



What is Social Justice?

by CAPP-USA

Applying Catholic Social Teaching (Not Corporal Works of Mercy) Leads to Social Justice!

What is social justice? A hindrance thwarting achieving social justice is the confusion caused by the many diocesan, parish and university student programs and projects labeled 'social justice' — but which are really corporal works of mercy.

Why does this matter?

By labeling projects to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and house the homeless “social justice” we inhibit our ability to **distinguish between** corporal works of mercy and the practice of Catholic social teaching – which is what leads to social justice.

What is Social Justice?

Social justice is what results when “associations or individuals...obtain what is their due, according to their nature and their vocation.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1928*)



Catholic social teaching results in social justice.

Social justice impacts the social structures around us; it “upholds the fundamental human right to a dignified life”. (*Pope Francis*).

This understanding of social justice was made clear by Pope Francis’ observation that: “the duty of social justice...requires the realignment of relationships between stronger and weaker peoples in terms of greater fairness”. (*2014 World Day of Peace Message, 4*).

What is Catholic Social Teaching?

The Church’s “social doctrine is a particular dimension of this proclamation [of the truth]: It is a service to the truth that sets us free.

Open to the truth from whichever branch of knowledge it comes, the Church's social doctrine receives it, assembles into a unity the fragments in which it is often found and mediates it within the constantly changing life patterns of the society of peoples and nations". (*Pope Benedict XVI, 9*).

Catholic social teaching (CST) proposes a set of principles to be used to form our conscience as we impact the social structures around us.

Social Justice – Impeded

This inaccurate labeling (of corporal works of mercy as synonymous with the practice of Catholic social teaching) obscures our recognition that, **in charity**, we have a similarly binding requirement to confront improper and even sinful social structures – the domain of Catholic social teaching:

"It is an act of charity to assist someone suffering, but it is also an act of charity, even if we do not know that person, to work to change the social conditions that caused his or her suffering." (*Pope Francis, Fratelli Tutti, 186*).

Applying Catholic Social Teaching is Charity

Our catechesis, whether as children or adults, typically fails to reveal that practicing Catholic social teaching is charity. It fails to identify that "Charity is at the heart of the Church's social doctrine." (*Caritas in Veritate, 2*).

That, "To defend the truth, to articulate it with humility and conviction, and to bear witness to it in our life are...**exacting and indispensable forms of charity**". (*Pope Benedict XVI, 1*).

The practice of Catholic social teaching "is the institutional path — we might also call it the political path — of charity, **no less excellent and effective than the kind of charity which encounters the neighbor directly**, outside the institutional mediation of the polis." (emphasis ours) (*Caritas in Veritate, 7*).

'Caritas in Veritate' is the principle around which the church's social doctrine turns". (*Caritas in Veritate, 6*)

We must understand: **to practice Catholic social teaching is also charity!**

The Confusion is a Problem

Clothing runs, food drives, home building projects are corporal works of mercy (charity) but not social justice and this confusion complicates realizing our **binding requirement** to practice Catholic social teaching in our 'public lives' (at work and at the voting booth).

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As Pope St. John Paul II made clear: proper formation with Catholic social teaching “will act as the best antidote to the not infrequent cases of inconsistency and even corruption marking socio-political structures.” (*Ecclesia in America, 67*).

Conversely, he was just as clear that if this requirement to know and practice Catholic social teaching “is neglected, it should not come as a surprise that many...will be guided by criteria alien to the Gospel and at times openly contrary to it.” (*Pope St. John Paul II, 67*).

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