Faith Doing Justice: Spirituality and Social Action

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I am deeply honored to have this opportunity to address this particular group of Catholic leaders from every part of our country who labor in the vast field of social justice ministries. In looking back on my 46 years as a Jesuit I can honestly say that my ministry has a golden thread of social justice concerns woven throughout that takes many forms: efforts to empower people on the margins by means of community organizing, advocacy on behalf of undocumented immigrants and engagement in the work of Catholic charities. Social justice ministries have been an integral component of my vocation, a focus for me in whatever I have been about over the years. So I consider you all to be kindred spirits attuned to the issues and concerns I want to raise this afternoon.

ROOTED IN FAMILY

At the beginning I want to take an autobiographical approach that situates these reflections on real experience. In doing so I want to shed light on how, at least in my case, the passion for social justice unfolds and how it connects to faith and Christian spirituality.

In looking back on how my interest in social justice developed I have discovered not surprisingly that the roots are in my family and my earliest education. My dad was a blue collar worker, a union man. One of the first newspapers I recall seeing even before I could read was the bulletin of the International Association of Machinists, my dad's labor union. The person who most influenced my religious formation was my grandmother on my mom’s side, my abuelita, who as a young widow migrated to the U.S. from Mexico in 1924 with four children and two teenage sisters. She was a seamstress who worked for more than 40 years in the Los Angeles garment district and she was a militant of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU).

My working class, Latino immigrant family roots connected with my faith at an early age when as an eighth-grader I visited the local Salesian high school and for the first time in my life heard about Catholic Social Teaching. In a halting Italian accent the Salesian Father unfolded the heritage of Pope Leo XIII, Rerum Novarum and the Church’s deep concern for the plight of the poor, the vulnerable and those on the margins of society. To me it seemed then and now altogether normal and natural to link Catholic Social Teaching to the nitty-gritty needs and experiences I had had myself and saw firsthand in others as a child and young man growing up in a Mexican American family on the edge of East Los Angeles.
Early in my life I took an interest in partisan politics. I remember very clearly, for example, watching the 1952 Democratic National Convention on TV at the ripe age of 7 and being quite taken by Adlai Stevenson to whom I threw my unqualified support! My sister reminded me about my political proclivities a few years back at my 25th anniversary of ordination when she brought out letters I had received as a young teenager that my mother had saved. These were responses to my letters from national political figures like Eleanor Roosevelt, Adlai Stevenson, John F. Kennedy and Harry Truman. Even then I didn’t want to waste any time with mid-level handlers. I wanted to go to the top and get things straightened out as fast as possible. My interest was in getting “things” to change since I knew they were not right -- whether it be inadequate minimum wages, racial discrimination, the right to organize a union, access to a job, the elimination of capital punishment and the list goes on and on.

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS AND EARLY EDUCATION

In thinking back on my precocious interest in politics I also detect a connection between that and my own character and personality. The Myers-Briggs Inventory and later the Enneagram helped me understand and accept myself as someone passionately looking for a vision and somewhat compulsive about taking on grand and glorious projects. The oratorical skills of Adlai Stevenson, for instance, for those of you old enough to remember, were considerable and before him, of course, Franklin Roosevelt. Barack Obama’s gifts as orator as displayed in the 2008 presidential election rang a bell in my heart and reminded me of those heady days of political activism in which the power of political ideas or ideology and my own penchant for envisioning a better world were the primary sources of my social justice concerns and activities.

As a Jesuit high school student I was encouraged to read the social encyclicals and as a debater I recall feeling re-assured as I developed my views and convictions on capital punishment, just war theory, the rights of labor, and the evil of abortion in light of the Church’s considerable reflection on these and many other issues in Catholic Social Doctrine, natural law and social morality. In looking back at all of this, however, I have to admit that for me the motivation came primarily from ideology, from the power of the rhetoric and the ideas around these social issues and not from the spiritual source which is biblical faith and my identification in baptism with Jesus Christ and his message.

