

Reflections on Charity and Social Justice

by Rev. Mark Hallinan, S.J.

World CLC Day – March 25, 2007

Our goal today is simple and direct. We want to reflect upon what our faith demands of us both in terms of charity and of justice. Most Catholic Christians today have an understanding and appreciation for charity, but not as many, I suspect, have an equal understanding and appreciation of the necessity for a commitment to justice. My role is to help you to understand the distinction between the two, while at the same time demonstrating how our faith sees the two as inextricably linked. We cannot choose between the two, but must be equally committed to both.

What is charity? What do you understand charity to be? Think of examples of charity. What would those examples be? [Homeless shelters, food pantries, clothing drives, emergency relief.] Who is taking action here? What is the purpose of that action? [Private, individual acts. Responds to immediate needs. Provides direct service (food, clothing, shelter). Requires repeated actions. Directed at effects of injustice – treating the symptoms.] Can you think of scripture passages that speak of the demands of charity? [Good Samaritan. Rich man and Lazarus. Great judgment scene in Matthew's Gospel.] Charity clearly responds to real needs. It is most powerfully defined as “compassionate solidarity.” [Rosemarie Berger, *What the Heck is Social Justice?*, Sojourners, February 2007.

“Compassionate solidarity” sounds wonderful but it begs the question why we are compassionate toward others and why we would be in solidarity with others, particularly others who may not be like us, or toward whom we might not be instinctively sympathetic. To understand why we must be compassionate toward others, why we stand in solidarity with others – without discrimination – we need to turn to our scriptures and remind ourselves of the foundational truth that is the core of the great Abrahamic faiths –

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Judiasm, Christianity, and Islam. In Genesis, we read: “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...So God created humankind in [God’s] image, in the image of God [God] created them; male and female [God] created them.’” (Genesis 1:26-27). This is the truth to which we must continually return in order to understand why our faith insists that there is both a requirement of charity and justice.

Every human person is created in the divine image, and so every human person is a bearer of the divine. Every human person, therefore, has an inherent dignity that must be respected and protected for it is divinely given. Divinely given, our human dignity cannot be compromised or stripped away by human agency. No person, institution, or system has the right to deprive any human being of his or her dignity because that dignity is divinely given. It is a requirement of our faith, therefore, that when we see that the dignity of another has been compromised, or stripped away, we must then act to restore that person’s dignity.

Here is what the United States Bishops had to say in their document, *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions*:

Catholic social teaching is based on and inseparable from our understanding of human life and human dignity. Every human being is created in the image of God and redeemed by Jesus Christ, and therefore is invaluable and worthy of respect as a member of our human family. Every person, from the moment of conception to natural death, has inherent dignity and a right to life consistent with that dignity. Human dignity comes from God, not from any human quality or accomplishment.

What are the conditions that compromise human dignity – one’s inherent self-worth? A lack of food, clothing, shelter, education, employment, health care, impediments to family life, impediments to the exercise of one’s faith. Notice that in this list there are things in it to which you can easily respond in charity. You can give people

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clothing, food, shelter, even education and health care to some measure. But when you start talking about employment, or impediments to family life, or impediments to worship, you begin to touch upon matters that require acts of justice. So, even as I'm trying to limit our focus for the moment to charity, you can see that justice necessarily intrudes. The two, indeed, are inextricably linked, but we'll make that clearer as we proceed. The point here is that the foundation of all that motivates us in acting in charity is to protect and preserve the dignity of the human person. We act with compassion – as did the Good Samaritan, as did those whom Jesus identified as the elect of God – when we see the dignity of another has been compromised and we seek to restore that person's dignity by our compassionate intervention.

Remember, however, that charity was defined for us as “compassionate solidarity.” The compassionate part seems self-evident as we have just discussed. We are moved with sympathy for the suffering of others, moved to act to restore that person's dignity. What does ‘solidarity’ add to this? Why can't we just define charity as compassion? In speaking of charity as “compassionate solidarity,” we are reminded that we are all members of one human family, created by one God, who invested each of us with the divine dignity. Each of us is equal in our dignity and united one to each other through our common origin in the one God who breathed life into each of us. Again, we turn to that document of our bishops, *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching*:

Catholic social teaching proclaims that we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they live. We are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. Learning to practice the virtue of solidarity means learning that “loving our neighbor” has global dimensions in an interdependent world. This virtue is described by John Paul II as “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.” (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no.38)

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We are all really responsible for all. Etch that principle in your minds and in your hearts. Reflect upon what demands this places upon us. It will be the principle to which we necessarily return as we look more deeply at what our faith calls us to in charity and in justice.

