

Blessed Are They Who Hunger for Justice

The Social Mission of the Church

Maria Riley, O.P.

Years of active engagement in the social mission of the Church enrich the author's exploration of its theological foundations, translation of social teaching into social action, and spirituality for those engaged in social ministry.

The social mission of the Church has a rich history, dating back to apostolic times with the institution of the diakonia (Acts: 6:1-6) to serve the needs of the Hellenistic members who complained their widows were slighted when the Hebrews distributed food—the first marginated group in the Christian community. But the theology and the flourishing of the social mission as we know it today is a direct outcome of the Vatican II documents on ecclesiology and the subsequent papal, synodal and episcopal statements that have followed that event. Today a rich body of Catholic social theology exists which informs the social ministries of the People of God.

The Second Vatican Council, opened by Pope John XXIII in 1962, moved the Church out of the defensive stance it had taken toward the world in the wake of the Enlightenment, the Protestant Reformation, the political revolutions that led to the secularized state, and the advent of modernism. The Council leaders had witnessed the destructiveness of modern warfare, the Holocaust, the world polarized by conflicting ideologies, the threat of nuclear war, the emergence of post-colonial nation states in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and a growing

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disparity between the rich and the poor. The council leaders themselves reflected the new reality of a “world church.” In many respects, the council represented the end of one ecclesial era and the beginning of a new era (DeBerri and Hug, 7).

In this article I reflect upon the social mission of the Church that emerged from Vatican II in its theological foundations, its movement from social theology to social action and a spirituality for the social minister. These reflections arise from over twenty-five years of active engagement in the social mission of the Church. They also express the critical dimension of my work as a feminist in search of justice for women in the Church and in society.

Theological Foundations

The new ecclesial era ushered in by the Council was particularly evident in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*), and the Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity (*Ad Gentes*). These three documents in particular explicate the social mission of the Church through their reflections on the Church as sacrament, the relation between the mission of the Church and the contemporary world, and their definition of the Church as People of God sent to continue Jesus’ work to establish “peace and community” among all humans (Fiorenza, 161–62). The image of the Church as the People of God transforms the traditional passive role of the faithful into an active role in defining and shaping their history in the contemporary world (DeBerri and Hug, 16). For me, the designation of the Church as People of God is a declaration of liberation for the women ministers in the Church. Rather than being obedient daughters of the clerical Church, we are now co-ministers responsible for the flourishing of the Church and society. However, that interpretation was not and still is not fully shared by the institutional Church either in its structures or in the attitudes of many of the ordained.

This ecclesial theology was given further definition at the Vatican Synod (1971) in its statement Justice in the World (*Justitia in Mundo*). The bishops, gathered at the synod, aligned themselves with the liberation dynamic of people to achieve justice in their lives. More definitively, they declared that working to undo unjust systems and structures which contradict God’s plan for the world is central to the Church’s mission of preaching the Gospel. In the words of the document: “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, or in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation” (6).

The bishops made two key statements defining the context of the social mission. First, they recognized that the Church must be just in its own structures if

it is to have credibility in its witness to justice (40), making the Church not only a subject, but also an object of the work for justice. Second, they recognized the Church's right and duty to proclaim justice, but not to offer solutions; that task is the responsibility of the members of the Church as citizens in their various locations (36 and 38) [Walsh and Davies 1991, 269]. The statement on justice in the Church is a further incentive for social ministers, especially women, to continue to raise their voices in advocacy for the recognition of women as fully and equally church in all its ministries and all dimensions of its ministries. The statement takes on even greater meaning for all the laity in light of the recent and painful scandals in the Church.

The responsibility of the People of God within their local settings was further explicated by Pope Paul VI in A Call to Action (*Octogesima Adveniens*, 1971). Paul VI clearly defines the work of social ministries in the social mission of the Church: "It is up to the Christian communities to analyze with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country, to shed on it the light of the gospel's unalterable words and to draw principles of reflection, norms of judgement and directives for action from the social teaching of the Church" (4). This papal challenge has been taken up by regional and national episcopal conferences, which have developed pastoral letters on a multiplicity of topics, including peace, economic justice, migration, racism, justice and evangelization, development and human rights. A rich body of Catholic social teaching is now available in all the regions of the world.

Pope John Paul II has been a prolific writer of social encyclicals during the twenty-five years of his pontificate. Building on the social teaching of his predecessors, he has brought a contemporary analysis to the question of labor (On Human Work [*Laborem Exercens*] 1981), to authentic development, and to the divisions of a world characterized by the "misereries of underdevelopment" and "inadmissible superdevelopment" (On the Social Concerns of the Church [*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*] 1988, 28). In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, John Paul II also introduced ecological issues into Catholic social teaching. He used the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the first social encyclical, On the Reconstruction of the Social Order (*Rerum Novarum* 1891) to review the issues of that document in the light of the historical developments of the latter part of the twentieth century.