TENSIONS BETWEEN IDEOLOGY AND FAITH

I say this by way of public confession because in reflecting on the theme of my talk today I came to see that for me existentially the challenge of linking faith and justice has to do with the power of my earliest experiences and education to produce motivations, not necessarily bad ones, but ones that compete at times with other motivations, namely, the ones that come from my Christian and Catholic identity, from my personal encounter with the living God in Jesus Christ and from my decision to follow Christ in the world. The way I resolve the tension between the ideological grounding of my vision of a just world may or may not coincide with where the option to follow Christ will lead, that is, with what faith requires of me. I think it’s important to recognize this tension and realize that linking faith with justice requires developing a discerning heart. Let me explain what I mean.

While my ideological grounding came quite naturally from my family, cultural and social class experience and took me in the direction of what one would call the way of thinking of the liberal Democratic Party, there may be others whose origins have more naturally moved them toward a more conservative Republican way of thinking or maybe even the libertarian or some other way.
Good Catholics surely can and will be found along quite a continuum of ideological positions. Conflicts and inconsistencies between liberal, conservative or libertarian thought and Catholic Social Teaching are not hard to find. Notably and regrettably in my mind today is the strong orientation of the Democratic Party to the “pro-choice” position on abortion and equally to a social ethic that puts consideration of individual rights above every other consideration, trumping the Catholic insistence on the common good. Speaking of the unacceptability for us Catholics of the underlying moral analysis of some liberal Democrats sociologist John A. Coleman writes:

Liberal theories of justice based on merely respecting human freedom remain stone deaf to moral ties we have not explicitly chosen. Liberal theories assume the “unencumbered self” without pre-existing loyalties or obligations. Such theories of purely procedural justice always privilege the right (proper or fair procedure) over the good. Catholic Social Teaching (through Aristotle and Aquinas) sees justice as a virtue dependent on prior deliberation about the ends, purposes and goods of human actions and institutions. All questions of the good cannot be left to mere human preference.

At one time in history the Democratic Party won the allegiance of Catholics because of its pro-labor stance and identification with the urban working class, the poor, immigrants and minorities. While some of that is still to be seen in its promotion of universal health care and immigration reform, its ideological tilt toward the championing of individual rights over the common good, for example, in the case of abortion and same-sex marriage, creates a real barrier and sadly contributes to the movement of Catholics away from the “party of their ancestors.”

I would also think that Catholic Republicans would find unwholesome tendencies in their party’s ideological bent which, with some notable exceptions like its pro-life commitment, seems to put individual advancement above many considerations of the common good. This preference for individualism and discomfort with the Catholic notion of solidarity and the option for the poor, if I am not mistaken, can be seen underlying many of that party’s stances toward health reform, immigration and economic justice, for example.

We need to keep in mind, by the way, that today the fires of one’s preferences and differences with others –political, theological or whatever-- are powerfully stoked by cyberspace and the blogosphere. The social media unfortunately have added a vehemence and tendency toward extremism between contending sides that we must be mindful of and moderate lest we undermine the tone of respect and the openness to the proposition of the other that is fundamental for all real dialogue.

Rich resources informed by faith and reason have nourished the social justice dialogue of my generation of Catholic leaders. We lived through the exhilarating aggiornamento of the Second Vatican Council and in its wake admired the teachings of the Latin American bishops as put forth in their impressive gatherings in Medellín (1968), Puebla (1979), Santo Domingo (1992) and Aparecida (2007). My generation of Latinos has also been influenced by the Encuentro process that the Conference of Bishops’ Hispanic Affairs Office spearheaded in the 1970’s and 80’s and by the vision our Latino and African American bishops have provided over the years. Moreover, my generation is justly proud of the great achievement of the U.S. bishops in their pastoral letters on economic justice and war and peace produced in the decade of the 1980’s.

In addition, many of us Latino and Latina theologians have been powerfully influenced by liberation theology. Despite sometimes inaccurate comments made about official Church teaching on liberation theology, the fact is that Pope John Paul II applauded it in several respects while
noting some significant concerns. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger gave his critique in two Vatican instructions on this theology issued in the 1980’s. All of these resources provide the foundations for an engaging vision of the hopes and aspirations of the people of our time, yet, as has been pointed out to us so many times, Catholic Social Teaching remains for so many a well-kept secret.

