Sharing the Light of Christ

How Responding to Poverty Can Enrich Parish Life

Joan Rosenhauer

In a clear and helpful manner the author, who has wide experience with grassroots parish efforts at social ministry, provides five characteristics of those parishes which have been successful.

Several years ago, while working in a diocesan social ministry office, I visited a parish with a former convent that was no longer being used. We were looking for a site to develop housing for senior citizens, and a member of the parish was quite happy to give us a tour of the facility. As we walked in, he explained that there might be some garbage around because a couple of homeless men sometimes found a way into the former convent and stayed during cold nights. Noting that I worked in social ministry, he told me, “Your people’ are using this building without permission.” I responded, “I thought they were our people.”

I relate this story because my host is not alone in his attitude about people who are poor or homeless. He did not see responding to their needs as central to his faith life or to the life of his parish. In his mind, responding to people who are poor was primarily the job of the social ministry office.

Fortunately, while this attitude exists, many Catholics and many parishes recognize that concern for the poor is not optional, nor is it a challenge for a few to undertake on our behalf. It is an essential part of our identity as Catholic Christians. It belongs to each and every believer, and to each and every parish.

Exciting examples of parishes effectively working with and for those who are poor can be found in every region of the country. Catholic parishes in low-income

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neighborhoods are often an important source of hope for their communities. Those in middle-income neighborhoods provide valuable opportunities for their members to work with, and offer support to, people who have less. Wherever they are, and whatever the details of their efforts, there are several key characteristics that these successful parish programs have in common.

**Rooted in Faith**

The best parish social mission programs consistently help their members make connections between their work with people who are poor and the basic values of their faith (Ulrich, 25). Concern for the “least among us” is at the core of what we believe and who we are as disciples of Christ. Gathered around the altar for the Eucharist, we are called to see Christ in the bread that is broken, and in our brothers and sisters whose lives have been broken by poverty and injustice. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us, “The Eucharist commits us to the poor” (n. 1397).

Throughout the Scriptures, a consistent theme is the importance of treating with respect and justice those who are on the margins of economic, social, and political life. The prophets reminded the people of ancient Israel that the way they treated their outcasts—the widows, the orphans, and the aliens—was a test of their fidelity to God. In the story of the Last Judgment, Jesus tells us that the primary measure of our lives will be how we treated those in greatest need. When we serve our “least brothers,” we serve Christ himself (Matt 25:31-36). As the bishops of the U.S. remind us: “Through the eyes of faith, the starving child, the believer in jail, and the woman without clean water or health care are not issues, but Jesus in disguise (U.S. Catholic Conference, 1997, 6).

Modern Catholic social teaching affirms this commitment to justice for those who are poor or vulnerable. The principle of the “Preferential Option—or Love—for the Poor” describes our special concern for those whose needs are greatest. This love for the poor is part of the Church’s constant tradition. It is even one of the reasons for the duty to work, to be able to share with those in need (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2444). It challenges us to act not simply out of generosity, but in response to the demands of justice. As St. John Chrysostom explained in a homily on Lazarus that “Not to enable the poor to share in our goods is to
steal from them and deprive them of life. The goods we possess are not ours, but theirs” (as quoted in Catechism, n. 2446).

This special concern for those who are poor requires that we participate in shaping a society that promotes the life and dignity of all people, especially those on the margins. Pope John Paul II has written that it is necessary “to nurture the growing awareness in society of the dignity of every person and, therefore, to promote in the community a sense of the duty to participate in political life in harmony with the Gospel” (John Paul II, n. 27).

Parishes that are leaders in ministry to—and with—those who are poor consistently help their members to reflect on the essential faith dimensions of practicing charity and working for justice. They make sure that Catholic social teaching is regularly shared through homilies, bulletin quotes, and a variety of educational programs. They make time before volunteers begin each social ministry project for prayer and reflection on key themes of Catholic social thought.

