Credible Signs of Christ Alive

Case Studies from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development

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Introduction

Catholic Social Teaching and the Catholic Campaign for Human Development

Before we turn to our case studies, it will be of value to create a context for the reader. The project profiles are best understood when viewed through the faith-justice lens of CCHD. That lens helps us to bring into focus the face of America's poor with the face of the poor revealed to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Although not all of the cases studied have direct church links, all relate closely, as we will see, to biblical roots and Catholic Social Teaching. This introductory chapter will briefly outline something of those roots and teachings. But the reader is reminded, even cautioned, at this point, of the basic premise of the case-study approach: beginning with real life stories is always more informative and more exciting and usually the best way to ignite the Catholic sacramental imagination. Our goal should be to put ourselves into the story—to the extent that we can—and identify with the people in the cases. But first, let us begin with a story familiar to all of us about a tough stretch of road between Jerusalem and Jericho. As we will see, the same kind of road runs right across our country from Camden, New Jersey, to Los Angeles, California.

GOOD SAMARITAN: DO-GOODER OR RISK TAKER?

The lawyer tested Jesus with the age-old and ageless question, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" When Jesus' surprising response united love of God with love of neighbor, the questioner became defensive
and self-righteous. "And who is my neighbor?" (Stoutzenberger, The Christian Call to Justice and Peace, pp. 8-10).

Jesus replied, "A man fell victim to robbers as he went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. They stripped and beat him and went off leaving him half-dead. A priest happened to be going down that road, but when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side. Likewise, a Levite came to the place, and when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side. But a Samaritan traveler who came upon him was moved with compassion at the sight. He approached the victim, poured oil and wine over his wounds and bandaged them. Then he lifted him up on his own animal, took him to an inn and cared for him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper with the instruction, 'Take care of him. If you spend more than what I have given you, I shall repay you on my way back.' Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the robber's victim?" He answered, "The one who treated him with mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise" (Lk 10:30-37).

At this point probably most of us fast-forward to identify with the Samaritan but fail to really grasp the twist Jesus is giving to his parable. Most of us have some sense of what it means to be a victim. We might be scared stiff in certain city neighborhoods. We might have been laid-off in a corporate downsizing or had our pension plans vaporized overnight. We might even have been mugged walking home from the bus stop. In short, we can readily identify with the "help" part of Jesus' parable. Why not stop and help the poor guy? But the parable is about more than helping a victim on a dark street or highway. It is about more than the dilemma of stopping or dialing 911. It concerns the much broader issues of human solidarity and what Pope John Paul II refers to as entrenched "structures of sin." It is about systemic change, a way of being that promotes the good of every individual.

The story confronts us with numerous questions and the potential for endless application to our own times. Was the situation a question of charity or was there a longer-range issue of justice? Was this a chance occurrence or were travelers easy targets on a road controlled by gangsters? Who was responsible for safety? Most importantly, why were the people with the power, means, and authority—the community, religious, and government leaders—unwilling to respond? Apparently, they believed they couldn’t help the bleeding man because his blood might contaminate them and render them unworthy to worship in the temple, according to the purity laws of the times. Institutional, religious, and national structures made them close their eyes and slink to the other side of the road. It is easy for us to pass judgment on these men, but what would we have done in the same situation? What do we do in our own lives to reach out
to those in need? Are there subtle sinful structures of racial, religious, national, or class prejudice that lead us to be like the men in the story?

The parable is meant to confront us with stark contrast. If eternal life is tied up with love of neighbor and victim—which side are we on? Are we willing to stand by and stand up for victims? Are we willing to risk and share some of our resources, power, and authority? Unfortunately, “Samaritan” has crept into our vocabulary as “do-gooder” but clearly Jesus had something much stronger in mind. The Samaritan—a victim himself as a member of an outcast minority in his time—takes a risk and opts for the victim, a trait repeated over and over in our case studies. Jesus’ meaning reaches all the way back to the prophets and forward to modern Catholic Social Teaching. We are all in some ways victims but God’s justice through Christ somehow clings to us. For Jesus, as for Jeremiah, to know God is to do justice (cf. Jer 22:13–16). God is on the side of the victim—the poor, the outcast. But that doesn’t mean he’s not on our side. It means rather that God is pushing us to see, understand, and identify with the less fortunate in our society. That is the meaning of the Church’s “option for and with the poor.” In a very real sense it is a call to conversion. It is also a twenty-first century insight into Jesus’ challenge to the lawyer, “Go and do likewise.”

