JUSTICE FOR THE POOR IN A LAND OF PLENTY: A PLACE AT THE TABLE

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United States citizens have a deep, abiding belief in justice. They are concerned with justice, most often envisioned as a basic sense of fairness: from the workplace to the home, in society at large, and in organizations to which they belong. They also expect conformity to law and a reasonable interpretation of law with attention to honesty and impartiality. From the Pledge of Allegiance to ordinary human encounters, people in the United States of America believe that justice is their birthright. Justice is not just a fervent expectation, but also a deep-seated hope, even when circumstances short circuit people’s lives. Despite difficulties, hope for justice permeates people’s outlook and expectations.

Many, if not most, United States citizens’ understanding of justice includes a sense of social justice, the conviction that in a land of plenty all should have their basic human needs met: the needs for food, shelter, health care, and education. Beyond that they would hope that all are provided with opportunities to develop their talents and gifts and pursue their life dreams. Yet, social justice in the United States is often shattered by the realities of poverty.

Poverty is a direct threat to the life and well being of people in the United States of America. Furthermore, poverty undermines the American Dream and weakens the very fabric of American society. As religious educators we need, if we are to address fully the social context of Christian faith formation, to understand the extent of poverty in the United States and how poverty impacts families, especially children. Hence, in this paper I explore the realities of poverty in the United States today and discuss how Christian religious traditions can offer a vision for integration of rich and poor, and for empowerment of the poor. I suggest that religious educators need to nurture a sense of social justice as not only central to Christian faith but as a way of reinvigorating the American Dream so that all people may live with a sense of security as well as hope for the future.

UNDERSTANDING POVERTY AND THE PROBLEMS IT CAUSES

United States Census Bureau Report

Poverty in the United States of America has increased every year since 2000. The U.S. Census Bureau reported that 35.9 million persons, 12.5 percent of the population, were officially labeled as living in poverty in 2003.\(^1\) When the data from the U.S. Census Bureau report are analyzed, the first point to emphasize is that poverty is increasing. The U.S. Census Bureau report includes visual representation of poverty since 1959. \(\text{Figure 1}\) is a graph portraying the Number in Poverty and Poverty Rate: 1959 to 2003.\(^2\) The graph shows the number of persons who are/were poor in millions and the rates of poverty by percent. Of concern is the fact that “both the number (in poverty) and (poverty) rate have risen for three consecutive years, from 31.6 million and 11.3 percent in 2000, to 35.9 million and 12.5 percent in 2003.”\(^3\) Since 2000 the number of people living in poverty has increased by 4.3 million, and the rate of poverty

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\(^1\) Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2003, 9.
\(^2\) Ibid., Figure 3, 9.
\(^3\) Ibid.
increased .8 percent. While the poverty rate for 2003 was 9.9 percent lower than it was in 1959, the number of people living in poverty today is the third highest number, just below 1959 and 1993 when almost 40 million people lived in poverty.

Second, the recent census data indicate that poverty varies by age and that children under 18 have consistently had the highest rates of poverty from 1975 up through 2003. *Figure 2: Poverty Rates by Age: 1959 to 2003* shows the variation in poverty rates by age for the years from 1959 to 2003. In 1959 more than 25% of children and more than 15% of adults were poor; by 2000 these percentages decreased. In 2003 the poverty rate for children under 18 years (17.6 percent) is the highest of the three age groups and the number in poverty increased by 800,000 over the 2002 figures. The poverty rate for people 18 to 64 years of age remained at 10.8 percent in 2003; the number in poverty rose from 18.9 million in 2002 to 19.4 million in 2003. People 65 years or older had the same rate of poverty and number in poverty: 10.2 percent and 3.6 million in 2003, a vast improvement over the 35% rate of poverty in 1959.

Third, not only is poverty greatest for children but also children (those under 18 years of age) had an increase both in the rate of poverty and the number in poverty: 17.6 percent and 12.9 million children lived in poverty in 2003 as compared to 16.7 percent and 12.1 million children in 2002. While children were 25.4 percent of the total population in 2003, they were 35.9 percent of the people in poverty. The rate of poverty for children under the age of 6 years varied by families: related children living with families numbered 4.7 million (19.8 percent) in 2003 up from 4.3 million (18.5 percent) in 2002; related children living in families with female householders and no husband present had a poverty rate of 52.9 percent as compared to 9.6 percent for children living in married-couple families.  