Shaped by Respect

Anything unknown to us or different can make us uncomfortable or frightened. In our society, middle-income people often have little contact with people who are poor, and have even less contact with poor neighborhoods. For parishes located in poor neighborhoods, respect for those without economic resources—their members and their neighbors—comes naturally. However, for parishes in middle-income areas, there may be a tendency to fear people who are homeless or poor, and to assume that the parish’s logical relationship with them is strictly as a donor. However, the best efforts by parishes to address the needs and issues of people who are poor are grounded in respect for them, and in a recognition that all people, even those with very few material goods, can contribute to society in important ways.

Respect for those who are on the margins of economic and social life is partly demonstrated by a commitment to serving their immediate needs and working for justice in our communities, our nation, and our world. In the Catholic tradition, a just society is one in which the basic human needs of all people are met, and all people have opportunities to participate in political, economic, and social life. The policies of governments, international institutions, businesses, and other sectors play a significant role in determining the level of justice in a society. As citizens of a democracy and participants in the richest economy in the world, American Catholics have unique opportunities to shape the policies that determine whether the world’s most vulnerable people are protected and supported. Our teaching suggests that participating in political life in ways that advance the common good is not an option, but a moral obligation (U.S. Catholic Conference, 1999, 9).
The best parish programs to address the needs of the poor provide help to parishioners in fulfilling their obligation to participate in public life, often through legislative networks. These networks can be affiliated with a number of local or national Catholic or Christian organizations, but are most often organized by the local diocese. Parishioners are invited to join a mailing list or an e-mail list to receive information about issues of justice and peace. Diocesan offices periodically send “action alerts” on key public policies. These “action alerts” are drawn from the work of the diocese, the work of the State Catholic Conference, or the work of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops or related groups. They explain the issue and describe what Catholic social teaching says about it. Then they invite network members to write, call, or send an e-mail message to public officials. These networks make it possible for busy parishioners to find out about, and act on, public issues that have important moral and ethical dimensions.

For parishes located in low-income areas, respect for those who are poor can mean providing opportunities for low-income people to be leaders in efforts to address the needs in their communities. Msgr. Phil Murnion of the National Pastoral Life Center tells a story about preparing to celebrate mass with the homeless men at the Holy Name Shelter where his office is located. The Gospel reading was from Matthew 25, the story of the Last Judgment. It occurred to him that when many people hear the story of the Last Judgment and its message about caring for the “least” of Christ’s brothers and sisters, they think about people like the men at Holy Name Shelter. He puzzled over what this reading meant for those whom many people would consider the “least among us.” When it came time for the homily, he asked the men, “How does this reading apply to you? Who are your ‘least’?” To his surprise, the men attending mass that day—men who had almost nothing—had no trouble whatsoever identifying people God was calling them to serve—their “least.”

Regardless of their economic circumstances, parishioners and others in many low-income communities are actively involved in serving those in need and working for justice. They coordinate service activities like collecting blankets for homeless people, coordinating food drives and distribution programs, or soliciting toys for children at Christmas. Equally important are their opportunities to organize and address the structural causes and consequences of poverty. Many parishes across the country are forming or joining local community organizations participating in political life in ways that advance the common good is not an option, but a moral obligation.
to address issues in their communities such as affordable housing, crime, unemployment, and drug trafficking.

In Brockton, Massachusetts, Catholic parishes work with other religious institutions through the Brockton Interfaith Community (BIC). By organizing people in the city’s low-income neighborhoods, the group has successfully secured after-school programs for eight thousand youth, obtained ten million dollars to support home ownership among low-income families, and helped create a new program to provide prescription drugs to close to one thousand people. This and many other programs, often funded by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD), provide opportunities for parishes in low-income neighborhoods to be sources of hope and support for their communities.

For parishes in middle-income communities, the challenge of maintaining and reflecting respect for the contributions of people who are poor is greater. The starting point is the generosity shown by Catholics in so many different ways. The right of every person to have his or her basic needs met is affirmed by parish programs providing housing, clothing, food, health care, and other necessities to those without them. The basic rights of those who are poor are also affirmed by parish efforts to promote justice and peace through legislative and policy activities.

