JUSTICE and PEACE
A Christian Primer
SECOND EDITION
Revised and Expanded

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Christian Faith, Jesus, and Catholic Social Teaching

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:14–16)

“To set out on the road to discipleship is to dispose oneself for a share in the cross (cf. Jn. 16:20). To be a Christian, according to the New Testament, is not simply to believe with one’s mind, but also to become a doer of the word, a wayfarer with and a witness to Jesus. This means, of course, that we never expect complete success within history and that we must regard as normal even the path of persecution and the possibility of martyrdom.”

This book explores issues of justice and peace that face humanity in the twenty-first century because Christians need to understand these issues in order to create a global community that is more just and at peace. This chapter will try to make explicit why Christians should work for justice and make peace.

CHRISTIAN FAITH

Faith is a relationship with God; Christian faith is a relationship with God who is revealed by Jesus, the Christ. It is important to understand faith as a relationship and not primarily as a set of beliefs or a checklist of moral requirements. Creeds and commandments are important for persons of faith because they begin to name the God who loves us and they guide us in our response to God. But the relationship of each person with God is primary and central.

As with any relationship, faith is rooted in experience. Since God is spirit, it is sometimes difficult for modern people, convinced of the efficacy of the scientific method and closed to mystery and transcendence, to open themselves to experience the Spirit. There are human experiences that tend to pull us beyond ourselves, such as falling in love or the birth of a child or the death of someone we love or a breathtaking sunrise, but faith always requires the leap that acknowledges the presence of God’s Spirit.

Like lovers bursting to recount the experience of being in love, an encounter with transcendent mystery begs to be shared, reflected upon, and responded to. Religious believers gather with other people of faith in community to tell stories of God, to seek to understand their relationship with God (doing theology), to celebrate their faith (worshiping God), and to respond to it (right living). This is how “church” is formed and tradition passed on. Eventually the narratives about God and faith are written down in scripture. Creeds are formulated, liturgy is designed, and principles are put into practice. All of this happens in response to the human relationship with God that rightfully becomes the core and compass of human life.

JESUS AND THE SPIRIT

Jesus was a person of faith. “The most crucial fact about Jesus was that he was a “spirit person,” a “mediator of the sacred,” one of those persons in human history for whom the Spirit was an experiential reality.” At the center of Jesus’ life was an intimate and continuous relationship with the divine Spirit. Jesus was the culmination of a stream of Spirit persons in the Jewish tradition—Abraham, Moses, and the prophets—and others following in Jesus’ wake—Peter and Paul, Benedict and Ignatius, Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Avila, and Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

Jesus knew God. He had visions of God at his baptism by John (Mt 3:13–17), in the desert (Mt 4:1–11), and on the mountaintop (Mt 17:1–13). Jesus sought out isolated places where he prayed to God throughout the night (Mt 14:23, Mk 1:35). In a culture afraid to utter the Almighty’s name, Jesus called God Abba (Mk 14:35), Aramaic for “Papa.” As the Spirit’s healing and liberating power flowed through Jesus, he taught about God and faith “with authority,” that is, on the basis of his own profound experience of the divine mystery at the heart of reality. At the beginning of his public ministry Jesus applied the words of Isaiah the prophet to himself:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. (Lk 4:18–19)

Jesus invited everyone he met to faith, to encounter the same Spirit he knew and to live in relationship with God.

THE POLITICS OF COMPASSION

Who is the God whom Jesus knew and obeyed and revealed? “For Jesus, compassion was the central quality of God and the central moral quality of a life centered on God.” “Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate”
Moreover, Jesus, “God-with-a-face,” is the embodiment of the divine compassion in the world.

The Hebrew word translated as “compassion” is the plural of the word for woib. It connotes giving life, nourishing, caring, and tenderness, a warm and gentle embrace. It is often used in referring to God in the Hebrew Scriptures. For Jesus, then, God is like a mother who feels for and loves the children of her womb; as followers of Jesus, Christians are to imitate God, being compassionate toward each other. Compassion is both a feeling—being moved by the suffering of others—and a way of being; a willingness to share that suffering and do something about it. In and through Jesus, God shares the suffering of humanity and transforms it into new life.

For Jesus, compassion was neither sentimental nor an individual virtue; rather, compassion was political. When compassion led Jesus to touch a leper, heal a woman with constant menstruation, feed the hungry, forgive sinners, or share a meal with tax collectors and prostitutes, it was moving him to challenge the dominant sociopolitical paradigm of his social world. Thus, Jesus was engaged in what might be called the “politics of compassion,” in contrast to the “politics of purity” that dominated his social world.

