

Social Justice in Catholic Schools: A document to assist reflection on present practice or in the introduction of a new program

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Introduction

The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (2008) promotes an education that produces active and informed citizens who are able to think deeply, able to make sense of the world and work for the common good. In addition, social justice programs in Catholic schools develop the dispositions of empathy (the capacity to stand in the shoes of another) and solidarity (the capacity to walk with another). *The whole of the Church's social doctrine, in fact, develops from the principle that affirms the inviolable dignity of the human person.*¹

What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8).

There are three dimensions to acting justly: commutative justice, distributive justice and social justice. Commutative or legal justice is about the rights and laws that govern fairness in people's dealings with one another. Distributive justice apportions the benefits in a community on those whose basic material needs are unmet and those who have more are expected to bear more of the burden.

Social justice obliges people to be active and productive participants in the life of society and that society has a duty to enable commutative and distributive justice to flourish: *it means working to eliminate the structural causes of poverty and to promote the integral development of the poor, as well as small daily acts of solidarity in meeting the real needs which we encounter.*²

*At the very heart of the Gospel is life in community and engagement with others.*³ Figure 1 outlines ten key principles of Catholic social teaching which are grounded in the person of Jesus Christ, *I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full (John 10:10)* and provides the way to *bring forth in our lives and actions a primary and fundamental response: to desire, seek and protect the good of others.*⁴ Biblical justice is done when we give all human beings their due as creations of God who seeks to make the object of his love whole. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, doing justice includes not only the righting of wrongs (judgments on sin and injustice) but generosity and social concern, especially toward the poor and vulnerable.

This document explores best practice in how social justice is being implemented in Catholic schools in Queensland and encourages schools to "get beyond the barrier of aid, of gifts, of assistance, to reach the realm of justice"⁵. *Each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society. This demands that we be docile and attentive to the cry of the poor and to come to their aid.*⁶

¹ Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church par. 107

² Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* [188]

³ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* [177]

⁴ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* [178]

⁵ Dom Helder Camara, Bishop of Recife, Brazil

⁶ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* [187]

The key principles are:

Human dignity	Each person is equal in dignity and rights, and every human community, every race and culture is equal in dignity and rights.
Preferential option for the poor	The needs and rights of the poor and marginalised are given special attention in God's eyes.
Political and economic rights	All people are obliged to take an active role in the development of socio-economic, political and cultural life and not be passive recipients of other people's decisions.
The common good	Every group in society must take into account the rights and aspirations of other groups, and of the wellbeing of the whole human family.
Subsidiarity	Responsibility and decision making should be kept as close as possible to the people most affected by a decision or policy. Assistance is offered when individuals or groups are unable to accomplish something on their own, and given in such a way that it fosters freedom and participation.
Solidarity	People are social by nature and can only grow and develop in relationship with others.
Stewardship	We have a responsibility to care for the world's goods as stewards and trustees, and not merely, as consumers.
Economic Justice	Every economic decision and institution must be judged in light of whether it protects or undermines the dignity of the human person. Any economic system is judged by what it does for and to people and by how it permits all to participate in it.
Participation	The Gospel message outlines the need to act with care and concern for one another, and if necessary, to work to correct the wrongs and injustices done to others. This can be realised through the application of restorative justice principles and processes that promote, reconcile and rebuild right relationships with God and with one another.
Promotion of peace	Peace is an outcome of justice and is dependent upon right order among people. In the words of Pope John Paul II, "Peace is not just the absence of war. It involves mutual respect and confidence between peoples and nations. It involves collaboration and binding agreements."

Figure 1

Key principles for schools

When considering social justice in Catholic schools it is important to consider the following:

1. A focus on the Gospel.

The Gospel compels us to be involved in justice for all and the need for care and concern for those who do not have access to the most basic opportunities in society⁷. A social justice program provides the opportunity to break open scripture and makes it relevant to students and staff. The program needs to be experiential, sustainable and provide real experiences for staff, students and parents (and possibly parish). A process such as *The Pastoral Circle*⁸ will help participants observe, analyse, reflect and act from the perspective of Catholic social tradition outlined above.

2. Evidence-based practice.

- An audit of the school community's justice needs as well as those of the wider community will help deliver consistency between internal school practices and procedures and outward-focused justice initiatives.
- The development of programs will also require sensitive, respectful consultation with the receiving community in all decisions and planning of programs. Programs must allow those communities receiving aid to be the subjects of their own development, not the object of someone else's idea of how they should be developed.
- Ongoing review, reflection and debriefings are an important part of social justice programs with an evaluation held at school level and with the partner community at its completion.

⁷ Fr Bill O'Shea and Peter Gagen, *At Home with God's People*, Faith & Life, pp190-191, 2011

⁸ *Shared Visions*, The Vincent Pallotti Centre Vol 22, No 1, 2011.