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4 Ibid., Figure 4, 13.  
5 Ibid.  
6 Ibid.
Further analysis of the data reveals that women and children were more likely to live in poverty: 12.9 million children under 18 years old (17.6 percent) and 52.9 percent of “related children under 6 living in families with female householders with no husband present” were in poverty.\(^7\) Generally, the high number of poor women and children has reached alarming proportions. People of color also bore a disproportionate share of poverty: the poverty rates were 24.4 percent for Blacks alone; 22.5 percent for Hispanics; and 8.2 percent for Whites. Those native to the United States were less likely to be poor: native-born had a poverty rate of 11.8 percent; foreign-born, 17.2 percent, and non-citizens 21.7 percent. There is also a greater concentration of the poor in cities. The highest rates of poverty were 17.5 percent for those living inside central cities and 14.2 percent for those outside metropolitan areas. The number in poverty was also greatest inside metropolitan areas (28.4 million people), with the largest number living inside central cities (14.6 million); outside metropolitan areas 7.5 million lived in poverty in 2003.\(^8\)

Finally, it is worth noting that the poverty gap has risen consistently since the mid-1970s. More fully, the poverty gap is a measure of the depth of poverty. It is defined as “the average income deficit (the dollar gap between a poor family’s income and its poverty threshold) experienced by poor families or individuals.”\(^9\) \textit{Figure 2: Family poverty gap and poverty rates, 1959-2001} \(^{10}\) shows the gap in 2001 dollars.

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\textit{Source: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (1998), updated using U.S. Bureau of the Census data.}
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\(^7\) Ibid., 11.
\(^8\) Ibid., 9-12.
\(^{10}\) Ibid., Fig. 5H, 328.
The family poverty rate decreased since 1959. However, the family poverty gap increased sharply in the early 1980s and by 2001 shows the “average poor family was over $1,000 (2001 dollars) worse off at the end of the period,” an indication of the increasing depth of poverty. In effect, the United States of America has many millions of individuals and families who are poor and the depth of their deprivation is increasing.

Of concern for families is the fact that the poverty gap or measure of the depth of poverty has risen since the mid-1970s, a fact that attests to the reality that the millions of individuals in poor families are suffering a greater depth of deprivation. Poverty translates into not having sufficient income to meet basic needs, namely food, clothing, and shelter. For children long bouts of poverty, especially severe poverty, adversely affect physical health, school achievement, and emotional and behavioral outcomes. The 2002 National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) provides national estimates for the health of children under 18 years of age and revealed that children who grow up in poverty are more likely to suffer from asthma and dental problems. They are also more likely to have a learning disability. These are not only health issues, but also make learning more difficult and life less enjoyable. In short, poverty robs children of the right to a healthy and productive life.

The Ecology of Poverty

David K. Shipler expands our understanding of poverty and its effect on people. Shipler suggests that we need to focus on the ecology of poverty, that is, the complex web of interlocking factors that create an environment of poverty within which the poor are separated from the broader society. Shipler’s model is based on explorations of the lives of the working poor who believe in the American Dream even when they are far from realizing its benefits. In his work, Shipler introduces us to the working poor whom he interviewed and studied over a five-year period beginning in 1997. A majority are unmarried women with children, of all races and national backgrounds. The ecology of poverty affects every aspect of their lives. Living in poverty translates into low pay for menial jobs, lack of job security, subsistent health care, substandard housing, and inadequate educational opportunities. Stressors resulting from living in poverty are magnified in the complex web of poverty. When one thing goes wrong, it often precipitates a series of unwanted events. Without a cushion of wealth and access to professionals, the poor are easily overwhelmed. The humanity of poor people is tested and often stretched beyond its breaking point. Shipler is convinced that we need to attack all of the problems associated with poverty at once. The complexities demand a multi-pronged approach by professionals:

We understand that holistic remedies are vital…If hospitals, schools, housing authorities, police departments, welfare offices, and other critical institutions were bold and well enough financed, they could reach far beyond their mandates, create

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11 Ibid.
connections of services, and become portals through which the distressed could pass into a web of assistance. It is a question of skill and will.14

Shipler is also firmly committed to the poor’s need to claim their own power. He notes that the poor have yet to claim their power in the marketplace and most importantly, in politics and that inequities in wages, health insurance, and education cry out for special attention. In Shipler’s words,

Opportunity and poverty in this country cannot be explained by either the American Myth that hard work is a panacea or by the Anti-Myth that the system imprisons the poor. Relief will come, if at all, in an amalgam that recognizes both the society’s obligations through government and business, and the individual’s obligation through labor and family—and the commitment of both society and individual through education.15

