

## “Social Justice”

Michael H. Crosby, OFM Cap.

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While notions related to justice were at the heart of Aristotle’s Nichomachean Ethics and Thomas Aquinas’ Summae, “social justice” is a relatively new notion. General justice, for both, subordinated all human behavior to the common good; particular justice was expressed in commutative justice, restorative justice and distributive justice.

Commutative justice defined relationships among a group’s members. It sought equality based on fair standards for reciprocity (the give and take of human relationships); it also rejected unnecessary encroachment on others’ rights. Restorative justice sought to reconcile conflicted parties in a way that enables them to find common ground for begin a new, more equal footing in a broken relationships. Distributive justice ordered the goods of the community in a way that enabled the most seriously injured to have access to their basic needs.

Social justice builds on all three kinds of justice noted above. Indeed, social justice can be considered as a kind of umbrella holding, not only these three forms, but all other forms of justice.

While seminally contained in Catholic Social Teaching (CST) since Rerum Novarum (“Of New Things”), the 1891 encyclical of Pope Leo XIII, the notion achieved a new acceptability in Quadragesimo Anno, (“After Forty Years”) written by Pope Pius XI in 1931. In this Letter, Pope Pius XI showed that social justice encompasses the common good of all, including respect for human rights (commutative justice) and a rightly ordered distribution of benefits and burdens (distributive justice).

Building on the corpus of papal writings that constitute the core of CST, The U.S. Catholic bishops stated in 1978: “In Catholic thought, social justice is not merely a secular or humanitarian matter. Social justice is a reflection of God’s essential respect and concern for each person and an effort to protect the essential human freedom necessary for each person to achieve his or her destiny as a child of God.” i

In the Old Testament, Justice was a name of God, a key identifier (Jer. 23.6). It defined God’s nature (Is. 30.18) as well as God’s activity (Gen. 18.25; Ps. 9.5). God’s purpose vis-à-vis all in creation involves the establishment of justice. The two main Hebrew words for justice were *misphat* and *tsedâqâh*, *tsedeq* or *tsadâq*. To know Yahweh is to do justice (Jer. 22.13-16). To be in right relationship with God demanded of God’s people that they promote just relations with each other and, especially, those marginated (the widow, the orphan and alien) and those denied the community’s resources (via almsgiving and fasting). In the Septuagint, *tsedâqâh*, *tsedeq* or *tsadâq* got translated as *dikaïosúne*. If human beings were to be just in a way that reflected God’s justice they

needed to observe God's will by caring for others who were marginalized and without resources.

In the four gospels of the New Testament, it appears nine times, seven being found in Matthew (Matt. 3.14; 5.6, 10, 20; 6.1, 33; 21.32; Luke 1.75; John 16.18). Because it is found seven times in Matthew, with five of these in the Sermon on the Mount and two of these dividing the eight beatitudes, Matthew's gospel has often been called "The Gospel of Justice." Indeed the opening words of Jesus find him saying that he must undergo John's baptism to "fulfill" all dikaiosúne (3.15). Furthermore, those who will follow him must image a dikaiosúne that is greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees (5.20).

Since all human relationships must image those of God and, since God's nature is expressed in Trinitarian dynamics, all human relationships must witness to the Economic Trinity wherein the three persons relate to each other in such a way that their very identity ("I AM") is realized only insofar as all three persons share fully in the resources of the Commonwealth (Reign/Reality/Life) of God. From this understanding of God's communitarian nature and functioning, theological anthropology posits three key concepts that under gird social justice: 1) the dignity of every person that is realized in the greatest freedom possible; 2) relationships of solidarity that are realized in the greatest forms of participation possible and 3) equity in sharing of resources that ensure the maximal degree of meeting human needs.

Building on this theological anthropology, social justice demands that: 1) the basic right of freedom for the many (persons) cannot be undermined in ways that ensure the control of the few; 2) the need for social security and solidarity take precedence over the desire for control by the few and 3) the needs of the many take precedence over the wants of the few.

The document in CST that most succinctly summarizes the biblical basis for justice as well as the human cry for justice is the 1971 statement from the Synod of Bishops. At this meeting, which, for the first time, had a very significant number of church leaders from less-developed nations (who, therefore, were experiencing the lack of social justice within their nations and among the nations of the world), they declared that their "analysis of the situation of the world" revealed a "network" of domination that denied people their basic need for freedom as well as dynamics that kept the "greater part of humanity" from sharing in the earth's basic resources. This led them to call for a renewed effort for "action on the part of justice." They further declared that this situation manifested a "grave sin" of social injustice that demanded conversion to God's word. In one of the few places where any leaders in the Roman Church admitted their own need for conversion, they also declared: "While the Church is bound to give witness to justice, she recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes. Hence we must undertake an examination of the modes of acting and of the possessions and the lifestyle found within the Church itself."

If Jesus came proclaiming the gospel of the “reign of God” and if the “reign of God” is grounded in Trinitarian relationships, community at every level of the world must reflect its maker. This demands that social justice ground every relationship throughout society.

Synod of Bishops, “Justice in the World,” in Joseph Gremillion, ed., *The gospel of Peace and Justice: Catholic Social Teaching since Pope John*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1976. Michael H. Crosby, *House of Disciples: Church, Economics and Justice in Matthew*, Portland, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2004. John Donahue, “Biblical Perspectives on Justice,” in John Haughey, ed., *The Faith that Does Justice: Examining the Christian Sources for Social Change*, New York: Paulist, 1977.

Michael H. Crosby, OFMCap. Michael Crosby lives in community with other Capuchins serving the poor in downtown Milwaukee, USA. He has a Masters in Economics and a PhD in Theology, as well as a STL.

iUnited States Catholic Bishops, “To Do Justice,” 8, Washington DC: U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1978.