

Catholic Social Justice and NETWORK's Political Ministry

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ABSTRACT: After more than forty-five years educating, organizing, and lobbying on Capitol Hill, NETWORK has come to know that the fullest understanding of Catholic Social Justice is in the contemplative moment of reflecting on lived experience and the stories of those around us. Catholic Social Justice is grounded in understanding of the scripture, the documents of Catholic Social Teaching, the teachings of popes and bishops on social issues, and the reality of lived experience.

In effect, Catholic Social Justice allows a person to live out a “political ministry”—to be attentive to the needs of people who are suffering and have their voices heard by people in power, as well as minister to those in power who are frequently more lonely and burdened by their position than it would appear.

With Sister Simone Campbell, SSS, at the helm, NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice has grounded their Catholic Social Justice ministry in faith teaching, in contemplation, and in concern for the needs of all, from people at the margins of society to those in power.

KEYWORDS: Catholic social justice, politics, healthcare, immigration, Catholic social teaching, political ministry.

For my entire religious life, Catholic Social Justice has been at the heart of the work that I do. In the novitiate in the 1960s we studied the social encyclicals and the documents of Vatican II. My heart was stirred by *Mater et Magistra* and *Pacem in Terris* as well as *Gaudium et Spes*. It really was hope and joy for me to know that Jesus and justice were integrally connected. This integral connection, I learned, is nourished in what I now call

the contemplative life. It is in the center of the contemplative that faithfulness to Gospel justice is nourished and purified. My experience, shaped by direct encounter rather than academic inquiry, is that “listening deeply” to the Spirit is essential for living Catholic Social Justice.

It also was (and continues to be) joy for me that my religious community, the Sisters of Social Service, were founded in 1923 in Budapest, Hungary and 1926 in Los Angeles, California to do the “social mission of the church.” Our foundress, Margaret Slachta, was the first woman in the Hungarian parliament. One of our treasured photos from the early days is Margaret standing in front of the Holy Trinity statue in Budapest leading a rally for justice. As a young Sister, it stirred my imagination and commitment.

In my early days in community I had various ministries: parish social worker, summer camp program director, archdiocesan junior high and high school religious education consultant, and campus minister. All of this led me to know that I was not the best social worker, and rather I felt called to study law. I thought that I needed a legal background if I was going to work on legislation. After I took my final vows, my community agreed that a legal education would be a good thing.

ENTERING MINISTRY IN THE SERVICE OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

After getting my degree from the University of California at Davis (King Hall School of Law), I set up a legal practice in Oakland, California, to serve the needs of the working poor. This legal service center was founded on the principle of the dignity of all people and the right of everyone to justice. Therefore, the office was not a “storefront” but rather a downtown office that acknowledged that everyone had a right to quality legal representation. We charged on a sliding scale based on an ability to pay. Everyone paid something monthly until their bill was paid off. We tried to create a system that was sustainable, revered the dignity of all, and operated counter to an economy of domination. For eighteen years I was the founder and lead attorney at the Law Center.

But it was not just about the direct service to clients. I had learned from Catholic Social Teaching that it was not enough to just do service, I was also required to care about the laws and processes that are forming our system. So, as an attorney I got involved in county projects to improve the practice of law and the experience of our clients. This led to an appointment by the chief justice of the California Supreme Court to various committees to create statewide policy for family law, including the first domestic violence laws in our state. It is this intersection of real life experience and systemic justice that I believe is the little recognized heart of Catholic Social Teaching. It is what Pope Francis calls the theology of encounter.

Every day practicing law with my clients was to touch the pain of the world, to use a phrase from the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann. He wrote, "We are learning a day at a time that humanity diminishes when no one enters the pain of the world. . . . We, however, are heirs of people who lived to the center of hurt and watched while the hurt was transformed."¹ At the Law Center, we were with people at some of their most difficult times, and at these times of pain and poverty we did not turn away. It was challenging, but out of that pain came glimmers of hope.

