock of their blessings, and stories of heroism reveal the true nature of individuals in a society united in a time of crisis. When conditions exist in society that allow all people, either as groups

Pray It

Praying with Dorothy Day
Dorothy Day was a tireless advocate for justice and for poor people. She was the cofounder of the Catholic Worker, a newspaper that began publication in 1933 and was the basis for a movement that resulted in houses of hospitality all over the country, which were run by volunteers committed to charity and justice. Today more than 185 Catholic Worker communities remain committed to nonviolence, voluntary poverty, prayer, hospitality for the homeless, and protesting injustice, war, racism, and violence of all forms. Pray these words of Dorothy Day’s and reflect on what God asks of you:

What we would like to do is change the world—make it a little simpler for people to feed, clothe, and shelter themselves as God intended them to do. And . . . by fighting for better conditions, by crying out unceasingly for the rights of the workers, of the poor, . . . we can to a certain extent change the world. . . . We can throw our pebble in the pond and be confident that its ever-widening circle will reach around the world. . . . Dear God—please enlarge our hearts to love each other, to love our neighbor, to love our enemy as well as our friend. (Dorothy Day, Selected Writings, page 98)
or individuals, to reach their human and spiritual fulfillment more fully and more easily, the **common good** is achieved. The concept of the common good is an important element in Catholic social teaching.

It is important that we understand what the common good really means; it isn’t just doing the greatest good for the greatest number of people. For example, although it is a good thing to provide electrical power, it would be wrong to do so if it meant exposing even a few people to unsafe radiation. The decision’s effect on each person must be taken into account.

Also the common good is not what is best only for our own community or the country we live in. Jesus Christ taught us that every person in the world is our spiritual brother or sister. Our membership in the family of God takes precedence over our allegiance to our country. This is a difficult challenge for those of us living in the United States, where about 5 percent of the world’s population uses 25 percent of the world’s energy resources. On a much grander scale of global society, we should recognize the importance of creating and supporting institutions that improve the conditions of human life for all.

When any government, whether it is the student government in your school or the representatives of a national government, exercises its authority, it must keep in mind not only the common good of the group but also the way that good is achieved. If authorities make laws that are unjust (even if the outcome may seem good), the people are not morally bound to follow the law. A classic example of unjust laws is the legal system that prevented African Americans from obtaining their human rights. Although lawmakers in the United States at the time thought such laws were necessary for public order, the means they used were morally wrong. It is clear now that both white and black people were adversely affected by this abuse of power.

**Responsibility of Political Authority**

Although some people may be cynical about politics and government, the Church affirms that political authority (also
called the state) has an important role: to defend and promote the common good of civil society. Political authority is based on human nature and therefore belongs to the same moral order established by God. In other words, our political leaders have a responsibility from God to make decisions for the common good. They do not have some special God-given right that lets them establish their moral order; they must follow the same moral law that God has implanted within every human being. They must create laws and structures that ensure people’s freedom to live moral lives.

Policy makers at all levels of government should ensure that each person has access to the resources needed to lead a truly human life: “food, clothing, health, work, education and culture, suitable information, the right to establish a family, and so on” (CCC, 1908). These needs are often referred to as basic human rights.

The United Nations (UN) is an institution that recognized these basic human rights in 1948 with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Although the world has a long way to go in fulfilling these rights for all people, the Church strongly supports this document. These are God-given rights, the conditions or things that any person needs to be fully what God created him or her to be. To achieve these rights for every person in the world, it is critically important that society have organizations like the UN to advocate for the common good of all.

Reflect
How would you respond to someone who says that religion and politics don’t mix? or that Christians and other religious people should stay out of politics?
Human Dignity
Another fundamental concept of social justice calls on us to reflect on the meaning of the Great Commandment: we are to love God and our neighbor as ourselves. As tough as it may be sometimes, we are called to respect and love the other as “another self,” whose rights flow from the same source as our own—human dignity. The homeless man on the street, the immigrant who crosses our borders illegally, even the prisoners in our jails all share the same human dignity that we have (recall Matthew 25:31–46). Because of this, God calls us to consider each and every human being as “another self” (CCC, 1944).

A belief in the equality of all human beings is acknowledged in our country’s founding documents. We know in our hearts that this belief is true because it flows from the natural moral law God placed in every human being. The equality of all people flows from the human dignity we share.

