

Social Ills and Possible Social Action in the United States

The Need to Support Families and Youth

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In preparing for the dialogue in Rome between Buddhists and Catholics, I have heard insights from other participants that emphasize our common ground as human beings, even though our approaches and understandings vary, even within our separate religious identities. We may have different opinions about how to interpret what we believe is right, but these opinions are in response to universal problems that must be addressed regardless of creed. We have chosen to meet in Rome to discuss social ills and their causes. Our dialogue will aid us in understanding and cooperating to reduce suffering in our communities.

Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture, Vol. 4, No. 2 (October 2015)
120–123 © 2015

Many social ills are caused by greed and hatred, but many problems can start from smaller desires. Even the smallest problem can harm society through suffering within the individual, which causes strife in relationships with other people, and can affect all of us in social conflicts, including war. Such “small” problems have become accepted as a normal way of life, which makes them not obvious to many people, especially when they do not seem to affect us immediately. However, recognizing our mistakes is an important step toward solving them.

Social life makes us pay attention to what we want at the cost of what we need. We are busy with planning what we want to do for the day, or we are busy when the day does not go according to our plans. Even as we struggle to catch up, we distract ourselves with news about other people. We distract ourselves with thinking about people, whether we are talking to them or hearing from others indirectly about what they are doing. We check often to see what other people are doing, and they check what we are doing too. This convenience of checking social media can become an obsession, because social attention can distract us with a constant flow of information that affects our emotions.

Social interaction is not inherently bad, but it is easy to turn this interest into a habit. Communication seems to be more convenient with new inventions and methods of using them, but many of us are ignoring the importance of communication by instead bringing attention to ourselves and talking about things we do not need. One popular activity is to talk about the things we have bought and to brag about our possessions or to see what things other people have bought. For example, we may learn that someone we know has bought the latest iPhone. This may create a desire in us to acquire one, even if we do not need one or, even worse, we may buy one

even if we cannot afford it. We think we are happier with the convenience of social media and modern gadgets, but we are instead creating unhappiness because we model our expectations from other people's activities. As a result, the social ills of financial pressure are interrelated with emotional instability. If a family is struggling to survive, then this constant desire to shop can cause several people to become miserable. New products seem to be coming out very often, so there are many choices in shopping. However, people may make the bad choice of spending uncontrollably, which can harm the other parts of their lives. Too much freedom and rights in society can cause people to make bad choices that lead to social ills. In my example of watching and imitating other people, I explained that the harmful effects of social pressure extend beyond the individual. What seems to be good, such as instant access to people, can be an ever-present source of stress because we think so much about what they are doing that we neglect ourselves and the people who depend on us, such as our families.

When family members lose focus on each other, they may see the other people in the family as further sources of social stress, which can cause people to overreact and direct attention away from the family and toward the self. For parents, the results can be divorce and single parenting, but these problems also cause children to misbehave. Families can also be split through the neglect or abuse of family members, either verbal or physical. Poor communication causes stress in family relationships, which can then be connected to many social ills inside and outside the family. As a result of stress in the family, some people may form unhealthy eating habits, become ill, or find themselves unemployed, which can lead to poverty. Rising prices in the housing market and inflation can lead an already struggling family to homelessness, making its

members more vulnerable to society's ills. Problems in the family may also cause young people to turn elsewhere, which may result in youth and juvenile violence and the increased risk of crimes and imprisonment, resulting in a further burden on the family and the rest of society.

The issues I discuss are not only due to modern technology. Their causes are to be found in human nature, as is evident in America's history. We can see how the future will develop by identifying similarities in the past. After World War I, the United States entered a time of prosperity. Developments in technology and manufacturing made it cheaper to produce goods. The high taxes of the war had also dropped by this time, which encouraged Americans to spend more. Road infrastructure was expanded and made transport easier. As a result of these conveniences, many Americans lived a lavish and flamboyant lifestyle. This sounds like good news because we did not have to worry about survival; but peacetime caused a return to the bad habit of materialism. Before the decade ended, Wall Street had crashed, signaling the start of the Great Depression. Not only did Americans suffer, but America's devastation was felt worldwide; some countries suffered from this economic downturn up until World War II. This cycle of excessive spending to the point of poverty has constantly repeated itself. All of these conditions built the country and world to what it is today, and our way of life as well as the way we think has not changed much since.

When enough people choose an unsustainable lifestyle, their consequences affect people beyond cities and states; in brief, it affects all of us. Choosing to spend more than we earn is not a new problem, but it is now more widespread due to the increased materialism as a result of technological and manufacturing conveniences.