When I left the Law Center I was elected to be the leader of my religious community. During that period, Catholic Social Teaching was at the heart of my ministry in leadership. I came to see that the church hierarchy where our Sisters were needed to know the stories of my Sisters and their people if the church leaders' decisions were to reflect the real needs of their dioceses. So my ministry became "story telling" to bishops and other leaders of our Church. I realized that our decisions within community were enhanced by knowing the real stories of church and civic leadership. For me this exchange of lived experience is the heart of the praxis of Catholic Social Teaching.

FROM INDIVIDUAL TO SYSTEMATIC CHANGE

After my time in community leadership, I went on to do California policy advocacy in Sacramento, the state capitol. Again, I brought the stories of our members, but an additional insight emerged in my prayer. We needed to care not just for the people whose stories we told, but we also needed to care for the legislators themselves. Catholic Social Teaching instructs us to leave no one out of the heart of our care.

This led me to create a program that would recruit retired Catholic Sisters from around the state to pray for an assigned legislator and their staff and to pray that they would be open to the needs of all California. We provided the Sister with the photo and short biography of "her" legislator and gathered photos of the Sisters and their biographies. I then met with the legislators individually to introduce them to "their Sister" and attempt to minister to their needs. It turned out to be a surprisingly rich experience as one new legislator burst into tears and shared how difficult the work was. I heard of several who thought of themselves as faithful Catholics, but had been rejected by local clergy and hierarchy. I learned of family and marital struggles. But most surprising to me was that I heard from the Sisters who were holding these legislators in prayer that it gave new meaning to their prayer and for some, their suffering. This is

¹Walter Brueggemann, *The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann*, vol. 1 (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 26.

the big circle of Catholic Social Teaching, where all are enriched if we work from the center of justice and care.

From this work in California policy (and pastoring) I was recruited to apply for the executive director position at NETWORK in 2004. This resulted in my move to Washington, D.C., and the transition to working at the national level.

RESPONDING TO A CALL IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

In 1971, a group of forty-seven Catholic Sisters responded to the call of the Catholic bishops of the United States to get involved in “systematic change.” At a meeting in December 1971 they created a “network” of women religious to advocate for federal policies that advance social and economic justice in Washington, D.C. With NETWORK’s founding, these Sisters and other members of the NETWORK community began living out Catholic Social Justice in a way that had not been done before in the United States. The founding was humble and true to the Sisters’ principles of community and simplicity. Staff lived and worked together in one house. NETWORK’s lobbying, true to Catholic Social Teaching, was informed by the diverse ministries of sisters across the country, including both direct service and community organizing.²

I joined the staff at NETWORK in November 2004. At that point, for thirty-two years NETWORK had continued its founding mission to lobby elected officials in Washington, D.C., and provide political training and education to people who were called by their faith to act for justice. We stood on the shoulders of our founding mothers with joy and hope.

HUNGER AND OPPORTUNITY IN THE NATION’S CAPITAL

The first thing I needed to do was understand the context I would be working within. Washington was much larger than Sacramento, where I had been advocating. While learning about the political landscape, I soon discovered that the predominant anti-government attitudes in the White House and on Capitol Hill during President Bush’s first term had caused a shift of power that resulted in most real policy change taking place at the state level. The only thing left to federal government was the question of federal funding. Working on the federal budget was a primary way to affect change. I began to meet members of Congress on Capitol Hill and at other events and discuss this and other issues with them.

²“History,” in *NETWORK Lobby*, 31 May 2015. www.networklobby.org/about/history. Accessed 9 Sept. 2017.

This new federal “political” ministry was different in some ways than the direct service or community organizing that I had done before, but the basics were the same. There were people who needed spiritual care, and NETWORK was called to meet that need. Political ministry, I have learned is twofold. I need to be attentive to both the cry of those who are suffering, and find ways to have their voices heard by those in positions of power, as well as minister to those in power, who are frequently more lonely and burdened by their position than it would appear. I have tried to stay faithful to the demands of this ministry even when it would be easier to dismiss a legislator for one of her or his positions or pursue a legislative fix that is easily achieved but is not the policy that our people are calling for.

This was exemplified for me when I was at a big meeting of immigration advocates after the Trump administration announced the decision to rescind the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program. House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi called on me at the beginning of the meeting to “give some words of inspiration and hope” for everyone gathered. I was stunned, silently begged for the presence of the Spirit, and shared what was on my heart. I trust that those present had the Pentecost experience and heard what they needed. This experience for me was the intersection of the contemplative and the quest for justice.

