

Social Justice Talk

San Jose Diocese Deanery 7 - the Southwest Deanery

Workshop

A Day of Reflection on Social Justice

Living the Dream: Faith, Justice, Action

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"Justice Talk"

Keynote Address by [Father Jon Pedigo](#)

Pastor, St. Julie Billiard Parish

Living the Dream: Faith, Justice, Action

Santa Clara County is one of the most culturally diverse counties in the United States. This tapestry cultural of diversity is evident in our diocesan life: for example, our jubilee liturgy at the Cathedral featured Vietnamese lion dancers, Korean drummers, Filipino dancers and Mexican Aztec liturgical dancers. Our music and prayer texts were multi-lingual and the ministers at the liturgy came from our immigrant communities. Ordinary parish life in our deanery is also typically multi-cultural. Many of our parish festivals offer Vietnamese, Filipino, Mexican, Polish, Italian and American cuisine side by side.

A Demographic Shift

Over the past 10 years, increasing numbers of immigrant workers and their families have become a part of our parishes, neighborhoods, and schools. What was in the past a solid European-majority deanery, has now become a multi-cultural community. The demographic shift has brought with it new pastoral needs: our population is concerned about health insurance for families, education for children, immigration reform, access to driver's licenses, labor and work place protection.

Diversity in the Church; therefore, goes deeper than an occasional Vietnamese lion dance or the Italian tarantella. The Church must embrace issues and problems that go beyond deciding what language the first or second reading will be, which songs will be sung in Spanish, or which prayers

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will be said in Tagalog. Keeping in mind that our deanery has increased in immigrant population, this talk will suggest ways in which we might think about justice ministry in different ways that are culturally sensitive. A nuanced paradigm of social justice will allow us to become more effective in addressing the needs of a diverse population.

Justice as Struggle for Fairness and Equity

Let us first look at Justice in an European and North American context. In the Northern Hemisphere, "Justice," is associated with "fairness" and "equity." Justice is upheld by "rights" by a legitimate government whose role is to ensure that all persons enjoy the fruits of equity and fairness. When there is injustice, a struggle is initiated to overcome the obstacles to fairness and equality. This struggle is a dialectical struggle between those who seek to maintain the status quo and those who wish to change it.

Injustice is often institutionalized through legislation that maintains the rights of the privileged and denies the rights of the underprivileged. Strategies of justice seek to undue laws that perpetuate inequity and privilege. Justice overturns unjust legislation through establishing new rights that remedy inequity or redresses historic inequity. Justice through legislation results in new laws that establish the conditions for equality through redistributing resources to those who previously lacked resources or by granting and guaranteeing equal access to resources. Catholic Social Teaching evolved from this context.

Catholic Social Teaching provides justice workers with specific principles; however, CST does not provide a *methodology* in which CST can benefit non-Western cultures and non-European traditions. By *methodology* I mean pastoral practice: that is the strategies and tactics that result in positive social and political change.

Justice as Transformation

As we look at the inclusion of non-European populations in our society, we realize that our pastoral practice in justice ministry must become culturally relevant in order for CST to take root in the hearts and minds of the people. I propose that we might consider justice ministry as a PROCESS of transformation that is at once personal and social. Justice in this context is eminently relational

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and results in new relationships that are borne from mutual liberation. Justice then enables people to move out of a culture of competition in which the powerful exploit the powerless. Justice eventually establishes a culture of cooperation and mutual gains.

Is Silicon Valley a Valley of Justice? There are those who say Silicon Valley enjoys a strong and healthy economy. Proponents of this conclusion point to indicators such as increased employment, investment, and wages. Upon closer analysis; however, we question whether or not the term, "strong and healthy economy" is appropriate. According to the research conducted by Working Partnerships, USA, the economic gains over these past few years is due to the contribution of the immigrant workforce. One could presume that immigrants who make up 45% of Silicon Valley's labor pool share substantially in this good fortune. Unfortunately, that is not the case. From a Catholic Social Teaching perspective, we have a weak economy because everyone does not share the economic bonanza.

The Unjust Gap Between the Have's and Have-Nots

Let us break this analysis down: In terms of wage increase, only a relative few benefit from wage increases: those at the top of the economic ladder enjoy astronomical benefits. For instance, bonuses are paid out regularly to those in upper management, even if a company performs poorly, an outgoing CEO still enjoys a multi-million dollar severance package or buyout. In our so-called strong economy, housing costs are so high that any available housing is accessible only to those in the upper echelons of the workforce. Families who cannot afford their own house or apartments live with other families or in their vehicles. The working poor cut costs by eating at Sacred Heart Community Services, Loaves and Fishes, or Martha's Kitchen. Some off-set monthly expenses by picking up groceries provided by emergency food banks from St. Julie's or St. Vincent de Paul.