Take a step back for a moment now and reflect on what charity demands of us – a compassionate solidarity. It demands that we feel sympathy for the suffering for others, a desire to see the dignity of another be restored when that dignity has been compromise, and to do so in the framework of believing that we are all one human family, that we are all really responsible for all. Is charity always easy for us? Do we always respond instinctively with compassion to the suffering of others? Do we find ourselves making distinctions in our minds as to who is worthy of our charity, who is worthy of our compassion? Are there persons toward whom we do not think we need to feel compassionate, with whom we need not stand in solidarity? Think of how you react when you see a homeless person on the street. Put aside the question of whether you should give that person assistance or not, and just reflect for a moment of what your thinking has been when you've seen a homeless person, particularly a homeless person of color. Do you always feel compassionate solidarity with such persons, or do you sometimes feel contempt, annoyance, or even indifference? Do you ever find yourself wondering about whether you have a duty of compassion toward a homosexual person with HIV/AIDs because that person may have contracted that disease through homosexual behavior? Do you feel comfortable in being in 'compassionate solidarity with such a person'? How about an intravenous drug user with HIV/AIDs? Can you feel compassionate solidarity

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with an observant Muslim family from Southeast Asia living in New York that lives in grinding poverty despite the fact that they work? We all like to think that we are compassionate, that charity comes naturally to us, but we have to admit that sometimes we place limits on our charity and think of ourselves as justified in doing so.

Reflect with me, for a moment, on the story of the Good Samaritan. This is an incredibly complex story that we reduce to a very simple moral tale. If we enter into its complexity, it can be very challenging for us. The so-called ‘hero’ of the story, of course, is the Samaritan. Why does Jesus create a story for a Jewish audience in which the hero is a Samaritan? The Samaritans were a people of northern Israel into whose region pagan peoples had once been populated by a conquering king. While some pagan influences did infiltrate the northern kingdom, most of the Israelites continued in their Israelite faith, but with points of disagreement with their brethren in the South over their common scriptures and where the locus of Jewish worship should be – Mount Gerazim or Jerusalem. The Jews of the South came to despise the Samaritans and judged them to be no better than a pagan people. Jesus, therefore, was striking a very sensitive nerve in placing a Samaritan at the heart of a story being related to a Jewish audience of the South. Jesus was directly challenging their presumption that they could judge for themselves who was truly worthy of God, who merited inclusion within their circle of concern, and who could embody the compassion of God. Jesus dared to tell a people who judged Samaritans to be a pagan people, a people whom they judged to be beyond the pale, that a Samaritan could be the very embodiment of the compassion of God.

Think of the implications of this for us. Who in our way of thinking is beyond the pale for us – persons whom we cannot imagine find favor with God, let alone could be a

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revelation of God's love? Could it be Jewish people? Could it be Muslims? Could it be persons in prison? Could it be homosexuals? Could it be drug users? Could it be Pakistanis? Are there any persons whom we judge to have placed themselves outside the concern of God, and thus outside our concern as well? If there are, how do you stand in compassionate solidarity with all? How do you live the truth that we are all really responsible for all?

There is another layer of complexity to the Samaritan story. Who passed by the badly wounded man on the side of the road? A priest and a Levite passed by the man and rendered no assistance. Did they do the right thing? They most likely thought that they did. The priest represented the highest religious leadership among the Jews and Levites were associates of the priests. There were very strict precepts in the Jewish tradition regarding contact with human blood, and particularly contact with dead bodies. Contact with either, or both, could render one ritually impure, that is, not worthy to be in the presence of God, not able to offer worship to God unless one had been cleansed of that impurity. Here is this bloody guy on the side of the road whom Jesus, himself, describes as 'half dead.' What was the religious imperative at that moment? What was the religiously correct thing to do – to avoid rendering yourself ritually impure by touching a bloody, potentially dead body, or to render assistance to this person? The priest and Levite each made the decision to hold to the letter of the Law and not act in a way that could put them in violation of that Law, render them ritually impure. They thought they were the embodiment of righteousness; faithfully upholding their religious tradition. But Jesus said that the Samaritan did the righteous thing – the thing that brings us in right relationship with God and with each other – in reaching out to this badly wounded man

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and offering assistance to him. This will be a consistent point of Jesus in the Gospels.