In the first century, Jewish society was structured around avoiding anything that would make one religiously unclean. The biblical roots of this purity system were found in the Book of Leviticus, especially in the verse, “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (Lev 19:2). Set in the context of laws about ritual and religious purity, the holiness of the Jewish community was defined in terms of purity.

This purity system tended to be hierarchical and exclusionary. It divided those who were born into the tribe of priests and Levites from those who were not, the righteous who observed the purity laws from sinners who were unclean and impure, the whole and the well from the handicapped and the ill, the rich (blessed by God) from the poor, males from females, and Jews from Gentiles. In effect, the purity system created a world with sharp social boundaries, a world where many were treated as outcasts.

In opposition to the teaching of the Pharisees and of Jewish leaders to “Be holy [pure] as God is holy,” Jesus proclaimed, “Be compassionate as God is compassionate.” Jesus’ call to compassion can be seen as a radical challenge to the theology and the politics of the dominant social system of the time, a social structure that placed an oppressive burden on the poor and the marginalized.

Jesus’ parables and sayings often indicted the purity system and those who used it for power and privilege. In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29–37), for example, it is probable that the priest and the Levite passed by the man beaten by robbers because they were afraid of becoming ritually unclean by drawing too close to him. The Samaritan, who was by definition impure, acted compassionately toward the wounded man and became the model for loving one’s neighbor. Speaking in the style of the prophets of Israel, Jesus denounced the Pharisees and other religious leaders for their rigorous following of the religious codes to the neglect of practicing “justice and mercy and faith.” Indeed, the string of Jesus’ denunciations of the Pharisees and leaders collected in Luke 11 and Matthew 23 are dense with allusions to the purity system and the Pharisaic preoccupation with the outside and external, the law and duty, to the neglect of the spirit and the heart, of justice and compassion.

Here, Jesus stands in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets who reminded the people of Israel that God was more concerned with justice and mercy and righteousness than with ritual or periodic fasting.

I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

But let justice roll down like waters
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

(Is 5:8-24)

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and to bring the homeless poor into your house?

(S 58:6-7)

Sincere worship and humble fasting are good and important, of course, but the Hebrew prophets and Jesus pointed out that such rituals became outrageous hypocrisy if not accompanied by justice and mercy for the oppressed and the poor.

Jesus’ healings and exorcisms and practices of table fellowship shattered the purity boundaries of his social world. Jesus touched lepers who were so unclean that they were literally cast out of the city, and he was touched by a hemorrhaging woman (Mk 5:25–34) and had his feet washed by an unclean woman when he was at dinner at Simon’s house (Lk 7:36–50). Jesus entered a graveyard to free a man of a “legion” of unclean spirits who entered a herd of unclean pigs (Mk 5:1–20). Jesus frequently “reclined at table” with impure social outcasts such as tax collectors and sinners.

AN INCLUSIVE EARLY CHURCH

The Christian movement in the early church was characterized by the inclusiveness of compassion rather than the exclusiveness of the purity system. Even an Ethiopian eunuch, a man at the bottom of the purity-system, was baptized into the church without hesitation (Acts 8:26–40). And in his letter to the Galatians, Paul resoundingly declared the unity of all in the Spirit of Christ: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free,
there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).

The apostles, filled with the spirit of Christ, founded communities that were inclusive and egalitarian, generous and loving. The Acts of the Apostles describes the Christian community at Jerusalem in this way:

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:44–47)¹⁵

Evangelical theologian Ronald Sider characterizes the practice of the Jerusalem community as “unlimited liability” for each other and “total availability” to each other.¹⁶

When, through a unique set of historical circumstances, the Jerusalem community became impoverished, Paul took up a great collection from the Gentile churches to bring to the church in Jerusalem. Thus Paul logically enlarged the scope of Christian unity and generosity to the universal church, giving us a model of interchurch sharing. And when Paul heard about class divisions in eucharistic celebrations at Corinth, he angrily declared that if wealthy Christians were feasting while poor believers went hungry, then they were not eating the Lord’s Supper at all, but profaning the Body of Christ (1 Cor 11:17–34). On the basis of the practice of the early church and the meaning of the Eucharist, Sider concludes, “As long as any Christian anywhere in the world is hungry, the eucharistic celebration of all Christians everywhere in the world is imperfect.”¹⁷ Along the same lines, we might legitimately wonder if Christ is really present at a racially segregated Eucharist, noting that ten o’clock Sunday morning probably remains the most segregated hour in the week in the United States.

**JESUS’ THIRD WAY**

Jesus’ politics of compassion addressed not only the Jewish purity system, but also the oppression of the Roman Empire.¹⁸ In the first century, Israel was occupied by the Romans, who ruled somewhat indirectly through Jewish leaders. Roman rule was still domineering and exploitative and the Jews understandably resented it. Thus, revolutionary sentiment and messianic expectations were high in Jesus’ social world.

