



# Catholic Social Justice Reflection Guide



*Use this resource for  
individual reflection,  
or with a group!*

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
How to Use this Guide	
Uphold Human Dignity .....	3
Scripture: 1 John 4:7-11	
Learning from Blessed Archbishop Oscar Romero	
Prayer: Sister Marge Clark, BVM	
Embrace the Right and Responsibility to Participate .....	6
Scripture: James 2:14-17	
Learning from Sister Antona Ebo, FSM	
Prayer: Sister Carren Herring, RSM	
Be in Solidarity .....	9
Scripture: 1 John 3:17-18	
Learning from Pope Francis	
Prayer: Sister Patty Chappell, SNDdeN	
Rise above Individualism .....	12
Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:12-13	
Learning from Thomas Merton	
Prayer: Sister Simone Campbell, SSS	
Unite with Workers.....	15
Scripture: James 5:4-6	
Learning from Dorothy Day	
Prayer: Sister Anne-Louise Nadeau, SNDdeN	
Nurture the Earth.....	18
Scripture: Genesis 2:15	
Learning from Sister Carol Costen, O.P.	
Prayer: Sister Leanne M Jablonski, FMI	
Conclusion .....	21

## Introduction

The principles of Catholic Social Justice are central to NETWORK's mission, and have guided the actions of lay and religious women and men for over a hundred years. This reflection guide will explore the six core principles we at NETWORK have relied on to ground our work and direct our actions. Inside, you will read personal stories, reflect on the wisdom of fellow justice-seekers, and be invited to contemplate how you live out the principles of Catholic Social Justice in your life. We call this collection of wisdom and instruction "Catholic Social Justice" because these principles emerged from Catholic sacred texts, official Church teaching, and the writing and witness of remarkable Catholic women and men. People of all faiths or no faith are welcomed and encouraged to learn from and live out these principles.

## How to Use This Guide

This guide is designed to be used by individuals or groups. Following this introduction there are six parts, each one dedicated to a Catholic Social Justice principle with readings, quotes, reflection questions, and a prayer. We recommend spending six weeks working through all of the material. You may choose to divide the content into multiple days for reading and reflection, or set aside time once a week to go through all of the week's materials.

We encourage you to share your experience, learnings, and feedback with us over social media or via email ([info@networklobby.org](mailto:info@networklobby.org)). To join us in our advocacy while using this reflection guide or after, visit NETWORK's Action Center at [www.networklobby.org/ActNow](http://www.networklobby.org/ActNow).

## Establishing a Contemplative Practice

Beginning this week, spend five minutes in quiet contemplation each time you open this Catholic Social Justice Reflection Guide. Sit with the questions: "What do I need to learn?" and "What new information or ideas am I being invited to consider today?" You may not have an exact answer, but the important thing is simply being open to listening for whatever rises in you. Whether alone or in a group, quiet your mind for five minutes and invite the Spirit to be present with you and lead you during your time with the material, before you begin to read or discuss.

## What Is Catholic Social Justice?

NETWORK's mission and values arise out of the long and rich tradition of Catholic Social Justice. This tradition encompasses the teachings of the Church (Catholic Social Teaching), but is also broader, including the witness of all Christians and people of faith who have committed to proclaiming the love of the Gospel and the justice of God's kingdom in the public sphere. We at NETWORK are inspired by the unwavering commitment of Catholic Sisters to proclaim the good news of the Gospel in solidarity with people who are oppressed and who are living in poverty. Catholic Social Justice is not a theory or an intellectual exercise, but rather how people of faith are called to live the Gospel in a broken and suffering world.

## The Foundations of Catholic Social Justice

### Scripture

Catholic Social Justice is grounded in scripture—in the wisdom of the Hebrew prophets and in the person and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. The Hebrew Scriptures both denounced injustice and announced a new way of being in the world and of relating to God. In the Christian Scriptures, Jesus identifies with and fulfills the Jewish prophetic tradition saying, “The Spirit of God has anointed me to proclaim liberty to captives” (Luke 4:18) and gives his followers a new commandment: “Love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12). Likewise, we are also called to denounce injustices where we see them, and to announce new, just ways of living together in community.

### Catholic Social Teaching

In addition to scripture, our Catholic Social Justice principles are inspired by Catholic Social Teaching, or the official instruction of popes and Catholic bishops on social issues. In *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), one of the four constitutions of the Second Vatican Council, Catholics are called to address current social and economic problems, as it is the responsibility of Christians in every age to “scrutinize the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel” (4). When we are instructed to face global inequality and poverty with courage in order to fight and overcome injustices, the document reemphasizes the essential teachings of the Church throughout the ages. More recently, Pope Francis has breathed fresh life into these teachings by challenging us to work together to build an economy of inclusion.

### Catholic Social Tradition

Catholic Social Justice also looks to the public witness of believers who have embodied these principles as additional sources of guidance, inspiration, and instruction. Catholic Social Justice looks to individuals like Sister Miriam Theresa, SNJM (Caroline Gleason) who fought for decent working conditions and the nation’s first minimum wage in Oregon, and Sister Antona Ebo, FSM, who has spent her entire life struggling for racial equality. It is not only the examples of vowed religious women and men that are sources of inspiration, but also lay people like Dorothy Day and Cesar Chavez who have taught us how people of faith can work to create a just, more peaceful society.

