

2007

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Barbara W. Shank

University of St. Thomas, Minnesota, BWSHANK@stthomas.edu

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## Recommended Citation

Shank, Barbara W., "The Call to Justice: Social Work in Catholic" (2007). *Social Work Faculty Publications*. 12.  
[http://ir.stthomas.edu/ssw\\_pub/12](http://ir.stthomas.edu/ssw_pub/12)

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# The Call to Justice: Social Work in Catholic Higher Education

Barbara W. Shank

*This paper describes the congruency between Catholic social work education and Catholic social teaching. Schools of Social Work in Catholic institutions prepare students for social work practice in ways that are compatible with the call to justice, the goals of Christian service and the tasks of the Catholic Church's social teaching. Articulating the connections between Catholic social teaching and social work education is an important starting point for understanding the importance of social work education to Catholic colleges and universities.*

**T**HE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, IN "THE CHURCH IN THE MODERN World," (Gaudium et Spes, 1965) stated:

The joys and hopes, the sorrows and anxieties, of the women and men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way oppressed, these are the joys and hopes, the sorrows and anxieties, of the followers of Jesus Christ.

Addressing what is meant by the "joys and hopes, sorrows and anxieties of the women and men of this age," is not only the task of the Catholic Church's social teaching, but also the task of Catholic social work education. Many Catholic schools of social work make this connection explicit. For example, the mission statement of the School of Social Work at the College of St. Catherine and the University of St. Thomas reads:

Drawing from the Judeo-Christian traditions of social caring, we prepare students to use social work knowledge, values and skills to demonstrate the intrinsic value of all humankind as they serve those in need and promote social justice and human rights.

This mission statement indicates the intent of the School of Social Work at the College of St. Catherine and the University of St. Thomas to prepare students for social work practice in ways that are compatible with the Catholic call to justice, the goals of Christian service and the tasks of the Catholic Church's social teaching. This connection between Catholic social teaching and social work education is an important basis for understanding the importance of social work education to Catholic colleges and universities.

#### **Catholic Social Work Education: History and Scope**

Annarelli notes that Catholic higher education was established "to train individuals with an integrated vision of faith and culture for service to society, to establish a community of Christian witnesses among faculty members and students, and to contribute to the Church and society through scientific research and the study of human problems" (1987, p. 63). Building upon these goals, Catholic social work education endeavors "to prepare students for the practice of social work in ways that are compatible with the goals of Christian service and social justice" (Catholic Social Work Education, 1990, 1) and to provide staffing for Catholic social service agencies.

In 2005, Catholic undergraduate programs in social work accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) numbered fifty-eight (Council on Social Work Education, 2005). This constituted 13 % of the 453 accredited social work programs nationally. Two other Catholic undergraduate programs were in candidacy for accreditation.

In 2005, there were 13 accredited graduate social work programs in Catholic colleges and universities (CSWE, 2005) or 8.2 % of the total number of accredited graduate programs nationwide. Loyola University, Chicago, offered the first Catholic university-based social work courses in 1914. A few years later, Fordham University in New York began offering social work courses, followed by The Catholic

University, St. Louis University, and Boston College. Other graduate programs under Catholic auspices established since the early 1900s include programs at Our Lady of the Lake in Texas, Barry University, Marywood College, the joint program at The College of St. Catherine and the University of St. Thomas, Dominican University, Spalding University, Newman University, and St. Ambrose University.

Doctoral programs in social work in 2005 numbered 64. The five Catholic schools offering a Ph.D. or D.S.W. include Barry University, The Catholic University of America, Boston College, Fordham University, and Loyola University of Chicago.

The location of Catholic programs nationally reflects the pattern of Catholic immigration and settlement in the U.S. Most accredited undergraduate and graduate programs are located in the East and Midwest. Few Catholic undergraduate programs in social work exist in the West, South, or Southwest. Only one graduate Catholic social work program is located in the South and only one is in the Southwest. This placement of programs leaves a large portion of the Catholic population without local access to Catholic social work education.

In reviewing the development and growth of programs at all three levels, the growth in program development under Catholic auspices has been primarily at the undergraduate level; however, five Catholic graduate social work programs have been developed since 1990. At the doctoral level, the number of Catholic programs has decreased from six to five. This decrease in the limited number of programs in doctoral education in social work presents a problem for undergraduate and graduate programs providing Catholic social work education as well as for the Catholic social service agencies. Doctoral-level programs at Catholic institutions help ensure there will be faculty available to teach at Catholic schools and provide leadership to Catholic social services who desire to retain a Catholic identity. Unless there is an increase in the number of programs and in the enrollment of students at all three levels, as well as active support for existing programs, Catholic institutions can expect to face a potential lack of scholars and service providers who are committed to an integrated vision of faith and culture for Christian service in the Catholic tradition.