Most of us probably want to “do likewise,” we are just not sure how to go about it. Often the hardest thing about following Christ is translating good intentions into deeds. Catholic Social Teaching offers some guidelines. But as has often been said, Catholic Social Teaching is “our best kept secret.” That unfortunately is still too true. Nonetheless, the word, as our case studies indicate, is getting out. For over thirty years, CCHD has put flesh on the bones of Catholic Social Teaching helping poor people become empowered and design solutions to their own problems. At the same time the Campaign has fostered partnerships and solidarity with those with greater access to resources and power. The best-kept secret is at least being whispered. The gospel call to justice is working to break the cycle of poverty. Indeed, we can as a community “go and do likewise.”

**BIBLICAL ROOTS OF JUSTICE**

As one reads and reflects on the case studies in the following chapters, it is very easy to project biblical images onto the men and women and the scenes described. In a few instances, I have done just that. The very revelation of God in the Old Testament, beginning with Genesis, takes place in a call to responsibility and justice. The Hebrew word used for justice relates to defense of the weak, the freeing of the oppressed. The story of the Exodus is key and a model for community organizing—complete with
training—"... I will assist both you and [Aaron] in speaking and will teach the two of you what you are to do" (Ex 4:15).

[Community Organizing] is a values-based process by which people—most often low-and moderate-income people previously absent from decision-making tables—are brought together in organizations to jointly act in the interest of their "communities" and the common good.

The term "values-based" refers to values that form the basis of CO theory and practice. For most community organizers and... groups, the values include: community, solidarity, equality, freedom, justice, the dignity of the individual, respect for differences, civility, and political democracy. (Larry Parachini and Sally Coving-... Organizing Toolbox: A Funder's Guide to Community Organizing, Washington, D.C.: Neighborhood Funders Group, 2001, pp. 11 and 41, fn 9.)

The poverty, harsh labor, and humiliation which the Jews suffered in Egypt present a horrible and almost hopeless picture. But the spark of hope is never extinguished, God awakens the call to leadership in Moses. It is interesting to note that like the leaders in our cases, and probably, like most of us, leadership begins with lots of butterflies in the stomach. Moses too had that queasy feeling when he had to stand up for what was right. He was hesitant and stammering. "Who am I that I should go to the Pharaoh and lead the Israelites out of Egypt?" (Ex 3:11). "If you please... send someone else" (Ex 4:13). But Moses rises to the call. That call to freedom, however, is also a call to responsibility and is, indeed, threatening not only to the powerful—the Pharaoh—but also to the powerless—the Hebrews themselves. The Exodus account is very candid and realistic, not unlike the stories which follow. In many ways the ancient Hebrews are a symbol of the reluctance we all experience when faced with real freedom and responsibility. But as the men and women in our case studies show us, the epitome of sin is giving in and giving up. That is denying one's humanity and denying God—idolatry. Today, if we are candid, we can imagine accusing Moses, the "activist," of stirring up the poor people who really were content with their lot. Indeed, Jesus too would fall prey to the same charge. The Scriptures are a mirror to read the signs of our own times.

When Israel forgets its own history and God's call to justice, the prophets—especially Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah—take up their role as social conscience. True religion cannot be reduced to ritual or lip service.
Away with your noisy songs!
I will not listen to the melodies of your harps.
But if you would offer me holocausts
then let justice surge like water,
and goodness like an unfailing stream (Am 5:23–24).

This, rather, is the fasting that I wish:
releasing those bound unjustly . . .
Setting free the oppressed . . .
Sharing your bread with the hungry,
sHELTERING THE OPPRESSED AND THE HOMELESS;
Clothing the naked when you see them,
and not turning your back on your own (Is 58:6–7).

Liturgy and sacrament come alive and are made manifest in works of charity and justice. Religion is animated by service.
Jesus built on this tradition with his message of the Kingdom of God. His first preaching echoed Isaiah.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring glad tidings to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord (Lk 4:18–20).

These same themes reverberate throughout all of the gospels and the letters of St. Paul. Jesus is "the justice of God." He was clearly a critic, a troublemaker, and a disturber of the peace who must have really riled the local authorities when he said that the Kingdom of God had already begun!
To return to the Good Samaritan story, it is not clear that the lawyer caught the real meaning of "neighbor" but we don't have any excuses for missing the point. Solidarity and service are woven throughout the great lessons of the New Testament: the Beatitudes (Lk 6:20–26); Lazarus and the rich man (Lk 16:19–31); the washing of the feet (Jn 1:12–20); the final judgment (Mt 25:31–46).