In the context of the 2008 presidential election Archbishop Charles J. Chaput of Denver wrote a zesty and provocative reflection on Catholic faith and participation in politics titled *Render unto Caesar*. While not everyone will agree with all of the Archbishop’s conclusions, his book awakens us to the ways in which both the political left and the right want to either muzzle and/or manipulate people of faith in the public square. People of faith struggling for justice need to be aware of this debilitating fact and work to counteract it, if indeed Catholic Social Teaching and faith are really going to make a difference.

**THE DIFFERENCE CHRIST MAKES**

So we can ask ourselves how effective have today’s ideologies of choice and efforts of the right or the left to instrumentalize faith been in determining my and your social visions. Have they been more influential on me and on you than faith itself, than our prayerful relationship to God in Christ, to the Church’s teachings and, most especially, to a discerning heart? The critical question I have had to ask myself more and more as I get older is how my relationship with Christ has shaped and is shaping my social justice concerns. What is the difference that God and specifically Jesus Christ and being part of an ecclesial communion make in motivating, inspiring and channeling my social justice concerns?

To begin to answer this question I am reminded of a widely disseminated statement attributed to Father Pedro Arrupe, the late Superior General of the Jesuits:

> Nothing is more practical than finding God, that is, falling in love in a quite absolute final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you do with your weekends, what you read, who you know, what breaks your heart and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in love, stay in love and it will decide everything.

What strikes me about Father Arrupe’s reflection here is that the source of motivation for living the Christian vocation which includes the struggle for justice has to be grounded first of all on an experience of a meaningful encounter with the living God. Our response to God in faith is accordingly analogous to falling in love, at least it is a first step in that direction. It is most especially a matter of the heart, a relationship, and an affective experience. Someone who understands this is none other than Pope Benedict XVI rightly known as a great thinker but at the same time a strong critic of rationalism. He insists on the difference between Christian action motivated by what he calls moralism, by a “should” or even a solid reason, to action flowing more from a real, personal relationship of love. Certainly moral exhortation has its place, living up to moral and ethical standards is important and using our intelligence is obviously part of making an integral, human response to God’s ceaseless, loving outreach to us. But that isn’t quite enough.

I’ve noticed a tendency to give a certain pride of place to reason in my own generation. It is said also that we Jesuits tend to intellectualize and that Church thinkers and teachers in the modern age since the Enlightenment have been characterized by a strong rationalizing and analytical drive. The intellectual, rational approach to social analysis and commentary is always necessary, of course, but our Christian response, our discernment, is not mainly the result of calculation. We are about
following Christ whose way is love, sacrificial love or agape, at that—the mystery of the cross, if you will.

Perhaps you've heard Karl Rahner's often quoted remark: “The Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist at all.” Even more so, could it not be said that “the social justice minister of the future will be a mystic or will not exist at all?” By mysticism, Rahner does not mean some esoteric practices but a genuine experience of God, constantly renewed, that will be necessary to offset the threats to faith from a defiantly secular and even atheistic culture. He refers, I believe, to the difference that a personal relationship with God in prayer makes—the beginning of mystical experience. That difference is necessary for people today, for people who really live their faith under the conditions of a secular world where there are so many incentives for leaving God out of the picture. What this means then is that weekly attendance at Mass, regular reception of the Eucharistic and reconciliation and all the “normal” practices of Catholic life are no longer enough unless they are nourished by the personal habit of daily prayer, by a deepening spirituality and sense of cultural discernment. Faith has to be nurtured by a growing, personal relationship with God and the means for doing that is prayer.

But there is another kind of personal relationship that nurtures one’s relationship with God as well. I am referring to personal relationships with the poor. At a key moment in my life as a priest on my first assignment after ordination I served a community of Mexican immigrants in a barrio called Delhi in Santa Ana, CA. It was there that I was blessed to come to know the poor existentially. I had the experience so often mentioned by those who commit to serve or evangelize among the poor, that of getting more out of this relationship, receiving more, than I put into it. The people, their friendship and being invited into their lives, homes and families ended up being one of the greatest graces of my life. I found God in them. I came to grasp what it means to say that the poor are the face of God. The theoretical, speculative, analytical, rationalizing, politicizing aspects of justice ministry melted in the face of real people who surprisingly had so much to give despite their poverty. If I am ever tempted to forget what social justice ministry is about, I go back to those early years of ministry when I can say the poor stopped being more a socioeconomic category for me and become real flesh and blood.