**Complementary Principles: Faith and Reason**

Pope John Paul II, in “On Catholic Universities” (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, 1990, p. 13-14), states that every Catholic university, as Catholic, must have “an institutional commitment to the service of the people of God and of the human family.” The Catholic university is also a place that protects the dignity of the human person, confronts the problems of society and culture, demands consideration of ethical concerns, and promotes social justice. Students should be challenged to combine humanistic and cultural development with specialized professional education. Professional education must also incorporate ethical values and a sense of service to individuals, to communities, and to society. Faculty and students should be particularly attentive to “the poorest and to those who suffer economic, social, cultural, or religious injustice” (Pope John Paul II, 1990, p. 25).

The purpose of social work education is the preparation of competent and effective social work professionals who are committed to social work practice that includes services to the poor and oppressed, and who work to alleviate poverty, oppression, and other forms of social injustice (Educational Policy Statement, 2001). Social work programs must ensure that students acquire a liberal arts perspective, which includes an understanding of one’s cultural heritage in the context of other cultures. Social work programs must also provide specific knowledge about values and their ethical implications, prepare students to understand and appreciate human diversity and the worth and dignity of the person, promote the well being of all, and present strategies for promoting social and economic justice and for combating the causes and effects of oppression. The social work profession commits one to promoting individual change (service) and social reform (justice).

**The Call to Justice: The Legacy of *Gaudium et Spes***

Forty years later, the principles articulated in *Gaudium et Spes* remain highly relevant for the social work profession and for undergraduate and graduate social work programs. “In the economic and social realms... the dignity and complete vocation of the human person and the welfare of society as a whole are to be respected and

promoted. For the person is the source, the center; and the purpose of all economic and social life” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1965). The profession of social work is based on such values as service, social and economic justice, the importance of human relationships, and the dignity and worth of persons. These values are clearly consistent with the principles explicated in *Guadium et Spes* as central components of Catholic social teaching.

Several themes emerge as one examines *Gaudium et Spes* within the larger context of Catholic social teaching. These themes include the respect for the human person; rights, responsibilities and participation of the human person; the interdependence of person, family, and society; the value and dignity of work and the importance of working conditions and human activity; economic justice and the poor and vulnerable; the common good, and solidarity. Each of these themes is connected to premises underlying the purpose of social work education. The following sections will develop these themes and the strong convergence between Catholic Social Teaching and the social work profession.

### **Respect for the Human Person**

In the Catholic tradition, the respect for and the dignity of the human person is central to the Gospel message. Each individual is a reflection of God and, as such, possesses a basic dignity that comes from God. Catholic teaching states that people should be understood differently from anything else in the created order because they possess two capacities that reflect the image of God — intelligence and free will. Human dignity, therefore, means that a person has a certain kind of standing in the order of creation that demands respect (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1965; Hehir, 1991; U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1998).

This intrinsic value or standing is irrespective of one’s race, gender, age, economic status, culture, or sexual orientation. Institutions and policies must be evaluated by their commitment to human dignity. Human dignity demands that one acts according to understanding and free choice that is personally motivated and not pressured by external conditions. Human beings are “under the control of their own decision” which includes pursuit of the good and acceptance of judgment before God when accounting for one’s

life decisions. Catholic teaching stresses hope and God's message of light, life, and freedom to the human person, communicating that the future of humanity rests on those who can provide reasons for living and hoping (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1965).

*Ex Corde Ecclesiae* calls upon Catholic universities to include in their research and teaching agendas the study of contemporary problems such as the dignity of the human person, the promotion of justice for all, the quality of personal and family life, the pursuit of peace, a just sharing of resources, and economic justice. The Catholic university is called to study these issues, paying special attention to their ethical and religious dimensions (Pope John Paul II, 1990).