This body of official Catholic social teaching has been enriched and deepened by the parallel work of theologians, particularly in the area of political theology

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and liberation theology. Women in the Church have been both heartened and discouraged by different dimensions of Catholic social teaching, such as its call for justice in the Church and its affirmation of human rights and liberation. However, Catholic social teaching also enshrines a subtle form of anthropological dualism regarding gender roles that opens the question as to whether the Church implicitly recognizes two human natures: man's nature as normative and woman's nature. Too often, when Catholic social teaching addresses the question of women in church and society, it includes language on women's "appropriate role" or "according to her nature." Such language is never applied to men nor are any limitations placed on men because of "their nature" (Riley, 988).

Too many Catholics are still unacquainted with this extensive reflection of the Church on the centrality of its social mission to its own identity and to their vocation as baptized Christians to be engaged in this mission. They are often confused when the bishops speak out on issues that are not considered traditionally "religious" such as the U.S. Bishops Pastoral on the Economy (1986). A continuing task that I and all social ministers have engaged in is the faith formation and the engagement of the People of God in its social mission, so that the work for justice is not seen as a special commitment of a few of the faithful, but as central to the Christian life and pastoral work in the service of all.

From Social Theology to Social Action

The evolution of social theology has of necessity involved shifts in the method of doing theology and of engaging in the social ministry of the Church. The Church in the Modern World affirmed the basic Christian belief that God continues to speak in and through human history when it used the biblical language of "reading the signs of the times" (4). God's presence and designs for the world are manifest through these signs. History is no longer just the context for applying natural law principles to social questions, the methodology of earlier Catholic social teaching. History is the place of on-going revelation where one discovers God's design either in its graced presence or sinful absence. One of the critical on-going revelations in my work has been the historical evolution of the global women's movement and the new issues that have come into the context of the social mission as a result, for example, violence against women and the structural causes of women's poverty.

While "reading the signs of the times" language resonates deeply with biblical echoes and signals a shift in the locus for the doing of theology, it lacks precision and direction as a methodology. Liberation theologians, in particular, developed the praxis method for doing theology. Praxis is the action that comes out of reflection and leads back to reflection in the work of the social minister and the social theologian.

The praxis method was popularized as the pastoral cycle of social analysis in the 1980s by Peter Henriot, S.J., and Joseph Holland (*Social Analysis*, 1980). Using the tools of the social sciences and theological reflection, Henriot and Holland provided a framework for praxis that begins with experience, then moves to social analysis through political, economic, social, and cultural lens on the structures that shape that experience. This critical social analysis is judged through theological reflection rooted in the experience of God, the contemplation of Scripture, the application of Catholic social teaching with its contemporary focus on God's preferential option for the poor, and the primacy of love in the work of doing justice. Theological reflection leads to a discernment of the action to be pursued in addressing the injustices embedded in the social structures (Henriot and Holland, 1980).

Locus of Social Ministry

Even a brief overview of the institutions, both official and quasi-official, that engage in the social mission of the Church opens a wide vista on the extensive creativity and dedicated work of the People of God in addressing the social ills of our time at the local, national, and global level. This flourishing of passion and commitment to support people in their struggle for human dignity and a future to believe in followed on the work of Vatican II to situate social mission at the heart of the Church. Due to space limitations, this article will focus primarily on the U.S.

Pope Paul VI established the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace “to awaken in the People of God full awareness of their mission today” (*The Progress of Peoples [Populorum Progressio]* 1967, 5). Identifying the commission as pontifical and locating it in the Vatican was a signal indicating that the “social question has become worldwide” (*The Progress of Peoples*, 3). The pontifical commission was soon supported by diocesan offices or commissions throughout the world. These offices encouraged local parishes to add Social Concerns committees to their parish structure and provided materials for faith formation and for reflection and action on the social conditions of both local and global realities.

In addition to the Justice and Peace Commissions, the traditional institutions, such as Catholic Charities, enlarged their mission of addressing direct social needs to include advocacy to transform the conditions causing these needs. Catholic Charities enlarges the circle of people involved in social ministry at the diocesan and parish level. Catholic Relief Services has gone through a similar evolution in its work with people in need outside the U.S.