When the Law conflicts with what compassionate solidarity demands, do what compassionate solidarity demands. This is what it means to be authentically faithful; truly righteous.

Again, think of the implications of this for us. We can't save ourselves in the eyes of God simply by saying that we were devout Catholics, went to Mass every Sunday, received the Sacraments, and sought always to be rigidly faithful to what we understood the Church to teach. If we do all that, but fail to have compassionate solidarity with those in need, with those whose dignity is compromised or at risk, we haven't lived a truly righteous life; a life lived in right relationship with God and with each other. Have there been times in your life when you may have pulled back from some act of compassion because you felt it conflicted with what the Church, or your faith, seemed to require of you? Have you ever felt justified in feeling indifferent to the sufferings of homosexuals with AIDS, or intravenous drug users, or alcoholic homeless persons because of how you understood the teachings of your Church, or the lessons of faith?

One final complication to this story is very important for us. Notice that the Samaritan helped a man whom that Samaritan had every reason to believe was a Jew of the South. The Samaritans were well-aware of what the Jews of the South thought of them, just as American blacks knew full well what whites in the South thought of them in the days of American apartheid. It would have been understandable, therefore, given the history of animosity between these two peoples for the Samaritan to have chosen not to get involved. Things could have gotten very messy and very ugly. But the Samaritan

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chose, instead, to act in compassionate solidarity with one who most likely would have spit on him had they encountered each other in other circumstances.

Think of the implications of that for us. Does an Iraqi Sunni have an obligation of compassionate solidarity toward an Iraqi Shiite? Does a Northern Ireland Catholic have an obligation of compassionate solidarity toward a Northern Ireland Protestant? Does a Palestinian have an obligation of compassionate solidarity toward an Israeli? Does an American black in the rural south, or the urban north, have an obligation of compassionate solidarity toward whites?

Ahmed Khatib was a 12-year old Palestinian youth living in the Jenin refugee camp in the occupied West Bank. When the Israeli army raided that camp, a soldier saw Ahmed playing with what looked like a real gun, but was, in fact, a toy. The soldier shot Ahmed in the head. The Israeli army admitted a terrible mistake had been made and took the child to an Israeli hospital. As Ahmed's life slipped away, his parents made a momentous decision. They would donate his organ's for transplant even though they were in an Israeli hospital and those organs would most likely go to the very people whose army had killed their son. Indeed, Ahmed's heart, kidneys, liver and lungs were transplanted into six Israelis, four of them Jewish. While the decision of Ahmed's family was hailed in Israel as a remarkable humanitarian act, not all in the Jenin refugee camp were accepting of the decision questioning how Ahmed's parents could give their child's body parts to the people who killed him. Ahmed's father admitted his motives in acting were mixed; to help others, but also to act in resistance to the continued occupation that cost his son his life. "To give away his organs was a different kind of resistance. Violence against violence is worthless. Maybe this will reach the ears of the whole world so they

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can distinguish between just and unjust. Maybe the Israelis will think of us differently. Maybe just one Israeli will decide not to shoot.”

When you came here today, I suspect most of you thought that charity was going to be the easy part of the day and the focus on justice was going to be harder, raising more questions, presenting more difficulties. Now we see that even our faith’s demand of charity, of compassionate solidarity, presents its own challenges to us when we consider that we can’t necessarily set the boundaries of our compassion for ourselves, at least not without careful consideration of our motives in doing so. Our extended look at the story of the Good Samaritan underscored for us just how deep are the demands that charity can place on us, and how challenging those demands can sometimes be in light of our own personal histories, our own cultural contexts, and our own understanding of faith.