The social work profession is often described as a profession of hope. Social workers help people in need and they address pressing and persistent social problems. Social workers respond to crises and emergencies as well as to everyday personal and social problems. Social workers are often credited with providing people with a reason to live and with hope for the future. The Council on Social Work Education's "Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards" (EPAS) mandates that social work education address these areas. One of the principal social work values is that all human beings have intrinsic worth, irrespective of their past or present behavior, race, culture, beliefs, lifestyle, economic status, or sexual orientation. Another principle includes self-determination, or the free choice to make decisions for one's self and to accept the consequences of those decisions. Social work values explicitly include respecting the inherent dignity and worth of the person. Faculty must integrate this content throughout the social work curriculum and affirm the value that professional relationships are built on regard for individual worth and dignity and furthered by acceptance, honesty, and responsible handling of conflict (CSWE, 2001). Students are expected to apply the concepts of unconditional positive regard, non-possessive warmth, acceptance, nonjudgmental attitude, and respect in their service delivery and professional relationships. They are expected to honor self-determination and ensure confidentiality (National Association of Social Workers, 1999).

**Rights, Responsibilities and Participation of the Human Person**

Catholic social teaching connects human dignity to individual rights, responsibilities, and participation in society. These rights and responsibilities include the freedom to live by one's conscience and to enjoy religious liberty, to raise a family, to immigrate and travel freely, to live free from unfair discrimination, and to have a share of earthly goods sufficient for one's self and one's family. People have a right to food, clothing, shelter, health care, education, security, social services, respect, appropriate information, and employment (*Mater et Magistra*, 1961; *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965). In Catholic social teaching, rights correspond to responsibilities to one's family, community, and the larger society and the respect for the individual carries with it the injunction that one respect the rights of others while working for the common good (U.S. Catholic Conference, 1990).

Catholic universities have the right and responsibility to be both a community of scholars and an academic institution in which Catholicism is vitally present and operative (Second International Congress of Delegates of Catholic Universities, 1972). The moral and ethical implications of research methodology and findings must be a concern for scholars and students in the Catholic university. The Catholic university must also be responsible for providing education that is accessible for the poor, for persons of color, and for members of other socially and economically disadvantaged groups. According to John Paul II, Catholic universities must assume some responsibility for promoting the development of emerging countries (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, 1990).

The Educational Policy (CSWE, 2001) of the Council on Social Work Education addresses issues of scholarship, research, accessibility of educational opportunities, and the global interdependence and context. It obligates schools of social work to assist students in developing an awareness of their personal values and to clarify conflicting values and ethical dilemmas, including ethical standards of scientific inquiry within research. Social work programs must make specific efforts to ensure equity to all students through fair and equitable policies and procedures in recruitment, admission, retention, and financial aid. The Council on Social Work Education also mandates schools of social work to demonstrate that student



aid is available to provide for a diverse student body that includes students who are economically disadvantaged (CSWE, 2001). CSWE also places an emphasis on the admission and retention of students of color, women, and other disadvantaged population groups. Many schools enhance their educational environment and opportunities by internationalizing their curriculum and developing “partner programs” with schools of social work in developing countries. Social work education has historically emphasized the importance of establishing services needed to meet basic human needs, which support the development of human capacities and enhance the social functioning of individuals and families.

### **Person, Family, Society and Interdependence**

*Gaudium et Spes* (1965) emphasizes God’s intent that people not live in isolation from one another. Christian Scripture and the shared teaching of various Christian traditions make clear that God desires people to participate in social groups and to participate as contributing members of their immediate and extended community. As such, Catholic social teaching asserts that human beings are not only sacred, but are also social in nature. Human dignity, rights, and responsibilities are recognized in relation to family and others in the community. This teaching emphasizes the important role of the family in shaping values, in addressing questions of social justice, and in encouraging us to contribute to the broader society. It addresses the obligation of:

...state and other political institutions to protect the life, dignity, and rights of the person; promote the well-being of our families and communities; and pursue the common good. Catholic social teaching stresses that a central test of political, legal, and economic institutions is what they do to people, what they do for people, and how people participate in them (US CC, 1990, p. 5).

This theme looks at the proper role of the state in civil society and identifies the principle of “subsidiarity,” which calls for a graduated structuring of power, so that all power is not located in

one place. Subsidiarity promotes problem solving at the lowest level before higher levels of society or government intervene to address a problem (Hehir, 1991).