FOCUSING THE WORK

NETWORK was founded to work for Gospel justice on Capitol Hill, a rather broad vision. In various times and places that has meant different priorities for the organization, but some issues have remained consistent through more than forty-five years of existence. These include: healthcare, the federal budget and tax justice, and immigrant and worker rights. As former NETWORK lobbyist Sister Catherine Pinkerton, CSJ, said:

Our agenda is an economic equity agenda; our major concern is to be a voice in solidarity with persons who are economically disenfranchised, both domestically and globally. Catholic social teaching places strong emphasis on the ‘option for the poor’ as it is expressed. The further explication of ‘option’ states that ‘the needs of people who are poor take precedence over the wants of those who are rich.’ In that light, the option for those who are poor becomes a mandate.³

³“About Us,” *NETWORK Lobby*, 31 May 2015. www.networklobby.org/about. Accessed 9 Sept. 2017.

NETWORK has had to reckon with conflicts and challenges associated with our active participation in politics many times, but we remain engaged in this work. Members of the NETWORK community see our work for justice in the political arena as a direct extension of Jesus's Gospel call to love our neighbor and care for those in most need. We attempt to respond systematically as the Samaritan did to the person suffering at the side of the road.

THE POWER OF STORY

NETWORK's role advocating for the Affordable Care Act during the groundbreaking 2010 healthcare reform debate has been well-documented, but the everyday efforts of the NETWORK community deserve the same attention. Our staff, our boards, and our network of justice-seekers across the country are dedicated to consistently witnessing to the lived realities of families and individuals on the margins. Together, we call on our elected officials to work for policies that mend the gaps in our society. One integral aspect of this work, which I learned early on, is the power of stories. There is little hope for our national well-being if decisions are made by those in power without ever seeing the real human face of the policies they debate. The stories that I hear, especially while traveling with Nuns on the Bus, stay with me and are the first thing I share with legislators when we meet. One Catholic interviewer recently surprised me by noting that my storytelling seemed to her quite like what Jesus did. Sharing these realities weaves us together.

Stories are critical to animating conversations with lawmakers on the federal budget: an issue that makes up a large portion of NETWORK's lobbying efforts but often lacks the drama of other political issues. Our advocacy is based off many sources in scripture where Jesus calls for economic justice as well as the foundational documents of Catholic Social Teaching. Beginning this tradition Pope Leo XIII wrote:

Still, when there is a question of defending the rights of individuals, the poor and badly off have a claim to especial consideration. The richer class have many ways of shielding themselves, and stand less in need of help from the State; whereas the mass of the poor have no resources of their own to fall back upon, and must chiefly depend upon the assistance of the State.⁴

⁴Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum, Encyclical Letter* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1891), No. 37, https://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html. Accessed 6 September 2017.

We know that the federal budget is a moral document, and NETWORK stands by its assertion that the federal budget must prioritize care for the most vulnerable over other areas of national spending.

A DISTINCT WAY OF LIVING CATHOLIC SOCIAL JUSTICE

The ultimate motivator through my personal history as well as NETWORK's founding and contemporary purpose, has been a continuous effort to define and live out Catholic Social Justice from a contemplative stance. In this endeavor, NETWORK has reflected on our history and our ethos as well as the Catholic Social Teaching documents and from that contemplation produced an enumeration of the Catholic Social Justice principles that guide our work. Catholic Social Justice, we have found, cannot be understood as simply a theory or an intellectual exercise, but must be considered an active call for people of faith to live the Gospel in a broken and suffering world. It is essential that this commitment to Catholic Social Justice leads to action. That action is informed by not only the official documents that constitute Catholic Social Teaching, but also by Scripture, public witness, and the lived realities of the people we meet.

FOUNDATIONS FOR OUR UNDERSTANDING

We ground our understanding of Catholic Social Justice in scripture, where the wisdom of the Hebrew prophets denounces injustice and the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth announce a new way of living in community based on the commandment to "Love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12). In addition to scripture, we reference the documents of Catholic Social Teaching, the teachings of popes and bishops on social issues. Among the issues they raise in these documents are: labor organizing, world peace, international poverty and development, and climate change.

