

PARISH SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTION GROUPS

3. Reading the Signs of the Times

Some steps to guide you from social justice thought to action.

“I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgement is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of Him who sent me”

John 5: 30

Step 1. Moving from Belief to Action:

- Moving from belief to action is a fundamental requirement of our faith (Matthew 25, 31 – 46; James 2: 14 – 17).
- One of the key teachings of the Catholic Church is that human life is sacred because each person is created in the image and likeness of God – so is endowed with human dignity. This is a fundamental point of reference for all action.
- To be a follower of Jesus means to confront powers of this world that do not reflect the values of the Kingdom of God.
- Jesus identified Himself as a stranger to be welcomed (Matthew 25:35) – for this reason, we are called to welcome the stranger (such as an asylum seeker, refugee or migrant) who comes knocking at our door seeking refuge.
- *“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ...So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead”* (James 2: 14-17).

*“Although the life of a person is in a land full of thorns and weeds,
there is always a space in which the good seed can grow.*

You have to trust God”

Pope Francis

Step 2. Theology for Justice (inclusive of but not restricted to):

- The Catholic Church teaches that the purpose of law is to serve justice and mercy (c.f. Matthew 23:33).
- In the Exodus of Israel, God reveals Himself as God in the liberation of an oppressed people: a God of compassion who hears the cry of His people... God intervenes in history on behalf of all the oppressed and suffering to set them free in this life, in the here and now (Social Justice in Everyday Life, ACSJC, 1990, p 16).
- Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God is for a kingdom of justice and peace as well as holiness and grace; a time of both social and personal fulfilment... The Gospel according to Luke has Jesus saying (at the beginning of His public ministry): *"The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor; He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; To set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord"* (Social Justice in Everyday Life, ACSJC, 1990, p 18).
- The Catholic Social Teaching (CST) of preferential option for the poor is modelled by Jesus Himself. Jesus not only associates with the poor and accepts them as His followers, but goes further than this by aiming His message at the poor and rejected, and by identifying with them. According to Matthew (25: 31-46), to stand beside the poor and to identify with them is to render the same service to Jesus Himself, and to merit eternal life with God (Social Justice in Everyday Life, ACSJC, 1990, p 21).
- Pope St John Paul II said, *"...consequently, the promotion of justice is at the heart of a true culture of solidarity. It is not just a question of giving one's surplus to those in need, but of helping entire peoples presently excluded or marginalised to enter into the sphere of economic and human development"* (World Day of Peace message, 2001).

*"Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works
and give glory to your Father in heaven"*

Mt 5: 16

Step 3. A Guide to Decision-Making about Injustices:

- In the encyclical, *Mater et Magistra*, "On Christianity and Social Progress" (1961), Pope St John XXIII affirmed the process of **see-judge-act** as a way of 'reading the signs of the times' (# 236);

- That is, we are called to see with the eyes of Jesus, judge or assess a situation with the heart of Jesus, and act as Jesus would today.
- Pope Benedict XVI highlighted in his encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate* (2009) that love must be the foundation and motivation for the see-judge-act process of discernment.
- Following on from Pope Pius XI in 1931 in his encyclical, *Quadregesimo Anno*, (for the 40th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, “On Capital and Labour,” by Pope Leo XIII), the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace highlighted four permanent principles within the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church: (1) the dignity of the human person, (2) the common good, (3) subsidiarity, and (4) solidarity.
- The four permanent principles are offered as primary and fundamental parameters of reference for interpreting and evaluating social situations – that is, our lived realities as compared or contrasted to the core values or principles of CST.

“We should be as the compass that goes round its circle without stirring from its centre – our centre is God, from whom all our actions should spring as from their source”

Catherine McAuley (Retreat Instruction p 154)

Step 4. Dealing with Conflict:

- Always remember the ground rule of respect, as we are all children of God and have inalienable dignity and worth.
- It’s worth noting that when the focus of discussion is too negative and on differences or what separates us, it can lead to a more *reactive* response, with a greater focus on concerns (this should not be at the expense of acknowledging and valuing human rights and diversity).
- A healthier, more *proactive* discussion would value the input of and from all members, but would focus more on strengths rather than limitations – with a focus on what unites the group, rather than what separates.
- It’s important to create a safe and secure space that values the input of all – this is in the physical location and outlay of the room, as well as the social or emotional atmosphere for all present (as much as is possible).
- Be mindful of some outcomes of group work, such as *groupthink*. This is when the desire for group unity may stifle healthy discussion, and reduce the likelihood of various options being investigated or talked about.