In social justice ministry, however, we often work in such a way as to create the illusion that it all depends on us, our smarts and capacity as individuals or as church-based organizations, non-profits or social agencies, our ability to really “do something.” We know all about advocacy, empowerment, community organizing, lobbying, and “the ways of the world.” Yes, we should be professional as we go about our work, be practical and pragmatic, and worldly wise, but do so without making it about our ability to get results and thus create the illusion of “success” based on what we do rather than on what God is doing. Our action becomes self-promoting, an activism that ends up being more about us than about the poor. Unless our actions are rooted in prayer and discernment, they will be rooted in worldly wisdom or even worse on ego, pride, and the seeking of riches and/or honors. So linking faith to justice is not so much about ideas but about practice, that is, developing the daily habit of prayer whereby our thoughts and actions are linked with the deepest of all motives which is the loving, free choice to follow Christ who loved all but preferentially loved the poor. In the Ignatian spiritual tradition the examination of consciousness is the tool par excellence for becoming aware of our attitudes and motivations that so often revert to self-promotion and the pursuit of comforts, wealth, honors or riches rather than the following of Christ.

**POPE BENEDICT’S CONTRIBUTION: LOVE AND TRUTH TOGETHER MATTER**
All of this is said by way of preparation for considering the meaning of Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* and its relevance to the topic of social action in relation to Christian spirituality, our life in Christ.

Getting down to the core of the Holy Father’s message I think a central point he makes is that for the baptized, social justice commitments flow directly from the reality of God's love for us and in return from the response of love we make to God and to others. Pope Benedict XVI says:

Charity is at the heart of the Church's social doctrine. Every responsibility and every commitment spelled out by that doctrine is derived from charity, which, according to the teaching of Jesus, is the synthesis of the entire Law. It gives real substance to the personal relationship with God and with neighbor, it is the principle not only of microrelationships (with friends, with family members, or within small groups), but also of macrorelationships (social, economic and political ones). For the Church, instructed by the Gospel, charity is everything because, as Saint John teaches (cf. 1 Jn 4:8, 16), and as I recalled in my first Encyclical Letter *God Is Love (Deus Caritas Est)*: everything has its origins in God’s love, everything is shaped by it, everything is directed towards it. Love is God’s greatest gift to humanity, it is his promise and our hope. (*Charity in Truth, #2*)

Pope Benedict goes on to add his own particular stamp to the central point about charity or *agape* (self-sacrificial love) as the underlying principle of Christian life. He says that charity needs to be linked to truth since charity is often dismissed as irrelevant for interpreting or giving direction to moral responsibility: “Truth needs to be sought, found, and expressed within the ‘economy’ of charity, but charity in its turn, needs to be understood, confirmed and practiced in the light of truth.” (*Caritas in Veritate, 2*)

In reminding us about the grounding of love in truth Pope Benedict is placing his signature on the Church’s social teaching. It is no secret that Joseph Ratzinger has dedicated his life to reminding us about the difference that the truths of revelation make to what we the Church are about. In placing the importance of revelation before us he is saying that the response of Christians to the reality of oppression, marginalization, and dehumanization – in a word, every form of injustice – is first and foremost qualified by faith. We are Christians because we believe that God has revealed himself to us going back to the call of Abraham and moving forward to the death of the last apostle John. To be people of faith is to accept this revelation and make it the centerpiece of our limited grasp of the truth about God, ourselves and humanity. The fullness of that revelation is found not in a list of propositions or a creedal statement but in a person, Jesus Christ, “the way, the truth and the life.” For us Christians the life in Christ has to be the starting point and inspiration of social action, not the ideology of left or right, nor a merely intellectualized, sophisticated understanding of the social, political, economic implications of Christian faith. That is not enough. We have to ask ourselves whether we are really in love with God and our neighbor and whether our commitment flows from compassion and love more than our ideological comfort zones and passing social trends and bandwagons.