The Jewish people were expecting God to send them a messiah, someone like David, who would throw out the Romans and re-establish the kingdom of Israel. And there were Jewish groups, some called Zealots, who were ready to engage in violent resistance to Roman rule. The politics of Jesus’ world were highly charged. Indeed, the Pharisees and the Essenes hoped that their faithful following of the purity laws and the holiness code would persuade God to send the messiah.¹⁹

Ordinary people—the peasants, shepherds, housekeepers, fisherfolk, shopkeepers, and merchants—experienced a double oppression by both Jewish and Roman leaders. The taxes paid to the Romans, which amounted to as much as 40 percent of their income, drove many people into debt. These taxes were collected by fellow Jews who not only collaborated with the hated Romans but enriched themselves in the process. And the religious leaders hardened the people with the onus of the purity system, adding religious guilt to their economic woes.²⁰

In this oppressive context Jesus proclaimed the good news that the reign of God was at hand, offering liberation, justice, and compassion. It was a welcome message. Understanding this social context, doubly oppressive and tense with revolutionary fervor, helps to make sense of some of Jesus’ sayings and of events that at first seem strange to contemporary Christians.

Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount as reported in Matthew 5–8 and Luke 6:20–49 is a challenging statement of his alternative way and of the politics of compassion. This teaching of Jesus has been a stumbling block for his followers throughout Christian history. Eileen Egan, a longtime advocate of peace and justice in the Catholic Worker tradition, once said that she thought all of theology might be understood as a way to get around the Sermon on the Mount. She thought Christians should walk through it instead.²¹ Is it possible to practice this ethic outlined by Jesus?

The first step in a realistic interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount is to see it in the context of Jesus’ social world. Biblical scholar Walter Wink provides surprising insight by applying this method to one of the most perplexing passages in Jesus’ discourse.²²

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone takes your bag, let him have the second.” (Mt 5:38–41; see also Lk 6:29–31)

Is Jesus asking his followers to be human doormats, cowardly and complicit in the face of injustice?

First, Wink argues persuasively that the Greek word *antistenei*, translated as “resist not evil” in the King James version of the Bible, should be more accurately rendered “Do not take revenge on someone who does you wrong,” as is found in the Good News version. The sense is to not retaliate against violence with violence. But if Jesus counsels his followers not to fight back, neither does he allow flight in response to injustice. Rather, he calls for courageous and *creative resistance* and he gives his audience—people who know about injustice first-hand—three examples of his alternative or “third way” to respond.
In the first example, the reference to the right cheek is key. The ancient world was a right-handed world where even to gesture with the left hand was offensive and insulting. The only way to hit the right cheek with the right hand is with the back of the hand. (Try acting out the scene.) So Jesus is saying: when someone gives you the back of their hand, turn your other cheek to them. A backhand slap was the normal way of reprimanding inferiors, and it still carries the connotation of putting someone down. ("Masters backhanded slaves; husbands, wives; parents, children; men, women; Romans, Jews."

The expected response is covering submission. Jesus counsels neither hitting back nor turning tail, but rather turning the other cheek, which is an act of remarkably creative resistance. It allows the inferior in the relationship to assert her or his equal humanity with the oppressor, and it forces the oppressor to take stock of the relationship and perhaps of the social system that supports such inequality. It is risky, to be sure, and demands courage, but it is a creative way to challenge an unhealthy relationship and an unjust system. Both Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., grasped this well and molded this idea into a tool for resisting social injustice and creating a more just community.

In Jesus’ second example someone is being sued for his coat or outer garment by a creditor. Indebtedness was the most difficult social problem in first-century Palestine and only the poorest person would have nothing but his coat to serve as collateral. Now he is being hauled into court to have even that stripped away.

Jesus recommends clowning and nudity as a creative response. The people of the time wore only an outer garment and an inner garment. In effect, Jesus would have the debtor say, “Here, take not only my coat, but my underwear as well. Then, you’ll have everything!” and walk out of the court naked, leaving the red-faced creditor with a coat in one hand and underwear in the other. The creditor would be embarrassed and shamed—and unmasked. This is not a respectable moneylender, but a loan shark who perpetuates a system that has reduced an entire social class of his own people to landlessness and destitution. This burlesque offers the creditor the chance to see the human consequences of these practices and to repent, and it empowers the oppressed to take the initiative and burst the delusion that this is a just system. It is a brave and ingenious form of resistance.

