

Living Justly: Sacred Scripture and Catholic Social Teaching

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How do I choose to live in this world?

“Living” Justly

Way of life in a world that is:

Influenced by secular and faith-based views

Complex, diverse

Privileged, white, middle-class

Living “Justly”

What is **justice**?

- Natural law, philosophy
- Human rights
- Law and Justice, legal system, rights and responsibilities
- Fairness, “a fair go”, “just desserts”

What choices do I make to **live justly** in **this world**?

On one hand ...

- Influenced by secular and faith-based views and values
- Complex, diverse
- Privileged, white, middle-class: education, language, stability, race, aspirational
- Globalised
- Acts of justice appear optional and individualized, e.g. volunteering, charities, NGOs

On another ...

- Desire for living justly, inspired by the traditions of Christianity
- “haunted by the gospel call to act justly”
- “troubled by encounters with those who are homeless or abandoned by society”
- I have a voice, but how much power?
- Risk: those living with unjust structures are not always part of my immediate network, thus become invisible and unable to speak on their own terms
- Reluctant to let go of privilege: caught in between two worlds of
 - 1) The main paradigm of aspirations towards house, leisure, lifestyle, education, family, comfortable retirement, choice, financial stability, career, “giving back”
 - 2) Gospel of justice

(Elsbernd, Bieringer, 1989, xvii)

Catholic Social Teaching

A **response** to **concrete** social, economic and political issues

Principles extracted from teachings: human dignity, solidarity, preferential option for the poor, common good, subsidiarity and participation, dignity of work and the rights of workers, stewardship of creation, rights and responsibilities.

Risk: sense of Catholic Social Teaching being understood as fixed, [uniform](#), universal in application, reduced to a set of principles

Catholic Social teaching is fundamentally a **process**.

Octogesimo Adveniens, Pope Paul VI

In the face of such widely **varying** situations, **it is difficult for us to utter a unified message and put forward a solution which has universal validity.** Such is not our ambition, nor our mission. It is up to the Christian communities to analyze with objectivity the situation which is **proper to their own country, to shed on it the light of the Gospel's unalterable words** and to draw principles of reflection, norms of judgement and directives for action from the social teaching of the church. It is up to **these Christian communities**, with the help of the Holy Spirit, in communion with the Bishops who hold responsibility and in dialogue with other Christian brethren [sic] and all people of good will, to discern the options and commitments which are called for in order to bring about the social, political and economic changes seen in many cases to be urgently needed. (OA4)



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What is the role of **scripture** in this process?: Considerations

a) Scripture as **revelation**

- Dynamic
- Ongoing
- Contextual

b) Image of the **Church** after VC II

- Active participation

e.g. *Populorum progressio, The Development of Peoples*, Paul VI, 1967

Scripture as Revelation

God communicating Godself to peoples, inviting them to share in the life of God.

Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God ... out of the abundance of His love **speaks** to men [sic] as **friends** ... and lives among them ..., so that He may **invite** and take them into **fellowship** with Himself.

Dei verbum 2

Association of humans and God in DV is

.... **Relational**, as friends, inviting into fellowship

.... **Invitational**, requires a response, reciprocity (mutual benefit), both opening up to each other's life

..... **Dialogical**, God “speaks” to people through objects, texts, people, events, emotions, physicality, sounds, images

.... An **interpersonal encounter** that prompts a response in a person and/or community

The Bible and Revelation

The Bible is able to inspire a personal encounter between a person and God.

The Bible **mediates** the dialogue between God and people. A biblical text doesn't mean anything until a person reads it, engages with it, interprets it, discerns how it speaks to the contemporary context.

God never finishes dialoguing with people, so the Bible, as mediator of the dialogue between people and God, will always have more to say to the reader/hearer.

Image of the Church

To Catholics

81. We appeal, first of all, to Our sons [sic]. In the developing nations and in other countries **lay people must consider it their task to improve the temporal order.** While the hierarchy has the role of teaching and authoritatively interpreting the moral laws and precepts that apply in this matter, **the laity have the duty of using their own initiative and taking action in this area—without waiting passively for directives and precepts from others.** They must try to infuse a Christian spirit into people's mental outlook and daily behavior, into the laws and structures of the civil community. (68) Changes must be made; present conditions must be improved. And the transformations must be permeated with the spirit of the Gospel.

We especially urge Catholic men [sic] living in developed nations **to offer their skills and earnest assistance to public and private organizations, both civil and religious, working to solve the problems of developing nations.** They will surely want to be in the **first ranks** of those who spare no effort to have just and fair laws, based on moral precepts, established among all nations.