Also, consulted in our quest to fully understand what Catholic Social Justice calls us to is deeper Tradition, including the public witness of believers who work to create a more just, peaceful society. The NETWORK community is particularly inspired by the commitment of Catholic sisters who have lived and worked in solidarity with people who are oppressed.

Finally, in addition to these sources of wisdom, we must hold the lived realities of all who suffer from injustice and their calls for change close to our hearts and minds. As Pope Francis wrote, "realities are more important than ideas."⁵ Our understanding of Catholic Social Justice and action is deepened by being in solidarity and listening to the experience of women, communities

⁵Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium, Encyclical Letter* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), No. 231. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/

of color, the economically exploited, and all whose dignity is denied by unjust systems and structures.

NETWORK'S CATHOLIC SOCIAL JUSTICE PRINCIPLES

Informed by these sources, NETWORK has identified and committed to living out six principles of Catholic Social Justice. They are stated as actions that all are invited to take in order to communicate the importance we place on living these principles not just as academic theories but as consistent actions in our lives.

The first principle is: *uphold the dignity of each person as an equally valuable member of the human family*. We believe that all people are made in the image of God and possess an equal and inalienable worth, and because of this essential human dignity each and every person has a right to all that she or he needs to live to her or his full potential, as intended by God. Moreover, we know that God is love and believe that we are meant to love one another and live in community. This means that no one can be left out of our care, even people we disagree with.

We are also called to *embrace our right and responsibility to participate with others in our shared public life*. Catholic Social Justice teaches us that we have a responsibility to participate in politics out of a concern and commitment to the good of the community. We cannot be bystanders who scoff at the political process. Instead, we are called to vote, to inform ourselves about the issues of the day, to engage in serious conversation about our nation's future, and to learn to listen to different perspectives with empathy. This responsibility to participate means each person also has a fundamental right to participate, and must be equipped with the resources needed to do so.

Catholic Social Justice teaches us to look at reality through the eyes of those who have been made poor by oppression and injustice and *be in solidarity with those who are living in poverty in the struggle against structures of injustice*. We do this when we join together to end poverty. People forced into poverty have the single most urgent claim on the conscience of the nation because they are denied the right to a life consistent with their inalienable dignity. The responsibility to uphold the dignity of each person means that we must judge our lifestyles, policies, and social institutions in terms of how they impact those suffering from the injustice of poverty. In the richest nation on earth, this is a particular challenge.

Catholic Social Justice teaches us that all people are children of God so every person belongs to a single and interconnected human family. Therefore, we are called to *bridge divisions, rising above individual interest for the good of the whole community*. As sisters and brothers, our needs are met in relationship with one another. When making individual and collective decisions, we have a responsibility to consider the good of the whole community over and above the interests of the few. Authorities at every level must work together for the good of the entire community. A just community is united in creating the conditions for every person to flourish and realize their full human potential as children of God.

We unite with workers to build an economy that puts people, not profit, at the center. Catholic Social Justice teaches us that work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God's creation. Work should enhance the dignity of the person by allowing all workers to express their uniqueness in a way that contributes to the common good. The community must also recognize the dignity of work by ensuring that it is justly rewarded with a living wage. As human beings are social, they have a fundamental right to organize collectively to create better working conditions for themselves and others.

Finally, we must *nurture the earth, recognizing that we are interdependent with the rest of God's creation*, because human beings are intimately united with all that exists. Our health and well-being are dependent upon that of the earth and all its creatures. We must cultivate and care for the earth in such a way that its bounty can provide for and sustain future generations. As creation was entrusted to all of God's children, all people have an equal right to breathe clean air and drink clean water. Because those on the margins of society are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation, concern for creation is inseparable from concern for justice.

It is easier to enumerate these principles than it is to live them out in one's personal and professional life and in the life of an organization. It is in the praxis of these principles then, where NETWORK's true work lies.