### Lived Realities

As Pope Francis said in *Evangelii Gaudium*, “realities are greater than ideas” (2013). Accordingly, our understanding of Catholic Social Justice is deepened by the experience of those who suffer from injustice and their prophetic call for change: women, communities of color, the economically exploited, and all those whose dignity is denied by unjust systems and structures. Catholic Social Justice prioritizes people’s lived experience and listens to the cries of the people.

### Conclusion

As one united NETWORK community, inspired by the principles of Catholic Social Justice, we commit to upholding human dignity, embracing our right and responsibility to participate, being in solidarity with those living in poverty, bridging divisions, uniting with workers, and nurturing the Earth.

## **Uphold the Dignity of Each Person as an Equally Valuable Member of the Human Family**

### **Description**

Catholic Social Justice teaches us that all people are made in the image of God and so possess an equal and inalienable worth. Because of this essential dignity, each person has a right to all that they need to allow them to live their full potential as intended by God. God is love, and we were created to love and be in relationship with each other. Human dignity is upheld when each person's needs are met and when they live in harmony with others in a community that together pursues the common good.

### **Scripture**

"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love. In this way the love of God was revealed to us: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might have life through him. In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also must love one another." (1 John 4:7-11)

### **Something Which Can Never Be Taken Away**

*By James Luisi*

Last spring I went to jail for the first time. Not because I had been charged with any crime or because I had been arrested—I was with a group of students from Boston College's School of Theology and Ministry. We were in jail together that Sunday morning, seeking to pray and break bread with the inmates.

I suppose the jail matched what I could imagine based off a season of *Orange is the New Black*. The walls were painted cinder block. The doors locked behind us wherever we went. Corrections officers were stationed periodically throughout the hallways, buzzing us through.

I wasn't even sure why I was there that morning or what I was expected to do. As part of a school-wide week-of-service, some of us had the opportunity to go to the jail to do "prison ministry" but I had no clue what that actually meant. Was I expected to talk to the prisoners? Counsel them? Tell them about God?

I breathed a sigh of relief when I learned I wouldn't be going alone through the jail that day. Our task would be rather straightforward and simple: my fellow student and I would go with the seasoned chaplain to three locations in the prison; we would celebrate a communion service with a pre-written reflection from the chaplain and offer the prisoners a chance to say a word or two about the readings if they felt so called; and then we would pack up and go to the next location. I took comfort in the

**Then God said:  
Let us make human  
beings in our image,  
after our likeness.**

**Genesis 1:26**

simple formula that our day would follow, knowing there was not much I could mess up so long as I didn't miss getting buzzed through a door.

I don't really know anything about the men I met in the jail that morning. I quickly learned that I was not being asked to "do" anything for them. There was nothing to do. The simple act of being present, of acknowledging the fundamental human dignity of the men in jail that day by praying with them, by sharing the Eucharist with them—that was all I could do.

Society often values human life only by what it can contribute to its prosperity. Most people might even agree with the reasonable-sounding idea that, for the most part, society should be structured to give to each person that which they have earned. It's hard to argue with the logic of a meritocracy—if you work hard, you should be able to get ahead in life; if you pursue higher education, you should make more money doing less strenuous work; if you have an innovative idea, you should profit from your ingenuity.

People in jail are severely limited in their ability to contribute to society. In fact, they have been removed from society precisely so that society can extract a debt from them. It is not for me to say whether or not the men I met that day merited their sentences; in fact, many if not all of them may have been duly processed for a law they had broken.

But this is precisely the point. Human dignity is not only something which cannot be earned, it is also something which can never be taken away, even if one has committed a heinous offense. What I learned by praying with those in jail is that human dignity radically transcends both merit and demerit—nothing can add to nor detract from the humanity of any human being, in any circumstance, ever. A person couldn't even renounce his or her own human dignity, so intrinsically is it linked to their very being!

We should be able to agree that those things which are necessary to uphold the human dignity of our fellow sisters and brothers—things like nutrition, shelter, healthcare, community, the opportunity to participate in society—are things for which no one must prove merit. Then, perhaps, we can begin to have a reasonable debate about how we can go about providing these things to all people. This might sound pretty radical, but then again, that's human dignity.

*James Luisi is a third year student at the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry, and a former NETWORK Government Relations Associate.*

## Learning from Blessed Archbishop Oscar Romero

*"When we struggle for human rights, for freedom, for dignity, when we feel that it is a ministry of the church to concern itself for those who are hungry, for those who have no schools, for those who are deprived, we are not departing from God's promise. God comes to free us from sin, and the church knows that sin's consequences are all such injustices and abuses. The church knows it is saving the world when it undertakes to speak also of such things."*

-Blessed Archbishop Oscar Romero, The Violence of Love  
Archbishop of San Salvador from 1977-1980, Archbishop Romero was martyred for speaking out against poverty, violence and oppression in El Salvador.



## Church Teaching

"A society lacks solid foundations when, on the one hand, it asserts values such as the dignity of the person, justice and peace, but then, on the other hand, radically acts to the contrary by allowing or tolerating a variety of ways in which human life is devalued and violated, especially where it is weak or marginalized."

Pope Benedict XV, *Caritas in Veritate* (2009)

## Pope Francis Says

"Promoting the dignity of the person means recognizing that he or she possesses inalienable rights which no one may take away arbitrarily, much less for the sake of economic interests."