The gospels make it clear that we can’t escape the demands of charity and can’t evade the complexity of those demands. Jesus did the compassionate thing in touching a man with leprosy in order to heal him, but in doing so broke the religious Law that put lepers outside the boundaries of communal concern. In compassion for his hungry disciples, Jesus let them break the Law of the Sabbath by doing the work of plucking grain to eat. Immediately thereafter, Jesus entered a synagogue where he broke the Sabbath law again by doing the work of healing a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath, in the synagogue, in front of the religious leadership. He would later repeat that offense in healing a woman who was crippled for eighteen years. Jesus healed the servant of a Roman soldier, a soldier of the empire that had brutally subjugated his people and held them down with an iron fist. When a synagogue leader approached Jesus to heal his dying daughter, Jesus did not reference the hostility he experienced from the religious

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leadership but with the man to his home and raised his daughter to life. Finally, Jesus told the cautionary tale of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man was condemned to an eternity of torment for he had failed to notice the beggar at his gate and thus rendered him no assistance. Note that when the rich man implored Abraham, who rested in the bosom of God, to send a messenger to his brothers still alive that they may be forewarned of the fate that awaited them if they neglected the duties of compassion, Abraham dismissed the suggestion out of hand. They had the teachings of Moses and the Prophets. This should have been adequate for them to comprehend and to act on what their faith demanded.

Thus it is with us. We have the scriptures of our tradition and the rich heritage of Catholic social teaching that place before us the clear demands of compassionate solidarity. It is now up to us to reflect continually on our scriptures and on those teachings to understand what they call us to do in light of the circumstances of our lives. They call us, as well, to look deep within ourselves to consider what might be holding us back from the universal solidarity to which we are called; that prevent us from truly believing and acting on the truth that we are all really responsible for all.

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We are all really responsible for all. This responsibility we have for each other extends beyond charity – beyond a compassionate concern to supply what others may lack that compromises their human dignity. Our responsibility for all calls us to act for justice. It is only when we are practicing charity and working for justice that we are living the fullness of what our faith requires.

What is justice? What do you understand justice to mean? How do we effect justice? What are examples of justice activity? [Effecting social change. Public, collective actions. Hoping to respond to long-term needs by effecting long-term change. Promotes social change in institutions. Directed at the root causes of social injustice. Legislative advocacy, changing corporate policies or practices, congregation-based community organizing.] Can you think of any scripture passages that speak to justice as opposed to charity; that call for change in social structures as opposed to ameliorating the conditions caused by unjust social structures? [In the Old Testament, the Exodus story. Moses does not ask for food and medicine for the Jewish slave-labor force. He challenges the institutional system. Message: “Let my people go.”]

As a people of faith, we look to the scriptures for our understanding of justice and from a biblical understanding of justice we come to learn what is required of us in our relationships with God and with each other. Returning to the book of Genesis where we began our look at charity, we see that the word of God brought forth all of creation. The heavens and earth, light and darkness, water and dry land, plants and all living creatures are created by the life-giving word of God. Finally, God creates the human person in the divine image, male and female God creates us. Take note that God looks upon what God created and declared it to be very good. The world as God intended it to be was to be a

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paradise to be enjoyed by the human family in all its wonder and splendor. Unfortunately, the human person is not content with enjoying the blessings of this creation but desires power and knowledge, desires to be like God. Referencing the story of Adam and Eve, the Jesuit scripture scholar, John Donahue, describes sin in this way: “Sin is overstepping the limits of the human condition by aspiring to divine power. It can take place through action (the woman) or through complicity (the man). Their desire to be like God sadly separates them from God.”

The alienation of our relationship with God is not permanent. The scriptures clearly attest to God’s desire to be in relationship with the human family and that desire finds expression in the covenants God concludes with us. A covenant is a formal commitment of one party to another in which the obligations of the one to the other are clearly spelled out. In the covenant God concluded with the Israelites through Moses, after having liberated them from their slavery in Egypt, God promises to be forever faithful to God’s people. The people, in turn, promise to live in right relationship with God and with each other. This is the purpose of the Ten Commandments. The Commandments are not given so much as specific prescriptions, or proscriptions, of behavior, but rather as a framework of how one is to relate to God and to each other. One relates to God by giving oneself wholly to God, not dividing one’s allegiance, and by offering worship and praise to the One who is the source of all life and goodness. One relates to others by honoring their dignity, doing nothing that would compromise or rob them of that dignity, and certainly doing nothing that would show disrespect toward another who, like yourself, is a bearer of the divine image. Here is the core of the biblical

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understanding of justice. Biblical justice is concerned primarily with right relationships; living in right relationship with God and in right relationship with each other.