Populorum Progressio 81

Who is responsible for ensuring justice according to *Populorum Progressio*?

All Catholics

Other Christians

Non-Christians

“All people of good will”. (also the addressees of *Laborum Exercens*, On Human Work, 1981, JP II)

Special mention: international organizations, public officials, the press, teachers and educators
Government authorities

Thoughtful men and women, “of deep thought and wisdom”—Catholics and Christians, believers in God and devotees of truth and justice, all people of good will. #85

Promoters of development: those who “have heard the cries of needy nations and have come to their aid. We consider you the promoters and apostles of genuine progress and true development.” #86

Important ideas

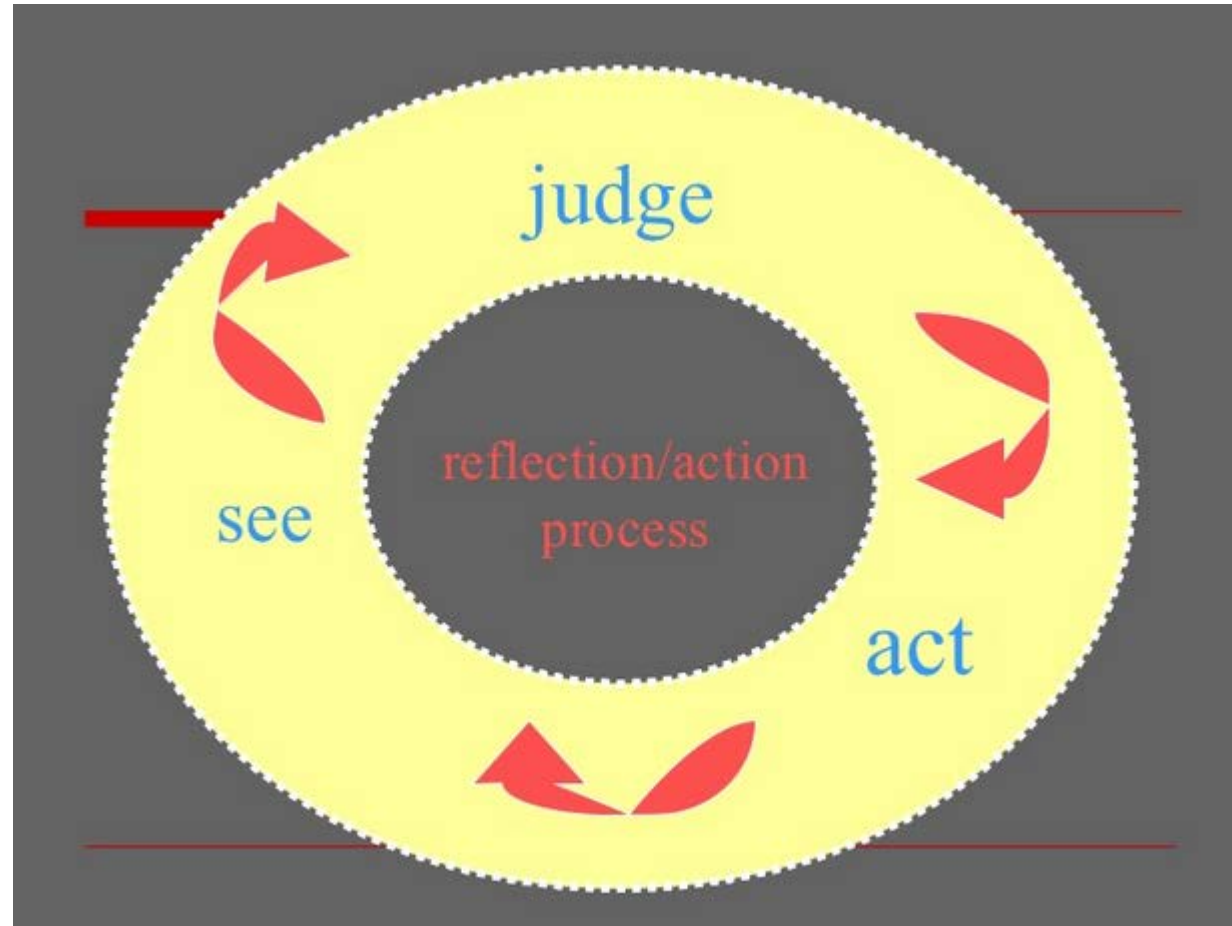
All in Church are **co-responsible** for living justly. Justice is a **communal activity**.

It is **contextual**: the needs and issues of specific communities prompt the call to justice, and the response must be pertinent to that context.

A just response requires **discernment**. A key reference point in the discernment process is the Bible.