Jesus’ third example refers to a practice of the Roman occupation troops. When Roman troops were moving about, a soldier could force a civilian to carry his sixty-five pound pack for him, but only for one mile. To force a civilian to go further risked severe penalties under military law. This sort of practice was a bitter reminder to the Jews that they were a subject people even in the Promised Land. Imagine, then, the soldier’s surprise when, upon arrival at the next mile marker, he absent-mindedly reaches for his pack, looking for his next human pack-mule, and the Jew says with a smile, “That’s all right, I’ll carry it for another mile,” and strides off down the road. Going the second mile knocks the oppressor off balance and reveals the injustice of the situation. It also affirms the dignity of the oppressed by allowing the victim to seize the initiative. Without shedding blood or even raising one’s voice in anger, the oppressed person has started down the road to liberation.

Given such an interpretation, this passage becomes a different sort of stumbling block to Christian discipleship. Rather than being dismayed by complacency or submissiveness in the face of evil and injustice, which at first glance seems implied by Jesus’ sayings, one can be put off by the courage and creativity called for by Jesus. But if the Christian disciple is to stumble over this teaching, it should be by the challenge of creative resistance, Jesus’ third way between the ordinary options of fight or flight in response to injustice.

In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus goes on to say,

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect [compassionate], therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect [compassionate]. (Mt 5: 43–48)

Love of enemies is challenging indeed, but love expressed in creative resistance has the power to free the oppressed from docility and the oppressor from sin, affirming the image of God in both. This is the way, says Jesus, that is consistent with the nature of God, who is compassionate, and with our relationship with God, who calls us to create a just community through love.

Jesus lived what he taught, as the events of his life attest. He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey rather than a white horse and was crucified at the hands of the Romans at the insistence of the Jewish leaders. The inscription that Pilate put on his cross read, “The King of the Jews.” Jesus’ suffering in love redeemed humanity from personal and social sin and established the kingdom of God. Jesus rejected dominating power and insisted instead on the power of love.

At the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus is presented as traveling through Galilee, proclaiming a message of metanoia or conversion in response to the coming of the reign of God. This notion of conversion is central to understanding the message of Jesus and the meaning of Christian discipleship. Basically this means turning from selfishness toward love by placing God and the teachings of Jesus at the center of life. Conversion, then, is a call to “Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate.” St. Paul puts it this way: “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, . . . emptied himself. . . . and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross” (Phil 2:4–5, 7, 8).
Conversion of the heart, then, means that Christians are to be socially subversive, that disciples of Christ must work to transform the world. Conversion means to turn around; subversion means to turn over. The implication is that the Christian, like a plow moving through a field, will turn society over, from oppression to justice, from violence to peace. "The Christian is called not only to change his [or her] own heart but also to change the social, political, economic, and cultural structures of human existence. Conversion is not addressed to the heart alone."30

It is interesting to note that the Christian community exchewed violence and warfare and embraced nonviolence and peace, even in the face of persecution, during the first three centuries of its existence. There are multiple and complex reasons why Christians refused military participation during this period, but the basic reason was its incompatibility with Christian love. This practice of pacifism changed rather dramatically in 313 when the Roman Empire became the Holy Roman Empire after the conversion of the Emperor Constantine.31

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

The social teaching of the churches, Protestant and Catholic, attempts to interpret the social dimension of Christian discipleship in the context of the contemporary world. The World Council of Churches (WCC), which includes nearly all Orthodox and Protestant churches, has held international assemblies every seven years since its founding in 1948, most recently in Harare, Zimbabwe, in 1998 (see its website at www.wcc-coe.org). The documents produced by these world assemblies have emphasized the theme of a "responsible society" and have clearly expressed the notion that justice demands the transformation of social structures.32 In recent years there has also been a particular focus on justice, peace, and the integrity of creation. The National Council of Churches (NCC), the comparable body in the United States (see its website at www.nccusca.org), has likewise given consistent and concerted attention to issues of justice and peace, as have the national assemblies of the various Protestant denominations.

"Catholic social teaching" refers to the body of work produced by the popes, the Second Vatican Council, the Vatican synods, and the national conferences of bishops, beginning with the encyclical Rerum Novarum (The Condition of Labor) issued by Pope Leo XIII in 1891 and continued in the writings of Pope John Paul II and the various bishops' conferences.33 The documents produced by the Vatican address global concerns of the universal Church (see the website for the Vatican at www.vatican.va), and those of the bishops' conferences tend to take more national or regional perspectives on justice and peace issues (see, for example the web site for the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops at www.nccbuscc.org).