Jesus' death on the cross is the consequence of a life in the radical service of justice and love, a consequence of his option for the poor and outcast human beings, of a choice for his people that suffered exploitation and manipulation. Within an evil world, any commitment to justice and love is perilous. (Edward Schillebeeckx, Church: The Human Story of God, New York: Crossroad, 1990, p. 125.)
The lessons might seem harsh or demanding, but the meaning is clear: ignoring the sufferings of the poor not only hurts the poor; in the long run, it hurts us all. That is the thrust of Pope John Paul’s message on solidarity between the poor and the non-poor. In his first encyclical Redeemer of Humankind, 1979, no. 13, he set the tone for that solidarity by reminding us that “through his incarnation the Son of God united himself to each one of us.” If only we could grasp Christ’s identification with all of humanity—and especially the poor and the vulnerable—we could move in faith to a real human solidarity.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

The biblical roots of justice and God’s call to human solidarity, especially solidarity with the poor as manifested in the Incarnation, involve serious ethical, economic, social, and political implications. Being Catholic means being socially responsible. We are called “to work for justice; to serve those in need; to pursue peace; and to defend life, dignity and rights of all sisters and brothers. This is the call of Jesus, the challenge of the prophets, and the living tradition of the Church” (U.S. Catholic Bishops, A Century of Social Teaching, 1990, 1).

This call to action and service is spelled out in a series of Papal documents and Bishops’ statements which form modern Catholic Social Teaching. The major documents of modern Catholic Social Teaching are included in the table below.

Pope Leo XIII, On the Condition of Labor, 1891
Pope Pius XI, The Reconstruction of the Social Order, 1931
Pope John XXIII, Christianity and Social Progress, 1961
Pope John XXIII, Peace on Earth, 1963
Pope Paul VI, The Church of Peoples, 1967
Pope Paul VI, A Call to Action, 1971
World Synod of Bishops, Justice in the World, 1971
Pope Paul VI, Evangelization in the Modern World, 1975
U.S. Catholic Bishops, Economic Justice for All, 1986
Pope John Paul II, On Social Concern, 1987
Pope John Paul II, The Hundredth Year, 1991
Pope John Paul II, Ecclesia in America, 1999
Catholic Social Teaching began in the late nineteenth century with Pope Leo XIII’s *On the Condition of Labor* (1891) which took up questions related to the harsh economic conditions and abuse of workers brought about by the Industrial Revolution. The encyclical supported the workers’ right to organize and join unions and the need for a “family” or “just” wage. This legacy continued through Vatican II and the U.S. Bishops’ *Economic Justice for All* (1986) and John Paul II’s *On Social Concern* (1987) and *The Hundredth Year* (1991). The recent encyclicals of Pope John Paul II broaden the legacy to deal with structures of sin, global injustice, the growing gap between rich and poor, and the contemporary dangers of consumerism.

Pope John Paul’s social message embodies new elements which have come to the fore since the Second Vatican Council, 1961–1965. These include a social or structural dimension to sin and a “preferential option for the poor and the vulnerable.” What the Pope refers to as “structures of sin” are rooted in “personal sin and thus always linked to the concrete acts of individuals who introduce these structures, consolidate them and make them difficult to remove. And thus they grow stronger, spread and become the source of other sins, and so influence people’s behavior” (*The Social Concerns of the Church*, 1988, no. 36). Discrimination against racial minorities would be the prime example for Americans. But overall, the realization of the social and structural dimensions of sin cries out for a preferential response.

These two teachings, the social or structural dimension of sin and the option for the poor, have pointed the Church toward a more active stance which seeks to empower poor people themselves. Solidarity is the key.

Positive signs in the contemporary world are the growing awareness of solidarity of the poor among themselves, their efforts to support one another, and their public demonstrations on the social scene which, without recourse to violence, present their own needs and rights in the face of the inefficiency or corruption of public authorities. By virtue of her own evangelical duty, the Church feels called to take her stand beside the poor, to discern the justice of their requests, and to help satisfy them, without losing sight of the good of groups in the context of the common good. (Pope John Paul II, *On Social Concerns*, 1987, no. 39.)