Pope Francis, *Address to European Parliament* 2014

## Reflection Questions

- In what ways do I honor my own dignity and the dignity of others?
- Do I treat strangers as if they are my sister or my brother and members of one single human family? What keeps me from always doing so?
- What do human beings need in order to live a truly human life worthy of the dignity they possess? Why do some people not have everything they need?
- What are the root causes of discrimination and oppression?
- How should we respond to discrimination? As individuals? As a community?
- How can I use my abilities to uphold the dignity of each person, and to work with others to create a just society?
- What would our society look like if "Love thy neighbor" was the guiding principle?

## Prayer

God of Love, you have created all that is good and rich and full all that sustains and energizes humanity. You have created all women and men in your very image - of goodness and of worth. We believe that you are truly present in each of us, no matter our heritage or our creed.

We pray that all people can live in harmony with a place to call home, and be nourished in body and in spirit. We hope for immigrants to be welcomed, and are saddened when anyone is oppressed because of race, gender or heritage. We grieve the violence and hatred in our cities and in countries around the world.

We ask your forgiveness for any times we have succumbed to words or actions that harm another human person. Help us to always honor each person as created in your likeness.

We look to you to open all human hearts, lead us to show your goodness by always placing people before money or power.

*Written by Sister Marge Clark, BVM*

## Embrace Our Right and Responsibility to Participate with Others in Our Shared Public Life

### Description

Catholic Social Justice teaches us that we have a responsibility to participate in politics out of a concern and commitment to the good of the community. This means that we cannot be bystanders who scoff at the political process. Instead, we are called to vote, to inform ourselves about the issues of the day, to engage in serious conversation about our nation's future, and to learn to listen to different perspectives with empathy. This responsibility to participate means each person also has a fundamental right to participate, and must be equipped with the resources needed to do so.

### Scripture

"What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he or she has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him or her? If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,' but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead." (James 2:14-17)

### Becoming Eagerly Engaged

*By Senator Catherine Cortez Masto*

Over 60 years ago, my father and mother met in Las Vegas, Nevada. My father, the son of a Mexican immigrant, got his start parking cars at the Dunes Hotel and eventually rose to become the head of the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority – working to help build Las Vegas into the premier destination it is today. My father, Manny Cortez, lived his life following three principles: work hard, be honest, and respect everyone.

If it were not for my grandparents and parents' hard work and the opportunities this country afforded them, my sister and I would have not been the first in our family to graduate from college and I would not be serving as the first Latina senator in the U.S. Senate.

For me, the appeal of public office has never been about the spotlight or political influence. It has always been about giving back – an important principle my parents taught me from a young age. I ran for public office because I want to give back to the community that has given so much to my family.

I've spent my career working to solve problems. As Nevada's attorney general, I introduced over 40 bipartisan bills that

**The Lord asked Cain,  
"Where is your brother  
Abel?" He answered,  
"I do not know. Am I my  
brother's keeper?" God  
then said: "What have  
you done? Your brother's  
blood cries out to me  
from the ground!"**

**Genesis 4:9-10**



were signed into law by a republican governor. As Nevada's newest U.S. Senator, I will work to find common ground with my new colleagues to end the gridlock in Washington and get to work on the issues most important to Nevadans.

I also believe in ensuring the most vulnerable among us have the opportunities they need and deserve to succeed. When I first ran for public office and later for Senate, I promised that I would be a voice for those who have often been neglected. That's why I have been a tireless advocate for human rights issues, especially domestic violence and sexual assault prevention. When women are given the support and tools they need to succeed, our communities thrive. That is why I am committed to passing equal pay for equal work legislation, raising the minimum wage, and passing comprehensive immigration reform to keep hardworking immigrant families together.

While we have a president who has wasted no time putting the anti-immigrant, misogynist, xenophobic rhetoric he campaigned on into dangerous action, I will continue fighting every day for an America that is inclusive and welcoming, not one that divides us and takes us backwards. But I cannot do it alone. We must all become eagerly engaged in our communities. Together, our voices and our actions can, and will, make a difference.

*Senator Catherine Cortez Masto represents the state of Nevada. As a former attorney general, she has championed the rights of the vulnerable and fought for comprehensive foreclosure reform.*

## Learning from Sister Antona Ebo, FSM

*"You want to really, actually learn about peace? Well, get busy doing something for justice... Each of us is called to do something for our neighbors to express our love."*

-Sister Antona Ebo, FSM, Faith in Ferguson prayer service, 2015.  
Sister Antona was one of the first African-American women to enter the Franciscan Sisters of Mary and was an advocate in the civil rights movement.

## Church Teaching

"In the Catholic Tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation."

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* (2015)

## Pope Francis Says

"Sometimes we hear: a good Catholic is not interested in politics. This is not true: good Catholics immerse themselves in politics by offering the best of themselves so that the leader can govern"

Pope Francis, *Meditation*, September 16, 2013

## Reflection Questions

- How am I called to participate in community decision-making and our shared public life?
- What worries or fears are there about participating in politics and public life?
- How does your faith influence your political decision-making?
- Who has the power in our society to make changes? Does every voice count? Why or why not?

