



Issues

Office of Peace and Social Justice and the Integrity of Creation
Diocese of Gary

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Systemic change—a primer

...it still remains true that charity must animate the entire lives of the lay faithful and therefore also their political activity, lived as ‘social charity.’

God Is Love (Deus Caritas Est), 2006, pg. 38
Benedict XVI

During the seven years I have worked in the Diocese of Gary, I have visited the peace and justice committees of many parishes. I found much charity in food pantries, giving trees, visits to needy families by the St. Vincent de Paul Society, and other charitable activities. But when I asked what works of justice were being done, or what change was happening, there was often confusion. Many do not understand what systemic change is.

In the passage of Benedict XVI’s encyclical letter, *God Is Love*, he uses the words “social charity.” This term refers to charity, or love as the animating force of the lives of the lay faithful, but it is more than acts of love or charity. The context is social, which earlier in the passage Benedict links to citizenship and involvement in the economic, social, and political life of society for the common good. Those activities must be animated by charity, or love as well, but they are not just charitable actions. They are actions for change.

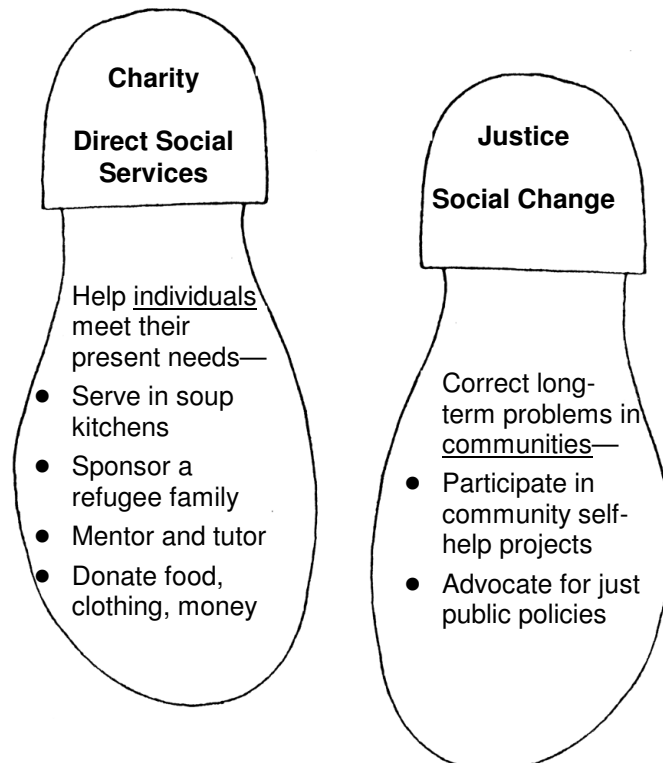
Each parish peace

and justice committee needs to stand on two feet. One foot for charity and its works like food pantries and giving trees. These are actions that help people with their immediate needs for food or clothing or Christmas gifts or rent. Acts of charity are rooted in the Corporal Works of Mercy: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, visit the sick, visit the imprisoned, bury the dead. It is a list of actions that reflect Jesus’ decision at the Last Judgement in Matthew 25:31-45.

The other foot asks questions. Why is it that person, family, county, town, city, or country are in need of food, or drink, or clothing? Why are they without shelter, or in prison, or sick?

Social change justice is focused not only on helping, but on working to change the reason there is a need. It takes the Corporal Works of Mercy and Matthew’s Jesus’ judgement to another context, to the social, economic and political.

The two feet of social change



Continued on page two

Systemic change continued

Benedict’s teaching is correct, the two feet fit together. They are social charity—charity and justice rooted in the relationship, aiding each other and both needing to be done. Peace and justice committees must do both. Simply doing the works of charity, although often easier, is not enough. The works of justice, often more difficult, are essential. The committee cannot walk on only one foot.

An excellent way to be involved in social change is to be active with Indiana Catholic Conference. I-Can, the Indiana Catholic Action Network, is linked to the legislation of the Indiana Assembly and the United States Congress. It provides the opportunity to contact representatives and senators to convey opinions regarding pending legislation. It is a reasonably simple process to respond to an alert. Alerts arrive with a message that states ICC’s position. After entering their name, address and email address, the I-Can responder’s message is sent to the proper representative and/or senator.

Communication on legislation can also be by telephone, postal mail or Fax. Two things are critical if involved with I-Can; learn about the legislation in question, and respond to alerts. It is not effective to just be listed on the network—participants must respond!

