

CATHOLIC SOCIAL WORK

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In May of this year, I sent a letter to a sampling of Roman Catholic bishops in America (actually seven bishops, three archbishops, and one cardinal) making some observations about the state of social work as practiced in Catholic institutions and asking for their comments and advice about ways to proceed to help remediate the situation, if they thought it was needed. The sampling of bishops was not scientific or at all random. I chose those whom I had read enough about to be fairly certain they would be orthodox in their running of the Church in their own diocese or archdiocese and thus somewhat more likely to respond sympathetically and thoughtfully in their response.

At the time the initial letters were sent out, although I was in contact with Dr. Stephen Krason of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists, a social work section under the Society was not yet set up. Part of the intent of the request for advice and counsel was to see what the bishops thought about the wisdom of establishing a separate network of mutual support and discussion of ideas for Catholic social workers. The basic premise of my own observations about Catholic social work institutions (Catholic Charities above all) was that my experience showed these institutions and their social workers were too much like their secular counterparts—in their acceptance of the dominant worldview, its left-liberal cultural and political assumptions, and even its anti-Catholic bias. I perceived that many laboring in Catholic social work settings were unfamiliar with, and often opposed to, Catholic social teaching, as set down by the Church in its teaching capacity. I maintained that such a situation needed very much to be corrected. Besides asking about a network of mutual support and a means of injecting authentic Catholic social teaching into the discourse in the social work profession, I made note of the need to develop schools of social work (or perhaps of “Catholic social service”, as had existed to some extent from approximately the 1940’s to 1965) which incorporated Catholic social and moral teaching systematically into their curriculum. I noted the success in this regard (to the best of my knowledge) of the social work program at Franciscan University of Steubenville, the psychology program at the University of Dallas and the programs for psychologists and other various counselors through the

Institute for the Psychological Sciences in Arlington, Virginia. However, I commented that such programs need desperately to be replicated elsewhere if succeeding generations of social service personnel can hope to become more clinically excellent, doctrinally sound, and spiritually alive.

Six of the eleven bishops responded to my initial letter. Their comments were varied but also had common themes. One bishop stated that he headed a small, rural diocese, saw little or none of the problems I described, and said his small Catholic Charities staff was orthodox, as were the programs operating. Three bishops observed that perhaps I had been hurt by my experiences working with Catholic Charities and that they did not see things in their dioceses as being as problematic as I had suggested, though they did have concern. Understandably, most made clear that they were in a position to talk only about their own situation and not those of other dioceses.

One bishop agreed that it is difficult to find a pool of workers who are trained well in the Catholic tradition, this applying both to social work teachers as well as practitioners. He encouraged focusing on education of Catholic social workers. Another acknowledged the likelihood of there being many in Catholic social services offices who do not subscribe to the tenets of the Catholic faith. He said situations in his diocese had come to light that left much to be desired. Two others mentioned that their own situations were reasonably good. They attributed this both to the active oversight of the local bishop and the executive director of the particular agency and to the care taken to infuse the Charities organizations with solid Catholic teaching and spirituality. Mass is offered twice daily in one diocese's chapels, and a full-time priest chaplain is available to the staff. Another made special mention of the centrality of spirituality: the workday begins with the Rosary, the Blessed Sacrament is reposed in the agency chapels, and the staff is united in an authentically Catholic outlook. One observation, surely destined for the next edition of the "Book of Classic Catholic Quotations" was that charity without Catholicism is as dead as Catholicism without charity.

In addition to the above observations, perhaps the most perceptive were those of a bishop who made these points: the status of many Catholic social service operations is indeed questionable, since most of the funding comes from government and non-Church sources where the approach taken tends to be very secularized, reflecting the approach of the dominant culture (and the acceptance of money from these sources always involves the acceptance of some amount of control by these sources); the situation locally has been worked through for a number of years to clarify the relationship of the local Catholic social service and its programs to the overall mission of the Church in the diocese; a mission statement is now in place and mission formation is being undertaken with Catholic social service personnel. The bishop noted the

difficulty of accomplishing this formation, since, as I myself discover when talking to persons in other parts of the country, many of the staff are not Catholic and the basic social service model in this country is not Christian at the core. (I might add that my own experience has been that evangelical Christians, even with the inadequacies in their theology and practice, are much more fruitful to work with than either dissident Catholics or persons of no particular faith outlook. This is so, in my experience, for two reasons: 1.) the evangelicals agree with most of the moral teachings of the Church—and this is where the real controversies come bursting to the forefront—and 2.) while evangelicals may have some or even considerable difficulty with the teaching and authority of the Catholic Church, their position and feeling toward Her does not descend to the level of contempt held by all too many dissident Catholics working in these institutions.)

In sum, it seems from this modest sampling of Catholic episcopal opinion that the situation varies from diocese to diocese in this country. However, most of the bishops agree there is a problem, and this problem: 1.) arises from a lack of authentically Catholic social workers and 2.) can be helped by fostering formation of future and existing Catholic social service personnel in Catholic social teaching and Catholic moral values. This change and formation process can only be difficult and of long duration. It is agreed that a network of Catholic social workers/social service personnel would be helpful, as many have spoken of the isolation they feel and the rejection they can experience from the majority of social workers.

As of this summer, the social work section of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists has been established. Its membership is still quite small; however, an average of one person a week has contacted me by e-mail to inquire about the section and the Society, and many useful conversations have taken place. There are, indeed, more authentically Catholic social workers out there than one might sometimes think. The social work section is continuing to make its presence known, little by little. It is hoped we can be a means of presenting Catholic social and other teaching to the larger social work community and that other social workers can be trained in true “Catholic social service”. In the meantime, a follow-up letter has been sent out to all eleven bishops, responding to the letters sent to me and making sure that all of them know of the existence of the social work section of the Society.

What is true of the Church Herself in every age is also specifically true of the social work profession: “the situation is perilous; the prospects are excellent.” The advice and counsel of the bishops noted here and the establishing of a social work section in the SCSS is at least a small start toward renewing in Christ and His Church a profession which touches the lives of many people in this country and has the potential to do a great deal more good

than it does at present. How wonderful if it can truly be said of Catholic social service institutions that in them every day one can witness the Gospel of Life in action. This is a goal worthy of the efforts of Catholic social workers and the support of the Church on all levels.

Notes

1. The only scholarly work employed in this work is by Sister Claudia Carlen, *The Papal Encyclicals*, volumes 1903-1939, and 1939-1958, from which sections of *Mit Brennender Sorge* and *Summi Pontificatus* are quoted.
2. Carlen, Claudia, *The Papal Encyclicals*, 1903-1939, The Pierian Press, 1990, pp. 525-535.
3. Carlen, Claudia, *The Papal Encyclicals*, 1939-1958, The Pierian Press, 1990, pp. 5-22.