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Living Justly in a Sinful World 1: Who Is My Neighbor? Catholicism and the Common Good

Objective

- To analyze elements of Catholic social teaching, specifically with reference to the notion of the common good, and basic rights and responsibilities

Catechism References

1905–48, 2401–63

Notes to the Teacher

In this lesson, students are exposed to some of the basics of Catholic social teaching. The Church has a long tradition, rooted in the Scriptures, of working to promote the social or common good of all people. While actions have not always been consistent with instruction, it is nevertheless one of the great treasures and gifts of the Church. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has spoken frequently on matters of social justice, echoing the teachings of Vatican II (see especially the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*) and Pope John Paul II (see especially the encyclical *On Social Concern*). Students will engage in more extended study of these and other documents later in their academic careers but will be exposed to age-appropriate principles intimately connected to material they have recently studied.

Catholic social teaching is rooted in the notion of the fundamental dignity of every human person. When people form a community, they voluntarily engage in a division of labor, and people use whatever talents they have for their own good and for the good of the community. The community depends on individuals to make their contributions and assumes a corresponding duty to all individuals. Human interdependence in community creates an obligation for individual's rights to be protected and their corresponding duties to be enforced.

There is a tendency in many communities to draw boundaries. Some are included, and some are excluded. This is perhaps a normal situation, but the wisdom of the Catholic tradition teaches that despite whatever political or social boundaries there might be, the fundamental humanity of every person creates a more significant bond. You should expect resistance to this notion in class. Adolescents are quick to form exclusionary groups, as we have seen. But also there is a powerful predisposition in American society to exclude others. A quick glance at any newspaper article on issues of immigration or attitudes towards Muslims in light of September 11 gives witness to that.

In this lesson, students explore some of the scriptural references that lead the Catholic Church to suggest that some boundaries are simply not acceptable. Jesus draws wide circles, and even if he was limited by some

of the customs of his day, in large measure he was radically inclusive. He was rebuked for being a friend of tax collectors and sinners, an associate of prostitutes. He told a tale of a good Samaritan which surely shocked most hearers. He told a story about a rich man seemingly condemned because of his inattentiveness to the poor at his gates. And, as students learned in Lesson 13, in the parable of final judgment, Jesus declares that whatever is done to the least ones is done to him. Students need to analyze these stories more fully than they may have in the past in order to realize their implications and understand the extension of those notions in Catholic social teaching.

Have several Bibles available for this lesson. If at all possible, use the New American Bible.

Procedure

1. Begin with prayer. Invite a student to read *Exodus 22:20–27*. Share with students that this teaching is given by Moses as a practical extension of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. Discuss the implications of these teachings for modern Americans. Pray for the wisdom to find practical ways to implement them in our society.
2. Write the word *justice* on the board. Place students in groups of three, and assign them the task of coming up with a definition for this term. When all groups are done, ask students to share their definitions. A very simple definition might indicate that justice is securing for each person what they deserve. Attempt to gain class consensus on such a definition. At this time, it is not important to identify all of those things that people might deserve, but use a few examples that will immediately appeal to students. Here are some examples. If a student earns an “A,” then a teacher should give that student an “A.” Failure to do so would be unjust. Students deserve teachers who come to class well prepared and ready to teach. They deserve to be treated with respect. Once students are reasonably happy with this definition, move on.
3. Share the idea that in Jewish culture there were some things that people did which automatically branded them as sinners, and hence as outcasts. Ask students if they can identify anything in our society that might be similar to that. Make notes on the board. Mention that in ancient Jewish society, prostitutes were just such people, and so were tax collectors. The “sinful woman” is generally regarded as someone known for sexual sins, though the text does not necessarily support that interpretation. Mention that tax collectors were seen as collaborators with Roman oppression and that they were known to extort more than they were legally expected to collect from people.
4. Direct students to **Exercise 37**, A Friend of Tax Collectors and Sinners. When students have read the passages, lead students in a discussion. In the first passage, note that Jesus quotes others who call him a drunkard and a glutton, an associate of tax collectors and sinners. Jesus tells a parable in which he situates his conduct. Jesus offers the love and forgiveness of God to those most in need. He

didn't associate only with the "good" people. His words and deeds match in how he deals with the "sinful" woman who bathed his feet. So it is also with Zacchaeus. He is shown as having some interest in Jesus but is a known sinner. Jesus goes to share a meal with him, and Zacchaeus has a change of heart.