Catholic higher education seeks to cultivate an environment that exemplifies the Church's call to understand and support family and to participate in and contribute to the broader society. The Catholic university, therefore, serves as the "custodian and the witness of Catholic civilization" (Ruud, 6). It must endeavor to be a "hospitable environment where the life of the mind and the urgings of the heart are taken seriously. Both those who stand within the community of faith and those who come as fellow-searchers for the ultimate source of life and human meaning should find welcome here. There should be no enemies or aliens in a university, a truly Catholic university" (Malloy, 1992, p. 23). The Catholic university calls all of its members to become part of a community of scholars dedicated to preserving and extending knowledge. Specific rights and responsibilities, including a commitment to teaching, research, and service, accompany this call. Each member of the Catholic academic community is called upon to participate in the life of the community and to contribute to broader communities in society. Catholic institutions of higher education must, through their "Christian spirit of service, be firmly committed to the promotion of social justice" (Pope John Paul II, 1990, p. 23).

The NASW Code of Ethics enjoins all social workers to uphold the profession's values and to act ethically. Some of these core values include challenging social injustice and emphasizing the importance of human relationships. Integrated throughout the Educational Policy of the Council on Social Work Education is the mandate that social work education promote the development and advancement of knowledge, practice skills, and services that enhance human well-being and promote social and economic justice, and that challenge social injustice (CSWE, 2001). Social work education emphasizes the need to understand the centrality of the family, its importance as a basic social unit in society, and its role in shaping values. The human behavior and the social environment curriculum area must provide content on ways social systems promote or deter people in the maintenance or attainment of optimal health and well-being, including related values

and ethical issues. The importance of human relationships and interdependence is stressed. Programs must integrate content emphasizing social and economic justice that is grounded in an understanding of distributive justice, human and civil rights, and the global interconnections of oppression (CSWE, 2001). Social work education must include teaching on the roles of the state and other political institutions as they influence policy development, protect the dignity and rights of the person, promote the well-being of our families and communities, and alleviate forms of social injustice. Central to social welfare policy and services curriculum in social work education are analyses of what political and organizational processes do to and for people. Social work education calls faculty and students to participate in the broader community and empowers clients to exercise control over their lives to enhance their well-being.

### **The Value and Dignity of Work, Working Conditions and Human Activity**

The value and dignity of work is another central theme of Catholic social teaching. The United States Catholic Conference declares that:

Work is a right, an expression of human dignity and allows one to contribute to God's creation. People have the right to decent and productive work, to decent and fair wages, to private property and economic initiative. Workers have the right to form voluntary associations such as unions, cultural organizations, and professional societies. The value of voluntary association, which is strongly supported by the Church, is at the heart of *Rerum Novarum* and other encyclicals on economic justice (USCC, 1990, p. 6).

Pope John Paul II's 1981 encyclical *Laborem Exercens* contends that the economy exists to serve people, not the other way around. This argument insists that society has an obligation to organize work so that people can earn a living wage and support their families. Economic systems must be created that provide meaningful work and protect the basic dignity of the person.

Catholic higher education challenges faculty and students “to attain integration between faith and life, and between professional competence and Christian wisdom. Students are challenged to search for the truth and for meaning in their lives, while training as leaders of tomorrow in their professions” (Pope John Paul II, 1990). A significant part of most mission statements of Catholic colleges and universities addresses the importance of combining a liberal education with career competency. Catholic higher education has expanded, not only to shape minds and to build morals, but also to extend the Catholic influence in society. Fostering a social, political, and intellectual environment guided by Catholic teaching, tradition, and moral values has always been an integral part of Catholic education. The growth and development of Catholic higher education has allowed numerous members of the Catholic Church and others to receive collegiate, graduate, and professional training, helping them to advance socially and economically (Leahy, 1991; John Paul II, 1999).

The purpose of social work education is to prepare competent and effective social work professionals. Social work education must provide the knowledge, values, and skills of the profession that are transferable among settings, population groups, and problem areas. Social work programs must ensure that graduates acquire a liberal arts perspective upon which a professional foundation can be built. Social work education does not allow for passive observation by its members, but focuses on social action and demands that constant attention be paid to values and ethics, diversity, populations-at-risk, and social and economic justice. Social work education emphasizes that practitioners strive to make social institutions more humane and responsive to human needs, are committed to assisting client systems to obtain needed resources, and are responsible for their own ethical conduct, the quality of their practice, and seeking continuous growth in the knowledge and skills of their profession (CSWE, 2001).

### **Economic Justice, the Poor and Vulnerable**

The poor and oppressed have a special place in Catholic social teaching. A basic moral test of a society is how it provides and cares for its most vulnerable members. The Catholic tradition calls upon its members to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first.

