

## **THIRTIETH SUNDAY PER ANNUM, Year A**

### **“BIBLICAL SOCIAL JUSTICE”<sup>i</sup>**

Social Justice stands at the heart of biblical religion and has found its way into the heart of Catholic tradition. To be a Catholic is to be committed to social justice.

Social Justice is the ‘virtue that inclines one to co-operate with others in order to help the institutions of society better serve the common good. While the obligation of social justice falls upon the individual, that person cannot fulfill the obligation alone, but must work in concert with others, through organized bodies, as a member of the group whose purpose is to identify the needs of society, and, by the use of appropriate means, to meet these needs locally, regionally, nationally, and even globally.’<sup>ii</sup>

Pope Leo XIII says that ‘once the demands of necessity and propriety have been met in your life, the rest that one owns belongs to the poor.’ Once these two things have been met, then everything else you own belongs to the poor.

St John Chrysostom said: ‘the man who has two shirts in his closet: one belongs to him; the other belongs to the man who has no shirt.’ We should go through our closets and see what we really need. The rest belongs to those who are really in need.

St. Thomas Aquinas said that private ownership is legitimate. This is a hallmark of the Church's social teaching. However, Aquinas says, and the Church echoes it, that 'the *use* of private property must always be directed toward the common good.' You can own private property. However, when it comes to the *use* of your private property, what do you do with it? The common good should always be foremost in your mind.

How many Catholics actually think this way? We don't! We tend to think in a more individualistic manner: 'It is my money, my possessions, my stocks, and it is for me'. No! You own it, but, in your *use* of it, the common good must be uppermost.

The roots of biblical social justice are to be found in in our first reading today from the Book of Exodus. Israel had been, for centuries, an oppressed people: poor destitute, enslaved, forgotten. For 400 years, Israel was in Egypt under these conditions. And, therefore, God reminds them in today's first reading:

**“You shall not molest or oppress an alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt.”**

This signals something of great importance to us: the key to biblical ethics is compassion; to 'suffer with', to 'feel with'. We are not dealing in the Bible with a moral abstraction; biblical social justice is founded on a visceral reaction of compassion.

This is why God reminded Israel of their past: ‘Look, you were once oppressed. You were once an alien people, enslaved. Then, why are you doing the same to other people?’

Emmanuel Levinas, the great 20<sup>th</sup> C Jewish philosopher, speaks of the moral demand which is carried by the face of the other. It is the face of the ‘suffering other’ which awakens in you a moral demand.

All of this is tied up with God and with the compassion, or visceral feeling that God has. Listen again to what we heard:

**“Thus says the Lord: ‘If ever you wrong them and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry. [and] My wrath will flare up. ... If he cries out to me, I will hear him; for I am compassionate.’”**

We have compassion for the ‘suffering other’, but it is grounded in something even more fundamental: that God has compassion for the ‘suffering other’. God’s visceral reaction to injustice awakens our visceral, or inner, reaction to injustice. This is biblical morality, biblical social justice.

This is why the two great commandments are so tightly linked. Jesus was asked what was at the heart of the Law. His answer:

**“Love the Lord your God with all your heart ... and love your neighbor as yourself.”**

In loving God, you *feel* the *feelings* of God. But God is compassionate to the poor and the oppressed. Therefore, *you* are compassionate to the poor and the oppressed.

Loving God means that you start ‘feeling his feelings’. God’s feelings are stirred up for the oppressed. And, therefore, our own innards are moved to act justly for the good of all.

Blessed Teresa of Calcutta is a modern day example of biblical social justice. She encourages us with these words:

‘We think sometimes that poverty is only being hungry, naked and homeless. The poverty of being unwanted, unloved and uncared for is the greatest poverty. We must start in our own homes to remedy this kind of poverty.’<sup>iii</sup>

‘Let us touch the dying, the poor, the lonely and the unwanted according to the graces we have received and let us not be ashamed or slow to do the humble work.’<sup>iv</sup>

*Mother Teresa*: ‘Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.’<sup>v</sup>

---

<sup>i</sup> Much of this homily has been taken from Fr. Robert Barron’s homily for the 30<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A, at <http://www.wordonfire.org/resources/homily/pier-giorgio-frassati-and-social-justice/4527/>

<sup>ii</sup> Fr. John Hardon, S.J., MODERN CATHOLIC DICTIONARY, 2001, Eternal Life, Bardstown, KY, p. 509f

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/mothertere130839.html>

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/mothertere133532.html>

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/christiancrier/2013/08/29/top-10-mother-teresa-quotes-to-inspire-you-today/>