AN IMAGE OF PLENTY

People of faith know that the reality of poverty is both a crisis and an opportunity: a crisis in the lives of those suffering the effects of poverty and an opportunity for people to work together to provide charity as needed, but more importantly, to remove barriers to social inclusion by working to change social structures. As religious educators we seek images to guide us to a fuller vision of social justice. One such image is the metaphor of the table. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ pastoral letter, A Place at the Table: A Catholic Recommitment to Overcome Poverty and to Respect the Dignity of All God’s Children (2002) proposed this metaphor of the table as an image of inclusion and empowerment. The bishops claim that respect for persons made in the image and likeness of God requires us to make a place at the table of social decision making for all members of our community, especially women and children since they have frequently been absent from the table of social decision making.

Letty M. Russell has proposed that the table is an image of partnership. For Russell God is the preeminent model for partnership. The communication of love among the persons of the Trinity allows humanity to marvel at the “Trinitarian image of reciprocity, joint sharing in the work of salvation and the mission of the world.”16 God’s activity of “being partner in God’s self and being partner with us”17 is the model for partnership among women and men. Russell defines partnership as “a new focus of relationship in which there is continuing commitment and common struggle in interaction with a wider community context.”18 The paradigm of partnership is envisioned as a circle of interdependence. Diversity is valued and participation welcomed. “Authority is exercised in community and not over community…”19

Letty Russell employs three images in her effort to work toward a global table. The first is a round table as “a sign of the coming unity of humanity.”20 The round table is a metaphor for achieving the “already of welcome, sharing, talk, and partnership” as opposed to the “not yet of

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15 Ibid., 299-300.
17 Ibid., 28-30.
18 Ibid., 18.
our divided and dominated world.”21 The second image is the kitchen table. People carry out the myriad tasks of daily living around the kitchen table. The kitchen table is where people share their lives with family and friends, the place where people learn to reach out in solidarity to include others as neighbor and friend. The third image is a welcome table, a place for “welcoming those who feel the least welcome.”22 The welcome table, part of the black church tradition, “symbolizes the communion table and every other gathering at table. At God’s welcome table those who have been denied access to the table of the rich white masters are welcomed and may welcome others as a foretaste of the final partnership with God.”23 The welcome table makes clear that women and men of all races, nationalities, and socioeconomic status experience God’s acceptance and love. For Christians the table is where they share the bread of their lives. In turn all are called to appreciate the giftedness of each individual and to work together in partnership with God.

The table reminds us of our calling by God to seek justice for the poor. It can challenge us to be more inclusive: to make a place for the poor at our table among family and friends. It can relate to the table of fellowship where a community of believers shares the word of God and the body of Christ so they can reach out to others, especially those living on the underside of life. In its very simplicity it can bring home how all are welcome and how individuals are called to shoulder responsibility for each other and for the world. The table can be a symbol of love between God and humans, as well as a symbol of partnership with God. As God calls each to life and love, so too rich and poor are called to be with and for each other.

EDUCATING FOR JUSTICE FROM A CHRISTIAN FAITH PERSPECTIVE IN THE UNITED STATES TODAY

In this section I will explore fundamental principles and approaches for educating for justice from a Christian faith perspective. These principles are rooted in and develop from reflection on scripture and tradition. In terms of educating for justice the writings of Letty M. Russell, Thomas H. Groome, and Gabriel Moran guide and inform our exploration.

Fundamental Principles

The starting point for our considerations is the goodness of creation and the dignity of each person. This first principle under girds and inspires all that we do in working for justice. It is vital to remember that in scripture God’s response to the varied acts of creation was the simple but profound refrain, “God saw how good” it was (Gen. 1:3, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). God creates humans “in the divine image” (Gen. 1:27), bestowing a unique dignity on every man, woman, and child. First and foremost, God identified God’s self intimately with each human. Humans in turn share all the wonders of nature as well as living creatures. It is this anthropology which Groome emphasizes and which Moran states as his first step in educating for justice, namely gratitude for God’s gifts. The simple pleasures of earthly existence need to be remembered in times of calm as well as when life and stability are threatened. We are blessed to be part of such a wondrous creation.

