

Church Social Teaching

“Church teaching” on Guam today

limited to what we pray for and march for: “understanding of marriage as between one man and one woman”, “respect for life from its very beginning to end.” issues are gay marriage, abortion, and perhaps euthanasia. contested *doctrine*, rather than *practice*. Battleground with secular society over faith. What about the other issues here that we are silent about? Let’s go back to the gospel and ask ourselves what the mission of the church truly is, and how that might enlighten us on the subject.

Theological Background

Social justice—or work for development, if you prefer—is an integral component of the gospel today, as it should have been in OT times and was with Jesus. (Read Luke 4:18-19)

- Because the gospel can never remain pure words; it must be incarnated somehow. Song lyrics: “Don’t speak of love, show me.”
- Because the salvation we proclaim in the name of Christ is not just for tomorrow (after our death) but begins with our life here and now. After all, we announce that the Kingdom is begun but not completed in this world. So we can’t just tell people that they are saved in the afterlife without any regard to what happens to them here and now.
- Because in today’s world, justice is the unmistakable embodiment of love. “If you claim to be witnesses to God’s love for us, help us improve our situation by redressing the wrongs done to us.”

Justice (or development, or whatever we choose to call it) can be understood not just with giving people their due, but as helping people acquire whatever they need for growth into full human beings. These needs might include such basics as education, adequate health services, and an income (or land) that will support them and their family.

Recognition of this in early church and before

- Injustice worked against the poor in OT times: defrauding the poor, neglecting those without anyone to provide for them (readings from Amos and OT prophets).
- Jesus’ mission as described when he read in the synagogue in Nazareth (Lk 4): liberation and healing.
- Jesus’s portrayal of the judgment in Mt 25—the norm used for separating the good from the bad is those who have taken care of the needy. “What you have done to the least of my brothers, you have done for me.”
- Inception of deacons to help provide food for widows and the needy among the faithful (Acts)

The church, if it is authentic to its founder and its mission, must show concern for those who are hurting in body and spirit. It must do what it can to provide relief. In doing this, it projects an image of “salvation”—world healed by Christ.

Rise of Social Teaching in a Changing World

In the old order, the social universe was fixed. Classes and roles and places in society were fixed, and advancement limited. In lieu of helping people attain upward mobility, the church could only provide for their basic needs. So the “social” program of the church was what was set out in Matthew 25: feed the hungry, visit the sick, etc.

Fixed world continued through the Middle Ages, with the church and the king working in collaboration with one another.

The old order began passing away with the Scientific Revolution—with Galileo, Newton and others in the 16th century. Divine right of kings (monarchy supported by God) collapsing. Then came the Age of Reason in the 17th century. Mindset became: Faith is not necessary. We can figure it out.

Kingly prerogatives were challenged by the end of the 18th century with the US and French revolutions. New focus on individual rights—the right of persons in the society to determine the government they want, and more.

Industrial Revolution in the 19th century, with invention of the steam engine. Creation of new jobs in manufacturing, rise of factories in the cities, relocation of the population, the rise of the new moneyed aristocracy, age of capitalism.

The old order was rapidly passing away. The stability and order it represented was challenged. Not just the social order, but the life of faith itself; atheism had become a real possibility now. The response of the church was to align itself with the traditional security and stability vs individualism and freedom.

“Syllabus of Errors” put out in 1864 by Pius IX. Declaration that the church could not be reconciled to progress, liberalism, and the underlying tenants of modern civilization. It’s back to the past if we want a good society.

Then the church did a sudden turn-around. The stimulus was the egregious labor abuses in Europe (read Charles Dickens). The new approach of the church was to come to terms with the modern world and accept the changes as irreversible.

In the old view the individual was a peg in a system, a person who had certain responsibilities that were dependant on his status and role. Emphasis was on his duties rather than rights. (Typical of traditional societies!)

In the new view, emphasis was on the individual and his *rights*—rooted in the dignity of the human person.

Encyclical “Rerum Novarum” of Leo XIII in 1891 with its emphasis on the rights of the individual inaugurated the new era.

Another encyclical “Quadragesimo Anno” by Pius XI in 1931 attacked the greed and selfishness that brought such hardships to the working class, and it call for the reform of a system.

The three concerns of the early church social teaching:

Labor. Worker is entitled to a living wage, not simply as much as his labor could command. Concern for more just profit-sharing and better ties between labor and management. This was seen as middle path between capitalism and socialism.

Private property and common good. The right to private property is not absolute. There may be

an inherent right to own property, but this is always subject to the good of the community. All rights are limited by communal purpose. And so land can be expropriated if necessary.

Economic systems. The encyclical still maintains that socialism, as defined by Marx, is wrong. Yet, the concern for the poor that underlies Marxism is legitimate and should be pursued by the church.

Major Themes of Social Teaching over the Last Century

Link of religious and social dimensions of life. The social order is intimately linked with the Reign of God. Hence, faith and justice are necessarily linked together.

Dignity of the human person. Persons have a preeminent place in the social order that must be protected.

Option for the poor. The poor are given special attention in god's eyes, as we see from the gospel passages.

Political and economic rights. All persons enjoy basic rights such as food, shelter, work, education, and also free speech and migration. These rights must be respected by all.

Link of love and justice. Love of neighbor means demanding justice for them, even by transforming structures that block what is due them.

Promotion of the common good. Individual rights are always situated within the context of the common good.

Subsidiarity. Decisions should be made close to the grassroots whenever possible, but this does not deny the responsibility of larger government structures when needed.

Political participation. Democratic participation in decision-making is the best way to respect the dignity and liberty of people.

Economic Justice. Labor takes precedence over capital and technology in the production process. Just wage and the right of workers to organize should be respected.

Stewardship. People are to respect and share the resources of the earth, for we are all part of the community of creation.

Global solidarity. We belong to one human family that obligates us to help one another even across national boundaries.

Promotion of peace. The arms race must cease and progressive disarmament take place if the future is to be secure.

Social Justice Issues Today

What are the needs of people and of the community on Guam that need to be met today? What are the matters of social justice that demand our attention?

Treatment of migrants. Strangers in need deserve compassion and assistance, whether in the US mainland or here on Guam.

Housing for the Needy. The prohibitive cost of housing today as well as the number of homeless on the street make this a major social justice issue here.

Nuclear weapons. At a time when the Pacific is in danger of becoming a world battleground,

nuclear missiles pose a real threat here and elsewhere.

Political say for the island people. People should have the right to determine their own political future.