- What does it mean that we have both a right and responsibility to participate? Why and how do these two belong together?
- How have some people been systemically excluded from our political process? Who benefitted from this system of exclusion?
- When I find myself discouraged by politicians or politics, how can I remain hopeful and continue to pursue justice?

## Prayer

"Thank God our time is now when wrong comes up to face us everywhere, never to leave us till we take the longest stride of soul we ever took..." From *A Sleep of Prisoners* by Christopher Fry

God of the ages, you placed us at in this point in history with the mandate to serve. We are standing on the shoulders of giants who brought us to this place of freedom and equality. You ask us to continue their good work and to right the wrongs that remain. We have the power to speak our truth, to vote, to work on behalf of those who still yearn for freedom and full inclusion in society.

This is our time. It is our challenge to raise up those who are pushed aside. Strengthen us to see beyond appearances and find you in everyone. Bless us with the gift of leadership, the courage to walk unafraid into the future, the compassion to reach out to those in need, and the conviction to stand alone when necessary.

We recommit ourselves to the work for justice inspired by civil rights leader A. Philip Randolph – "A community is democratic only when the humblest and weakest person can enjoy the highest civil, economic, and social rights that the biggest and most powerful possess."

Amen.

*Written by Sister Carren Herring, RSM*

## Be in Solidarity with Those Who Are Living in Poverty in the Struggle against Structures of Injustice

### Description

Catholic Social Justice teaches us to look at reality through the eyes of those who have been made poor by oppression and injustice. We do this when we join together to end poverty. People forced into poverty have the single most urgent claim on the conscience of the nation because they are denied the right to a life consistent with their inalienable dignity. The responsibility to uphold the dignity of each person means that we must judge our lifestyles, policies, and social institutions in terms of how they affect those suffering from the injustice of poverty.

### Scripture

"If someone who has worldly means sees a sister or brother in need and refuses her or him compassion, how can the love of God remain in this person? Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth." (1 John 3:17-18)

### We Are There for Each Other

*By Alice Kitchen*

My inspiration to pursue justice comes from a confluence of family, educational experiences, and exposure to many courageous faith leaders through the years. These remarkable leaders have spoken up when their voices were not welcome, marched in cold winter weather, disobeyed unjust laws, and became shields for those in harm's way. I learned from them that to be silent is to be complicit in injustice and oppression.

In my community, I have found that working with our local Jobs with Justice (JwJ) organizers, a part of the national Jobs with Justice, as a Co-Member of Loretto has afforded me a deep connection to what Solidarity looks like up close. We, faith leaders, work as a part of the team supporting the priorities decided by the JwJ core committee. This has led us to work with unions in the low wage worker movement, now for the fourth year.

We must work to overturn the prejudice against workers and their right to unionize. Unions are the structural way to provide working people with human dignity. 100 years of Catholic Social Teaching is deeply pro-union and is loudly proclaimed in five major encyclicals.

Is this the manner of fasting I would choose, a day to afflict oneself? To bow one's head like a reed, and lie upon sackcloth and ashes? Is this what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Is this not, rather, the fast that I choose: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; Setting free the oppressed, breaking off every yoke? Is it not sharing your bread with the hungry, bringing the afflicted and the homeless into your house; Clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own flesh.

Isaiah 58:5-7

Applying NETWORK'S 2020 Mend the Gaps policy vision locally, I focus on the wage gap for fast food workers, home care workers, child care workers, and adjunct faculty and their employers. As faith leaders and justice-seekers, we are encouraged to accompany them on such action steps as:

- Going out on strike when the workers exercise their legal right to strike without fear of being fired, connect them to the media ( we are not their voice, we amplify their voice)
- Securing signatures for referendum ballot initiatives and petitions, writing letters to the Editors, speaking out on talk radio and social media
- Joining with workers in the exercise of civil disobedience to witness to injustice
- Accompanying workers at rallies to demonstrate the need to shrink the wage gap, secure health care coverage, and sick leave and a family-friendly work place. (Remember the *acompañamiento* model, from the experience of women in Nicaragua working with Canadian social workers. *Accompaniment* is best characterized by nonintrusive collaboration, mutual trust, agreement on the social ill, egalitarian spirit, commitment to solidarity, and an agreed upon plan of action)
- Joining with a worker when they go to court, traveling to the state capital to educate elected officials to pass minimum wage laws- \$15 and a union

Solidarity means working with organizations across our communities and states in a unified manner to carry out shared goals. That means we meet with them, create implementation plans, and support the identified lead agencies. Cohesion is a challenge as each organization has a unique mission and they often have differing approaches. This requires the hard work of identifying, analyzing and planning strategy. It can mean compromise, lining up behind others, and bringing our members along to support others.

The power of working in unison with others is: strength in numbers, voices, and the ability to leverage structural change and increase wages. This is not a one way street. Reciprocity is the ingredient needed to make this work. We are there for each other, standing in solidarity, no matter whether the issue is ecological reforms, payday lending regulators, health care coverage or minimum wage increases.