This unabashedly religious and spiritual approach to linking faith and action that I am talking about here comes up against the acids of secularity. Accordingly, reliance upon and reference to religious truths, that is, the truths of revelation, are less and less admissible. We are being told in a thousand ways everyday that religion is fine as long as it has nothing to do with anything of substance. To be promoters of faith and justice today in an age of pluralism and relativism means that we have to find a way to take on this creeping or should I say “galloping” secularism. Pope Benedict XVI’s perceptive dialogue with political and cultural leaders during his 2009 visit to
France sets the tone for this encounter between faith and secularity. It is not a question of denying the proper autonomy of the secular and its competence in addressing many worldly realities and needs. Nor is it about denying the truths that can and do come from whatever quarter in a pluralistic world. Rather, the faith of Christians has something to offer that qualifies what love in action concretely means, socially, economically, politically and culturally. What we have to offer is not social, economic or political plans but some fundamental principles culled from the revelation given us in Christ.

Being faithful to the gift of faith we have received is very difficult because it brings us into tension with brothers and sisters for whom the revelation of faith and its claims to truth are meaningless and whose social ethical values no longer reflect, if they ever did, a common acceptance or understanding of something like "solidarity." Unfortunately, the need to choose between a vision of society presented by Catholic faith with its emphasis on natural law, the common good and divine revelation on the one hand and a truncated, secular vision of human rights and dignity on the other has led to defections in the ranks of Catholic Christians. I fear there will be more. Where this is particularly painful is among Catholics who find the Church' pro-life position on abortion, on the rights and dignity of immigrants, on homosexuality or marriage real stumbling blocks. Certainly there continues to be room for dialogue about these complex issues of personal and social morality, but my point is that faith has to make a difference and in those conflicted areas just mentioned we see it all too clearly. What is at play in the Holy Father’s insistence on the connection between charity and truth is a robust affirmation of the difference that faith makes in one’s social vision. His words awake in us a realization of the debilitating erosion of faith's implications in an aggressively secular world that privatizes and silences the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

WITNESSING TO LOVE: THE MYSTERY OF THE CROSS

In talking about the difference faith makes as pointed out by Pope Benedict’s last encyclical I am not trying to create polarities across ideological divides. Rather, the grounding of Catholic social justice ministries on a robust and unapologetic affirmation of faith demands that those of us who claim to be practitioners are people of faith ourselves. The inspiration cannot be mere adherence to a moral vision no matter how well founded on the Magisterium. This would amount to a kind of moralism that the Holy Father has frequently critiqued in his writings. Rather, the baptismal call to evangelize that we all have received includes the call to both inculturate the Gospel and liberate oneself and others from the bonds of injustice that oppress. This baptismal vocation has to be lived with conviction, put into action, from the inside out. It is a matter of spirituality. Linking faith to social action is not first a matter of getting one’s rationales and theological ducks all lined up. It is about conversion. I go back to the words of Father Arrupe. It’s about falling in love. Stop and think: have you ever really fallen in love? If so, how can one understand that unique, life-altering experience and make it not just a one-shot deal, a flash-in-the-pan experience, but rather a life-long adventure centered on following Christ “who loved us and gave himself for us.”

What is at stake in linking faith with justice, and charity with truth, is nothing less than our very lives. It has always been very dangerous to really follow Christ. That is why what we are about as social justice ministers is as Pope Benedict insists a matter of agape. Agape, as we all know, means self-sacrificial love. The ultimate link between faith and justice is found in the Cross of Christ. Did not our great prophets and saints of social justice demonstrate this: Martin Luther King, Jr., César Chavez, Dorothy Day, Archbishop Oscar Romero, Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and literally thousands of priests, religious, catechists and lay leaders, especially in Latin America, who witnessed to the reality of faith doing justice by giving their lives in service to the poor and oppressed and this in the lifetime of most of us here today? viii
On the Cross Jesus accomplished the reconciliation between all things and God and assured the ultimate triumph of justice against every possible injustice that has ever or will ever be. Our little efforts to somehow bring that justice and peace about is itself a sacrament and sign of the definitive victory of God’s Reign. We live it every day in the Eucharist when God’s brokenness becomes the means by which He enters in to our lives, feeds us and makes us in turn the Body of Christ, instruments of that selfsame love. In the face of setbacks, natural, socioeconomic and political disasters and depressing world events we Christians have hope because we never did think that justice and peace is the fruit of our puny efforts, but rather God’s doing.