Catholic social thought has not always developed in a systematic manner. Sometimes popes and bishops' conferences have decided to address specific issues that seemed pressing at a particular moment in history. Thus Pope Leo XIII addressed labor conditions in 1891; Pope John XXIII wrote on human rights and the arms race in 1963; Pope Paul VI took on poverty and development in 1967; the Latin American bishops, poverty and liberation in 1968 (at Medellin) and in 1979 (at Puebla); and the American Catholic bishops prepared statements on the arms race and deterrence in 1983 and the U.S. economy in 1986. Other social encyclicals have been produced to mark the anniversary of a previous encyclical, such as Quadragesimo Anno by Pope Pius XI, Octogesimo Adveniens by Pope Paul VI, and Centesimus Annus by Pope John Paul II, to mark the fortieth, eightieth, and hundredth anniversaries of Rerum Novarum (1891). These documents tend to have a broader, more general scope, while also engaging issues of the day. Although there is much cross-referencing among these documents and a certain consistency both in theory and in positions taken, there is no conscious philosophical or theological foundation adopted and developed, nor do they expound a clear economic, social, or political theory. Although Catholic social thought has paid much more attention to its biblical basis since the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), its use of scripture has remained uneven. Nevertheless, the Magisterium (the pope and the bishops) of the Catholic Church has managed to produce a substantial and credible body of social teaching, one that, unfortunately, has been accurately referred to as "our best kept secret."34

The documents comprising Catholic social teaching over the past hundred years fill several volumes and theological reflection on this body of thought fills yet more volumes.35 While it is not possible here to give a thorough overview of Catholic social thought, it is important to note several key themes related to the issues addressed in this book.

First, Catholic social teaching unambiguously affirms that the church and individual Christians are to be engaged in the work of transforming the world. This is clearly expressed in a famous sentence from the document produced by an international Synod of Bishops in 1971, Justice in the World: "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."36 Working for justice is not peripheral or optional, but rather central and essential for a life lived in relationship with God. Faith affects every aspect of the believer's life, including the social, cultural, economic, and political dimensions. "Our faith is not just a weekend obligation, a mystery to be celebrated around the altar on Sunday. It is a pervasive reality to be practiced in homes, offices, factories, schools, and businesses across our land."37

Second, the two values that form the foundation of Catholic social thought are human dignity, realized in community. The human person is both sacred and social. The church's profound commitment to the values of human dignity and community is based on the biblical stories of creation and of God's covenant with the people of Israel.
Human beings are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:27) and gifted with an unearned and inestimable value and dignity. Each person is obligated to respect this human dignity and to treat one another as sacraments of God and as sisters and brothers. Through the call of Abraham and his descendants and through God’s revelation to Moses at Sinai, God established a covenant with the Hebrew people.

Then Moses went up to God; the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.” (Ex 19:3–6)

God acted in the history of the people of Israel, liberating them from bondage in Egypt and thus demonstrating compassion, faithfulness, and concern for justice and freedom. At Sinai God promised to take care of the people if they would keep the covenant with God. The following chapters in the book of Exodus (chapters 20–23) detail the code that is to characterize their lives: faithful worship of God alone, care for one another, creation of a just community, and a special concern for the vulnerable members of the community—widows and orphans, the poor and strangers. Thus the people of Israel are called into community, a just community that becomes the norm of their faithful response to God’s love for them.34

The principles of the community of Israel include the **Sabbatical Year** (the seventh year) and the **Year of Jubilee** (fiftieth year or the Grand Sabbathal) when Israelites recognize that the land is to be cared for as God’s gift and that a people liberated from bondage should take care of the poor and oppressed in their midst. During the Sabbatical Year (Ex 23:11; Lev 25:1–7) land was to remain uncultivated, slaves were to be freed, and debts forgiven. During the Year of Jubilee (Lev 25:8–41) all members of the community were to be returned to their rightful place in the community and property was to be restored to its original owners. Thus, in principle, the tribes of Israel were to be kept in a sort of egalitarian community.35

In the eighth century B.C.E., when idolatry and social injustice had come to characterize the people of Israel, prophets called Israel back to the demands of the covenant. The prophets spoke in God’s name, and functioned as the conscience of the nation. They identified Israel’s sins—the people’s infidelity to the covenant with God. Israel had turned to other gods and had put its trust in alliances rather than in Yahweh. In Israel, the rich oppressed the poor, and the rulers were corrupt, violent, and exploitative.

Alas for those who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds!

When morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in their power. They covet fields and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress the household and house, people and their inheritance. (Mic 2:1–2)

Hear this you rulers of the house of Jacob and chiefs of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong! Its rulers give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money; Yet they lean upon the LORD and say, “Surely the LORD is with us! No harm shall come upon us.” Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height. (Mic 3:9–12)

Thus, the prophets announced the judgment of God, a punishment meant to correct the people’s evil ways and to bring them back to the covenant with God.

