

How the Church promotes social justice

By Rev. John W. Crossin, OSFS
Catholic News Service

The church promotes social justice by living it.

Annunciation Catholic Church in Washington, D.C., where I celebrate Eucharist on Sundays has a deep sensitivity to social justice issues.

The social concerns committee quietly sponsors a parish apartment. It provides transitional housing for people in need — without causing them any embarrassment. It also receives regular requests from local social service agencies for special help, especially when their cash flow is weak.

Recently I spoke to a group of candidates for baptism and confirmation. I reminded the candidates and their sponsors of our obligations toward social justice.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church's discussion of the Seventh Commandment recalls many particulars of this teaching. And the discussion only scratches the surface of the last century of Catholic social teaching. The local, national and international church is committed to social justice.

Education for justice is one important thread in all Catholic education and the best teaching is by example.

When we teach formally, we can readily explain that Jesus had a special concern for those who were poor and in need. We can see this particularly in Luke's Gospel.

A concern for justice and for mercy is a constant in Christian history. Love for the poor must always be present. Sometimes we differ over the best means for achieving this end. Nonetheless, this commitment on the church's part extends from Paul's collection for the church in Jerusalem to the present moment.

If we are committed to work for justice, we build coalitions with fellow Christians. We can have more impact when we work together for the common good. There is, as the old saying goes, "strength in numbers."

Working together, of course, involves building relationships. A priest recently sponsored a "no agenda dinner" for local Christian clergy from the churches in his area. His purpose was merely to get to know his colleagues. Many came. From such friendly and informal conversations, common work for justice can arise.

Christians at the local level do a great deal of collaborative work. Food banks and shelters are often joint efforts of local parishes.

When a community lives this social teaching, then it speaks credibly in local, state, national and international arenas.



Volunteers from Catholic Churches in Nashville feed the poor.

Archdiocese of Washington's parishes social justice representatives speak to legislators, mayors and the governor regularly about their concerns for

those in need. Immigrants, poor, unborn and others are the focus of face-to-face efforts.

On the national level, a new ecumenical group, Christian Churches Together, is emerging. The group includes the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. The 36 members of Christian Churches Together represent 100 million Christians. A high priority for the group is concern for the poor — especially children. This group is committed strongly and publicly to promoting this very important aspect of social justice.

Internationally, the papal visits of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI have promoted justice and equity among groups and nations. Papal visits stress human rights and freedom of religion, pointing out justice is the foundation for a peaceful society.

Often a key foundation for seeking justice is reconciliation among groups that harbor hostility for each other due to past wrongs. When a group acknowledges the truth about the past, it can move into a more just future. We see this in the efforts of the Truth Commission in South Africa. However, acknowledging this truth can be difficult, for it involves taking responsibility for wrongs done in the distant or recent past. Whether personally or communally, it is easier to blame someone else or some other group than to take responsibility ourselves.

In our pride, we think we cannot be mistaken or do evil. "I" or "we" can never be wrong. This attitude encourages victims to seek revenge.

Refusal to accept responsibility for past wrongs prolongs conflict. Acknowledging the past enables a more just and peaceful future to emerge.

Our ability to acknowledge the truth and to seek forgiveness can encourage others to forgive. This is true in personal, communal, international and religious affairs.

Truth is the foundation for justice. Ultimately we need humility to acknowledge the truth. We pray to Jesus for this virtue; he "humbled himself for our salvation." ✠

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One parish's successful, local campaign for social justice

By Barbara Stinson Lee
Catholic News Service

In his 14 years in the resort community of Park City, Utah, Msgr. Robert J. Bussen, who prefers being called "Father Bob," has been involved in how the city copes with issues facing all growing communities: immigration, health care, affordable housing, education, violence and crime, and planning for the future.

As pastor of St. Mary of the Assumption Parish in Park City, Father Bob is not one who shies away from a difficult issue or from speaking truth to power. As leader of a faith community, he has developed power of his own, tempering it with compassion.

Father Bob faces the dichotomy of Park City — a resort town dependent on the labor of people who can't afford to live there — with the courage of a Catholic voice.

"I've always been supportive of the leadership program in Park City," said Father Bob. "We were studying the issue of balance in the community. We looked at issues of the arts and business, the needs of our minority populations and how to provide quality education for all our children whether they speak English or not, and how to integrate our growing Hispanic population into the city in a way that is healthy for everyone."

"Park City has a diverse population," he observed. "We have inner-city poor and people who are very wealthy. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has spoken eloquently on the issues of poverty. Bishop (William) Weigand gave us all an example of compassion in dealing with the state's growing Hispanic population, and Archbishop (George) Niederauer taught us about solidarity with the poor and oppressed. I speak to those issues and bring their insights to the table." Bishop Weigand was Salt Lake City's seventh bishop and Bishop Niederauer the eighth.