21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 149.
23 Ibid.
Flowing from the largesse of a loving God is the second principle, namely that we are partners with God and one another. Russell emphasized that God’s partnership with humanity leads us to work more carefully and caringly with other people. God invites us to join in God’s mission of working to sustain and improve the world. This mission is first and foremost God’s initiative and we are invited to be partners by celebrating the Lord’s presence in the Eucharist and most especially among the poor (Mt. 25:31-40).

The third principle is the necessity to be grounded in theological convictions that flow from the goodness of creation, the dignity of each person, and the fact that we are partners with God and one another. This principle is captured in Andei Rublev’s icon, “The Holy Trinity,” an image of the Triune God. The icon encourages reflection, provides a place where one observes in silence and listens with the heart, and ultimately invites action. Henri Nouwen has noted,

Through the contemplation of this icon we come to see with our inner eyes that all engagements in this world can bear fruit only when they take place within this divine circle…We can be involved in struggles for justice and in actions for peace. We can be part of the ambiguities of family and community life…We can do all of this without ever having to leave the house of love.

The Trinity mirrors perfectly how women and men are to approach each other: with respect, attention, and love. The icon captures the essence of Christianity: the contemplative stance in a world of action. This concept is foremost in the writings of Moran who considered a contemplative attitude at the heart of those who educate for justice; Groome also identified contemplation as essential if one is to have a “passion for justice,” while Russell extolled a spirituality of liberation based on a “Christian mysticism of partnership.”

A fourth principle, the principle of realism, underlies this discussion of justice. The principle of realism means that we identify and become aware of how things are at this time and place. To state it simply, even as we affirm the goodness of the world, we need to acknowledge that there are serious problems. All too often we easily forget our relationship with God by placing our perceived needs and desire for comfort ahead of everything or everyone else’s needs. When we place ourselves above and before even God, we can easily ignore responsibilities to our family and our neighbor. As a result of misguided love, we may ourselves be guilty of personal sin, and in severing the bonds of solidarity we may also be complicit in social sin. Blinded by ambition, a desire for wealth, and involvement in harmful relationships, we can easily fall into a pattern of evil: by direct participation, by approval (“by ordering, advising, praising, or approving them”), by protection and non-disclosure. Personal sin leads to social sin, which results from “social situations and institutions that are contrary to divine goodness.” (#1869) A realistic appraisal of life in the United States may well lead us to question if American society through its political, economic, and social structures effectively denies people their right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” In the name of efficiency and over reliance on the market model, are many families locked out and denied access to a decent life? In all honesty we can say that

equality of opportunity has not led to equality of outcome, and for some in the United States, life is grim.

And yet, this principle of realism draws us back to the principles already discussed. Specifically, because the world has problems, we are called to respond to God and God’s invitation to affirm and build upon the inherent goodness of the world and to work as partners with God and each other to address the problems of the world. When asked how she kept going in the struggle for justice, Letty Russell admitted, “I know the world is a mess.” But she also stated, “I’m always excited about what God might be doing and what I could be doing.” Russell expressed strong convictions that “God will mend creation.” Russell admitted, “We don’t succeed every time.” But she believes, “there is more to come.” For Russell, “Work for justice may not necessarily succeed, but it is the right thing to do.”

What else do we need to know to educate and work for justice? In responding to this question I state my next summary principle: We need to know our rights as citizens of our nation and of the world community and as members of a faith community. We need to educate all people so that all of us know our rights. Those of us who are Americans are likely to think of our rights in terms of the American Dream, namely the right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” We are also likely to think of justice as a kind of fairness as demonstrated by a desire for all of us to live freely and to have fairly equal opportunities to provide for the basic necessities for ourselves and our families, specifically, nourishing food, adequate housing in a safe neighborhood, a job that pays a living wage, good schools, and affordable health care. We have a right to know any threats against us or our neighbors stemming from crime, disease, or poverty. The reason is simple: people need a safe environment and the ability to live healthy, productive lives. The principle of realism challenges us to reevaluate how and why so many people in the United States are far removed from satisfying their basic needs and those of their children. We have a right to access information about these problems and we have a right to be involved in efforts to address them.

Drawing from Christian Scripture, History, and Tradition

Familiarity with the alarming realities of poverty can push a person toward despair and a sense of hopelessness and helplessness. At such times we need to return to our fundamental principles. That is, we need to face the realities of poverty. At the same time we need to affirm our beliefs in the goodness of our world, and the power and potential of human efforts to change and even transform the world, and most importantly our belief in the guiding and enabling presence of a God who mentors us in the ways of peace and justice. Then, we need to draw from Christian scripture, history and traditions as we reflect theologically on the meanings of justice and poverty and how God is enabling and requiring us to respond to the poor as a matter of justice.