God’s requirements for right living in accord with the covenant were clear:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. (Mic 6:8)

The prophets reveal a God who requires fidelity, justice, and righteousness, but who, in the end, is compassionate and merciful, forgiving and faithful.40 God’s steadfast love gives the prophets and Israel reason to hope.

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency. He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot.
Jesus stands in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets. Like the prophets of Israel, Jesus calls his followers to fidelity, justice, righteousness, and community, and he proclaims the presence of a God who is faithful, compassionate, and gracious. (See, for example, the parable of the prodigal son and his brother in Lk 15:11–32, or the story of the sinful woman who is forgiven at the house of a Pharisee in Lk 7:36–50.) Through his death and resurrection Jesus renews the covenant and expands its scope to include all of humanity. Through Jesus, God establishes a new covenant with all people and calls on humankind to become a just community throughout the earth. In the new covenant, as in the original one, the way the community responds to the needs of the poor is the “litmus test” of its justice or injustice, of its fidelity to the covenant with God.42

These two values, then, human dignity and just community, rooted in the stories of creation and covenant, are the foundation for the major principles developed in Catholic social teaching. Although listings of the principles may differ somewhat, those most relevant to the themes developed in this book are human rights, social sin, solidarity, participation, the preferential option for the poor, and peacemaking. Although some of these have been touched on in previous chapters, each will receive at least a brief reflection here.

The meaning of human rights and the development of this principle in Catholic social thought was explored earlier (see chapter 4). Clearly the concept of human rights is rooted in the creation of humanity in the image of God and in the obligations of life in community. Pope John XXIII provides the fullest exposition of human rights from the church’s perspective in his encyclical Peace on Earth (1963).43

Whenever the church talks about human rights, it is always careful to give equal attention to human responsibility. Catholic social thought has used human rights as a normative framework for addressing the minimal obligations of any society or polity in a pluralistic world.44 In other words, the least that can be expected of any government is to create a society where basic human needs (for food, water, health care, shelter, safety) are met and where there is the opportunity to develop one’s potential and to participate in society through work and through the political process. Each person, then, has the responsibility to use his or her gifts for the betterment of society and to participate in creating a more just community.

There is an abiding awareness in Catholic social thought that evil and sin tend to become embedded in the structures and institutions of society, that is, there is a consciousness of social sin or the “structures of sin.” This concept is deeply rooted in the theology of the Hebrew prophets who accused Israel of infidelity and who functioned as the conscience of the nation.

The social sciences, which have convincingly argued that all knowledge is socially constructed—that is, that each person is so immersed in culture and society that it is virtually impossible to understand or know anything outside of our social framework—add an empirical dimension to the concept of social sin. Thus, for example, racism transcends the sum total of individual acts of discrimination and can become institutionalized and self-perpetuating in society. The same claim can be made for other social sins, such as sexism, violence, ethnic hatred, and materialism or consumerism.

In his encyclical On Social Concern, Pope John Paul II speaks of “structures of sin,” which . . . are rooted in personal sin, and thus always linked to the concrete acts of individuals who introduce these structures, consolidate them and make them difficult to remove. And thus they grow stronger, spread, and become the source of other sins, and so influence people’s behavior.”45 Pope John Paul II then points to two interrelated actions and attitudes that seem to him to be at the root of structures of sin in the contemporary world—“the all-consuming desire for profit” and “the thirst for power.” They give rise to “certain forms of modern imperialism,” and to “real forms of idolatry: of money, ideology, class and technology.”46 Certainly race, ethnicity, and gender could be added to the idolatries mentioned by the pope.

If evil is structured into a society, its remedy must include social transformation, that is, changing the structures and institutions of society. Christian responsibility, then, must include both charity, personal acts of compassion in response to individual suffering, and justice, social and political action aimed at transforming the root causes of evil and suffering. Christians should be found in soup kitchens, tutoring programs, and inner-city clinics, and on picket lines, in political campaigns and congressional lobbies.47

Pope John Paul II recommends the virtue of solidarity as the antidote to structures of sin. He sees solidarity as the moral virtue and social attitude that correspond to the reality of global interdependence. “[Solidarity] then is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.”48 Solidarity is diametrically opposed to the desire for profit or a thirst for power. It calls for a readiness to sacrifice oneself for the sake of the other and to serve the neighbor, as opposed to a willingness to exploit or oppress the other for one’s own advantage. Because of the unity and interdependence of humanity, the virtue of solidarity is a commitment
to recognize the equality of persons and peoples, to share the goods of creation with all, and to work with others as partners on behalf of development, justice, and peace.

Increasingly Catholic social thought has understood social justice in terms of participation. "Social justice implies that persons have an obligation to be active and productive participants in the life of society and that society has a duty to enable them to participate in this way." The principle of participation is rooted in the created dignity of the human person, who is endowed with freedom and charged with self-determination, and in the obligations of a just community.