CONCLUDING ESCHATOLOGICAL NOTE

And on that note I will end with an anecdote. Forty-five years ago as a young novice I found myself at a reception for a famous Jesuit theologian, Father Joseph Wall, a peritus or expert who had just returned from the Second Vatican Council. Out of the clear blue, as a conversation starter, he said, “You know, some people think that we Jesuits are heretics, and I think they are right.” Puzzled, I said, “Oh, really, Father, how come?” “Well,” he said “we act as if we can save ourselves because we’re so smart, our schools and ministries are so good and we have such a fine reputation.” I said, “Is that a heresy?” He said, “Oh, yes, it amounts to a kind of Pelagianism, the most subtle and persistent heresy that’s ever been, the idea that we can save ourselves because of how good we are and how effective our works are. We forget that it’s all about God’s grace.” I nodded my head knowingly as if I really knew what Pelagianism was. Father Wall went on, “You know, it’s worse than that. We Jesuits not only act as if we can save ourselves, we think we can save everybody else, It’s like telling Jesus to get off the cross, so that we can be lifted up…”

Over the years I have pondered why those providential words were directed toward me at the tender age of 18 as a novice. They have served to keep me, I suppose, a little more honest and remind me about what’s most real. Well, I now direct those words to you, since my years in ministry have demonstrated that the temptation to the Pelagian heresy is alive and well. So many of us “faith and justice types” talk and act as if we want to make the coming of God’s Reign of justice and peace our doing and we are impatient to bring it about. Good Catholic orthodoxy tells us, however, not to worry. As I have tried to suggest in this talk, our eschatological faith in the Final Coming is fed and nourished everyday by a habit of prayer and at least weekly in the Eucharist by which we put ourselves in contact with the only Savior that is, Jesus Christ, the Lord of Justice and Peace. In baptism, the Eucharist and confirmation we have all been called and chosen to follow that same loving Lord. Choosing to follow that Lord in the world means loving our neighbor, especially the poor and vulnerable. So we roll up our sleeves, get down and dirty in the work of charity for, advocacy on behalf of and empowerment of the poor. In the words of our deceased brother Bishop Kenneth Untener quoted so often in memory of the martyred Archbishop Oscar Romero, “We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.”

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iii See Pope John Paul II’s “Letter to the Brazilian Episcopal Conference” issued on the occasion of their Ad Limina visit of 1986 after Cardinal Ratzinger had issued two documents criticizing certain aspects of
liberation theology: Pope John Paul II writes, “...we are convinced, we and you, that the theology of liberation is not only timely but useful and necessary. It should constitute a new state – in close connection with former ones – of the theological reflection initiated with the apostolic tradition and continued by the great fathers and doctors, by the ordinary and extraordinary magisterium and, in more recent years, by the rich patrimony of the Church’s Social Doctrine, expressed in documents from Rerum Novarum to Laborem Exercens.” See Alfred T. Hennelly, SJ, Liberation Theology: A Documentary History, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990, 503


vi Joseph Ratzinger, Christianity and the Crisis of Cultures, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006, 29

vii Karl Rahner, Theological Investigations, XX, 149

viii In this connection a recent chapter by Stephen R. Lloyd-Moffet demonstrates the fundamental role of Catholic faith in the life and work of César E. Chávez. According to Professor Lloyd-Moffett biographers and activists alike have tended to ignore the underlying motivation of Chavez which was his Mexican American Catholic faith pure and simple. See “Holy Activist, Secular Saint,” in Mexican American Religions: Spirituality, Activism and Culture, Gastón Espinosa and Mario T. García, eds., Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008, 106-124