- 1) the Bible promotes a vision of justice.
- 2) The Bible, as mediator of the on-going dialogue between God and God's people, is able to speak to problems that people face today.
- 3) Paradox: While Scripture paints a dream of God's justice, as we engage with the Bible today it also allows new dreams of justice to emerge.

How does Scripture function in the discernment process?



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How might we go about interpreting Scripture in this process?

Reading biblical texts from the perspectives of the:

Past

What might the author have been trying to communicate and why? What might hearers/readers have heard and why?

Present

How does the text speak to the world I live in today?

Future

What kind of alternative world does the text suggest?

The world that unfolds before me is a world where

Issue: Should I have to pay tax?

- I work hard for my money. I should be able to keep it and decide where and how it is spent.
- Competition is vital: it's a survival of the fittest, so get out there and make living and support yourself.
- Tax cheats
- Taxes are need to ensure everyone has access to education, healthcare, roads, employment, etc.



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Raise the Rate! (ACOSS)

John Hewson AM, 2017

“Genuine reform must include a willingness to increase the base Newstart and pension benefits to at least an accepted poverty line.”

Chris Richardson, Deloitte Access Economics, 2018

“What Australia has failed to do with unemployment benefits for virtually a quarter of a century now is verging on a national embarrassment.”

John Howard OM, AC, former PM, 2018

“I was in favour of freezing [Newstart] but I think the freeze has probably gone on too long.”

Jennifer Westacott, Business Council of Australia, 2017

“We need a ‘robust and targeted welfare safety net that ensures displaced workers don’t fall into poverty while finding their feet. This could include increasing the inadequate Newstart allowance.”

Quotes taken from the ACOSS site, Raise the Rate,
<https://www.acoss.org.au/raisetherate/>

What's the reality?

Single person on Newstart: \$39 per day/\$278 per week

\$175 less than the pension

More than half (55%) of the people on Newstart Allowance live below the poverty line.

Buying the basics like housing, food, transport, health, energy, and clothing costs a single person a minimum of \$433 per week (UNSW 2017).

- Over 800,000 people, including parents, carers, people with disability, other people locked out of paid work and students are struggling daily to afford basic essentials like a roof over their head and food on their table.
- People are having to make tough choices between eating a meal and paying a bill, buying shoes for their children and maintaining their health.
- It is nearly impossible to look for paid work if you are homeless and hungry.

ACOSS (Australian Council of Social Services), 2018.

The Reality

- “There is just one job for every eight people looking for paid work or looking to increase their hours.”
- “One in four people on Newstart has a partial capacity to work because of illness or disability. For this cohort, finding suitable employment is often very difficult.”
- “even with supplements, Newstart and Youth Allowance are still inadequate.”

ACOSS, <https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/FAQs.pdf>

“A payment increase would help people find a job. The Business Council of Australia has stated that the rate of unemployment payments is so low it is acting as a barrier to work.”



Fuel Poverty, VICTOR DE SCHWANBERG, SCIENCE PHOTO LIBRARY, UIG, Rights Managed, For Educational Use Only

“Text of provocation” for contemporary times

Matthew 20:1-16: What is right?



Matthew 20:1-16

20“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.³When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. ⁵When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. ⁶And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ ⁷They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ ⁸When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ ⁹When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹²saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ ¹³But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? ¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Read the text

What strikes you?

Interests you?

Puzzles you?

Concerns you?

What questions do you have?

Parable – illustrates Matt 19:30

Parable: **comparisons** to illustrate a defect (*Encyclopedia of Homer*); prompts the hearer to assess their actions and behaviors; **to see world in a different way; multiple interpretations**; riddles; element of metaphor (Browning, *A Dictionary of the Bible*)

Parables: Emphasis is on **what parables do “remind, provoke, refine, confront, disturb** Rather than what do they mean.” (Levine, 4). Different things to different people.

Not an allegory: the hearer is not told who the landowner and manager are, or who the hired workers are.

Note

Denarius: standard silver coin from 209 BCE-215 CE. Daily wage of a laborer, **'minimum wage'** to survive

Landowners of a vineyard: initial investment is substantial and yield is high, thus there is **wealth.**

Day laborers: pool of cheap labor that was a common sight in the agora, marketplace; life was unpredictable dealing with issues concerning unemployment, hunger and malnutrition, and was more risky than that of a slave (Carter, 391). Standing inactive due to no work, or a glut of workers. Inactive, ἀργός (v.6)



Silver denarius of Vespasian, The Granger Collection / Universal Images Group
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Two scenes: Hiring and Paying

Hiring

- Settings: market place
- Early morning then 9am, 12 noon, 3 pm, 5 pm
- Urgency of harvest
- Wealth of the landowner
- Links to issue of repayment in 2nd scene
- Key issue: I will pay you whatever is **right**.