An important trend among middle-income parishes promotes respect for people who are poor by taking efforts to address their needs one step farther. These parishes set up relationships with groups or parishes in low-income communities so that their social ministry programs become collaborative, undertaken with—not for—those who are poor. Some middle-income parishes set up twinning relationships with low-income parishes in their dioceses. While financial resources may flow primarily from the middle-income parish to the low-income parish, at best these relationships include a wide range of exchanges and joint projects that recognize and respect the contributions of both groups. These activities can include choir exchanges, joint liturgies, shared adult education programs, joint service or advocacy projects, coordinated youth ministry programs, and many other collaborative efforts.

The Catholic Campaign for Human Development’s Journey to Justice Program helps middle-income parishes work with, and not just for, people who are low-income. Through this program, a middle-income parish builds a relationship with an organization funded by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development in a low-income neighborhood. Working together, the groups try to address issues of concern to the low-income community.

Eucharistic liturgies are inherently connected to the social mission of the Church.
St. Helena Parish in Wilmington, Delaware, began working with the Statewide Association of Tenants (SWAT) during a Journey to Justice weekend retreat in February, 2001. SWAT members were facing the loss of their homes when their building’s owner considered eliminating his Section VIII subsidized housing units. Members of St. Helena joined SWAT members in meetings with housing officials and the owner. Their efforts resulted in an agreement that will allow the tenants to stay for at least another year. Meanwhile, they continue to work together toward a long-term solution.

“We had no idea what these tenants were facing,” explained Dorothy Medeiros, describing the experience of the Journey to Justice Team from St. Helena’s. Although some had doubts about the rights of tenants in the beginning, the team is now fully committed to working with the tenants. “We’ve had a change of heart when it comes to justice issues,” says Medeiros.

**Woven Throughout Parish Life**

If our commitment to the poor is rooted in the Eucharist, it must be reflected in the life of every Catholic and the work of every parish ministry. Our social mission must be woven throughout parish life, not delegated to a handful of people on a social concerns committee. At best, it is reflected in liturgy, preaching, and education, as well as in the programs of parish clubs and organizations (U.S. Catholic Conference, 1994, 4).

Eucharistic liturgies are inherently connected to the social mission of the Church and should embody justice at their core (Coleman). They can reflect God’s call to conversion, service and justice in a variety of ways. The choice of music, the general intercessions, and other appropriate prayers can express our special concern for people who are poor and suffering. The offertory can include offerings of food, blankets, or other goods for those in need. “Offerings of letters” on public policy issues related to poverty can be held during or after Mass. When the readings include one of the many Scripture passages that discuss God’s concern for the weakest and his call to justice, homilists can share key principles from Catholic social teaching and affirm the social ministry activities in which parishioners are involved. When people leave Mass, their bulletin can include a quote from Catholic social teaching or a short description of the work parishioners are doing to address the needs and issues of people who are poor.

An important social ministry program at Prince of Peace parish in Belfair, Washington, involves using funds from Catholic Relief Services’ Operation Rice Bowl to provide a monthly mass and dinner for a large migrant population from Guatemala. The workers come to the region to pick greens for the floral industry, earning far more than the $4.00 per day they would earn in Guatemala. Although the program began as a social ministry project, Prince of Peace parishioners...
decided it was important to connect this program to other aspects of parish life. They have begun by involving the Guatemalan community in regular parish masses, including having Guatemalan musicians sing at their masses.

“Although we have a long way to go,” explains parishioner Gloria Lincoln, “our hope is to incorporate the program and the Guatemalan community into the life of our parish.”

Integrating the Catholic social mission throughout parish life also means reflecting a commitment to those who are poor and vulnerable in parish education programs. The Catholic social mission is an essential part of Catholic moral formation. According to the bishops of the U.S.: “If Catholic education and formation fail to communicate our social tradition, they are not fully Catholic” (U.S. Catholic Conference, 1998, 2).

Many Catholic schools and parish religious education programs are finding innovative ways to share Catholic social teaching and involve students in acts of charity and efforts to work for justice. They explicitly teach key ideas from Catholic social teaching in religion classes and other subjects. They involve students in service activities like collecting food for hungry families before Thanksgiving, collecting toys for poor children at Christmas, or sponsoring a child in a developing country. The best programs connect each service activity to a key idea from Catholic social teaching. Teachers and catechists teach about Catholic social thought while students are involved in the service project.