The church’s understanding of participation is broad and inclusive and it involves reciprocal obligations on the part of individuals and society. Pope John Paul II and the American and Canadian bishops have stressed both the right to civil or political participation and the right to meaningful work, or economic participation. As citizens and workers, persons should have the opportunity and the obligation to participate in a whole range of voluntary organizations and associations, including political parties and unions, and in the full spectrum of political and economic decisions. Nations, as well, large and small, rich and poor, should have the opportunity and the obligation to participate in international organizations such as regional associations, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the United Nations. It is the principle of participation that empowers persons and nations to have a voice in decisions that affect them.

There is a balanced appreciation of the role of the government in Catholic social thought. On the one hand, the principle of subsidiarity, which insists that larger communities should not usurp the proper role and authority of smaller communities, tends to decentralize power and to limit the authority of central governments. On the other hand, the principle often called "socialization" insists on the proper role of central government, especially in the increasingly complex contemporary world, to help promote the common good and to advocate for the poor. Government should not render citizens and local communities powerless by throwing its weight around where inappropriate, but government should not fail to exercise power where it is needed. Both individual initiative and government intervention can be proper forms of participation.

In their pastoral letter on the American economy, the U.S. Catholic bishops highlight “the preferential option for the poor.” The bishops stated that Christians must judge the morality and the justice of public policies from the perspective of the poor.

Decisions must be judged in light of what they do for the poor, what they do to the poor, and what they enable the poor to do for themselves. The fundamental moral criterion for all economic decisions, policies, and institutions is this: They must be at the service of all people, especially the poor.

This option for the poor and the powerless is a remarkably challenging way to invite contemporary Christians to “Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate.”

The U.S. bishops adapted this principle from their brother bishops in Latin America. In 1968, the Latin American Bishops’ Conference met at Medellin, Colombia, to reflect on the implications of the Second Vatican Council and especially its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. That document said that “...the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the gospel.” The most significant “sign of the time” in Latin America was the crushing poverty of the overwhelming majority of people and the glaring gap between the rich and the poor. At Medellin the church began to move decisively from the side of the rich to stand with the poor. When the Latin American bishops met again in 1979 in Puebla, Mexico, they articulated this move as the preferential option for the poor. This Latin American theology was consistent with Pope Paul VI’s encyclical On the Development of Peoples (1971) and, after being picked up by the U.S. bishops, was also employed by Pope John Paul II in his On Social Concern (1987, 442-45). It presents a key principle of Catholic social teaching.

The preferential option for the poor has deep biblical roots. God’s compassionate and caring concern for the poor is a dominant theme in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the message and ministry of Jesus and the early Christian community. The commitment of God’s people to the covenant was manifested in their treatment of the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. Jesus identified himself with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned—with “the least of these” (Mt 25:31-46).

Who are the poor? “The poor are the economically disadvantaged, the materially deprived, who as a consequence suffer powerlessness, exploitation and oppression.” Poverty, then, is primarily an economic and material reality in this usage. The U.S. bishops acknowledge the many spiritual and physical diminishments affecting people, but add that material poverty compounds these problems. The option for the poor calls Christians and the church to stand with the hungry, the homeless, those without access to adequate education or basic health care, those on the margins of society.

The “option” for the poor is not optional. “Rather it is a decisive action and a deliberate choice, reflecting values as well as desires, flowing from the core of... faith.” Standing with the poor, being present to the poor, seeing the world from the perspective of the poor, working with the poor, advocating for the poor, this is essential to being a follower of Christ. Christians stand with the poor because God stands with the poor. Given the scandalous extent and depth of poverty in the United States and in the world (see chapter 2), the preferential option for the poor is a radical challenge. How is it possible that there can be rich Christians in a hungry world?

Peacemaking (a central issue in chapter 7) has been another prominent and consistent theme in Catholic social thought. The Catholic tradition, at least
the world of the fact of interdependence and by calling for the virtue of solidarity that is necessary for creating a just global community, the church has advocated a world order that is essential for justice and peace. The church continually supports and suggests strengthening the United Nations and other regimes that foster cooperation and conflict resolution. And the church has been willing, sometimes behind the scenes as in Poland and sometimes more publicly as in El Salvador, to participate directly in conflict resolution.

Finally, it is important to note something of an oversight in official Catholic social teaching—a major statement on the environment. Although John Paul II included passing mention of ecological concerns in two of his social encyclicals and also addressed the issue in his World Day of Peace Message in 1990 and the U.S. bishops have produced some statements on the issue, the Magisterium has yet to give this subject sufficient attention. The theological literature on theology and ecology is blossoming. Although principles such as “stewardship,” “just and sustainable development,” and “humanity as co-creators with God” can be found in Catholic social thought, neither the Vatican nor the U.S. bishops have produced a significant statement on this crucial issue.