Justice in many biblical texts is defined in terms of right relationships and loving kindness between persons and God. We read that the biblically just person is “gracious and merciful and just;” one who “gives lavishly to the poor.” (Ps. 112) God is presented in the bible as defender of the poor, a champion of those who are powerless because of economic and social deprivation (especially orphans, widows, and aliens); and God expects God’s people as a matter of justice to do the same, to also reach out to and care for the poor. Moreover, Jesus embodied...
how God acts in the world: with compassion and mercy. Jesus’ relationship with God inspired him to welcome those in need of healing, forgiveness, and inclusion. Jesus taught that love of God and love of neighbor is the commandment by which we are to live. Jesus’ followers continued to care for the poor. They often proposed the total sharing of material resources for the benefit of those in need. In the first Christian communities church leaders encouraged believers to respond willingly and generously to the poor. Generally, within the early church and then continuing up to the present day, Christians have seen loving service with the poor as a way of nurturing a vital connection with God.

During the Middle Ages a number of factors diminished Christian concern for the poor to a degree. Yet, over the centuries there have always been Christians who dedicated their lives and fortunes to caring for the poor. Throughout the history of Christianity there are many stories of believers engaging in works of charity to assuage the suffering and misery of orphans, widows, and those who were sick or destitute.

By the 19th century with changes in society, the economy, and governance (e.g., the Industrial Revolution, the Enlightenment, modern revolutions, Marxism and capitalism), social problems were of such a magnitude that there was a demand for a more unified analysis as well as a concerted effort to address not just the effects of poverty but also the systems or structures which were causative factors. Against this background Catholic Social Teaching emerged. The encyclicals of Pope Leo XIII (*Rerum Novarum*, 1891) and Pope Pius XI (*Quadragesimo Anno*, 1931) espoused two essential principles: social charity (which may be defined as direct service to the poor out of a sense of loving kindness) and social justice (which can be conceptualized in terms of the rights of all people to participate fully in society and to share in the benefits of society). Throughout the 20th century and into the 21st century the popes as well as bishops through national church conferences showed great sensitivity to those excluded and oppressed by economic, political, and social systems. Church leaders were critical of systems that favored the wealthy and powerful at the expense of those who suffered destitution and servitude. They consistently reminded the world of the inherent dignity of each person, of the rights of all people to the goods of the earth and of society.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) called for a commitment to social justice and a concern for the poor as it scrutinized “the signs of the times,” interpreting these in “the light of the gospel.” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, #4) Then, the 1971 Synod of Bishops summarized over a half a century of Catholic Social teaching about justice with the statement: “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.” (*Justice in the World*, 1971, #6) The U.S. Catholic Bishops further elaborated their concern for justice in a pastoral letter on the economy, *Economic Justice for All* (1986). The letter presented basic moral principles:

1. Every economic decision and institution must be judged in light of whether it protects or undermines the dignity of the human person.
2. Human dignity can be realized and protected only in community.
3. All people have a right to participate in the economic life of society.
4. All members of a society have a special obligation to the poor and vulnerable.
5. Human rights are the minimum conditions for life in community.
6. Society as a whole, acting through public and private institutions, has the moral responsibility to enhance human dignity and protect human rights.27

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The bishops identified poverty as a condition deeper than lacking “financial resources.” The deprivation resulting from poverty is “a denial of full participation in the economic, social, and political life of society and an inability to influence decisions that affect one’s life.” Poverty is “being powerless” and is in effect an assault on “one’s fundamental human dignity.” (#188)

Throughout the 20th century Catholic Social Teaching addressed justice for the poor by embracing the preferential option for the poor. The Latin American Bishops’ Conferences at Medellin (1968) and Puebla (1979) addressed the intense suffering of their people as a result of poverty. In stating that the poor challenged the Church to conversion, service, and solidarity, the Latin American bishops also stated unequivocally that the option for the poor requires changes in unjust political, economic, and social structures (*The Puebla Conference Document, 1979,* #1147, 1155). Pope John Paul II in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987) explained the love of preference for the poor as “an option, or a special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity” which applied to each person’s life, but also “equally to our social responsibilities and hence to our manner of living, and to the logical decisions to be made concerning the ownership and use of goods.” (#42) In 1986 the U.S. Catholic bishops stated emphatically that, “the poor have the single most urgent economic claim on the conscience of the nation.” The bishops went on to say that we as Americans have an “obligation to evaluate social and economic activity from the viewpoint of the poor and powerless.” (*Economic Justice for All, 1986,* #86-87)

Another principle of educating for justice for the poor is the challenge for us as educators to draw deeply from the riches of Hebrew and Christian scripture, history and faith traditions (especially Catholic Social Teaching) and then to present these riches using methods appropriate to the age, position, and social location of those with whom we minister. Stated differently, one of our tasks as religious educators is to remember our Christian past and to help others remember this past as a resource that can inspire and sustain our efforts to seek justice for the poor in the present.