Many schools and religious education programs also help students to understand that in the Catholic tradition, acting on our social mission includes working for justice and peace. They encourage students to research public policy issues and discuss their moral and ethical dimensions. If the parish holds an “Offering of Letters” or participates in a “March for Life” or a diocesan “Lobby Night” in the state capital, students are involved.

At St. Patrick’s School in Kansas City, Missouri, teacher Patricia Haney joined forces with Tom Turner, the director of a local Catholic social service agency, to teach sixth graders about charity and justice. Their program, called “That’s Not Fair!” used interesting activities and games to help students learn about key themes of Catholic social teaching. Once they were familiar with basic Catholic social thought, the students visited a social service agency to meet and talk with people living in poverty. Next the leaders of the program helped the students identify a public policy issue affecting those in need to which they could apply Catholic social teaching. The students shared their work with the entire parish.
by making presentations about the issue at all the masses one Sunday. Finally, the class went to the state capitol to make the same presentation before their legislators.

When asked what she had learned from the experience, one sixth grader replied, “That not all people get treated fairly and sometimes they just need some help.” Another added, “It is good to help poor people and change the rules if they are not fair.”

**Focused Locally and Globally**

The persistence of poverty in a country as wealthy as the United States is a disgrace that must be addressed. At the same time, we must not forget the desperately poor people who live beyond our borders. Catholic teaching on solidarity compels us to care for our brothers and sisters whether they live across the street or around the globe.

Across the U.S., parishes are responding to global poverty in a variety of ways. They use the Church’s collections for international aid and development as opportunities to educate parishioners about Church teaching on global solidarity. They encourage parishioners to welcome these opportunities to share what they have. They also help parishioners work on international justice issues by participating in a diocesan legislative network or another advocacy group like Bread for the World. Many parishes are establishing twinning relationships with parishes or schools in developing countries.

Jesus the Good Shepherd Covenant Community in Owings, Maryland, first established a twinning relationship in 1985. Their sister parish is Santa Ana parish in Enriquillo, in the Diocese of Barahona, in the Dominican Republic. Over the years, members of Jesus the Good Shepherd have visited Enriquillo on several occasions. Each summer, the pastor of Santa Ana comes to Maryland to fill in for Msgr. Dudziak, the pastor of Jesus the Good Shepherd, during his vacation. After years of baptizing new members, performing marriage ceremonies, and otherwise ministering to the community each summer, the pastor of Santa Ana Parish has become an important part of the Jesus the Good Shepherd Covenant Community.

Msgr. Dudziak and his members have done a great deal to help the parishioners in Enriquillo. They have established a home repair project that provides zinc-coated roofs and concrete floors; they have helped build a mountain medical and dental clinic; they have bought a motorcycle so that a local doctor can get to remote areas. Nonetheless, like most U.S. parishes that enter into twinning relationships, members of Jesus the Good Shepherd feel that they have gained as much from the relationship as they’ve given.

“I always knew that in a prosperous area, we could be a comfortable and happy community,” explained Msgr. Dudziak, “but that’s not what the Lord...
wants. The Church is judged by its outreach to the poor. Our relationship with Santa Ana helps us to be true to the Gospel.”

**Enriched by the Experience**

Parishes that focus too much energy inward, instead of focusing on being the light of Christ in their communities, fall short of Jesus’ mission of bringing good news to the poor, new sight to the blind, and liberty to captives (Luke 4:18). They risk becoming consumed by maintenance rather than mission.

On the other hand, parishes with active social ministry programs and a strong commitment to justice for those who are poor generally gain more from these experiences than they give. They not only help people in need, but often enrich the faith lives of their members. By defending human life and dignity, bringing hope to those who are poor or suffering, and working for justice and peace, parishes can become stronger, more vibrant communities. They can help their members become clear signs of Christ among us.

**References**