*Alice Kitchen is a NETWORK board member, Co-member of the Sisters of Loretto, Adjunct Professor at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, School of Social Work, and retired Licensed Social Worker.*

## Learning from Pope Francis

*"God's heart has a special place for the poor, so much so that God "became poor" (2 Cor 8:9). The entire history of our redemption is marked by the presence of the poor. Salvation came to us from the "yes" uttered by a lowly maiden from a small town on the fringes of a great empire. The Savior was born in a manger, in the midst of animals, like children of poor families; he was presented at the Temple along with two turtledoves, the offering made by those who could not afford a lamb (cf. Lk 2:24; Lev 5:7); he was raised in a home of ordinary workers and worked with his own hands to earn his bread."*

-Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* - 'Joy of the Gospel,' 2013

## Church Teaching

"When there is a question of protecting the rights of individuals, the poor and helpless have a claim to special consideration. The rich population has many ways of protecting themselves, and stands less in need of help."

Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* (1891)

## Reflection Questions

- When have I ignored a person asking for help? What feelings or thoughts caused me to do so?
- How does poverty erode human dignity? What does it feel like not to have one's dignity respected?
- What is life like for people living below or near the poverty line? How can we look at reality through their eyes? Why is this important?
- Reflect on this quote from Lilla Watson, an indigenous woman of Australia: "If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. If you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." What does this mean? How is "being in solidarity with" different than "helping?"
- What does it mean to speak "for" someone instead of "with someone"? How can we speak "with" and not "for"?
- How does our community's policies and decisions impact people in poverty? Do we always consider the impact of our policies and decisions on people living in poverty? How can we make sure people living in poverty have priority in our decision-making?

## Prayer

God of Wisdom, open our eyes and minds to the unjust economic structures that we have created that have reduced our sisters and brothers to subsistence living. For we believe that

*Response:* We are not free until we are all free.

God of Transformation, help us to find ways to change our life styles and ways of supporting greed so that all have enough of the earth's resources to live with abundance and dignity. For we believe that

*Response:* We are not free until we are all free.

God of Insight, enable us to see beyond our narrow perspectives and to realize that our social institutions and national policies have created the degrading forces that condemn our sisters and brothers to generations of poverty. For we believe that

*Response:* We are not free until we are all free.

God of Goodness and Compassion, grant us mercy for our blindness in NOT seeing you in those made poor by oppression and injustice and grant us a fierce passion to join together in the struggle to end poverty. For we believe that

*Response:* We are not free until we are all free.

*Written by Sister Patty Chappell, SNDdeN*



## Bridge Divisions, Rising Above Individualism for the Good of the Whole Community

### Description

Catholic Social Justice teaches us that all people are children of God so every person belongs to a single and interconnected human family. As sisters and brothers, our needs are met in relationship with one another. When making individual and collective decisions, we have a responsibility to consider the good of the community over and above the interests of the few. Authorities at every level must work together for the good of the entire community. A just community is united in creating the conditions for every person to flourish and realize their full human potential as children of God.

### Scripture

"As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit." (1 Corinthians 12:12-13)

### Understanding That We Are All Connected

*By Sister Nancy Sylvester, IHM*

One of the principles of Catholic Social Justice Teaching is needed more than ever today. It is that of the Common Good. We, as a nation, have lost our sense of responsibility as citizens to address the needs of the whole community and seem to only advocate for those policies which affect me and my group. As we move further and further away from each other and self-identify with specific groups, it becomes harder to address what we need as a people, as a nation, to realize our full potential as children of God.

When I was at NETWORK, I heard Congresspersons talk about the common good. Today, it is rare if anyone raises it up. Yet, for me it is growing in importance as we navigate an increasingly complex political terrain that has become mean spirited and divisively partisan. We have forgotten that governments play an important role in our lives. Catholic Social Justice Teaching reminds us of this when in the encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, Pope John the XXIII wrote that "the attainment of the common good is the sole reason for the existence of civil authorities." Every society needs a body who will promote the good of each of us and has the authority and capacity to step back and address the good of the whole.

In Catholic Social Justice Teaching, to promote the common good is to create the conditions for every person to realize their full potential as children of God. To do that is to safeguard and foster the various rights first stated in *Pacem in Terris*. These rights include: life, the right to bodily integrity and the means necessary for its proper

**You have been told,  
O mortal, what is  
good, and what the  
Lord requires of you:  
Only to do justice and  
to love goodness, and  
to walk humbly with  
your God**

**Micah 6:8**



development – food, clothing, shelter, medical care, rest and social services; freedom to worship; to work; to form associations; to immigrate and emigrate; and to take an active role in public life.

This understanding of the common good, safeguarding what we need to flourish as full human beings, reflects the scriptural image that we are all parts of one body and each is needed for the whole to function and be healthy. We are the Body of Christ and we find our fulfillment in relationship with each other.

Our society is far from embracing such a teaching, yet I believe it is critical for our future. It is understanding that we are all connected and all share the same Earth-home that will enable us to relinquish group agendas for the common good so that we can move forward together as a nation.

My work for justice and systemic change has evolved over these past years to address the transformation of consciousness. I believe that contemplation—individually and communally—is transformative. Becoming more attuned to God working within you frees you to see your biases, your assumptions, your world view. You awaken to the fears you have of those who are not like yourself; you begin to stop reacting to people and ideas and begin to respond.

It is with this self-awareness rooted in our deep center where the Divine dwells that will free us to create a space to meet those with whom we differ. We need to talk to each other and to those whom we elect about the values and vision we have as a people, a nation, a planetary community. We need to come to understand that we are all sisters and brothers; we are all connected, sentient and non-sentient beings. If we grasp that and respect each other, then the possibility exists that over time we can imagine a new way forward where the common good is addressed in mutually enhancing ways.