Staying current about justice issues is also important. More fully, as another principle of educating for justice for the poor, I contend that Christians need to study current issues of justice and injustice in the world and then view these issues in the light of Christian scripture, history and traditions. While no one person can follow all the issues, there are resources that analyze contemporary social issues in the light of the accumulated wisdom of Christian faith traditions and that offer balanced information to assist people of good will. One example is the many web sites with information on justice and poverty. These include but are not limited to: the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Catholic Campaign for Human Development, Catholic Charities USA, Center of Concern, Network, Call to Renewal, Pax Christi USA, and Sojourners.

When we turn to Christian history and traditions, special mention must be made of liberation theologies. Liberation theologies are major contributors to discussions of justice for the poor. Poverty is a major concern and starting point for liberation theology as it developed in Latin America, and no other tradition of contemporary theology has done as much as the liberation theologies as a collective whole to heighten our awareness of impoverishment and marginalization as theological issues. Moreover, when we review the history of liberation theology the example set by the Christian base communities (*comunidades de base*), which contributed to the development of Latin American liberation theologies, is particularly inspiring. Christian base communities were the means through which individuals and families met and formed community; they read the Bible, reflected on biblical stories and applied these to their
own lives. The skills of social science as well as theology were used to address the effects of poverty and to work to change oppressive structures. Additionally, as liberation theologies have become more sensitive to factors of gender, race, and culture, they have enabled many marginalized and oppressed people and groups to have a voice and to seek liberation from sin and injustice in the midst of personal and communal suffering. The sensitivity of an encompassing understanding of liberation theologies was expressed well by Gustavo Gutierrez when he stated that, “Salvation…embraces all human reality, transforms it, and leads it to its fullness in Christ.”

Liberation theologies offer hope—for the future. They enable us to imagine God’s reign of justice and peace envisioned as a future event that informs the present and inspires us to work in the here and now to effect the reign of God. Liberation theologies stress freedom—from oppression for those who are subjugated and considered by some to be non-persons; from attachment to riches, power, and spiritual blindness for those whose hearts and minds turn toward God as they adopt and embrace God’s concern for the poor and oppressed. Liberation theologies offer community—a way to be together as the people of God sharing the journey of faith. Liberation theologies offer a Bible-based spirituality—a method of prayer, study, and reflection that opens the word of God and relates to the concerns of people. In summary, liberation theologies provide an inclusive vision of humanity -- women and men, children and adults, rich and poor, the learned and those open to learning, all nationalities and races -- as the loam into which God can breathe new life to recreate humans grounded in love for God, their neighbor, and the earth. While liberation theologies recognize that social problems continue to persist despite the best efforts of many people of good will, they offer a hope-filled vision of God and God’s people working together to realize the reign of God in small ways each day, praying that God’s will of peace and justice will be realized over time and in spite of hardened hearts and seemingly infertile soil.

SPECIFIC APPROACHES AND PRINCIPLES FOR EDUCATING FOR JUSTICE

All religious educators concerned about educating for justice can find guidance in the writings of prominent religious educators especially Letty Russell, Thomas Groome, and Gabriel Moran. Russell as pastor and Christian educator has modeled God’s quest for justice and encouraged people to join in God’s mission of reconciling the world. She has called Christians to join with other people as partners with God and with each other to bring liberation and justice to all people, and to welcome all people, especially those on the margins of society, so that women, men, and children who are oppressed, deprived, or excluded may come to know the welcoming presence of a loving God in community. Russell often wrote that the faith community needed to be actively engaged in service. She pointed out that education takes place within the community, that “liturgy, action, and nurture” can be educational and aid believers/participants to grow in partnership, and that the leadership of Christian communities can provide mentors who can become “the source of ideas, the inspiration and support” for those with whom they serve.