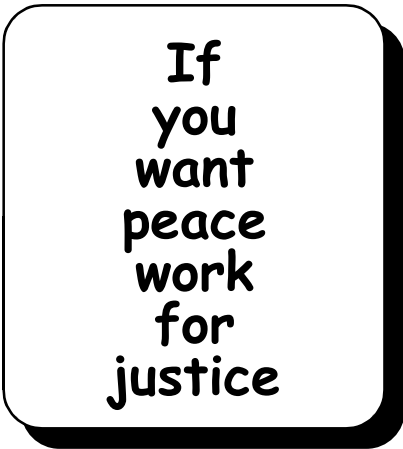
To do the work of justice and social change, you have to be educated about the issues. This is done by listening and reading about the social, economic, and political implications and asking what does this mean for the common good, the Gospel and Catholic social teaching. Being involved, being committed to social change and to justice is not easy. It is work, but it is the work that Benedict, the Church, our baptisms, the Gospel and Christ call us to do.

Connected to I-Can and to doing the works of justice and social change, is a process of social analysis. This process links faith and justice. There are five steps in the process:

1. **Experience or insertion**
With whom or where are we connecting as we begin? Whose experience is being

considered? Where does the experience of the poor or those in need fit in? How do we touch that experience? The first step is a location question. Where are we starting from? With whom are we linked? How do those in need and/or the poor and their experience fit into our analysis?

2. **Social analysis**
What are the demographic characteristics? Are there racial or ethnic disparities? Is there a class structure? What are the social problems? What is the temper of the locality? What is the economic status of the population? Are there links to the national and international economy? What is the environmental situation? What is the political profile of the locality? Who are its political and non-political leaders? What are other factors such as the press and media like? What religious groups are involved and how? What is the situation with the local church?



3. **Theological reflection**
What is the relationship between Catholic social teaching and the social analysis we are doing? How do the principles of life and dignity of the human person, of family and community, the rights and responsibilities, option for the poor, the dignity of work and the rights of workers, solidarity, and care for

God’s creation apply to the situation we experience? What is the experience of the poor and people in need? Where is the Gospel and Christ in this?

4. **Planning**
Where do we go from here? What connections do we need to make? What groups are affected? How much are we going to do? What is most important?
5. **Action**
What is the fruit of the process we have done? What concrete action can we take? Can this work be done alone, with one committee, or should others be involved?

Working for change

The process of social analysis can be intimidating and hard work. Begin by selecting an

issue from your community, the smallest and hopefully the easiest one, and follow the steps. Before taking the final step, action, invite a trustworthy person, a community leader, someone outside the committee, to evaluate the process and the action plan to determine its effectiveness.

A good way to begin systemic change is mapping (investigating) the parish community to become familiar with the population's age, gender, race, ethnicity, and religion. Become aware of the economic realities, businesses, political parties and leaders, cultural and social groups, schools, churches, non-profit organizations, and service groups. Gathering the information would be helpful in doing social analysis. It could also be a change experience for the committee. The information could be shared with the parish or group of parishes which could lead to change.

Environmental projects offer opportunities to

do social change. The Bucket Brigade is a simple, user-friendly air testing project. The test results show the quality of the air at the location the air was collected. Heartland Center is working with Calumet Project on a Bucket Brigade to monitor air pollution outside local schools. Using the Bucket Brigade with a mapping of the area could be a fruitful exercise in social change.

Another possibility would be to participate in a local self-help project. That could be a project funded by a diocesan Catholic Campaign for Human Development, or the project from another church. It is important that it is a self-help project, one that helps people to help themselves. A neighborhood watch group set up to deal with gang violence could lead to social change and community building.

The goal is to be active in bringing about change.

✉ James M. Dixon, S.J.

The integrity of creation

Because of the blessings God has bestowed on our nation and the power it possesses, the United States bears a special responsibility in its stewardship of God's creation to shape responses that serve the entire human family... We offer some themes from Catholic social teachings that could help to shape this dialogue, and we suggest some directions for the debate and public policy decisions that face us.

✚US Catholic Bishops, 2001

There are Catholic websites that are good resources for action and education. The websites contain statements by the Holy Father, bishops, and others, as well as stories of people and institutions carrying out programs to raise awareness and promote action on climate change. You will also find analysis and action alerts on legislative efforts to reduce global climate change and lessen its impacts.

U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops
www.usccb.org/sdwp/ejp/climate

Catholic Coalition on Climate Change
www.catholicsandclimatechange.org

Prayer for the environmental common good

As we breathe the very air which sustains us,
 we remember your love, God,
 which gives us life.

Fill us with your compassion for creation.
 Empty us of apathy, selfishness and fear,
 of all pessimism and hesitation.

Breathe into us solidarity with all who suffer
 now, and the future generations who will suffer
 because of our environmental irresponsibility.

Move us into action to save our earth and
 to build your sustainable Kingdom.

Amen

By Jane Deren
 Center of Concern Education for Justice

Happy New Year 2010

*A simple wish for JOY,
a heartfelt wish for LOVE,
a lasting wish for PEACE.*

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