This concern for right relationships is crucial to understanding a fundamental difference between our common understanding of justice, as it comes to us through our acquaintance with the American system of jurisprudence, and biblical justice. On courthouses and in courtrooms throughout America, what is the famous symbol of American justice? How is justice personified? It is personified in the image of a woman with two scales that she is seeking to balance while wearing a blindfold. In American jurisprudence, justice is supposed to be blind, that is, impartial and seeking to find the correct balance between competing claims. Biblical justice, on the other hand, is biased. It is not impartial. It is partial to those who are most affected by evil and oppression, those whose dignity is most at risk – characterized in the Old Testament by the four groups of widows, orphans, the poor, and strangers in the land. God shows a consistent partiality toward the weak and vulnerable in our midst because they are the ones whose dignity is most at risk. If we are to live in right relationship with God and with each other, we must have that same bias.

Exodus: God speaks to the people: “You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry...If your neighbor cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate.” Ex. 22:21-23; 27.

Deuteronomy: “If there is among you anyone in need...do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor...Since there will never cease to be some in need

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on the earth, I therefore command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.”

In one of the great prophecies of Isaiah, which is proclaimed every year in our readings for the first week of Lent, we hear God demand that justice which finds expression in the transformation of structures and in deeds of compassionate solidarity:

Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? 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; when you see the naked to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

In the biblical conception of justice, justice is concerned with establishing right relationships and it has a distinct bias toward the poor, the weak, and the vulnerable.

We see this same conception of justice carried forward into the New Testament. Recall the story of the visitation. Antecedent to Jesus’ birth, the pregnant Mary is said to have visited her cousin Elizabeth who was very pregnant with the one who was to be John the Baptist. When Elizabeth hailed Mary as blessed of God, Mary responded with her magnificat. How many of you are familiar with Mary’s magnificat? Have you paid attention to what she proclaims in her hymn of praise to God? This is the hymn of a devout Jewish woman who clearly knows the history of how her God has acted in human history. “He has shown might with his arm, dispersed the proud and arrogant of heart. He has thrown down rulers from their thrones, but lifted up the lowly. The hungry he has filled with good things, the rich he has sent away empty.” The God in whom Mary believes, and who takes flesh through her, is not impartial.

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Jesus echoes the themes sounded by his mother in the magnificat in the inauguration of his public ministry in the synagogue of his hometown of Nazareth where he proclaimed this composite passage from the prophecy of Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Jesus then gave testimony to the truth of what he proclaimed in the liberating deeds of justice that characterized his ministry to the people of God. And throughout his ministry, Jesus consistently demonstrated a partiality to the poor and the marginalized.

This is the challenge of living biblical justice. We seek to effect the reign of God in our world through our commitment to living in right relationship with God and in right relationship with each other. And we do so with a conscious bias toward the weak and vulnerable. This requires not only that we seek to be in compassionate solidarity with others, but that we seek to transform the structures and systems within society that create, or contribute to, conditions of life contrary to human dignity. At the Roman Synod on Justice in the World in 1971, the Bishops of our Church declared:

Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.

To put it in a way that may be more immediate to you, think of this image from the Office for Social Justice for the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis. You are walking by a river and you see that someone has fallen into the river so you jump in and pull that person to safety. An hour later, you are returning from your walk when you see a second person drowning in the same spot so, once again, you jump in and save that

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person. The next day this series of events repeats itself until finally you realize that there is a hole in the bridge crossing the river at that spot. Do you simply stand there all day plucking people from the river, or do you set about rebuilding the bridge? The Church says that we have an obligation to repair the bridge in order to prevent more people from falling into the river, some of whom may well drown before they can be saved.

