

A Catholic View of Social Concerns in the United States

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Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace;
Where there is hatred, let me sow love,
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light; and
Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
To be consoled as to console;
To be understood as to understand;
To be loved as to love;

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For it is in
Giving that we receive,
Pardoning that we are pardoned,
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul's Vincentian Mission has Ten Foundational Principles. I have chosen to use the Prayer of St. Francis as the framework for my reflections on these principles as I tell stories of five persons: Richard, Dan, Dianne, Rachel, and Jason.

Two Foundational Principles: The Dignity of the Human Person, and Respect for Human Life: Jason's Story

*Lord make me an instrument of Thy peace
Where there is injury let me sow pardon*

Jason just avoided the death penalty when his crime was reduced to manslaughter, because it was uncertain as to who in a homeless encampment, all in drunken stupors, had actually kicked another man to death. Jason's mom fed him beer in a bottle as an infant. Jason served six years in a prison, where because of its location, there were few program and rehabilitation services offered. Prior to his incarceration and after his release the Society of St. Vincent de Paul (SVdP) periodically employed Jason. A cabinet maker by trade, he struggles to find and keep employment because of his rap sheet and addiction issues. Jason repeatedly says that he wishes he had that moment to live over again. He is extremely sorry for what

happened, but because of current laws he is unable to express that to the next of kin.

Three Foundational Principles: Association, Participation, and the Common Good: Rachel's Story

*Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace;
Where there is despair let me sow hope*

Rachel and her husband, Isaac, have six children. Four were born in the United States. One has battled cancer since early childhood and has had an arm amputated. Another is having issues at school, is stealing from neighbors, and there is the potential for gang affiliation. Rachel and Isaac work in housecleaning, gardening, and the food industry. They are a hard-working family barely able to survive on their incomes plus a little help from SVdP. Three months ago they received their green cards, having been granted refugee status, so they were very excited about becoming voters, taxpayers, and advocates for others. All good news for them? Unfortunately, no. About the same time, because of the tremendous demand for housing in the Bay Area, their landlord decided to raise the rent on their one bedroom apartment from \$1,900 to \$2,200. Their grassroots advocacy group encouraged them (because they are now legal) to be the family whose rent increases they can share with the press. Unfortunately, this resulted in their being served an eviction notice. The landlord, supported by the Health Department, cited them for overcrowding a one-bedroom apartment. Additionally, they now have a grandchild living with them. SVdP continues to walk with them supporting them and offering hope through part-time employment.

The Foundational Principle: Preferential Protection of the Poor: Dianne's Story

*Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace;
Where there is darkness let me sow light*

Dianne lives in her car. Or she did, until it broke down one night and had to be towed to the nearest gas station, where it was pronounced dead and unworthy of resuscitation! Her car was also her transportation to her temporary jobs. She became homeless following the break-up of a relationship and also found herself deep in debt. In her adolescence, she was abused and trafficked. Naturally, the resultant trauma still impacts her. She finds shelters to be unsafe for a single middle-aged woman. On her meager sporadic income she maintains a gym membership, which sounds like a luxury, but she needs it for her daily showers so she can work. It also makes her feel more part of mainstream America. SVdP replaced the car, and when she is not working, SVdP provides her and other homeless people with helpful services such as laundry, toiletries, mail, and food.

Two Foundational Principles: Solidarity and Stewardship: Dan's Story

*Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace;
Where there is sadness let me sow joy.*

Dan died in May from cancer. A senior citizen, for thirty years he had been a "roofless" man on the streets and in the parks. He had a minimalist's carbon footprint, neither driving nor flying, and using

public transportation only periodically. A small cell phone, used to schedule doctor visits, was his only electronic device. His food was plain. He did not use alcohol or drugs, but he would never say no to a cup of coffee and peppermint candy. Over the years, SVdP supplied the many sleeping bags and several heavy jackets that he used as housing. He considered himself a “recycler” of sorts, acquiring “unattended” items, particularly those dropped off after hours at the local SVdP thrift store. He tried to “repurpose” his finds to avoid them going into landfills. His idea of a shower was to wait for the sprinklers to come on in the park. He denied being a Vietnam vet, but probably was. He trusted SVdP; we had been there for him during the cataract surgery that corrected his blindness a few years ago, and we were able to accompany him through his final days. His true identity went to the grave with him, for county authorities considered him a “John Doe.” He had no official papers. SVdP claimed his body and buried him. Not only did Dan maintain a small carbon footprint, but he also did not even leave his “own” set of footprints in the sand.