A complementary set of social ministry institutions was developed as part of the response by religious communities to Vatican II's call to renewal and to the challenge of the Vatican Synod of 1971 in *Justice in the World*. In fact, it has been observed that without the dedication, personnel and financial resources of religious

communities, particularly women's communities, the justice and peace movement as it is today would not exist. These complementary institutions are local, national, and global in scope. They serve not only their members, but are a resource to parishes and small faith communities as they seek to live out their social mission in the world. They often work in ecumenical and interfaith coalitions, sharing in the richness of the social commitment of other faith traditions. Whereas these institutions were staffed initially by members of the sponsoring religious communities, today the majority of staff is often members of the laity. These institutions offer alternative settings for social ministers to live out their vocation in the social mission of the Church.

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The approach of these alternative social ministry institutions varies with the intent of their founders. For example, NETWORK: A Catholic Social Justice Lobby, founded by religious sisters, is a focal point to facilitate its members' lobbying efforts with the U.S. Congress. It follows such issues as the impact of welfare reform on its recipients, the extension of health care to improve its coverage, economic issues such as trade, and war and peace issues. Its focus is primarily on U.S. domestic issues. Regional and local institutions such as Eighth Day Center in Chicago, Groundwork in Detroit, and the Intercommunity Center of the Northwest in Seattle, focus on local, state and regional issues, which often have national and Federal implications. The Center of Concern in Washington, D.C., addresses the impact of global institutions on global poverty, human rights, women's rights, and development. The arena of work includes the United Nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organizations, transnational corporations and the role of the U.S.

Another approach taken by these complementary institutions is to focus on a particular need of people in poverty, such as homelessness, health care and affordable housing. McAuley Institute, sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy in the Americas, is an example of an effort to ensure affordable housing for people in poverty. Many Catholic hospitals, owned by religious communities, run neighborhood clinics to address the health needs of the uninsured. These examples are but a small representation of the many ways religious communities have provided settings for the People of God to engage in the social mission of the Church.

Both the official and the complementary institutions support the laity in their everyday efforts to bring the social mission into the workplace. This commitment

goes beyond the usual demands of business ethics and focuses on examining financial decisions, methods of production and distribution to reflect a concern for their effect on people, particularly those in poverty, and the environment.

It is clear from these examples that engagement in the social ministries of the Church takes the minister well beyond the traditional settings of pastoral ministry. I have found myself in the halls of power and in urban slums in the U.S., Kenya and India, at United Nations World Conferences and town meetings, confronting government officials and feeding the hungry, at endless committee meetings and alone, often in conflict with family members and colleagues on social and economic issues, sometimes savoring moments of a successful effort to improve people's lives but more often overwhelmed by the political, economic, and social powers arrayed against any social change. The question of how to sustain these ministerial demands and avoid burn-out is a real one. Clearly the minister must be grounded in a spirituality that sustains the vision, the passion, and the energy to continue to seek a world of greater justice and peace for all.

Spirituality for the Social Minister

To sketch the spiritual underpinnings of the work for social justice, I will reflect upon three key elements that have sustained me: the biblical promise of the "reign of God," the Catholic social teaching concept of solidarity, and the necessary support of community.

The biblical message of the "reign of God" is a central metaphor in the life and ministry of Jesus and so it must be in the life and ministry of the People of God. The vision of the reign of God has deep and lyrical roots in the Hebrew Scriptures. The book of Isaiah is replete with the promises of God's care and restoration of Israel from its captivity. Isaiah also continues to call the people of Israel to live the reality of God's mercy and justice in their own lives and promises God's continuing redemption. The prophet promises current peace and prosperity and future salvation. He announces the redemption in both the present time and the future: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the one who brings good tidings, who publishes peace, bearing good news, announcing salvation and saying to Zion, 'Your God is King!' . . . Break out together in song, O ruins of Jerusalem! For the LORD comforts his people, he redeems Jerusalem. The LORD has bared his holy arm in the sight of all the nations; all the ends of the earth will behold the salvation of our God" (Isa 52:8-10). Isaiah is speaking of the Messiah to come, but does the passage not also speak of the social minister? Such lovely passages of promise have fed my spirit over the years.

The reign of God is the central motif of Jesus' ministry. It occurs more than 150 times in the Christian Scriptures, mostly in the Synoptics (Senior, 856). John the Baptist foretells the coming of Jesus by announcing that the reign of God is

at hand and Jesus begins his public ministry proclaiming its arrival: "After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God: 'This is the time of fulfillment. The reign of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel'" (Mark 1: 14-15). Jesus also outlined the essential justice dimension of the reign of God and of his ministry when he spoke in the synagogue at Nazareth. Quoting Isaiah, he announced: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord." At the conclusion of the reading Jesus stated: "Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:18-21).

These passages are illustrative of Jesus' understanding of the reign of God as characterized by forgiveness and mercy and by universal justice and peace. The establishment of this reign will demand not only "the transformation of the human heart but also of the oppressive social structures that dehumanize and exclude the poor and defenseless from participation" in the human community (Senior, 858).

