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Parish Social Justice

While the primary focus of the parish is the evangelization and spiritual nurturing of souls, it is also intended as a place that “practices the charity of the Lord in good works and brotherly love.”ⁱ

Good works – works of mercy – are usually direct and specific: food, clothing, rent money, counseling, and so forth. However, the parish may find itself operating under social conditions that exacerbate the problems of its community. High abortion rates, widespread contracepting, layoffs, unsafe work conditions, high drug use, poor education, and insufficient employment opportunities are not remedied by short-term assistance but require careful analysis, intense moral education, and sometimes “direct action” against responsible parties. While such work is generally conducted by the laity, the parish, too, has a place of solidarity with them. The parish Respect Life Committee comes to mind, which is not only a disseminator of information but a coordinator of a broad range of pro-life activities, often including fundraising for a crisis-pregnancy center, letter-writing campaigns, or prayer vigils at a local abortion clinic. The Church can never be reduced to an agency of good works, but never is it indifferent – or unresponsive – to unjust or immoral situations.

Therefore the Church provides the faithful with a body of teaching that not only identifies various social problems (lack of respect for the human person, excessive and oppressive economic disparities between persons and peoples, etc.), but also provides the principles for appropriately responding to them.

Understanding those principles is essential for discerning between legitimate social justice activism and the plethora of illegitimate programs and organizations that target the parish and compete for the Catholic soul. Those principles boil down to truth and morals.

TRUTH AND MORALS

It isn't enough to do good works. Legitimate social justice activism must be predicated on the truth, understanding that although some Church teachings may not be popular (consider the reception of *Humanae Vitae*), justice cannot be accomplished when moral laws that govern the human spirit are denied. Pope John Paul II has written:

There is a tendency to see intellectual relativism as the necessary corollary of democratic forms of political life. In such a view, truth is determined by the majority and varies in accordance with passing cultural and political trends. From this point of view, those who are convinced certain truths are absolute and immutable are considered unreasonable and unreliable. On the other hand, as Christians we firmly believe that “if there is no ultimate truth to guide and direct political activity, then ideas and convictions can easily be manipulated for reasons of power. As history demonstrates, a democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism.”ⁱⁱ

And, elsewhere:

This essential bond between Truth, the Good and Freedom has been largely lost sight of by present-day culture. As a result, helping man to rediscover it represents nowadays one of the specific requirements of the Church's mission....According to some, it appears that one no longer need acknowledge the enduring absoluteness of any moral value. All around us we encounter contempt for human life after conception and before birth; the ongoing violation of basic rights of the person; the unjust destruction of goods minimally necessary for a human life. Indeed, something more serious has happened: man is no longer convinced that only in the truth can he find salvation. The saving power of the truth is contested, and freedom alone, uprooted from any objectivity, is left to decide by itself what is good and what is evil. This relativism becomes, in the field of theology, a lack of trust in the wisdom of God, who guides man with the moral law.

Concrete situations are unfavorably contrasted with the precepts of the moral law, nor is it any longer maintained that, when all is said and done, the law of God is always the one true good of man.ⁱⁱⁱ

Hand in hand, then with submission to the truth, legitimate social justice activism always uses and teaches ethical means to an end. Without belaboring what ought to be an obvious point, *Veritatis Splendor* takes some pains to explain that “It is not licit to do evil that good may come of it.”^{iv} It isn’t enough that organizations acquire “goods” for their constituencies. They must accept and teach moral truth; they must be principled. A lying or bribing political lobby may win all its temporal battles, but it will have lost its soul.

DISCERNING CATHOLIC SOCIAL JUSTICE FROM ITS PRETENDERS

The above points are important to understand when one is faced with the decision to use pre-existing social justice materials. The vast majority of programs and organizing opportunities available to Catholic parishes are deeply compromised. Examining one example gives insight into the problem: Alinskyian faith-based organizations such as the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) and its clones, which operate in hundreds of Catholic churches around the United States under scores of local names, openly teach that in politics, the ends justify the means and that truth is decided by consensus.

