

Will we recognize injustice?

By Rev. Kenneth R. Himes, OFM
Catholic News Service

Some human actions contrast dramatically with what God desires for us.

To commit an injustice is to violate the norms of genuine communion, to transgress the bonds of solidarity and mutuality that ought to mark life in God's reign.

For the ancient Hebrew, justice was linked intimately to the idea of covenant -- God's promise to be faithful to us and our promise to be faithful to God, Yahweh. Throughout the Hebrew Bible God's offer of covenant is central to Jewish faith. When the Jewish people lose sight of their special relationship with Yahweh, when they fail to live up to the terms of the covenant, they must repent and undergo conversion.

In this context, justice was understood as living rightly; to be just was to be in a right relationship with God and the people God loves. Justice was situated within the belief in God's covenant with creation in general and with Jewish people in particular.

Therefore, injustice is a fundamental contradiction of the covenant, a betrayal of the relationship one has with God and God's people.

In the New Testament, justice is linked to the central message of Jesus, the coming of the reign of God to a world in the throes of sin. This theme of the reign of God reminded those who heard Jesus that creation was in disorder, that conversion was the necessary response to the invitation to enter God's reign.

To live in the world where God's power holds sway, the disciples of Jesus would live in a new way, establishing authentic community with God, one another and all of God's creatures.

Justice was a characteristic of such community; it meant that a person was in harmony with the Creator and creation.

We may not always know exactly what justice requires; for example, how do we stop terrorism? Still we frequently know what injustice is, such as the senseless killing of innocents.

The noted Dominican theologian Father Edward Schillebeeckx coined the phrase "contrast experience" to refer to situations that are so transparently and egregiously evil that we can with certainty state, "That is not the reign of God." His point was that some things are so manifestly wrong that even if we do not know the solution or the right thing to do, we know the existing situation cannot be allowed to stand.

As the U.S. bishops said in their well-known pastoral letter on economic life, justice in the Bible is different than in the later tradition. "Biblical justice is more comprehensive than subsequent philosophical definitions. It is not concerned with a strict definition of rights and duties, but with the rightness of the human condition before God and within society" (Economic Justice for All, 39).

As the Catholic faith moved out beyond the Semitic world where it began and encountered classical Greek and Roman cultures, it found new ways of thinking and had to formulate new ways of communicating the faith to people unfamiliar with biblical ideas.

Over the centuries justice has been considered one of the cardinal virtues in Catholic moral theology. A recent exposition of what the virtue of justice entails can be found in the bishops' letter on economic justice.

The bishops maintained that the full vision of biblical justice remains the goal of moral living.

The pastoral on the economy says that as we move along on our earthly pilgrimage toward this goal, we can determine certain minimal standards of virtuous living that express three dimensions of justice:

■ "Commutative justice calls for funda-



"Justice was understood as living rightly; to be just was to be in a right relationship with God and the people God loves," states Father Himes. CNS/Crosiers

mentally fairness in all agreements and exchanges between individuals or private social groups. ...

■ "Distributive justice requires that the allocation of income, wealth and power in society be evaluated in light of its effects on persons whose basic material needs are unmet." ...

■ "Social justice implies that persons have an obligation to be active and productive participants in the life of society and that society has a duty to enable them to participate in this way" (Economic Justice for All, 69-71).

Conversely, we can understand injustice as a failure to treat individuals fairly in our dealings with them, to ensure that all people have available a minimum array of the goods that meet basic human needs and to organize society in such a way that all people are able to participate in political, economic and cultural life.

A failure to secure basic justice for all makes the biblical goal of authentic community seem unreachable. To treat the biblical vision of justice as unattainable is to break faith with the God of the covenant whose Son invited us to enter God's reign. Justice has been described in various ways throughout Catholic tradition. All the various formulations, however, serve the same purpose -- to remind us that to be faithful to a God who loves justice means that believers must oppose injustice and practice justice in every age.

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How to communicate about social justice

By Father Dan Danielson
Catholic News Service

I have been pastor of a large parish now for 22 years and in that time have built up some credibility. I am not seen as a naive do-gooder or knee-jerk liberal, but as a thinking pastor. That gives me the background I need to be able to ask the parishioners to take seriously the role of social justice in their lives as Catholic Christians. They have responded very well.

We first addressed this issue in 2000, taking on some presumably "easy" issues: the death penalty during Lent, poverty during the spring and summer, and responsible voting for the "common good" in the fall.

The main point to get across is that this is not a matter of "politics" but rather "action on behalf of justice," which "is a constitutive part of the preaching of the Gospel" (Synod of Bishops, 1974).

I think the people of our parish are clear on this distinction. Social justice has to do with transforming society's structures so that they will be in conformity with the rights and dignity of every human being on the face of the earth.