3. **Both charity and social justice programs have a purpose.**

Although both charity and justice aim to fulfil a need, their approach to that need is different. *Charity* is the traditional Christian word for love expressed through actions that might help people survive a current need and are informed by the common good. Best practice will:

- identify items most needed by the receiving community;
- avoid providing items that could be culturally inappropriate or difficult to dispose of if unwanted;
- purchase goods from the local community where possible to support local businesses and avoid flooding local markets with free goods or handouts that could put the local communities out of work;
- allow community leaders to disperse items appropriately and avoid giving presents directly to children or to some families only.

Social justice programs, however, seek to:

- remove the causes of human suffering and go deeper into the root cause of the problem;
- promote positive values and focus on delivering empowerment to people and never treat people as commodities nor as mere recipients of aid;
- develop active participation as a member of a global community to stand in solidarity with the poor and marginalised and identify with their situation;
- not only listen to the poor and marginalised, but learn from them and learn with them in a relational context and build a shared future.

4. **A whole of school approach to social justice.**

- An authentic social justice culture within a Catholic school will reflect the school's mission, its prayer/ritual life and its policies, structures and practices. It enhances Catholic identity and fits in with the religious life of the school.
- It will be integrated into the school's curriculum and not left to the Religious Education program alone. However, there will always be a strong link to the Religious Education curriculum, especially to what happens in the classroom.
- The process will involve the Principal's approval, preparation and formation (around Catholic social teaching), parent/parish information sessions and commissioning of participants.

5. **Community engagement.**

Stakeholders need to be consulted. Successful community engagement has the following attributes⁹:

- **Authenticity.** Authentic relationship formation is based on openness and trust, and formed at both personal and institutional levels. These relationships require time and 'nourishment' to form and develop;
- **Sustainability.** Sustainable partnerships require planning and supportive structures including communication strategies, particularly when partners are separated by distance;
- **Mutuality.** Mutuality implies that together, the communities and the school seek to identify inequalities and injustices, to understand the nature of these, and to explore and implement possible solutions.

6. **Learning from the experts.**

The mentoring and support offered through Caritas, Catholic Mission and St Vincent de Paul organisations assist in identifying suitable projects, developing appropriate partnerships and guide how to work and build with a community. Their experience may be useful in ensuring a sensitivity to power imbalances, earning the respect of host communities, maintaining the safety of participants and being attentive of legal and liability concerns in any resulting immersion experience.

7. **Good practice is transformative for staff, families and community.**

The program invites participants to reflect and build a deeper understanding of their ability to affect positive change in their immediate, respective worlds as a life-long commitment that is not disconnected from everyday behaviour. This daily behaviour and interaction with others is defined in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37). Reunions of past participants can promote additional service, lay missionary vocations and political/economic advocacy.

⁹ Peter Howard, Ann Gervasoni, Jude Butcher, *Implementing a University Paradigm for Effective Community Engagement*, 2007

Further Considerations

There are a number of considerations in applying the seven guiding principles:

- **Catholic ethos.** Even if the project being supported is secular, involvement should be from a Catholic perspective towards a more just world as articulated in the Gospel and the principles of Catholic social teaching outlined above.
- **Experiential participation.** “Fundraising” is the easiest place to start but much more can be accomplished through experiential learning. Students need to feel that this learning is something that is good, raw and engaging. Students need to be challenged but not overwhelmed and careful monitoring through regular debriefs will help measure students capacity to cope. Where necessary, further resources and counselling may be needed to further support students.
- **Inclusion.** Key (influential) students from each of their peer groups (justice, sporting, drama etc) need to be invited to participate. As a group they create an interest and passion that attracts other students to be involved.
- **Formation.** It is important to provide training, support and reflection on experiences in the field. Staff need formation from the outset with “champions” identified to progress the social justice agenda. Adequate financial support and release time for staff may need to be provided.

Examples of Best Practice

The Australian Bishops request that all Catholic schools show support for Caritas, Catholic Mission and St Vincent de Paul Society. Some examples of good practice are:

- Marginalised groups are identified within the school and local community and ways are developed to demonstrate welcome and support.
- Structured immersion experiences for students and staff that provide valuable insight into the lives of others (e.g. street retreats, visiting care facilities).
- [Caritas](#) immersion experiences e.g. to Cambodia, Malawi, Bolivia.
- [Catholic Mission](#)’s Getting Involved Globally (GIG) program and alternatives to “schoolies”.
- [St Vincent de Paul Society](#)’s Mini Vinnies program and the High School Conferences generally involve three components: ‘see’ (education and awareness), ‘think’ (formation and reflection) and ‘do’ (community service and fundraising). ‘See, think, do’ encourages young people to think and talk about their spirituality.
- [Children’s Holiday Camp Program](#) provides Year 11 and 12 students the opportunity to care for a child with special needs over a four-day period. The majority of the camps run in the September and December school holidays.
- [Edmund Rice Camps](#) provide holiday experiences for young people aged 7 - 16 years considered marginalised or with disadvantaged backgrounds.