Scale illustration- "I've always been supportive of the leadership program in Park city," said Msgr. Robert J. Bussen. "We are studying the issue of balance in the community." CNS illustration

Joining in the community leadership effort has allowed Father Bob to partner with others to address such issues as bringing quality health and dental care to the Hispanic community in Park City and its environs, and immigration issues.

"This has certainly taught me that one person can make a difference," he said. "Of course, it helps if your opinions are heard and responded to, and I have always found myself very well received in the community."

Housing is one big issue Park City's leadership is facing, Father Bob said. "We have employment on a seasonal basis, during the ski season, for example, from November to April. The people who come to work during that season need affordable housing. We have some affordable housing in apartments and duplexes built for that purpose about 10 years ago."

Seasonal work in Park City's ski resorts, hotels and restaurants draws people from Mexico and South and Central America, Australia, New Zealand and Africa. Father Bob said that immigration problems are faced in many cases. "A guest-worker program would be helpful to many Park City employers. We need to address the immigration issues with compassion and justice."

He said transitional housing also is needed — places families can live temporarily until they receive their first paychecks.

"We have lots of jobs in Park City, but people are locked out of them because they have nowhere to live. Affordable and transitional housing is high on our priority list."

Father Bob Bussen's name has been synonymous with the struggle for human rights, fair treatment for immigrants and providing quality education for immigrant children. ✠

Editor's Note: Lee edits the Intermountain Catholic, newspaper of the Diocese of Salt Lake City, Utah.

How ecumenism and social justice relate

By Maureen Daly
Catholic News Service

Real change comes from personal connection.

"Ecumenical efforts often are the byproduct of the personal relationships that ministers develop," says Father Richard Bozzelli, pastor of Corpus Christi Catholic Church in the Bolton Hill neighborhood of Baltimore, Md.

Father Bozzelli shares a monthly meal with his two nearest church neighbors, Rev. Andrew Foster Connors of Brown Memorial Presbyterian Church and Rev. Martha Macgill of Memorial Episcopal Church. He credits the increased cooperation among the churches to that monthly meal.

The three churches have a long tradition of shared Ash Wednesday services and a Palm Sunday procession. In recent years they have shared in adult education classes and social justice demonstrations. During the "Year of the Eucharist" for Catholics, each church gave educational presentations on what they believe about the Eucharist. They also have discussed their respective notions of sin, repentance and forgiveness.

"Each night one minister presents and the other two respond from their faith perspective," Father Bozzelli said. "People and the ministers like this because it clarifies thinking and addresses misconceptions."

The ministers have planned a three-session adult education course for spring and fall 2007. The spring course is "War and Peace: From Just Warriors to Just Peacemakers. How Do We Get Out?" Father Bozzelli said leaders of the congregations noticed that "writings about just-war teaching cover three aspects: how to get into a war, how to conduct a war and what happens after war. But there was not much on how to get out of war, so we are working on that."



Pope Benedict XVI and Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew at a prayer service at the Orthodox Church of St. George in Istanbul, Turkey. CNS photo

Father Bozzelli, ordained in 1994, is a graduate of St. Mary's Seminary and University in Baltimore, where ecumenical cooperation is a focus.

Michael Gorman, dean of the Ecumenical Institute of Theology, a division of St. Mary's Seminary and University, said that in 1968 the Sulpician Fathers opened the institute as a place where Protestants and Catholics, blacks and whites, can study together.

"We are the only degree-granting ecumenical division of a Catholic seminary in the world," Gorman said. At the institute, "people from all kinds of faith traditions come together for service and academic work," he continued. About 40 percent of the students are Catholic.

The institute includes "classes that address social justice issues from a theoretical and practical perspective," Gorman said. In the course "The Gospels and Social Justice," students create a group project.

"Bring them together and who knows what will come out of that," Gorman said. "When that is over, connections have been made, fostering the program goals of academic preparation for ministry and ecumenical understanding and knowledge." ✠

Editor's Note: Daly is an editor and freelance writer in Baltimore, Md.

FAITH IN THE MARKETPLACE

What form of injustice is too often overlooked?

Selected Responses From Readers:

"Disrespect of the elderly. The wisest and richest resources we have living with and around us are treated regularly as useless, inconvenient and slow-moving baggage. ... How lacking our society is in the genuine riches the elderly would so graciously share if only we'd take the time and patience to ask and receive." -- Louise Gillmore, Paddock Lake, Wis.

"Abortion. I feel it is greatly overlooked by people who believe it is not a human being within a woman. ... If people researched the total number of deaths and the mothers' psychological problems post abortion [they'd see]. We overlook this as a nation." -- Eddie Ochoa, Bakersfield, Calif.

"I think it's the welfare of children. We're not doing enough, especially for those sold and exploited sexually." -- Deborah Powell, Troy, Mo.

"Honesty. Both my sons have had problems because they've been honest. ... Today a lot of young people are not telling the truth because they see people seem to get punished for it." -- Dottie Climer, Lebanon, Tenn

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