

## *Social Relations*

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But if we society as an organism, as the Body of Christ, the illness of any part hurts the whole, and injustice done to any part is injustice to all.

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**T**he previous section focused on how we set up barriers to seeing ourselves and each other as whole people. We must rediscover our variety and richness of character, and search out a way of letting that variety and those contradictions work together in our personalities.

What goes for individuals goes for society as well. The Second Vatican Council taught us that the role of the church is to "humanize" the world. We cannot do that without being human ourselves. But we'd better not put off our work in the world till we have become "truly integrated" or "fully realized" or whatever this season's pop psychologist is calling it. The same road leads us to both goals at the same time.

I remarked in the previous section that the quest for wholeness is not rugged individualism, but community-building and servanthood to all. We are not isolated individuals, but members of humanity. Both creation stories in Genesis show

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God creating humanity as social beings: "It is not right for the man [Adam, as a human being] to be alone (Gen. 2:18)." The Council said, "By their innermost nature human beings are social beings, and unless they relate themselves to others they can neither live nor develop their potential." And as long as we live as servants, we have knocked out the two props that support the injustice of our social relationships: dominance and submission.

We are so used to basing our social life on these two principles that we think of them as being not only right, but also a fact of nature, like the North and South Poles. It has infiltrated every aspect of how we look at the world around us. Better, stronger, higher, more advanced, more up-to-date, more expensive — these are words of praise we never question. Utter them and the discussion ends. "The pursuit of excellence" is our watchword. We make lists of ten best this and ten most that. The Guinness Book of World Records is a best-seller (that word again!). In many cases this seems harmless enough. But it spills over into the way we behave toward each other. It is only a step from the best film of 1992 to best language, best religion, best culture, best nation, best army, best bomb. And there is a danger that the best bomb will soon be the last bomb.

White over black, male over female, adult over child, young over old, English over Spanish over Native American, straight over gay, rich over poor. Catholic over Protestant over Jew over Muslim over Hindu and so on down the line — we make judgments like these all the time. Whenever any group has power, it enforces these judgments whether legally or through more subtle means. And all too often the goal of the oppressed is merely to get on top, to reverse the previous state

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of affairs. This may be moderated with the language of rights, but rights are still something we use to protect our status rather than bringing wholeness and unity to society.

This ordering of society from top to bottom is maintained and strengthened by our passion for dividing and classifying people. We set up categories and expect everyone to fit one or another of them. These categories may be class or race or religion or gender, but they all prevent us from seeing each other as fully human. To be different in our society, no matter what the difference, is to be an outcast. After all, our industrial method of production requires not only the pieces that go into a machine, but also the people who run the machine, to be interchangeable.

The sense of differentness is kept fresh by our constant competition. Even those who equate Darwin with the Devil accept the notion that "survival of the fittest" is the basic commandment in social life. (This notion, often called "social Darwinism," was firmly repudiated by Darwin himself, who claimed nothing more for his "Theory of Natural Selection" than that it explained the development of species.) Who these days reads Peter Kropotkin's Mutual Aid, which showed that throughout nature and human history, sociability and cooperation have been at least as important as competition in the survival of species? The "law of each against all" is now the destructive first rule of industrial society — each man against his brother (I use the male terms deliberately), "the battle of the sexes," the arms race. No doubt one reason gay men are so feared and loathed in industrial countries, capitalist or Marxist-Leninist, is because they raise the specter of men loving and working together rather than competing.

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This situation has long been used by those in power to maintain their dominance. "Divide and conquer" was used by the British to rule India. It is used by the robber barons of the U.S. to keep workers from organizing. It is used in prisons to keep inmates from demanding decent treatment and in politics to keep oppressed groups from seeing connections between issues and thus making common cause.

Pope John Paul II described the situation this way in his second encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*: "The desire to annihilate the enemy, limit his freedom or even force him into total dependence becomes the fundamental motive for action; and this contrasts with the essence of justice, which by its nature tends to establish equality and harmony between the parties in conflict."

The conflict may take different forms in different situations, and different approaches are necessary. It is impossible to prescribe for all cases. In keeping with the teaching just cited, though, we can see that if a method "tends to establish equality and harmony" it is probably just.