Suggested Responses:

1. *He is considered a glutton and a drunkard. He associates with sinners.*
2. *She was a sinful woman.*
3. *public reputation, temptation*
5. Share with students the notion of the common good, making use of Notes to the Teacher. Be sure to remind students of the prophetic tradition of care for the weakest members of society as a sign of covenant fidelity. The answer to the question "Who is my neighbor?" in the Old Testament certainly included the weakest members of society—in teaching, if not always in practice.
6. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus squarely addresses the question of who is a neighbor in the famous parable of the Good Samaritan. In order for students to appreciate the vivid teaching Jesus offers in this parable, review the adverse relationship that existed between Jews and Samaritans. From the time of the restoration after the exile in Babylon, Jews and Samaritans were bitter enemies. Samaritans rejected the notion that Jerusalem was the chosen place of worship and even opposed the rebuilding of the temple. Jews regarded Samaritans as people who had impure worship and had even become impure as a people by intermarrying with non-Jews. From time to time, there were violent attacks between both groups, even to the point of raiding one another's places of worship. To evoke a sense of the hatred that existed between these two groups, one might compare the sense of hostility that exists between Al Qaeda and the United States. How likely would it be, in our imagining, for an Al Qaeda operative to stop and help a wounded American? (Expect some real resistance to this idea.) Students should also be told that the priest and Levite in the story would have been people who devoted their lives to assisting with worship in the Jewish community and that if they had come in contact with the man on the side of the road, they would have become "ritually unclean" and thus been prevented from doing their jobs. So, ironically enough, by not helping they followed the law.
7. Direct students to **Exercise 38**, Who Is My Neighbor? When students have completed the reading and reflection questions, pair them, and have them share responses.

Suggested Responses:

3. *It would have shocked the hearers into a new way of seeing the world. If even my enemy is my neighbor, I have to reevaluate many of my actions and attitudes.*

4. *Answers will vary. Try to find examples appropriate to your local community, and then consider some nationally appropriate ones, such as immigrants, migrant laborers, and Muslims.*
5. *Answers will vary. Help students think about their relationships with one another. Concern for the common good must begin locally.*
8. Ask students to try to connect the concepts of justice, the common good, and the attitudes taught by Jesus. Help students to see that the notion of the common good suggests that a society must look out for the needs of all within that society. Working to make sure that all fulfill their duties and receive the things that are due to them is the function of justice. Not only is the government responsible for justice, but so too are all the members of a society. Jesus challenges his followers in the prophetic tradition to make concern for those who are outcast and weakest in society a special priority. In Catholic social teaching, this notion is known as a “preferential option for the poor.”
9. Direct students to part A of **Exercise 39**, Preferential Option for the Poor. Students will read the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. When they have finished it, lead the class in analyzing the passage. Typically, students find this parable difficult to accept and think it unjust that the rich man went to hell. Some objections might be “How do we know the rich man was bad?” and “How do we know that Lazarus was good?” The scriptural presumption is that the judgments of God are indeed just, so we need to try to make sense of them. To do so is not difficult in this case. Lazarus lying at the gate was a clear appeal to the rich man to love his neighbor. He chose not to do so. Failure to meet the needs of the poor is in a very real sense failure to meet the needs of Christ, who in the Catholic tradition is found hidden in the neighbor, and especially in the poor. The parable is an appeal to reach out to the poor in our midst.
10. In 1979, Pope John Paul II celebrated Mass in Yankee Stadium, located in a very poor section of the Bronx. Have students read the excerpts from his remarks in part B and answer the questions. Discuss responses as a class.
11. Ask students to think about who the poor are in your area and what specific things students might do to meet the needs of the poor. Have students share these ideas in the next lesson.

Optional Activity

Invite a team of students to conduct a panel discussion in front of the class in which they discuss topics like “What is the common good?” and “How do unions attempt to protect the common good?”