



What is Social Ministry or Service?

The mission to which Christ calls the Church clearly includes works of charity and justice. Throughout his public ministry, Jesus demonstrated the degree to which we are to provide service to others in need while working to change the social conditions that create such needs. The Church is called both to direct service (works of charity, like providing food, clothing and shelter) and to address the root causes of social problems (works of justice, like changing an unjust law or social structure).

Jesus' own mission was characterized from the beginning by what the Church has come to call social ministry or outreach and service to others. In the synagogue, Jesus read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord. (Luke 4:16-22)

Jesus continually modeled and mandated such service to others as a primary requirement for discipleship. Later, the letter of James reminds the early Christian community that faith without works is dead. (Jas 2:14-17) Already the faithful were in need of encouragement to persist in lives of service to others as an important part of their Christian call.

In our own time, the U.S. Bishops have issued a clear reminder to the Church of this essential element of service. In the 1993 statement, *Communities of Salt and Light: Reflections on the Social Ministry of the Parish*, they said:

The central message is simple: our faith is profoundly social. We cannot be truly Catholic unless we hear and heed the Church's call to serve those in need and work for justice and peace. We see the parish dimension of social ministry not as an added burden, but as part of what keeps a parish alive and makes it truly Catholic. Effective social ministry helps the parish not only do more, but be more—more of a reflection of the Gospel, more of a worshipping and evangelizing people, more of a faithful community. It is an essential part of parish life.

There can be no fidelity to Christ, his teaching or his Church without the element of service—both

charity and justice—on behalf of others. By means of collaboration and integration, parish leadership brings together liturgy, formation, outreach and action into a sense of common mission.

Deus Caritas Est, Pope Benedict XVI describes the “unbreakable bond between love of God and love of neighbor” (no. 16). The experience of God’s love, he says, should move us to love our neighbors, in whom God is present. The “extraordinary force” of love, or caritas, the Holy Father writes, propels us to action on behalf of our neighbors (Caritas in Veritate, no. 1). But what should this loving action look like? The Catholic tradition recognizes two types of necessary responses: charity and justice.

“The Church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the Sacraments and the Word. . . . Those who are able to make offerings in accordance with their means. . . to support orphans, widows, the sick, and those who for other reasons find themselves in need, such as prisoners and foreigners.”—Pope Benedict XVI, Deus Caritas Est, no. 22

“To love is to give, to offer what is ‘mine’ to the other; but it never lacks justice, which prompts us to give the other what is ‘his’, what is due to him by reason of his being or his acting. I cannot ‘give’ what is mine to the other, without first giving him what pertains to him in justice... Not only is justice not extraneous to charity, not only is it not an alternative or parallel path to charity: justice is inseparable from charity, and intrinsic to it.” (Pope Benedict XVI, Caritas in Veritate, no. 6)

“The conscience is called by this social teaching to recognize and fulfill the obligations of justice and charity in society.”—Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, no. 83

“Social justice. . . concerns the social, political, and economic aspects and, above all, the structural dimension of problems and their respective solutions.”—Compendium, no. 201

In the Diocese of Honolulu, Hawaii, Catholic Living of charity and social justice involves a wide range of areas, including food security, environment, child and youth protection, respect life, homelessness and affordable housing, prison ministry and community re-integration, immigration. Parishes are communities of faith, of action, and of hope. They are where the gospel is proclaimed and celebrated, where believers are formed and sent to renew the earth. Building a successful social ministry effort of the kind envisioned in the US. Bishops document *Communities of Salt and Light* which calls for tapping each and every able Catholic’s baptismal call to serve. The following descriptions are models of what each ministry could like. No two parishes Social Ministry Committee/Teams/ministries will be identical and that most parishes are always in the process of developing and strengthening their programs.

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