The organization’s founder, Saul Alinsky wrote: “An organizer working for change...does not have a fixed truth – truth to him is relative and changing.”^v The contemporary IAF agrees: “Ernie Cortes, a key figure in network [SW Regional Director of the IAF], pointed out, the IAF methodology bears resemblance [to the] ‘critical method’ of Karl Popper, philosopher of science, who argued for a view of ‘truth’ not as a positive assertion, but as theories formulated out of practice and aimed at problem solving that had not yet been refuted.”^{vi} Karl Popper coined the term “open society,” which refers to a form of social organization in which “nobody has a monopoly on the truth.”

Alinsky was as problematic in his ethical – or anti-ethical – principles as he was his relationship to the truth. The “rules” he proposed to his community organizers, taken from his own writings, include:

- “The third rule of the ethics of means and ends is that...the end justifies almost any means.”
- “The seventh rule of the ethics of means and ends is that generally success or failure is a mighty determinant of ethics.... There can be no such thing as a successful traitor, for if one succeeds, he becomes a founding father.”
- “The tenth rule of the ethics of means and ends is that you do what you can with what you have and clothe it with moral garments.... Moral rationalization is indispensable at all times of action whether to justify the selection or the use of ends or means.... All effective actions require the passport of morality.”^{vii}

Elsewhere in his primer for radicals, Alinsky writes:

Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it.... By this I mean that in a complex...society it becomes increasingly difficult to single out who is to blame for a particular evil.... One of the criteria for picking the target is the target’s vulnerability...as you zero in and freeze your target and carry out your attack, all the “others” come out of the woodwork very soon...the other important point in the choosing of a target is that it must be a personification, not something general and abstract...Many liberals, during our attack on the then-school superintendent, pointing out that he wasn’t 100% devil, he was a regular churchgoer, he was a good family man, and he was generous in his contributions to charity. Can you imagine in the arena of conflict charging that so-and-so is a racist bastard and then diluting the impact of the attack with qualifying remarks...this becomes political idiocy.^{viii}

The “target” in question here, of course, is a fellow human being who has been unjustly demonized. The contemporary IAF operates no less dubiously:

All participants in the Industrial Areas Foundation national training programs are given a reprint of a 1933 article by John H. Randall, Jr. titled ‘The Importance of Being Unprincipled’...The thesis is that because politics is nothing but the ‘practical method of compromise,’ only two kinds of people can afford the luxury of acting on principle...everyone else who wants to be effective in politics has to learn to be ‘unprincipled’ enough to compromise in order to see their principles succeed.”^{ix}

To move religious people from Judeo-Christian moral principles into an acceptance of Machiavellian political action, the IAF has developed a process of popular education. Handpicked “leaders” attend IAF workshops and participate in sessions “followed by value clarification exercises.”^x

IAF organizers use values clarification and controlled, channeled surfacing of anger to “provide the momentum for action.”^{xi} “Emphasis is placed on understanding individual values through value clarification exercises, how to use power, the difference between self-interest and selfishness, relationships, especially the differences between public and private relationships, how to organize meetings, and how to use the media. These training sessions are intensive, weeklong workshops where IAF professional organizers utilize many forms of human relations development techniques.”^{xii}

This values clarification “education” is not designed simply to shift an individual’s philosophical perspective, but is intended to develop another sensibility in him. This is not simply teaching a man to put his faith into practice. It is teaching him to redefine what that faith means. The technique of values clarification – or “popular education” or conscientization” –changes the values of its participants and replaces them with the values of the organizer. For example, a New Republic article states: “...[The] IAF seeks to teach groups like Mexican/Americans of San Antonio to build on and then transcend natural ties of family and ethnicity.”^{xiii}

Another writer reports: “Cortes [SW regional IAF director] knew that Mexican parents willingly sacrificed for their children – and often for their church. By talking about family values, could you motivate and organize people to act politically in their own genuine self-interest?...[T]he new organization had to reach into the heart...The idea of protecting and enhancing families might make that possible.”^{xiv}

The implication of these passages is that the spiritual and family values of religious people have been used to spark a conversation between them and the IAF. The IAF then uses the relationship built from those values to introduce another set of values – those of the IAF. “In St. Timothy’s Church [in San Antonio], for instance, new catechisms connected biblical and Mexican historical and cultural themes with the current issues COPS [the IAF local] was working on.... From such experiences, the [the IAF] developed an ongoing process of community and parish renewal.”^{xv}