The Foundational Principle: Human Equality: Richard’s Story

*Lord make me an instrument of Thy peace;
Grant that I may not so much seek to be understood as to
understand.*

Each morning, Richard waits outside my office door at one of our three SVdP Homeless Help Centers with a smile and a kind word when I exit my car. As is my practice, I meet and greet newcomers for a few weeks before inquiring about their needs. As I began to build a relationship with Richard, he opened up and shared that

he was raised by parents who were Zen Buddhists. The deaths of family members, business failures, marriage breakdowns, and the resultant garnishment of wages pushed him to the streets. More recently, his three children have been seeking closer relationships with him, yet he finds himself isolating. As I began to network Richard into additional counseling and support services, the Buddhist Parable of the “Oxherder” came to mind as a resource I could share with him. I had been given a copy during our Northern California Ch’an/Zen/Catholic Interreligious Dialogue. The next morning, I brought the book to my office and presented it to Richard. Tears welled up in his eyes as he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a lovingly worn photocopy of the parable in booklet form. “I read it every day,” he said. Now it was my turn to cry. Equality of all persons comes from our essential dignity. My encounter with, and accompaniment of Richard, continues to affirm the goodness that is within each of us. My hope is that Richard might also experience that goodness from me.

The Principle of Subsidiarity

*Lord make me an instrument of Thy Peace;
For it is in loving that we are loved.*

While I have painted a local mosaic of social issues that impact those often forgotten, suffering, or deprived, is the national mosaic much different? In May at the Georgetown University Poverty Summit, President Obama stated that he feels America is “sorting by class.” What has happened, he suggests, is that those who are doing better and better—those with more skills, more education, luck, and other advantages—are withdrawing to their privileged

places. This is leading to “an anti-government ideology” that “dis-invests” in public goods and creates inequality. Federal, state, and city budgets are not making the same common investments they used to. Others who participated in the summit spoke about our need to understand our role as neighbors to each other.

Some Catholic bishops, in particular the Most Rev. Robert McElroy, the bishop of San Diego, are also challenging the Catholic Church in the United States to build on Pope Francis’s teaching that alleviating the evil of poverty must be at the very heart of the church’s mission. It is neither optional nor secondary. The core teaching of the church on the role of government in combating poverty declares that in addition to promoting conditions that provide citizens with meaningful jobs, nations must provide a humane threshold of income, health benefits, and housing. In *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis’s amazing encyclical on the environment, he powerfully addresses and seamlessly integrates the issue of poverty. Poverty is happening all around the United States

What can be done at the local level? While the problem of social injustice in local areas may differ from those I experience in the San Francisco Bay Area, I believe the social justice principles can still serve as a guide for continuing to build interreligious friendships that help end suffering and bring liberation. All the great religious traditions teach, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”.

In conclusion, I believe there is one other essential element that our ongoing friendships might offer a weary, violent, and overscheduled world at a very grassroots level. **When Pope Francis spoke to us the other day, he spoke about what we are doing as being “healthy.”** I respectfully suggest that one life-giving medicine that we can offer in encountering and accompanying those

on the margins, helping alleviate suffering and building fraternity, might be the gift both our traditions have at their deepest roots: SILENCE. In the midst of caring for those on the margins at the grassroots level of society, we can also offer meditation, contemplation, prayer for the caregivers and those we care for. St. Vincent de Paul, that great promoter of charity and social justice in word and deed, said, “It is in the silence that God speaks to our hearts!” So as we continue to build friendships and reflect on ways to address social concerns, let us never forget the great gift we have to give those in need of health: opening and listening with one’s heart. We all need the human kindness we find in that healthy place.

Ms. Lorraine Moriarty is executive director of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul of San Mateo County, Archdiocese of San Francisco. She serves on the USCCB National Advisory Council, and has served on the California Catholic Conference’s Restorative Justice Committee as well as the Detention and Catechetical Ministries of the Diocese of Richmond, VA. She is an active volunteer in SVdP’s Restorative Justice Ministry and has walked with victims, the homeless, the incarcerated, and supported post release services for more than thirty years. She has been a participant in the Northern California Zen/Ch’an-Catholic Dialogue since its inception in 2003.