No one says anymore, "I came to church to hear about God, not politics!" That is a singular advance for any parish.

Another issue that has to be clarified is the distinction between social justice



Cardinal Renato Martino, president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, holds up his book on social doctrine as he addresses the "Point 7 Now" conference whose goal is to reduce global poverty by mobilizing Catholics to influence U.S. policy toward developing nations. CNS photo

Why was justice so important in the Bible?

By Lawrence Boadt, CSP
Catholic News Service

The story of creation sets the stage for understanding the entire biblical view of the world.

In Genesis 1-2, the story dramatically unfolds in which God makes all things to be ordered and good, with human beings above all created in the very image of God.

The world quickly becomes distorted when humans refuse the command of God. Thus the stories in Genesis 3-11 about Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the generation of the Flood and the people who build the Tower of Babel, a world is revealed in which divisions, distrust, jealousy and violence flourish.

The powerful scene in Genesis 3 where Adam blames Eve and Eve blames the serpent underlines the lesson that sin is the rejection of the common good in favor of the desires of the self.

But God begins healing this broken relationship by establishing a covenant with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their descendants as a nation under Moses.

A covenant is a solemn bond of mutual fidelity. It establishes a relationship built on trust and the promise of fidelity to one another.

When God and a whole world live according to their covenant obligations, they live in right relationship. This is the predefinition of "justice" in the Bible.

It was God who took the initiative to re-establish personal contact with us beginning with his call to Abraham in Genesis 12. He then provided the teachings and laws to guide us in living the



Father Boadt observes, "The powerful scene in Genesis 3 where Adam blames Eve and Eve blames the serpent underlines the lesson that sin in the rejection of the common good in favor of the desires of the self." CNS/Crosiers

Bible emphasizes is mercy. People can change and repent and return to the way of justice. Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-32 pointedly urges a father to treat a son with mercy, but it also reflects the beautiful words of Isaiah 54:8: "In an outburst of wrath, for a moment I hid my face from you; but with enduring love I take pity on you, says the Lord, your redeemer."

The whole of Scripture revolves around these two themes: living justly and showing merciful forgiveness. In pursuing these virtues, we imitate the very God we worship.

Editor's Note: Father is publisher of Paulist Press, Mahwah, N.J.

covenant faithfully.

Because the covenant is between God and the physical world he made, as well as with all of us in that world, justice is not just obedience to God but requires treating one another as God treats us.

Leviticus 19:1 says that "you must be holy as I the Lord am holy," meaning we must treat one another as God treats us. This is echoed in the New Testament when Jesus tells the good sheep that they did good deeds for him when they did good deeds for the least among them (Mt 25:31-46).

Another aspect of justice that the Bible emphasizes is mercy. People can change and repent and return to the way of justice. Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-32 pointedly urges a father to treat a son with mercy, but it also reflects the beautiful words of Isaiah 54:8: "In an outburst of wrath, for a moment I hid my face from you; but with enduring love I take pity on you, says the Lord, your redeemer."

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and charity. There is a need for both. Catholics are very accustomed to responding generously in charity. But the search for justice is something more. It takes time to get that point across.

The other main approach is to ask people to "wrestle" with the church's teaching, to take it seriously. We treat people with respect. And many people, not feeling they are being told what to do, will embrace the challenge to study, listen, discuss and pray about this issue.

In many instances they will move beyond their original thinking.

Social justice issues have been presented in our parish in preaching at Sunday liturgy and through numerous pastor's letters and inserts in the Sunday bulletins. Social justice is also dealt with in all our adult education programs, from the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults to adult confirmation.

We have dealt with issues of immigration, the 2006 election, affordable housing, worldwide poverty and hunger, and putting an end to extreme poverty. Along the way we have held adult education sessions on global warming, ecology and world hunger.

At this point there are many in our parish who take these issues seriously:

They are better informed, they make contact with government leaders through phone calls and letters, and they are involved in "hands on" projects to improve the lives of others. Such activity only increases as people become better informed on the larger issues.

Editor's Note: Father Danielson is pastor of the Catholic Community of Pleasanton, Calif., and a freelance writer.

In A Nutshell

- Failure to secure basic justice for all may make the biblical goal of authentic community seem unreachable.
- But if God loves justice, aren't believers called to oppose injustice and practice justice?
- Social justice is all about transforming society's structures so that they are in conformity with the rights and dignity of every human being.
- "Eucharist becomes in life what it signifies in its celebration" through efforts to transform unjust structures and restore respect for the dignity of all, Pope Benedict XVI said in "Sacrament of Charity".
- The church promotes social justice by living it. Justice efforts can have an ecumenical or interreligious dimension. Food banks and shelters often are a joint effort of local religious bodies.