Looking at employment rates more closely, we note that job gains are mostly in low wage, dead end service jobs that do not offer health coverage or an adequate retirement plan. Because unskilled jobs typically offer no health plan or an unaffordable health plan, families enroll their children for Healthy Families. In cases of medical emergency, families who are uninsured, or on the waiting list for Healthy Families, or do not qualify for government assistance, opt to wait until symptoms become so acute that they have no other choice other than go to the emergency room

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at Valley Medical Center. There they wait for up to 7 hours in the emergency room before being seen by a doctor. Uninsured children who are sick, lose many school days and under-perform at school. What started out as a cold, soon becomes strep throat or pneumonia.

At no other time in American history has the disparity between the wealthiest American workers and the poorest workers been the greatest. Disproportionate economic benefits exacerbate the rapidly expanding gap between the “halves” and the “have-nots”. This disparity is evidenced in the increase in service sector jobs, such as restaurant work, landscaping, unskilled construction work and janitorial work. These low wage jobs far outnumber the modest increase in white collar and executive jobs.

Immigrant Workers

Unskilled jobs are most likely filled by immigrants lured to the United States by labor contractors or companies who promise those who are so desperately poor, that they accept employment in sweatshops in the Marianas Islands, dangerous factories in Los Angeles, and back-breaking work in agricultural fields in the Central Valley. Newly-arrived workers are not inclined to complain nor are they inclined to fight for better working conditions, higher wages, or health coverage.

A docile immigrant workforce makes it difficult for native-born unskilled workers to agitate for justice. Labor organizers in particular have a difficult time organizing immigrant workers and building them into a confident service sector workforce because the entire employment system is geared to favor the corporate interests and share holders rather than the well-being of the worker and his or her family.

Another difficulty in organizing immigrant workers and organizing immigrant communities is the atmosphere of intimidation that hovers over the tens of millions of undocumented and falsely documented immigrants. This cloud of fear pervades every aspect of an immigrant family's life (documented and undocumented alike) and creates a chill effect among immigrant people. There are many incidents and complaints of worker intimidation on file with the National Labor Relations Board. There are even incidents of harassment of community leaders who support community

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organizations like PACT or PIA. Despite scape-goating rhetoric and intimidation, the work of justice continues!

Justice as Relational Transformation

There are many Catholic sponsored community-based justice campaigns active here in our deanery: affordable housing, education, healthcare and immigration reform. At the heart of each campaign we find the human person. Austin is an individual who is impacted by the lack of affordable housing. He works full time, but lives in his car and takes a shower in the gym. Ernesto's child requires special medical attention, but he makes too much to qualify for Healthy Families but not enough to pay for specialists and prescriptions. Sara is a single mother who has lodged a complaint of discrimination at work and needs legal representation. The Dominguez family is torn apart by deportation. Laura has been redeployed to Iraq for the 2nd time and now has come to believe that she can no longer support this war. She feels guilty about leaving her comrades, but refuses to engage any more in an unjust war. We come to the crux of justice work: the human person.

One of the mistakes I have made – and continue to make to this day – is to forget the human person and rush the justice process of “SEE-JUDGE-ACT.” I am guilty of moving toward *solution* too quickly and often do so at the expense of relationships. Justice is not about a cause or about “doing the right thing.” I have to constantly remind myself that justice is above all things, transformation. Justice is the transformation of relationships of exploitation and power into relationships of cooperation and mutuality.

Justice as Harmony

Through my engagement in immigration reform, I have undergone a shift in the paradigm of justice ministry. Where social change is about changing laws and policy and structures of injustice, transformation results in a harmonious relationship of mutuality between individuals and entire peoples.

At first, I bristled at the concept of “justice-as-harmony” because I thought that harmony meant living in a victimized, powerless, co-dependent relationship. I imagined harmony as playing

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“Second Chair Violin” to the oppressor’s lead. Harmony; however, is not about playing

“Second Fiddle” or in the words of my band-geek days, playing boring whole notes while the trumpets get all the fun melodies. No, harmony is more like a J.S. Bach Invention.

Bach’s music has two lines playing interdependent melodies that result in harmony. Justice is in effect the harmony that is created as Psalm 85 says, when peace and justice embrace. Our task in justice ministry is not to instigate or agitate conflict between the oppressor and the oppressed, but rather create the possibility for personal and social transformation that results in fairness and equity among people. We do justice work through building bridges of dialog between people. We do this by preaching fearlessly and without apology about relevant issues from both the pulpit and the classroom. We do this by providing meaningful service-learning projects that go beyond charity and feel-good experiences to our students.

Today there are many ways in which you can enter into the process of transformation.

Globalization and poverty, death penalty, immigration, and other workshops are relevant. Each topic has at its core a human being who has a story. Let us be present to these stories and enter into a mutual process of transformation.

Fr. Jon Pedigo

Pastor

All Are Welcome – Todos Son Bienvenidos

St. Julie Billiard Parish

More about this parish & pastor online at : stjulies.org