*“I know that the Lord maintains the cause of the needy,
and executes justice for the poor”*

Psalm 140: 12

Step 5. Reconciliation and Healing:

- It’s important to acknowledge that we are all on a journey of healing – although some may be better equipped (through self-awareness, personal skills, supportive environment etc.) to voice and act on what is right and just.
- In *Gaudium et Spes* (“Joy and Hope,” 1965), Pope St John XXIII stated that “...with respect to the fundamental rights of the person, every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, colour, social condition, language or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God’s intent.”
- Pope Francis stated that “we need a Church capable of rediscovering the maternal womb of mercy. Without mercy we have little chance nowadays of entering the world of wounded persons in need of understanding, forgiveness and love.”
- Our first Australian Saint, St Mary of the Cross MacKillop, brought the Gospel to life through her healing actions: “... she went out in search of the lost, she bandaged up the wounded, she brought healing to those who were sick, and brought the light of Christ to places of human misery, darkness and despair... She is a friend to the poor and needy, the broken and the afflicted, those struggling with life and those seeking home, the vulnerable and the marginalised” (Max Vodola in the ACSJC Issue Paper # 72, Charity and Justice – St Mary MacKillop and Australian Society, 2012, John Warhurst, p 18).
- The Catholic Church teaches all people have the right to be a part of a community as we are one human family. When we work for the *common good* and in *solidarity* with and for our brothers and sisters – across cultures, classes, creeds and countries – we are acknowledging our inter-connectedness, giving a sense of belonging and purpose.

“Be the change you wish to see in the world”

Mahatma Gandhi

Step 6. Hope-Filled Transformation:

- Pope St John XXIII referred to the Church's social doctrine of which '*Truth is its light, Justice its objective and Love its driving force*' (Reading the Signs of the Times – a basic introduction to CST; ACSJC, 2011, #70, p 35).
- With the **Sermon on the Mount - the Beatitudes** as our guide, we are called to transform our world: '*to live by the beatitudes is to usher in the reign of God*' (Gerard Moore SM, A Spirituality for Justice, ACSJC, 2002, #43, p 7).
- "*A spirituality of justice must offer a taste of its fruits, the wonder, beauty and goodness of God's reign*" (Gerard Moore SM, A Spirituality for Justice, ACSJC Issue Paper # 43, p 10).
- Pope Francis said that "*The Church must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel* (Evangelii Gaudium - the Joy of the Gospel, 2013, # 114).
- From Psalm 85: 11, we are inspired with a vision of a just world – "*Kindness and truth shall meet; justice and peace shall kiss.*"

"Every page of the Gospels unfolds for us the mystery of Jesus who, in His life and in His death, reveals the face of the loving heart of God to us"

Archbishop Timothy Costelloe SDB
(Homily, 2nd Rite of Reconciliation within the Year of Mercy, March 2016)

Step 7. Missionary Discipleship and Stewardship:

- Our call to action is to evangelise – to "*make Christ known to others*" (Lumen Gentium, 1964, para 31) through our deeds of both charity and justice.
- Pope St Paul VI challenged all Christians to play a role in the search for justice and peace in his Apostolic letter, or call to action, *Octogesima Adveniens* (on the 80th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum* in 1971).
- Pope St John Paul II stated in *Laborem Exercens* ("On Human Work," 1981 - para 25): "*the knowledge that by means of work the human person shares in the work of Creation constitutes the most profound motive for undertaking it in various sectors.*"
- Pope Francis stated in *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013, # 218) that "*the dignity of the human person and the common good rank higher than the comfort of those who refuse to*

renounce their privileges. When these values are threatened, a prophetic voice must be raised.”

- In *Laudato Si’ – Care for our Common Home* (2015), Pope Francis builds on the notion of **ecological conversion** and uses the term **integral ecology** to outline that our social and environmental worlds intersect and that they are important in regards to our discipleship and stewardship: “...*Living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or secondary aspect of our Christian experience*” (LS # 217).

“Let us open our eyes and see the misery of the world; the wounds of our brothers and sisters who are denied their dignity and let us recognise that we are compelled to heed their cry for help. May we reach out to them and support them so they can feel the warmth of our presence, our friendship and our fraternity”

Pope Francis (Misericordiae Vultus, 2015, # 15)