Jesus asserts that ". . . behold, the reign of God is in the midst of you" (Luke 17:20) but he also prays for the coming of God's reign in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done" and speaks of its final realization at the last judgement which will judge the nations and the people on how they fulfilled the justice demands of the reign of God (Matt 25:31-46).

Jesus' declarations of the reign of God as both now and in the future, both alive among the People of God and in process of fulfillment, are key points of reflection for social ministers. They point not only to the works of justice that must be done but to the minister's process in working for justice. The very work for justice must be imbued with justice. The justice and peace institutions, indeed the Church itself, and

the actions of the ministers must exhibit respect for the dignity of people, a strict adherence to the human rights, a context of love, compassion, peace and right relationships. The personal discipline of being a just person is the central asceticism of the social minister.

Hope in the promise of the reign of God is the central activating virtue. I had to come to peace with the fact that I will probably never see the realities for which I labor. What is important, I have learned, is to be an active agent in realiz-

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ing the reign of God, not only in the present time but in the future. Social ministers must work for the “right now” of God’s reign in their place and time and for the full realization of God’s designs for the earth and all the peoples in the end time. Realizing that I am participating in God’s work for justice keeps alive in me the hope that justice will come in God’s time.

A second dimension of my spirituality as a social minister is a commitment to solidarity. The concept of solidarity has a long history in Catholic social thought. Its roots are in the recognition of the unity of the human family and the need to join together to achieve the common good of all. It was first used by labor union movements and adopted into Catholic social teaching as a call to business, labor, and government to work together for the common good. It later was a call for Christians to unite against the rise of Communism. In Europe, solidarity was defined as countries’ systems of social welfare whereby the wealth of the country was distributed to ensure that all had their basic needs fulfilled.

In the encyclical, *On the Social Concerns of the Church*, Pope John Paul II presents a rich and extended reflection on solidarity as a virtue and identifies the demands it makes on people. Those countries and peoples with great wealth have a moral obligation to share with those countries and peoples in need; people in poverty have the obligation to join together in solidarity to seek justice for themselves. It is the evangelical duty of the Church to stand with those in poverty (39–40).

In this age of increasing globalization dominated by economic integration, the demands of solidarity take on even greater reality. The liberation of people from the bonds of poverty and oppression is directly related to the liberation of the affluent from the superficiality of the consumer culture and excessive individualism. The salvation of both those with wealth and those living in poverty is inextricably linked. Solidarity goes beyond a sense of beneficence towards others who are less fortunate, and embraces justice, the right of all to share in the goods of creation. Justice is at the heart of the Christian life. The work for justice and solidarity, is essential to personal and communal salvation.

This understanding of solidarity as mutually salvific saves social ministers from the mistake of assuming a maternal or paternal attitude towards the people

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they serve. Recognizing the mutual relationship between the servant and the server ensures that the social minister authentically recognizes and affirms the human dignity of each person.

Finally, persons who engage in the social mission of the Church must be embedded in a community of persons who share their passion for justice. I have been blessed over the years with my religious community's commitment to justice and peace, and continuing support of my work. In addition, my colleagues at the Center of Concern work to be mutually supportive and challenging of each other. The challenges are substantive in calling us to probe the issues before us, to search for alternatives, and to shape responses that reflect the full and rich dimensions of the social vision of the Church.

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They also help to keep us in touch with our truest selves. The demands of the ministry are great, the temptations to self-aggrandizement or self-delusion as we walk the halls of power are real, maternalism and paternalism towards those served is destructive, and burn out is all too common. Our staff engagement in reflection and evaluation, not only on the efforts being made and the work being accomplished but also of our development as just persons working in a just institution, is essential to avoid the pitfalls of the work. Also, communities become the carriers of the hope and vision of the ministry and support the minister when that hope and vision falters.

Communities engaged in the social mission of the Church are also places of formation and practica for the next generation of social ministers. They are the context where the social theology of the Church is translated into action for justice and peace. Seasoned social ministers mentor the new ministers through their shared faith, shared wisdom, and shared experience.

Conclusion

The rich theology and praxis of the social mission of the Church is a story still unfolding. But the story needs to be more widely shared, so that the great energy and passion for justice of the whole People of God may be unleashed on the world. The current and future realization of the reign of God will become clearer and more irresistible through the traditional work of feeding the hungry and clothing the naked and the structural work of seeking to eradicate the causes of

hunger and poverty so the peoples of the world may flourish and the context of peace is secure. For the social minister the grace and blessings she discovers in working with others to secure liberation, justice, and peace are rich.

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