Nancy Sylvester, IHM, is founder and director of the Institute for Communal Contemplation and Dialogue (ICCD) since 2002. She served in leadership of her own religious community, the Sister Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Monroe, MI. [www.ihmsisters.org](http://www.ihmsisters.org) as well as in the Presidency of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. Prior to that she was National Coordinator of NETWORK, the National Catholic Social Justice Lobby. A new free resource that is related to this topic can be found at [www.iccdinstitute.org](http://www.iccdinstitute.org) click on “Finding Our Balance Post Election.”

## Learning from Thomas Merton

*“In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness.... This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud... I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.”*

-Thomas Merton, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander  
Thomas Merton, O.C.S.O. was a Trappist monk, poet, and the author of numerous writings on peace, justice, and ecumenism.

## Church Teaching

"[Solidarity] is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all."

Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987)

## Pope Francis Says

"Politics, according to the Social Doctrine of the Church, is one of the highest forms of charity, because it serves the common good. I cannot wash my hands, eh? We all have to give something!"

Pope Francis, *Daily Homily*, September 26, 2013

## Reflection Questions

- How are we experiencing divides in our community? How can we build bridges together?
- How do I respond when someone disagrees with one of my core values?
- Sister Simone Campbell has said that we should approach those who are different from us or who have different perspectives with "holy curiosity." What do we think Sister Simone means by that? How can we practice holy curiosity?
- What does rising above individualism and considering the good of the whole community look like in practice?
- Do we have a just tax system where no one is unfairly burdened and everyone contributes their fair share? What ideas do we have for reforming our tax system?
- When we envision a healthy, vibrant community, what does that vision look like to us? How can we act together to make that vision a reality?

## Prayer

O Divine Love, you create us at every moment and call us into the fullness of life in community.

Open our eyes that we might see how we as humans are all connected with each other and all of creation.

Open our minds that we might have imagination and insight to create policies for the good of all.

Open our hearts that we might reach beyond our personal preferences, fear and individualism to bridge the divides in our world.

Open our hands that we might give and receive caring even with those we disagree with.

Oh Divine Love, flame up in us that we might know that together we reflect your fullness of life.

Let nothing separate us from the reality that in you we live, move and have our being.

In the name of all that is holy we pray.

Amen

*Written by Sister Simone Campbell, SSS*

## Unite With Workers to Build an Economy That Puts People, Not Profit, at the Center

### Description

Catholic Social Justice teaches us that work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God's creation. Work should enhance the dignity of the person by allowing all workers to express their uniqueness in a way that contributes to the common good. The community must also recognize the dignity of work by ensuring that it is justly rewarded with a living wage. As human beings are social, they have a fundamental right to organize collectively to create better working conditions for themselves and others.

### Scripture

"Behold, the wages you withheld from the workers who harvested your fields are crying aloud, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on earth in luxury and pleasure; you have fattened your hearts for the day of slaughter. You have condemned; you have murdered the righteous one; he offers you no resistance." (James 5:4-6)

### Called to Defend the Rights of Workers

*By Joseph Geevarghese*

Every day, Charles Gladden wakes up and goes to work at the US Capitol. As a cook and cleaner at the Senate, Charles serves some of the wealthiest and most powerful people in our nation. But every night, Charles goes to sleep outside a metro station just a few blocks from the White House. Even though Charles worked full-time, he was homeless.

Charles is just one of millions of low-wage federal contract workers who earn so little that they cannot live in dignity. In fact, the U.S. Government is America's leading low-wage job creator, using our tax dollars to fund more poverty jobs than Wal-Mart and McDonalds combined.

This means that we the people – as taxpayers and citizens – are complicit in creating an economy that keeps Charles and other workers struggling to survive. But it also means that we have the power to stand-up and transform a broken system.

Charles is already taking action alongside other low-wage federal contract workers. Over the past four years, thousands of these workers – supported by Sr. Simone and other faith leaders – walked off their jobs 20 times to help 20 million contract workers win higher wages, protection against wage theft and other labor abuses, and paid leave benefits through Presidential action.

**Woe to him or her who  
builds their palace by  
unrighteousness, their  
upper rooms by  
injustice, making their  
own people work for  
nothing, not paying  
them for their labor.**

**Jeremiah 22:13**

However, these gains are now at risk of being lost. Like our Latino and Muslim brothers and sisters, the rights of workers are under attack.

Catholic social teaching calls us to stand in solidarity with workers to transform unjust political and economic systems that put people last. We are called to defend the right of workers who are organizing to create a better life for themselves and their families. We are called to safeguard the right of workers to enjoy the fruits of their labor. And, importantly, we are called to unite with workers like Charles to hold our elected officials accountable to end our government-sponsored low-wage economy.