If our Church is calling us to effect the transformation of social structures so that our society and our world might better conform to what God intends this world to be, what principles are available to us that will help us assess the justice or injustice of social realities with which we are confronted? Different sources will enumerate different numbers of principles, but for our purposes I would like to recommend the ten building blocks of Catholic social teaching as presented by the Jesuit scholar, Bill Byron.

1) The Principle of Human Dignity

When speaking of the call to compassionate solidarity, I noted that this was the bedrock upon which Catholic social teaching rests. Indeed, when writing their pastoral letter on the American economy, *Economic Justice for All*, the American bishops wrote:

Every economic decision and institution must be judged in light of whether it protects or undermines the dignity of the human person... We judge any economic system by what it does *for* and *to* people and by how it permits all to *participate* in it. The economy should serve people, and not the other way around.

When looking at a particular social reality, we should always do so in light of what human dignity requires. This is why the Church also teaches quite clearly that human rights are the minimum conditions for life in community. Again, quoting *Economic Justice for All*:

In Catholic teaching, human rights include not only civil and political rights but also economic rights. As Pope John XXIII declared, “all people have a right to life, food,

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clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, education and employment.” ...Society must ensure that these rights are protected. In this way, we will ensure that the minimum conditions of economic justice are met for all our brothers and sisters.

Is our society meeting the minimum conditions of economic justice when we have 47 million Americans without health insurance? Is our society meeting the minimum conditions of economic justice when the unemployment rate for blacks is 10.8 percent and for whites it is 4.7 percent? These are the types of uncomfortable questions raised when the Church teaches that human dignity demands the fulfillment of certain basic rights.

2) The Principle of Respect for Human Life

“Every person, from the moment of conception to natural death, has inherent dignity and a right to life consistent with that dignity.” *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching*

It is this principle that has formed the basis for the Church’s strong opposition to abortion, embryonic cell research, assisted suicide, and the death penalty. John Paul II has told us that we have an “inescapable responsibility of choosing to be unconditionally pro-life.” In light of that commitment, the U.S. bishops have said simply and firmly: “We reaffirm our common judgment that the use of the death penalty is unnecessary and unjustified in our time and circumstances.” How comfortable are you in being unconditionally pro-life even when it means showing respect for the life of one who failed to show that respect for the life of another?

3) The Principle of Association

Our tradition proclaims that the person is not only sacred but also 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... While our society often exalts individualism, the Catholic tradition teaches that human beings grow and achieve fulfillment in community. *Sharing*

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Here the Church is saying that human dignity can only be realized and protected in the context of relationships within the wider society – relationships of family, work, community, faith. In assessing certain economic or public policy decisions, we need to ask whether what is proposed enhances or threatens our life together as a community.

4) The Principle of Participation

“We believe people have a right and a duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable.” *Sharing*

All people have a right to participate in the economic, political, and cultural life of society. It is in such participation that our personal dignity is affirmed as we offer our contribution to the fostering of the common good of the entire society. It is wrong, unjust, for a person or group to be excluded unfairly or to be unable to participate in society.

The ultimate injustice is for a person or group to be treated actively or abandoned passively as if they were non-members of the human race. To treat people this way is effectively to say they simply do not count as human beings. *Economic Justice for All*

This principle applies in a special way to conditions associated with work.

Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God’s creation. If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected – the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to organize and join unions, to private property, and to economic initiative. *Sharing*

How do we reconcile this principle of participation with the reality that in 2004 half of black men in their 20’s were jobless, up from 46 percent in 2000, or with the reality that in the inner cities, more than half of all black men do not finish high school, or with the reality that in the 25-29 age group, 8.1 percent of black men –about one in thirteen – are incarcerated, compared with 2.6 percent of Hispanic men and 1.1 percent of white men?

5.) The Principle of Preferential Protection for the Poor and Vulnerable

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In light of what we have said as to the bias of God toward the poor and vulnerable, it should go without saying that this is a fundamental principle of Catholic social teaching.

Our bishops have stated:

The Church calls on all of us to embrace this preferential option for the poor and vulnerable, to embody it in our lives, and to work to have it shape public policies and priorities. A fundamental measure of our society is how we care for and stand with the poor and vulnerable. *Faithful Citizenship 2004*.

