

What the heck is social justice?

Rose Marie Berge

2007 is a Sabbath Year. Every seventh year, according to biblical tradition, the people of God are invited to observe a “Year of Remission” (*Shmita*, in Hebrew). It is a year in which land and crops and domesticated animals rest, when creditors refrain from collecting debts, and when the Law of the Lord is read in the hearing of all (marking the completion of the Torah liturgical cycle).

These ancient biblical customs and covenants form the foundation for the Christian concept of social justice. In Christian tradition, particularly Catholic teaching, social justice and social charity form the horizontal axis, and individual justice and individual charity form the vertical axis. All four elements work in harmony for individuals and communities to live out the commandment: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

Justice is the moral code that guides a fair and equitable society. When an individual acts on behalf of justice, he or she stands up for what is right. Charity is a basic sense of generosity and goodwill toward others, especially the suffering. Individual charity is when one responds to the more immediate needs of others—volunteering in a women’s shelter, for example.

The goal of social charity and social justice is furthering the common good. Social charity addresses the *effects* of social sin, while social justice addresses the *causes* of such sins. Brazilian Catholic Archbishop Hélder Câmara famously said, “When I feed the poor, they call me a saint; when I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist.” His phrase indicates the societal pressure to separate charity and justice. The two can not be separated. It would be like taking the heart out of a body—neither would live for long.

Social charity is sometimes called compassionate solidarity. A church’s decision to buy only fair trade coffee might be considered an act of social charity. It is a communal economic act that addresses the immediate needs of those who are oppressed by an unjust economic system. However, it doesn’t fundamentally change or challenge the unjust structure.

The principle of social justice, according to Catholic social teaching, requires the individual Christian to act in an organized manner with others to hold social institutions accountable—whether government or private—to the common good. The “common good comprises the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily,” according to Pope Paul VI. However, social justice can become hollow if it is not constantly in touch with real people’s experiences.

SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES are determined by “discerning the signs of the times” (Matthew 16:3), a careful process of social analysis. First, we listen to and observe the experiences of those closest to the problem. Second, together with those closest to the problem, we look at the context. What’s the history and what are the root causes? Are there political and/or cultural forces at play? We take the expanded

information (experience plus context) and examine it in light of biblical values and Christian teaching. What would Jesus do in a situation like this? Third, we ask: What action might successfully make this situation more just? Finally, we take the action and evaluate the results. The evaluation takes us back to step one.

Social justice almost always has an economic, as well as a policy, component. Our lives are organized around basic goods and services that we exchange in order to grow as healthy human beings in families and communities. When we listen to the experiences of poor people in the U.S., for example, we learn that many are working full-time but can't afford the basics of food, housing, and health care. The context includes spiraling costs of medical insurance and an inadequate federal minimum wage. We reflect on the experience and context in the light of Jesus' healing ministry and Jesus' parable of the worker getting a just wage. Campaigns for health care reform and a living wage have arisen from such analysis. Success is evaluated by how the lives of America's working poor have improved. Have these actions helped to restore justice and reveal more clearly the reign of God?

The Sabbath Year is a good time to review (and renew) the social justice ethic of the church. Salvation Army leader Evangeline Booth's comments on the women's movement in 1930 are pertinent for social justice movements today. For what we call the movement, she says, "is not social merely, not political merely, not economic merely. It is the direct fulfilment of the gospel of the Redeemer."

Rose Marie Berger, an associate editor of Sojourners, is a Catholic peace activist and poet. Find out more about 2007 as a Sabbath Year at www.jubileeusa.org.