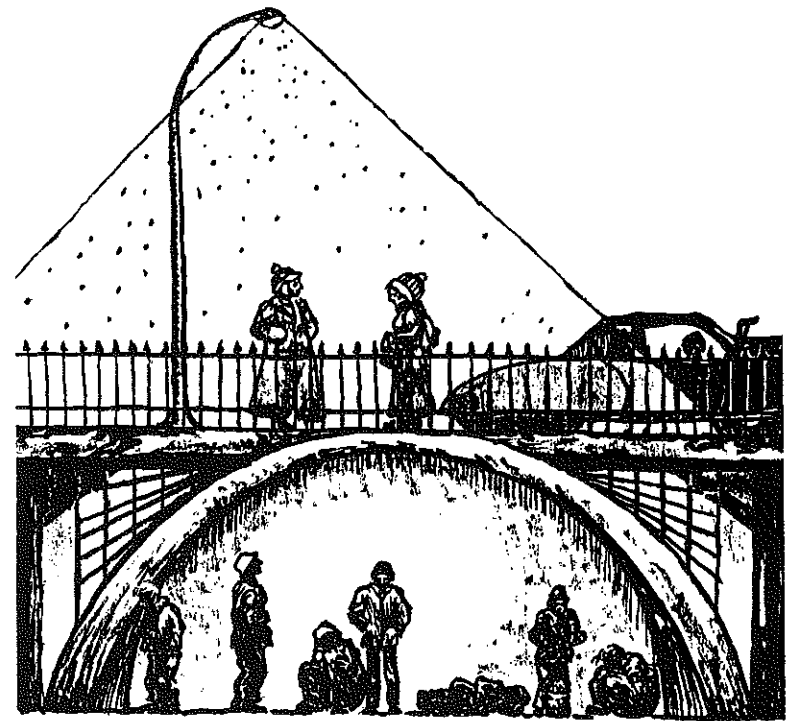
One unjust means, according to traditional Catholic social teaching, is class warfare. Our daily experience of working with people Dorothy Day called "the victims of the class war" has given us a perspective on this question not generally available to bishops or academic theologians. Albert Parsons, the Haymarket martyr, once declared, "Anarchists do not make the social revolution. They prophesy its coming." The same could be said of class war — especially if we recall that prophets aren't people who predict the future, but are simply those who can see the present with special clarity. For class warfare is going on already, all around us.

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The class war is not so much an attitude, as the popes have tended to believe, as it is a fact of simple arithmetic. As long as the goal of the managers (whether owners or not) is "a healthy bottom line," in other words profit above all else, it will be in their interest to reduce wages to the lowest level possible. Practically speaking, that means robbing the worker of as much of the value created by her labor as they can get away with. Only a system that puts human dignity above profit will be able to resolve this contradiction.

In a sense, of course, this *is* a matter of different attitudes. But the attitude that must change is that of the managers. It does no good to urge such change on the wage-



earners, who can only sell their bodies or their souls, their physical or their mental labor, in order to survive. It not only does no good, it is positively wicked, because it robs workers of the opportunity to bear witness to the daily truth of our lives. It reduces us from people to entries on a spreadsheet. In theological terms, it steals from us part of the vocation we share in baptism: to be prophets, truth-tellers. Preaching class harmony to us is violence against the working class, and thus is itself a weapon of class warfare.

When Parsons spoke so confidently of prophesying the social revolution, he believed it was imminent. A hundred years later and more, we have had to bear disappointment. We have seen over and over that capitalism can adapt itself just enough to keep its hold. As I write (1992), its eternal victory is loudly being proclaimed. Those of us who never believed that the U.S.S.R. represented communism (and the Catholic Worker over the years was often criticized for this) have nothing to recant. Nevertheless, we have no reason to be glad. We have seen the capitalism of the New World Order. We have lived through it in a decade and more of farm foreclosures, unemployment, union-busting, homelessness, infant mortality, nonexistent health care. We have watched as wealth was stolen not only from the poor, but from the middle class as well, and handed over to the rich. We have proclaimed that this upward redistribution of wealth was accomplished mainly by the government's borrowing to finance the most obscene military buildup in our nation's history.

We look at the state of our country, and we recall Thomas Jefferson's words: "Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that his justice cannot sleep

forever." It is centuries too late now to warn about the danger of class warfare. We can, however, argue that we must proceed in the spirit of nonviolence, and we do.

Dorothy Day reminded us that the Christian's vocation is to suffer wrong rather than to inflict it. Peter Maurin put it neatly when he said we should be "go-givers, not go-getters." He was restating Christ's teaching that the one who would be greatest among the disciples must be servant of all. The Collect for Peace in the Book of Common Prayer calls God "the author of peace and lover of concord . . . whose service is perfect freedom." Servanthood, or in Kropotkin's phrase, "mutual aid", is indeed freedom, freedom from arbitrary roles, freedom from the system that demands that we rise on the backs of our sisters and brothers. It is the Cross, but it is also the resurrection. It is giving, but (as St. Francis reminds us) "it is in giving that we receive."

The suggestion that justice can come from taking up the role of servant sounds to many like telling the oppressed to keep to their place. We preach not passive resignation, but active love. Willing service to the "least of my brothers and sisters" is not slavery to the rich; it is building up a whole new society. By all means we must work for liberation — but through solidarity, solidarity with everyone. This removes the power of the oppressor to oppress, since that power is based on fear of harm to ourselves. Give freely what is required of you, and more, and how can you be robbed?