Δίκαιος: just, lawful, fair, meeting my obligations (v.4)

Unclear: What is just and fair?

Paying

Setting: vineyard

Each worker gets paid the same, the minimum daily wage

Response of workers: grumbled

Response of worker: This is what we agreed. I can spend my money how I choose.



How is this 'right'?

Inclusio

"So the last will be first, and the first will be last." (20:16)

Possible interpretation

Mercy outweighs merit.

Balancing justice and mercy.

Newcomers to early Christian community are as deserving as longer term members.

But the figure of the landowner is a challenging one:

Exercises power over uncertain, vulnerable persons: “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?” (v.15)

Their livelihood depends on the choices of the land owner, who holds all the power.

Where does it take my thinking about my world today?

What's a fair and just amount of money today for the poorest or most vulnerable in my community?

Is the landowner generous or merely fulfilling obligations?

How do I and my society view our privilege and wealth? How do we exercise the power that comes with our privilege and wealth?

Who gains and who loses from the choices we make about how wealth is distributed?

What vision of the world unfolds in the parable?

Wealth is not distributed according to performance or merit, but according to commitments to solidarity and equity.

Preferential option for the poor: “Preferential care should be shown to poor and vulnerable people, whose needs and rights are given **special attention** in God’s eyes.” Caritas Australia

The common good: “is reached when we work together to improve the wellbeing of people in our society and the wider world. The rights of the individual to personal possessions and community resources must be balanced with the needs of the **disadvantaged and dispossessed**.” Caritas Australia

Solidarity: “**What is authentic power?** Everyone belongs to one human family, regardless of their national, religious, ethnic, economic, political and ideological differences. Everyone has an obligation to promote the rights and development of all peoples across communities, nations, and the world, irrespective of national boundaries. [We enact] solidarity by reaching out to those who are **most marginalised**.” Caritas Australia

No to an economy of exclusion

53. Just as the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say “thou shalt not” to an **economy of exclusion and inequality**. Such an economy kills. How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points? This is a case of exclusion. Can we continue to stand by when food is thrown away while people are starving? This is a case of inequality. Today everything comes under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest, where the powerful feed upon the powerless. As a consequence, masses of people find themselves excluded and marginalized: without work, without possibilities, without any means of escape.

Human beings are themselves considered consumer goods to be used and then discarded. We have created a “throw away” culture which is now spreading. It is no longer simply about exploitation and oppression, but something new. Exclusion ultimately has to do with what it means to be a part of the society in which we live; those excluded are no longer society’s underside or its fringes or its disenfranchised – they are no longer even a part of it. The excluded are not the “exploited” but the outcast, the “leftovers”.

54. In this context, some people continue to defend trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world. This opinion, which has never been confirmed by the facts, expresses a crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power and in the sacralized workings of the prevailing economic system. Meanwhile, the excluded are still waiting. **To sustain a lifestyle which excludes others, or to sustain enthusiasm for that selfish ideal, a globalization of indifference has developed.** Almost without being aware of it, we end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people’s pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else’s responsibility and not our own. **The culture of prosperity deadens us; we are thrilled if the market offers us something new to purchase. In the meantime all those lives stunted for lack of opportunity seem a mere spectacle; they fail to move us.**

Evangelii Gaudium, 53, 54

John Chrysostom

“Not to share one’s wealth with the poor is to steal from them and take away their livelihood. It is not our goods we hold, but theirs.”

EG, 57 cited in Gerard Mannion, *Pope Francis and the Future of Catholicism: Evangelii Gaudium and the Papal Agenda*, CUP, 2017, 182

Tax: Communal/political and individual choices

Systematic sharing of wealth, rather than a race for individual prosperity, that ensures that the poor and excluded can participate in society. This may mean that I pay more tax, rather than less.

Live with the tension of this, sometimes feeling cheated:

Can I welcome another's flourishing, at my own expense?

Can I give people **more than what they deserve** or do I reduce my life to fulfilling a set of rights and responsibilities?

Closing remark

80. We must travel this road together, united in minds and hearts. Hence We feel it necessary to remind **everyone** of the seriousness of this issue in all its dimensions, and to impress upon them the need for action. The moment for action has reached a critical juncture. Can countless innocent children be saved? Can countless destitute families obtain more human living conditions? Can world peace and human civilization be preserved intact? **Every individual** and every nation must face up to this issue, **for it is theirs [and our] problem.**

Pope Paul VI, PP