How does this principle challenge our nation's priorities when we are spending \$14,000 per second on the defense budget, apart from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, while the poverty rate is now at 12.7%, 37 million Americans, and while 17.8% of our children are living in poverty, 7.8 million, or about one in five? No other Western nation has a rate of child poverty close to our own. Can we truly say that our society is doing all it can for the poor and vulnerable in our midst?

6.) The Principle of Solidarity

Again, recall what we said when we were speaking of the demands of compassionate solidarity. Our bishops have stated: "We are all one human family. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they may be. Pope John Paul II insists, 'We are all really responsible for all.'" This is the principle to which we must continually return when asking ourselves what is demanded of us in charity and in justice.

7.) The Principle of Stewardship

The Church has come to articulate a much more robust teaching on our responsibility to preserve and protect our environment. The protection of the environment is necessarily related to the understanding of justice as being concerned with right relationships. To protect our environment is to live in right relationship with God as we respect the gift of

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creation we have received from God and use that gift as God intended it to be used – for the benefit of all. Our concern for the environment is to live in right relationship with others as we seek to use the gifts of God’s creation in a way that does not deny others their use of these gifts either in the present or in the future. Think of the implications of this for contemporary concerns over global warming, or the way we so freely deplete our water resources without regard for the impact on others now and in the future.

8.) The Principle of Subsidiarity

The principle of subsidiarity puts a proper limit on government by insisting that no higher level of organization should perform any function that can be handled efficiently and effectively at a lower level of organization by human persons who, individually or in groups, are closer to the problems and closer to the ground. Oppressive governments are always in violation of the principle of subsidiarity; overactive governments frequently violate this principle.

9.) The Principle of Human Equality

Equality of all persons comes from their essential dignity...While differences in talents are a part of God’s plan, social and cultural discrimination in fundamental rights...are not compatible with God’s designs. *U.S. Bishops*

It is clear that our society continues to struggle with ensuring that there is a fundamental fairness and equity in access to the gifts with which God has blessed this society. The Federal Reserve Bank’s Survey of Consumer Finances found that the richest 1 percent of Americans held 32 percent of the nation’s wealth in 2001. In our global context, there is an enormous inequity in how the resources of this world are distributed. In 2000, the top 1 percent of the world’s population – some 37 million adults with a net worth of at least \$515,000 – accounted for about 40 percent of the world’s total net worth. The bottom

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half of the population owned merely 1.1 percent of the globe's wealth. The net worth of the world's typical person – whose wealth was above that of half the world's population and below that of the other half – was under \$2,200. (Report of the *World Institute for Development Economics Research* of the UN University.) More than 1 billion people in the world live on less than \$1 per day, while 2.7 billion struggle to survive on less than two dollars per day.

10.) The Principle of the Common Good

The common good consists...primarily of having the social systems, institutions, and environments on which we all depend work in a manner that benefits all people. Examples of particular common goods or parts of the common good include an accessible and affordable public health care system, and effective system of public safety and security, peace among the nations of the world, a just legal and political system, and unpolluted natural environment, and a flourishing economic system. *The Common Good, Issues in Ethics, Volume 5, Number 2 (Spring, 1992).*

Or, as the bishops put it more succinctly: “The common good is understood as the social conditions that allow people to reach their full human potential and to realize their human dignity.”

What complicates the search for the common good is that our focus cannot be solely on establishing the common good just for our own community, or for our own state, or even for our own nation. After all, we are all really responsible for all. Therefore, our pursuit of the common good must be global in outlook. Are we willing, for example, to increase the level of international development aid that the United States provides in order to address the serious inequities in global living standards even if that may mean slightly higher taxes for us, or reductions in spending in other areas to allow for that increase?

These are the principles by which we are called as Catholic Christians to assess the social realities of our time as we seek to effect that justice which is in accord with

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what God intends for the human family. As exhausting and difficult as the pursuit of justice sometimes can be, we have to remember that the Church has declared the pursuit of justice to be a constitutive element of the proclamation of the Gospel, a point affirmed by John Paul II who said: “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.” (*On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum.*) The challenge for each of us, therefore, is to be true to our call as Christians to live in compassionate solidarity with all of God’s people as we work together to effect that justice without which there cannot be true and lasting peace.