Given that contemporary Catholic social teaching was developed in a Cold War world characterized by a deep polarization of competing ideologies, there is a remarkable balance in Catholic social thought. To the polarizations of “either/or,” Catholic social thought responds with “both/and.” Catholic social teaching affirms both the value and dignity of each human person and the value of the community, both individual freedom and the common good, both human rights and human responsibility, both personal sin and structures of sin and the redemption of persons and nations and all of creation, both the obligation of society to enable persons to participate in political and economic life and the responsibility of the person to participate in society, both the principle of subsidiarity or decentralization of decision-making and the principle of socialization or the proper role of the central government, both nonviolence and the justified use of force.

There is much to be said for this balance in Catholic social teaching. It focuses on seeking the truth rather than getting trapped in a one-sided ideology that is popular at the moment. It allows the church to criticize both capitalism and socialism and to call for the integral or wholistic development of the human person. It also allows the church to be critical and constructive without being politically partisan.

The danger of such balance, however, is the tendency to be dispassionate or lukewarm when a situation calls for the passionate defense of justice or a burning condemnation of oppression. There are times when the church and Christians should be prophetic, should take sides. Indeed, the preferential option for the poor and the church’s clear stand on behalf of human dignity, human rights, just community, and peacemaking call for precisely such committed advocacy and action. Reason and truth are not obstacles to a passion for justice and peace; selfishness and apathy are the problems.

No doubt that there are many who would urge the church to take even
stronger stands for justice and peace, but the record of the Christian community as a justice seeker and peacemaker is, on the whole, positive and constructive. Included in that record is the witness and service of individual Christians whose lives have introduced neighbors and friends to Catholic social thought and the social teaching of the churches. Some of these Christian witnesses have become well known, including Dorothy Day, Helder Camara, Oscar Romero, Jean Donovan, Martin Luther King, Jr., Desmond Tutu, Mother Teresa, Cesar Chavez, Helen Prejean, and Philip and Daniel Berrigan. Those who practice justice and peace are eloquent witnesses to the healing presence and reconciling power of God in our world.

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. Is the idea that faith is a relationship with God meaningful for you?
2. What is the message of Jesus? What makes you think Jesus was or was not interested in justice and peace issues? Is the Gospel message relevant to social and political issues?
3. Is it possible to validly celebrate the Eucharist in a church that is divided along lines of race, gender, sexual orientation, or class?
4. Can you think of a personal experience where Jesus’ Third Way could have offered you an alternative between fighting or fleeing?
5. Should converted Christians be socially subversive?
6. Catholic social teaching has been called the church’s “best kept secret.” What strategies would you propose for getting this message out to the people in the church and into society? What is the message? What are the central themes in Catholic social teaching?
7. What is the difference between charity and justice? How can Christians be both charitable and just?
8. How can Christians follow Christ in a consumer society? How should rich Christians respond to a hungry world? What would it mean to take seriously the “preferential option for the poor?”
9. In what ways do you think the church has been successful in being a peacemaker and an advocate for justice? In what ways has the church fallen short in these roles?

**CHAPTER NINE**

**Christian Citizenship and Resources for Involvement**

“... What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet do not supply their daily needs, what is the good in that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” (James 2: 14–17)

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; out do one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.” (Romans 12: 9–13)

Christian discipleship requires that one work for justice and make peace. This is the social and global dimension of striving to be compassionate. Christians must be hearers of the Word, that is, attentive to the presence and call of God in their lives, and doers of the Word, actively responding to God’s call in the world. This chapter discusses how Christians can become constructively involved in working for justice and making peace.

Discipleship requires both an inner journey and an outer journey, both contemplation and resistance. There are at least four dimensions to this journey: growing in knowledge and wisdom, personal conversion and changes in lifestyle, working within a faith community, and public policy advocacy or exercising one’s citizenship. Growth in each of these areas contributes to living a life of compassion and justice.

In Luke’s Gospel the transition between the infancy narrative and Jesus’ public ministry is accomplished with the statement: “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor” (Lk 2:52). “To grow in knowledge and wisdom” requires information and education, and it requires the development of a heart and conscience able to discern right from wrong. If knowledge is the queen of virtues, wisdom is the grandmother of virtues—earthly, practical, sensitive, caring, and authentic. Knowledge can be gained from books, but wisdom is born of experience. Wisdom comes from making love, tending to sick children, weathering conflict patiently, and growing older gracefully.