This seems like weakness in our competitive world — and so it is. But St. Paul reminds us that in weakness is our strength, in the folly of the Cross is wisdom. That wisdom has its place in this world. It is our weakness that disarms our

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enemies. And what is more necessary, as a first step, than to replace division and hopelessness with solidarity and hope? How is any revolution to achieve justice without the willing service of all the people, and how are people to learn to work together for justice if warfare, however rooted in "class justice" (as if justice could be anything but universal!) is all they know or are allowed to know?

Willing service, love in action, is more powerful than any weapon because it is more disarming than any threat. Pope John Paul II calls it *mercy* and says, "True mercy is the most profound source of justice." And, he says, mercy "is manifested in its true and proper aspect when it restores to value, promotes and draws good from all the forms of evil existing in the world and in human beings." Mercy makes no enemies and so, attracting no revenge, founds a lasting revolution.

It is important to clarify I am speaking here of how each of us interacts with other human beings as people. The evil of our social system is not the work of a few individuals. It is the outcome of unjust *structures* — ways of doing things and assumptions about what and who has value. This is one reason violence, even in response to the real violence of systems, cannot bring genuine change. Killing an individual or many individuals who in the end are merely agents of structural injustice does nothing to change the *system* of oppression. New agents can always be found or bought.

Too often, though, those who are seduced, or forced, into working to maintain injustice begin to cling to their office as a kind of identity. In such cases, honoring the office is dishonoring the person. Treating a young man at a demonstration as a "cop" or a "soldier" rather than as "Willy,"

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"Ron," or "Jesus" is to fail to see him as truly human. Only by going beyond the uniform (designed, as the name implies, to take away the person's individuality) to the heart can we begin to engage in the common search for truth that is the core of nonviolent revolution. The insistence of judges, for instance, on being called "Your Honor" instead of "Sister Joan" is proof that the State recognizes the power of naming. Recall the Psalmist's praise of our Creator: "You have called me by my name."

Our revolutionary theory is rooted in spiritual values and bathed in the mysteries of faith. Its source is the Most Holy Trinity, "that inscrutable unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," in Pope John Paul's words, "in which love, containing justice, sets in motion mercy, which in turn reveals the perfection of justice." It depends on our vision of society not as a machine for producing goods, but as the Mystical Body of Christ. If we believe creating wealth is the solution to all problems, the division and competition I described earlier is quite functional. We do not need to consider the nature of the work we give to people, because prosperity is worth any amount of mental illness resulting from the equating of a person with his or her productivity or from ignoring the need of each human being to be creative. If the mental illness is too serious for the worker to continue, no matter: the workers are interchangeable, we'll get another. The same goes, of course, for physical breakdowns due to accident, industrial poisoning, inadequate housing and clothing, lack of health care or starvation.

But if we see society as an organism, as the Body of Christ, the illness of any part hurts the whole, and injustice done to any part is injustice to all. So it is to everyone's

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advantage to foster human creativity and wholeness, to let work be a celebration of humanity, to share, "to laugh with those who laugh and weep with those who weep" because as Vatican II taught, in caring for all of us "God desired that all human beings form one family."

An impossible visionary picture, you say. Naturally, it can never be achieved without grace and personal preparation. But Peter Maurin described a training program which not only builds for the future, but also allows a glimpse of the Commonwealth in the present. Peter's "rule" for the Catholic Worker is "the daily practice of the works of mercy."

The corporal works of mercy are feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, ransoming the captive and burying the dead. The spiritual works of mercy are instructing the ignorant, counseling the doubtful, comforting the sorrowful, admonishing sinners, forgiving injuries, bearing wrongs patiently, and praying for the living and the dead. Each of us does some of these better and some less well. Each of us has one he or she is incapable of. None of us succeeds often enough to boast. None of us, thanks to God's grace, fails often enough to despair. Because we do them ourselves rather than paying the State or some private charity to do them for us, there are plenty of hard times; but because we do it for love, and not for money, we get much in return. There is no glamour, but there is the vision of "a new heaven and a new earth wherein justice dwells," the vision of "a Kingdom of truth and life, a Kingdom of holiness and peace," the vision of the Day of the Lord when "everyone beneath her vine and fig tree shall sit, and we shall study war no longer."

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We are social revolutionaries. We "hunger and thirst for justice" and we work for it too; but we know from personal experience what the Pope teaches, again in *Dives in Misericordia*: "Love conditions justice and in the final analysis, justice serves love. The primacy and the superiority of love over justice (this is a mark of the whole of revelation) are revealed precisely through mercy."