Yet sinful inequalities keep large segments of the human population from obtaining the absolute necessities of life, while others enjoy rich abundance. God did not intend for the world to be this way. With the intellect and free will we possess, we have the ability to solve local and global problems, vast and complex though they may be. For the child who is starving, for the mother who cannot survive without medicine, and for the father who cannot find work within his own community, there is a great urgency to ensure that the earth’s resources are fairly distributed to meet people’s basic needs. As individuals examine their consciences for their own sinful actions and attitudes, so must society consider the lack of human rights as a grave matter that cannot be put off by telling ourselves that we can do nothing about it, or that it has always been this way.

Human Solidarity
A final key concept in Catholic social teaching is the principle of human solidarity. Solidarity means we are to think in terms
of friendship and charity toward our brothers and sisters in society. We are one. It’s like being connected by invisible threads to every other person in the world. When one of us is suffering, that suffering is transferred down that invisible thread to all of us. As a starting point, solidarity means distributing the world’s resources so each of us gets our fair share and no one is suffering because of physical need. Maybe we cannot always share resources equally, but we can always share enough to meet everyone’s basic human needs.

If we are to be in solidarity with one another, we need to strive to break down barriers between employees and employers, between rich people and poor people, and between nations and peoples. Within our own social circles, we must find ways to include rather than exclude. We all have a responsibility

Saintly Profiles

Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton (1774–1821)

Elizabeth Ann Seton is a great American saint who was born wealthy but found her happiness in serving the poor. She was born in New York City into a wealthy Episcopalian family. She was homeschooled by her father and she read voraciously. At the age of nineteen, she married the wealthy merchant William Magee Seton, and they had five children. With her “soul-mate” and sister-in-law Rebecca Seton, she went about doing works of mercy. In 1797 she founded the Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Children. Six years later her husband died. Attracted by the Catholic faith, she became a Catholic in 1805, facing rejection by her family.

Encouraged by others, Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton founded the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph, whose priority was to serve poor people in works of charity and through Catholic education. She is credited with founding the first Catholic school and the first orphanage in the United States. She was canonized in 1975, making her the first saint born in the United States. We can be inspired by her life to reach out to those in need and experience the joy of serving Christ in the process. Her feast day is January 4.
Two Feet of Service and Justice

- Keep Going
- Works of Justice (removing the causes of those problems)
- You need both feet to walk and keep your balance.
- But you must move on to the next foot.
- Works of Service or Charity (helping people survive their present crisis)
- If you are new, start here.

(Adapted from USCCB, *Poverty and Faith Justice*, page 20)

to work at creating a society whose very structure encourages people to live generously and justly. Instead of promoting the vices of greed and jealousy, society should promote virtues such as generosity, concern for the environment, and tolerance for different views and opinions.

The virtue of solidarity gives us motivation to act for justice. The belief that we are all God’s children has motivated people for centuries to perform acts of charity and lead movements of justice that have changed lives and transformed society. We are capable of the same. When we serve those who are poor or on the margins of society, we live out the call to care for the least of God’s children. And if we ask the questions “Why are they poor?” and “What can I do to make the world a more just place?” we have taken the next step toward social justice. By asking the questions—and acting on the answers—we live more fully our destiny as the Body of Christ.
Reflect
What ideas do you have for structuring society so it would be easier for those who are poor to obtain what they need for a full life?

Service and Justice
Throughout this chapter we have talked about our response to social injustice as having two components. On the one hand, we must try to alleviate immediate needs by giving food to the hungry, clothing to the naked, comfort to the sick and the imprisoned, and so on. This is sometimes called the work of service, or charity. On the other hand, we must also work to change the structures of society that keep people hungry or poor or hopeless. This is called the work of justice. Charity and justice are like two feet that walk together in our faith.

Both service and justice are needed as part of our response to social injustice. Works of service are more immediate, and often the results are easier to see. Works of justice are more long term, more complex to deal with, and the results may never come. But Christ calls us to be faithful—though not necessarily successful—and he will strengthen and guide us in this work.

The chapters on the Commandments that follow this chapter highlight issues of both personal morality and social morality. Some of the social issues are war, abortion, workers’ rights, world hunger, and the environment. Think of how you can respond to each of these issues with works of service and works of justice. Your good works, combined with the good works of thousands and millions of others, will make a difference.

Reflect
Choose one social issue—local or global—and find out how people are addressing it through works of justice and works of service (charity). How can you contribute to these efforts?
Review Questions

1. What does our belief in the Holy Trinity show us about God and about how we are to treat one another?
2. Define society and social justice.
3. Give some examples of how social justice is rooted in Scripture.
4. Name four key concepts that Catholic social teaching is based on, and describe why each concept is important.
5. List at least eight basic human rights that each person is entitled to in order to live with the dignity that all people deserve.
6. What is the work of charity or service? What is the work of justice? Why are the “two feet” of charity and justice necessary for an effective response to social injustice?