From the above, one sees that membership in an Alinsky-based organization – whatever goods it may procure for its member communities – is highly problematic for a Catholic parish. Catholicism affirms a fixed, knowable, eternal truth. The IAF denies this. Catholicism affirms that there are fixed, unchangeable moral principles. The IAF teaches pragmatics. Catholicism affirms that each individual human person is created in the image of God and “therefore possesses a sacredness that can never be simply subordinate to the good of society as a whole.”^{xvi} The IAF determines the “common good” through guided, cooperative inquiry, which possess no external moral framework to protect an individual from collective tyranny.

LOOKING FOR *CATHOLIC* SOCIAL JUSTICE PROGRAMS

Unfortunately, groups such as the IAF receive tremendous Catholic support, in part because paint-by-number organizations afford ease of implementation for a busy pastor and in part because there are so few genuinely Catholic social justice materials, programs or organizations to use in their place.^{xvii} There are some, however. The motivated parish social justice committee can turn to solid “issue groups,” such as the American Life League or the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, that address through education and through activism a specific, circumscribed body of problems from a perspective that is in complete conformity with Catholic teaching.

There are also reliable materials for those who need a broader understanding of Catholic social justice teaching and its practical applications. The St. Antoninus Institute offers free study guides appropriate for dedicated groups of people within a parish (or diocese). These materials have nothing of the slick presentation one finds among those less reflective of a Catholic perspective, but they are faithful – and affordable.

Social justice activism is legitimate, and in some communities necessary. The Catholic Church has a rich body of teaching to assist Catholics in this work. But the pastor must be alert to the fact that many organizations, preying off the widespread ignorance most Catholics have of Catholic teaching, attempt to use parishes as a place from which to “evangelize” an ideological agenda, seductively packaged for the Catholic but in reality, quite foreign.

ⁱ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #2179

ⁱⁱ Message of John Paul II to the participants in the Sixth Plenary Session of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, February 24, 2000, quoting *Centesimus Annus*, 46.

ⁱⁱⁱ Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor*: Regarding Certain Fundamental Questions of the Church's Moral Teaching, with a quotation taken from an address to those taking part in the International Congress of Moral Theology (10 April 1986), 1: "Insegnamenti" IX, 1 (1986), 970-971.

^{iv} *Veritatis Splendor* 79-87, cf. Rom 3:8

^v Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, (Vantage Books: New York, 1971), p. 10-11.

^{vi} Harry Boyte, *Commonwealth: A Return to Citizen Politics*, 1989 (chapter 6 notes).

^{vii} Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals* (Vantage Books: New York, 1971) pp. 29, 34, 36, 43, 44.

^{viii} Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals* (p. 130, 133)

^{ix} Mary Beth Rogers, *Cold Anger* (University of North Texas Press: Denton, 1990), p. 210, footnotes for chapter 16, #4.

^x Maryann Eklund, *The Structure and Function of Rhetoric of Valley Interfaith: A Case Study of a Contemporary Social Movement*, Masters Thesis, University of New Mexico, 1987, p. 83.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, p 13.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, p 14.

^{xiii} Peter Skerry, "Neighborhood COPS," *The New Republic*, Feb. 6, 1984.

^{xiv} Mary Beth Rogers, *Cold Anger*, pg. 97.

^{xv} Harry Boyte, *Community is Possible: Repairing America's Roots*, (Harper and Row: New York, 1984), p 149.

^{xvi} David Hollenbach, S.J., "Liberalism, Communitarianism, and the Bishops' Pastoral on the Economy," chapter V in *Church Polity and American Politics: Issues in Contemporary American Catholicism*, edited by Mary C. Segers, Garland Publishing, Inc., 1990.

^{xvii} The IAF alone takes approximately 16% of Catholic Campaign for Human Development grants annually, and about 1/3 of CCHD funding goes into Alinskyian organizing.

Other groups whose flawed social justice analysis and training are prevalent in Catholic parishes include the liberationist Mexican American Cultural Center, the National Pastoral Life Center and ROUNDTABLE, the Center of Concern, Network, Pax Christi, and RENEW, International.