The “cries of those who are poor” in our society demand new and renewed commitment to systemic social change through organizing, community outreach, legislative networks, racial reconciliation, social policy development, coalition-building, and public and private sector partnerships for economic development. (U.S. Bishops, *In All Things Charity*, 1999, 32.)

Two additional quotes capture well the social commitment of the Church and the intimate linkage between faith and justice.
The joys and hopes, the sorrows and anxieties of the women and men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way oppressed—these are the joys and hopes, the sorrows and anxieties of the followers of Christ. (Vatican II, The Church and the Modern World, 1965, no. 1.)

Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully 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. (World Synod of Bishops, Justice in the World, 1971, no. 6.)

The challenge embodied in these quotes is framed by a set of principles and themes which have been distilled from scripture, history, and Catholic reflection on ethics, economics, politics, and law. These basic themes of Catholic Social Teaching will be fleshed out in each of our case studies. The following brief preview alerts the reader to some basic concepts.

1. **Life and dignity of the human person.** Every one of us is made in God’s image. The human person is central. Basic dignity is not something we earn; it is a gift of God. No matter what TV, pop culture, fashion, the stock market, or the government say, people are sacred and more important than things.

2. **Call to family, community, and participation.** How we organize society, laws, economics, and public policy affects the integrity and well-being of individuals and families. We depend on one another. We need to participate in the decisions that affect us; when one suffers, we all suffer. **Subsidiarity,** a key concept, is related to **participation** and means that decisions about governance and economics should be made as closely as possible to the people most directly affected. Families, neighborhoods, community organizations, and small businesses should have a strong voice. But when necessary for the **common good** larger government entities should be ready to step in and assist.

3. **Rights and responsibilities.** Fundamental human rights need to be protected. Each person has a right to food, shelter, health care, education, and employment. Coupled with these rights, however, is our individual and collective **responsibility** to help meet the needs of one another and society as a whole.

4. **Option for and with the poor and vulnerable.** The test of our society’s real moral worth is how we treat the most vulnerable people in our midst. Catholic tradition affirms Jesus’ teaching on the Last Judgment. “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me. . . . Amen, I
say to you, what you did not do for one of those least ones, you did not do for me” (Mt 25:35–45). Working with the poor and vulnerable is a special duty.
5. **Dignity of work and the rights of workers.** The dignity of the person and the dignity of work are intimately connected. The economy exists to serve people, not the other way around. The basic rights of workers must be protected: the right to organize and join a union, the right to a living wage, and adequate benefits such as health insurance.
6. **Solidarity.** The teaching of the gospel calls us to love and serve our neighbor but to expand that concept of neighbor beyond family, national, racial, and religious limits. We are called to be one human family and in a special way to manifest our solidarity with those less fortunate. This notion of solidarity is a central theme of John Paul II and is a contemporary way of expressing St. Paul’s image of the “Body of Christ” in the age of globalization.
7. **Care for God’s creation.** From the opening lines of the Bible, we are called upon to live in harmony with one another and with God’s creation. Stewardship of the environment means concern for issues such as air and water pollution, exploitation of animals, increased use of pesticides and fertilizers, global warming, and recycling of materials. Care of the earth is a requirement of our faith.

The above seven themes are a popular thumbnail sketch of Catholic Social Teaching. However, we should not be content with simply checking off a list of themes or principles. Principles can sound too idealistic or academic. Moreover, the application of broad principles in complicated economic and political situations is a very delicate matter. Massaro quotes Pope Paul VI:

> In the face of such widely varying situations, it is difficult for us to utter a unified message and to put forward a solution which has universal validity. Such is not our ambition nor our mission. It is up to the Christian communities to analyze with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country, to shed on it the light of the Gospel’s unalterable words and to draw principles of reflection, norms of judgment and directives for action from the social teaching of the Church. (Pope Paul VI, *A Call to Action*, 1971, no. 4.)

Massaro goes on to say that these “sentences contain much wisdom” (Massaro, pp. 107–108). Indeed, as we will see, the same kind of wisdom is evident in the cases below. Principles cannot be applied in a “one-size-fits-all” fashion.

Very often the reaction to the Church’s social teaching and to the political and economic implications of the gospel is either one of ignorance—“I didn’t know that”—or defensive discomfort—“What is the Church doing
messing around in politics and business?" Both are unfortunate reactions and not far removed from the parable of the Good Samaritan. But these reactions usually change when principles are seen and understood in practice. That is what this book hopes to accomplish.