*Joseph Geevarghese is the Director of Good Jobs Nation, an organization of low-wage federal contractors organizing for living wages and union rights. Read more at: <http://goodjobsnation.org>.*

## Learning from Dorothy Day

*“What we would like to do is change the world--make it a little simpler for people to feed, clothe, and shelter themselves as God intended them to do. And, by fighting for better conditions, by crying out unceasingly for the rights of the workers, the poor, of the destitute--the rights of the worthy and the unworthy poor, in other words--we can, to a certain extent, change the world; we can work for the oasis, the little cell of joy and peace in a harried world. We can throw our pebble in the pond and be confident that its ever widening circle will reach around the world. We repeat, there is nothing we can do but love, and, dear God, please enlarge our hearts to love each other, to love our neighbor, to love our enemy as our friend.”*

-Dorothy Day, *The Catholic Worker*, June 1946

Dorothy Day co-founded the Catholic Worker Movement in 1933. It has grown to over 200 communities in the U.S. and internationally where Catholic Workers live a simple lifestyle in community, serve the poor, and resist war and social injustice.

## Church Teaching

“The obligation to earn one's bread by the sweat of one's brow also presumes the right to do so. A society in which this right is systematically denied, in which economic policies do not allow workers to reach satisfactory levels of employment, cannot be justified from an ethical point of view, nor can that society attain social peace.”

Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus – ‘The One Hundredth Year’* (1991)

## Pope Francis Says

“The fundamental right to employment should not be dismantled. This cannot be considered a variable dependent on financial and monetary markets. It is a fundamental good in regard to dignity, to the formation of a family, to the realization of the common good and of peace.”

Pope Francis, *Address to the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace*, 2014

## Reflection Questions

- Do I value the work of all people equally? Do I treat some workers differently than I treat others? Why? How can I respect the dignity of all workers?

- What are some ways our economy puts profit, not people at the center? What are the consequences?
- If everyone has gifts and talents to give, but not everyone has the opportunity to share them, what effect does this have on the individual and on our society?
- How does the inability to earn a living wage affect individuals and families?
- In what ways can we unite with workers to build an economy of inclusion, where all people earn a living wage and are able to care for their families?
- What can we as a society do to ensure people have adequate work that allows them to express their unique gifts and talents?

## Prayer

Oh God,

We cry justice for workers who have a right to a just wage, safe working conditions and to a job that enhances their human dignity.

We cry justice for workers who labor in unhealthy environments thereby compromising their health and the security of their families.

We cry justice for immigrants who want a better life for themselves and their children.

We cry justice for refugees who want safety and a place to live and to work but are discriminated against because of their countries of origin, status, their language and their race.

We cry justice to change an economic system that has put profit and greed before the common good of the people they employ and serve.

We cry justice for our Muslim brothers and sisters who are maligned and persecuted for their creed and belief in Allah.

We cry justice for the unemployed who want to work but because of circumstances are not given a chance.

We cry justice for jobs that allow each worker to express their creativity, thereby being co-creators with the God of Creation.

We cry Justice... We cry Peace.

Amen

*Written by Sister Anne-Louise Nadeau, SNDdeN*

## Nurture the Earth, Recognizing That We Are Interdependent with the Rest of God's Creation

### Description

God gave human beings the task of caring for and nurturing all of creation. Because human beings are intimately connected with all that exists, our health and well-being are dependent upon that of the earth and all its creatures. We must cultivate and care for the earth in such a way that its bounty can provide for and sustain future generations. Creation was entrusted to all of God's children, and thus all people have an equal right to breathe clean air and drink clean water. Because those on the margins of society are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation, concern for creation is inseparable from concern for justice.

### Scripture

"The Lord God then took the man and settled him in the Garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it."  
(Genesis 2:15)

### Caring For All of God's Creation

*By Shantha Ready Alonso*

I find it profound to worship a God who revels in the knowledge that the diversity of creation is very good. Beginning in the book of Genesis, we learn of a Creator who finds joy in difference – distinguishing land from water, forming a variety of plants and creatures, and calling forth humans of different genders, many colors and various creeds.

In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis introduces to us the concept of integral ecology, which expands our concept of what is included when we think of "God's creation." Creation not only encompasses the natural world, but also everything we co-create with God: built environments, economies, political systems, currencies, cuisines, languages, and music. From an integral ecology perspective, care for God's creation means caring for the whole inhabited earth, and the cosmos beyond.

As people living in the United States, one way to delve into caring for creation is through our vast system of public lands: national parks, forests, monuments, refuges, sanctuaries and wilderness areas. Together, we the people collectively share responsibility for stewardship of these public lands. Through this system, together we can conserve our spiritual, natural, historical, and cultural heritage.

The heritage preserved in our public lands is something we can all treasure. But, our nation's racist history of forced removal of people from land, confinement to reservations, segregation,

**Ever since the creation of the world, God's invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what God has made.**

**Romans 1:20**



discrimination, and unfair or forced labor practices has left a painful legacy – even in our public lands system. Likewise, our nation’s history of low regard for threatened and endangered species needs to be overcome by greater care. We have work to do to ensure our public lands belong to all of God’s creation.

Recently, the values of cultural and bio-diversity have become more prominent in our public lands and waters system. In the past five years, we have seen more and more monument designations that honor social justice leaders of courage, including the Cesar Chavez National Monument in California, the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Monument in Maryland, and the Belmont-Paul Women’s Equality National Monument in Washington DC. For the first time in our history, the public lands system has a national monument with a focus on Native American heritage: Bears Ears National Monument. This 1.35 acres of land in Utah is sacred to multiple tribes, and through this monument, we can all benefit from the wisdom of the tribes that claim Bears Ears as their ancestral land.