It is only when a social problem becomes serious enough that we can look away from our obsession with our desires.

We are aware that many social issues affect us directly or indirectly. The simple life has changed with the development and expansion of society. People used to work to get resources for survival, but now it is the other way around: they work to get more resources. People do not need very much, but society pushes us to possess more than we need. We learn from society to buy things we cannot afford, and we become part of the problem by being greedy. People become ignorant as they accept this behavior automatically, which makes them more miserable. By paying attention to the social desire of artificial materialism, people ignore their natural needs.

What people need is stability, which is available through social education, skills development, and morality. Morality is an important foundation of peace and order, and it is present at all levels of society. Generally speaking, society has generally incorporated morality through traditions that connect families to their communities. Our interactions in small groups teach us how to live in a harmonious society. In times of conflict, people have also often turned to religion as a traditional source of guidance. There is a sense of security when entering a house of worship because wherever we may travel around the world it is a familiar place. Even more familiar is home because it is where we have been with our families from the beginning. Both of these places can act as our moral homes in the face of confusion from outside influences.

Whether one thinks of his or her family as a home, or congregation at a place of worship as an extended home, the people in each environment serve as our family. They provide refuge in good and bad times. When there is a strong fraternal connection,

mutual respect, and understanding among members, we stand for each other at anytime and anywhere we are needed. Developing loyal, respectful behavior among family members is crucial. Family members learn how to live and establish their own values rather than let society tell them how to live.

We learn from the family to act as one unit to build values, relationships, and skills. Family members share physical and mental togetherness, financial support, and other familial resources by understanding that they need to take care of each other. They try to be honest and to develop patience, forgiveness, and cooperation. These qualities cannot be learned in a short period of time or taught by force. Religious scriptures can be used to teach us the value of good behavior. If we expect a harmonious society where people can find happiness, it is our responsibility as religious leaders to teach people what we have learned as part of our training. We must show our communities the good that we can do by collaborating as role models so that people can learn from our example. When family members experience connectedness and how much they depend on each other, they can develop a positive attitude and have a great deal of gratitude for one another.

Family members are responsible for taking care of each other. This care can create a peaceful, successful family environment as members work together in service of each other's needs. Happiness in the family can be found in caring for each other irrespective of age, health, or wealth. The commitment to share work and fulfill needs can create a happy, family environment. Family members will learn how to appreciate what others are doing and see their positive rather than negative actions.

Communication among family members requires spending the time to talk and listen with openness, honesty, and kindness.

A friendly talk can improve relationships, develop trust, and heighten the feeling of safety. Family members can turn to spiritual teachings with questions such as, “What is life about? Is there any meaning to life? How can we spend more time together? Why are we here? How can we cope when there is a tragedy? Can we make our lives better?” Questions like these can help us maintain a positive outlook on life and provide guidelines for meaningful living. These topics are even more suitable for our religious families because they are our primary purpose and contribution to society.

In response to the social ills in the United States, I have been working with other people who also want to help reduce suffering. You are all aware of what happened in Emanuel AME Church in South Carolina. I met with other religious leaders at the First AME Church of Los Angeles to hold an interfaith prayer service. This is a reminder that social issues are not limited to one group or area; they are signs of how we must be available for people’s needs in general. I have been involved with the Interreligious Council of Southern California since I moved to the United States in 1981. I have also been involved with the Buddhist-Catholic Dialogue since its inception, when Pope John Paul II visited Los Angeles. We just had our annual Buddhist-Catholic forum, sponsored by the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. We participate in each other’s religious events, such as the Buddha Day celebration in temples and the Archdiocese’s Requiem for the Unborn. We also meet at public events organized by Los Angeles County, such as the Mental Health and Spirituality Conference, and other events organized by the Los Angeles Police Department and the City of Los Angeles. Another significant gathering is called “Connections,” where city officials, law enforcement officers, school principals, religious

leaders, and community organizations meet to discuss what is happening to youth in our community and what we can do to help.

As religious representatives of our communities, we need to work together in the spirit of fraternity and ask ourselves, “How can we contribute to supporting the moral foundation of families in our communities?” I suggest that we also meet to discuss how we can help each other and our youth toward a positive use of social communication. We can share our diverse experiences and create an environment of “family” in our meetings. We can discuss ways to enrich our understanding of each other’s beliefs as we meet in churches, schools, and temples. It is important to extend this conversation to members of the public because they may have suggestions as well. By working together, we can create productive ways of communicating and enact action plans to help make families and youth more healthy and successful in our cities.

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