LIVING OUT THE PRINCIPLES

Each year the NETWORK staff and board consider the upcoming challenges and opportunities facing our federal government and devise a lobbying agenda based on both the political landscape and our understanding of Catholic Social Justice. This involves drawing explicit connections between our faith principles and public policy, a process that is uncomfortable for many. This is the difficult work we are called to though, and we cannot choose the alternative of not taking a position on policy debates. As our second principle inspired by

Catholic Social Justice states, we are called by faith to participate in our shared public life out of our concern for and commitment to the common good.

There are two concerns to be conscious of here. While we are inspired and informed by our commitment to and understanding of Catholic Social Justice, it is each individual's right and responsibility to decide how they will participate in our shared political life to best promote the common good. When an individual or a religious community chooses to endorse NETWORK's lobbying agenda by becoming members of NETWORK, we take that commitment seriously and do our best to advance that agenda in Washington. But, in situations such as an election when each voter is called to make their own decision NETWORK provides resources to educate people on the factors that impact our work for justice. It would perhaps be easier—both for us and for the voters faced with a difficult decision—to give them explicit direction. Telling someone that this option is the right choice for advancing the mission of Catholic Social Justice might be tempting, but doing so would counteract the principle of participation we seek to embody. We can only reach the common good with the unique participation of every person.

BEING OPEN TO AND COOPERATIVE WITH ALL

Involving every person in governing for the common good also means encounter with people of different faiths or no faith. How can we move forward in our efforts to promote the common good if we do not have a common understanding of Catholic Social Justice or share a belief in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ? We must find other ways to come together and advance the common good; in the United States we gather around the rights set down in our founding documents. In the Declaration of Independence the pronouncement of “Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” as “inalienable rights” has strongly influenced our national identity and our actions. Additionally, the autonomy and dignity claimed by “We the People” in the creation of “a more perfect union” in the Constitution has been a motivating force for diverse social movements to demand equal rights and policy changes. In the international sphere, human rights especially those endorsed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 can be a powerful animating force for international action and cooperation.

INTERPRETING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

When communally held values fail to support the common good, and when marginalization replaces belonging, authentic lived experience must break through. As the Vatican II constitution *Gaudium et Spes* reminded us: “the

Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel.”⁶ We must continue to observe and interpret these “signs of the times” today. Listening with an open heart and allowing our heart to be broken by the suffering that our sisters’ and brothers’ experience, motivates and directs our action. This lesson, which I first learned practicing law in Oakland, I have continued to see alive in my work and integral to our mission at NETWORK. If I had not heard the story of Margaret, who died in 2012 because she did not have access to healthcare that would have caught her cancer sooner, then my advocacy for healthcare would not have the same power and passion. Margaret’s story inspired me, and transformed those who heard it.

Being attentive to the experience of those who are living on the economic margins of our society is an important way for justice-seekers to be in solidarity with these individuals and communities in their struggle against structures of injustice. Too frequently misleading narratives about those who have been forced into poverty by unjust economic systems become the pervading belief. This harmful narrative gives elected officials permission to reduce assistance to our community members who are struggling. For this reason, witnessing to the reality of what those on the margins experience is essential to dispel the myths that bring us farther away from caring for the common good.

WORKING FOR JUSTICE IN OUR WORLD

From decades of advocating for justice inspired by Catholic Social Teaching, NETWORK has come to know that the fullest understanding of Catholic Social Justice is in the contemplative moment of reflecting on lived experience and the stories of those around us. We endeavor to live out the conviction expressed by the World Synod of Catholic Bishops: “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.”⁷ This preaching of the Gospel through action is a continuous process of evaluation and evolution. Informed by first person accounts of injustice, Holy Scripture, Catholic Social Teaching, and Catholic Social Tradition, we seek justice and peace in our world. It is through a continuous reflection and striving, that we build

⁶*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), No. 4. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html. Accessed 4 September 2017.

⁷World Synod of Catholic Bishops, *Justitia in Mundo* (1971), No. 6. Catholic Charities of St. Paul and Minneapolis website, <https://www.cctwincities.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Justicia-in-Mundo.pdf>. Accessed 5 September 2017.

the reality we wish to see. Join us in this communal quest to live together the very life of the spirit in the heart of the anguish of our time.

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