Our public lands and waters tell our stories and shape our collective memory. They are places where we learn, play, and pray. We all depend on the integrity of God’s creation, which brings us together. All of us want clean air, water, and land for ourselves and our families. May we treasure the earth and these places of beauty that reveal the wonders of our Creator. In reflecting on the importance and sacredness of the earth, may we understand that it is a lens for us to see our interconnectedness and to celebrate our diversity.

*Shantha Ready Alonso is the Executive Director of Creation Justice Ministries, which represents the creation care and environmental justice policies of major Christian denominations throughout the United States. Read more about their work at <http://www.creationjustice.org>.*

## Learning from Sister Carol Coston, O.P.

*“We must have a change of consciousness, as human beings, as Christians. We have to change our whole consciousness to one that is more centered on ourselves as one of many living species. We’re not so important. The whole idea that we have to be number one has shifted. Earth can take care of herself if we leave her alone. This is our call as social justice-Catholics, as socially involved Christians.”*

-Sister Carol Coston, O.P., Co-founder of Santuario Sisterfarm and Founding Director of NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice.

## Church Teaching

“We often use the word progress to describe what has taken place over the past few decades. There is no denying that in some areas our roads have improved and that electricity is more readily available. But can we say that there is it real progress? Who has benefitted most and who has borne the real costs? The poor are as disadvantaged as ever and the natural world has been grievously wounded. We have stripped it bare, silenced its sounds and banished other creatures, from the community of the living. Through our thoughtlessness and greed we have sinned against God and His creation. One thing is certain: we cannot continue to ignore and disregard the Earth.”

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines,  
*What is happening to our Beautiful Land: A Pastoral Letter on Ecology (1988)*

## Pope Francis Says

“The vocation of being a “protector”, however, is not just something involving us Christians alone; it also has a prior dimension which is simply human, involving everyone. It means protecting all creation, the beauty of the created world, as the Book of Genesis tells us and as Saint Francis of Assisi showed us. It means respecting each of God’s creatures and respecting the environment in which we live.”

Pope Francis, *Homily*, March 19, 2013

## Reflection Questions

- How are we human beings intimately connected with all of creation?
- In what ways have we acted as if the whole earth belongs to human beings alone?
- What have I learned about God from animals or from the Earth?
- What damage to our natural environment do we see in our own community? How does this affect human beings and animals?
- How are people who are marginalized disproportionately affected by the destruction of the environment? How can we be in solidarity with them?
- What does Pope Francis mean by a “throwaway culture” or a “culture of waste”? How can we counter a culture of waste with a culture of solidarity with all of creation?
- What is the role of people of faith in the larger environmental movement?

## Prayer

God of all life, thank you for the gift of our Mother earth home and for intimately uniting us as sisters and brothers with all your creation on whom our health and well-being depends. We want to live in greater care and solidarity with the earth and with people on the margins of society who are disproportionately impacted by environmental degradation.

Empower our response to Pope Francis’s challenges –rejecting the harms of a throwaway culture and an economy of exclusion, and nurturing life through supporting sustainable development, investment in ‘green jobs’ and advocating for those in poverty.

Inspire us with Wisdom that we may cultivate and care for the earth in ways that its bounty enables future generations to thrive in a peaceful world that is free from war over resources and that sustains all with clean air to breathe, safe water to drink, and nourishing food to eat.

Guide us in all these ways of justice, now and forever, Amen.

*Written by Sister Leanne M. Jablonski, FMI*

## Conclusion

Focusing on the principles of Catholic Social Justice one at a time is a useful way to deepen our understanding and our appreciation of the scope of each individually. It is important to remember, however, the principles together create a unique approach to evaluate our reality and to hope for the future. That way of thinking is a gift you can bring to your families and your communities, and to your elected officials.

When we see a change in the stock market getting more news coverage than workers' fight for a living wage or hear about environmental damage with no plans to prevent further harm to the Earth, it can be tempting to simply accept that this is the way our world works. Remembering Catholic Social Justice and judging what we experience by how well the principles of Catholic Social Justice are upheld is one way to remember that we are called to live by a different set of priorities than the dominant political or economic systems. This way of being stands in opposition to what Pope Francis calls the "globalization of indifference," our "throwaway culture," or an "economy of exclusion and inequality." Instead, it seeks to spread the globalization of solidarity and cooperation.

Catholic Social Justice is not a theoretical moral exercise. It is alive in the world, and can be engaged through encounters with those who suffer from injustice and by taking action with other justice-seekers. If you seek to grow stronger in your faith, live more like Jesus did, or simply be a better neighbor, Catholic Social Justice can lead you to a deeper way of living and being in relationship with God. As NETWORK board member Alice Kitchen suggests in her reflection: "go on strike with workers, travel to the state capital to lobby elected officials, write letters to the editor, and speak out on talk radio and social media."

Commit to upholding human dignity, embracing our right and responsibility to participate, being in solidarity with those living in poverty, bridging divisions, uniting with workers, and nurturing the Earth. Commit to staying engaged with NETWORK and continuing to pursue the common good through federal policy.

## To stay involved

Visit [www.networklobby.org](http://www.networklobby.org)

## Or follow us on social media:

[www.facebook.com/NETWORKLobby](https://www.facebook.com/NETWORKLobby)

[www.twitter.com/@NETWORKLobby](https://www.twitter.com/@NETWORKLobby)