Russell claimed that educating for justice also requires the practice of hospitality. She noted that hospitality is essential for all persons to be welcome at the table of worship and of life.

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30 Ibid., 126-127.
and thereby to be members of the community of faith. In relating the mission of the church to hospitality, Russell pointed out that, “Hospitality creates a safe and welcoming space for persons to find their own sense of humanity and worth.” Russell suggested that as a community welcomes people of other races and cultures, the community encourages interaction among all the members, and that, “unity without uniformity…makes hospitality and diversity possible.” Russell also argued that the church we need to move from the center outward to the margins to share in the concerns and struggles of those who are in the margin so that they truly feel welcome and can overcome any sense that they may have of being outside looking in on the community. Welcoming the stranger, Russell noted, can open the community to a larger world and broader concerns, and diversity has the potential to enrich the community provided the community is receptive and open to the giftedness of other people.

In exploring justice as a mandate of Christian faith, Thomas Groome proposed that, “every teacher and every system of education are responsible to educate for justice in society.” He summarized concern for justice in a variety of areas: an anthropology based on valuing people and treating people with dignity and respect; a sacramentality which allows people to “see” and respond to the poor and oppressed of society and to imagine how to change unjust social structures and oppressive cultural mores; teaching civic responsibility based on “right relationship” and the common good; justice presented as part of the tradition with models and “ways to live justly;” using reason to encourage ethical thought based on wisdom that flows from truth and goodness; spirituality as a “call to ‘right relationship;’” and care for all humanity and respect for diversity. Groome has always seen justice education as prophetic, i.e., education with a strong awareness of oppression and injustice and a dedication to creating “structures and cultural mores that promote ‘right relationship’ for all.” Groome has also pointed out that direct service with the poor combined with the opportunity for reflection and sharing one’s thoughts and feelings is essential for learning to live justly.

Moran’s approach to educating for justice calls us to strive to become contemplatives who are engaged in action/practices for justice. According to Moran, educators need to begin with a sense of gratitude for the gifts of this earth, realize that life is finite, move beyond the ordinary to a vision of a world greater than any brokenness, and break out of illusion through

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32 Ibid., 174.
34 Ibid., 380.
35 Ibid., 390.
36 Ibid., 390-391.
language, imagery, and practices that allow us to “affirm a life together in justice and peace.” Moran’s call to approach issues creatively can aid us in finding new ways to envision work, the environmental crises and other pressing social issues as concerns of justice. For instance, in addressing the issue of work Moran distinguished between the toilsomeness of labor and the life-giving dimensions of meaningful work. He then challenged us to approach the issue of unemployment creatively by seeing a need not just to provide jobs, but also to provide meaningful work that can enable a person and his or her family to share in the benefits of society.

As I draw from but look beyond the work of Russell, Groome and Moran I would like to offer a number of specific principles concerning education for justice.

Promoting inclusive education for justice. Justice issues need to reach those who are active members of churches. For instance, the Eucharist is the community’s gathering together to worship and pray; here we are welcomed by a loving God, and here we are united by the desire to reach out to others. At liturgy we welcome families, single parents, visitors, and individuals--children, young adults, and older adults--to pray together around the table of the Lord. At the Eucharist we offer the substance of our lives as we share the word of God. A homilist has a unique opportunity to make justice live as he/she addresses those at Eucharist. The many scriptural references to how God acts justly that regularly appear in the liturgy could be integrated into homilies to inspire all participants to go and do likewise.

Providing knowledge about how justice issues are being addressed. Catholics, and indeed all Christians, could be informed more fully about how/when church leadership responds to issues like welfare reform, social security, proposed federal and state budgets, immigration, et al. Diocesan newspapers could be utilized to present Catholic Social Teaching in readable format, and the social ministries in our faith communities with the vision of effecting Catholic Social Teaching. Meetings at the parish or diocesan level could include statements about how their deliberations will affect the poor. Parish adult education could focus on models of social justice and the modern saints who have spent and are currently spending their lives defending the rights of others, caring for those in need, and seeking ways to improve social, religious, political, and economic conditions for a more balanced and productive life. Generally, to be inspired to work for greater justice in the world, Christians need to know what justice work is already being done.

Educating for involvement. As we learn about poverty and the real life conditions of those living in poverty as well as the principles of Catholic Social Teaching, another principle for educating about justice emerges. We need to get involved. Some might question why? Quite simply, we need to show that we care. As we know from scripture, Jesus’ story of the Last Judgment reminds us that our final judgment by God is a question of recognizing Jesus in the person of those in need and having seen our neighbor’s suffering, responding lovingly to their needs. The problems of the poor are to be shared by us as we work with God and with the persons who are suffering.