*Gaudium et Spes* (1965) reinforces this principles through stressing reverence for the poor and consideration of neighbor as self. Catholic social teaching contends that society be viewed in terms of all of its members, and that social programs benefit everyone, not just the privileged few. Catholic social teaching instructs people to respond to the needs of others, but noting that those with the greatest needs require a greater response. Catholic social teaching stresses the need to seek creative ways to move beyond an emphasis on individual rights and freedom to extend democratic ideals to economic life and thus ensure that the basic needs for a life with dignity are accessible to all (USCC, 1990; U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1998).

“Training of the intellect,” observed John Henry Newman, “which is best for the individual himself, best enables him to discharge his duties to society. If a practical end must be assigned to a university course, I say it is that of training good members of society. Its art is the art of the social life, and its end is fitness for the world” (Cited in Pelikan, 1992, p. 137). The Catholic university does not define its mission as one of directly providing care for the poor and vulnerable in society, but it works toward that end and toward the betterment of society through the lives and careers of its students (John Paul II, 1999). Newman saw the university and Catholic education as “the ground of promise in the future,” as a way to address “the wrongs of the oppressed” (Pelikan, 1992, p. 147).

The stated purpose of social work education is preparation of competent and effective social work professionals who are committed to professional practice including services to the poor and oppressed, and who work to alleviate poverty, oppression, and other forms of social injustice (CSWE, 2001). Social workers strive to liberate vulnerable and oppressed people and to promote social inclusion. All graduates of accredited social work programs must be able to demonstrate that they “understand the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination and apply strategies of advocacy and social change that advance social and economic justice” (CSWE, 2001, p. 9). At the heart of the social work profession is a concern for the well-being of all people and a commitment to serving the more helpless and vulnerable members of society.

### **The Common Good and Solidarity**

Catholic social teaching focuses on the common good, the connectedness of all human beings, and includes all people as part of the “human family.” Humans as social beings belong to three communities: the family, civil society, and the human community.

We are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. We are our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers (cf. Gen 4:9). In a connected and global economy, our responsibilities to one another cross national and other boundaries. Violent conflict and the denial of dignity and rights of people anywhere on the globe diminish each of us. Catholic social teaching clearly identifies the Church’s concern for world peace, global development, environment, and international human rights. “Love of neighbor” has global dimensions in an interdependent world and love of God cannot be separated from love of one’s neighbor (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1965; *Laborem Exercens*, 1981; USCC, 1990).

Newman notes that the Catholic university has “duties to society” on the local, national, and international level. The Catholic university must recognize an international context for its research and publication. Catholic universities must accept the challenge to become actively involved with professional international exchange programs to help prepare trained professionals in every profession for service in developing Third World countries. Providing the knowledge and skills for survival and growth demonstrates a commitment to the dignity of the human person, encourages individuals to take an active role in society, provides meaningful work, and assists the poor and the oppressed.

Social work education is committed to preparing practitioners to engage in prevention activities that promote well-being and to alleviate poverty, oppression and other forms of social injustice (CSWE 2001). Social workers are in solidarity with those who are disadvantaged and strive to alleviate poverty. Social work programs are to prepare social workers who can formulate and influence

social policies and service in diverse political contexts. A premise underlying social work education contends that effective social work practitioners recognize global interdependence and context, and the need for worldwide professional cooperation in service delivery.

State social work organizations and schools of social work are becoming involved in “pairing programs” with developing Third World countries. Social work faculty are providing expertise in planning and social development and in curriculum development to develop professional programs in countries where professional social work education has not been available. Both the national professional social work organization and the national professional social work education accrediting organization have identified internationalizing the profession and the curriculum as a major focus.

### **Conclusion**

Catholic social teaching, as presented in *Gaudium et Spes*, the Catholic university, and social work education are complementary and compatible. Each has a rich heritage that places people before things, recognizes the dignity of the human person and the interdependence of humanity, challenges the oppression of racism and bigotry, and works for social and economic justice. Each calls upon its members to defend human rights, to participate in society at all levels, and to take action to serve the poor and vulnerable. Each requires that its members act out of a developed sense of values, ethics, and moral conscience for social justice. Social work education in many respects represents the actualization of Catholic social teaching and represents the Catholic universities’ commitment to liberal education, preparation for career competency, and public service. ❖

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**Barbara W. Shank**, Ph.D., Dean and Professor, College of St. Catherine/University of St. Thomas, School of Social Work, LOR 406, 2115 Summit Ave., St. Paul, MN 55105. Phone: (651) 962-5801. Email: bwshank@stthomas.edu

**Key Words:** Social Justice, Catholic Social Teaching, Social Work Education