How to encourage involvement in addressing social justice concerns raises many complex issues. Parents and educators know how different people are: in terms of their

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personalities and preferences, their styles of learning, their motivation, and their talents and assets. If we picture justice as a continuum, each person is at distinct points along that spectrum: from disinterested and uninformed, to someone knowing somewhat but unwilling or unable to get involved, to another with limited knowledge but open to doing whatever is possible, to some who are very knowledgeable and totally committed. Just as Jesus looked on the rich, young man with love (Mk. 10:21), so too we need to love each person for him/herself. God can move hearts so we need to place our trust in God; justice is God’s work, and we are privileged to join in this venture. We are called to be creative in getting personally involved through direct action or service as well as in involving others: by speaking words of comfort and encouragement, presenting the work of social justice as a challenge as well as a social event, looking for ways to connect people, and sharing a vision of God’s reign of justice and peace.

The goal of achieving the reign of God may at times seem distant. How can we share a vision of the Promised Land with those who feel they are wandering in the desert? At other times when persons get involved in working for justice, we need to express appreciation for what each is able and willing to do. The ecology of poverty makes us realize that there are many problems crying for attention. Rather than losing heart, we need to view these as possibilities. The dream/plan is to tap into the talents and assets of the willing so that a concerned community uses its very real social, political, and economic assets to assure the effects, and more importantly, to eliminate the causes of poverty. Serious problems require deep thought, careful planning, personal and corporate action by capable, dedicated people. Throughout this process, we need to remember especially the children who suffer because of poverty—we need to strive to reach them before their eagerness to learn and their openness to life are adversely affected by the harsh realities of impoverishment. It is for these that we dream, plan, and work indefatigably.

Struggling for liberation personally, socially, and spiritually is a life-long endeavor leading in God’s time to transformation and salvation.

Fostering justice as a habit of heart and mind. For justice to become a habit, a person needs first to see justice in action. When we witness a person who acts justly, his/her actions provide a pattern that shows us that justice is possible. These good actions can help us to notice the person(s) whom we might not even see, those far from our circle of care. When someone we know and admire is generous and kind, their actions can redound not just to the person(s) being helped but also to those observing or participating. Moreover, when someone acts justly, it is not just the action that speaks to us; it is the person’s attitude and generosity that help us realize that this is something we can also do. Additionally, we may sometimes feel that we are spent and cannot go the extra mile; at such times someone else’s example may open the wellsprings of our personal reserves so we can continue or, in some cases, begin to act justly.

Developing the virtue of justice requires motivation, concentration, and opportunity. We need to respond to requests for our time, our energy, and our assets. By repeated actions for good, justice can become as natural as breathing. As mentioned before, our involvement in justice differs over time, but the important thing is to begin to be involved and to follow through with meaningful acts. Our small steps toward welcoming the poor into our minds and, ultimately, the community can grow over time to including all at the table of decision-making.

Justice may well call us to conversion so that our hearts will be attuned to God’s ways. When we defend those who are helpless or oppressed, we can discover that the rewards of solidarity far outweigh the burdens of rugged individualism.
A practical concern is that educators take time to care for themselves even as they reach out and build a community for justice. Celebrating the small triumphs in life helps the community to move forward. There will be moments of exhilaration as well as times of exhaustion. We need to know when and how to replenish our spirit through silence, rest, beauty, entertainment, and fellowship. For when we are whole, we are best able to see that all of creation is good.

CONCLUSION

In summary, organized religions are inspired to respond to people in need. Christians have a history of caring for the poor, and throughout the years reaching out to those in need throughout the world. Justice in our time includes the duty to educate believers to recognize that the call to seek justice is a constitutive dimension of Christian faith. Since justice affects people—their relationships and their responsibilities—educating for justice will happen between and among individuals—in the family, in a religious congregation, in the church community, in the places where society’s myriad groups meet: school, church, neighborhoods, the city, the country, and throughout the world. Justice education is for people; it happens between persons, between persons and their God, and among persons in organizations that form the very fabric of life in the personal, civic, and religious realms. Social justice, then, will enable us in the United States to work together to limit poverty by bringing all people to the table of fellowship where we are equal before God and united with a common sense of purpose: service and solidarity with our neighbor.

REFERENCES


