

MUSINGS  
FROM  
THE  
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# DEAR READERS

Recently, I found myself immersed in the solitary task of grading the mid-term exams of students in my Foundations of Christian Theology course. One of the exam essays asked the students to compare Hosea and Amos, two of the earliest prophets in the Old Testament canon. Almost unanimously, student after student declared that Hosea addressed the religious sins of Israel, while Amos treated the issue of social justice.

Though undoubtedly the fault of the professor (in this case, me!), the students' tendency to separate religious and cultic practice from social action is endemic in American culture. "Catholics" are lauded publicly in non-religious media insofar as they engage in heroic feats of social action. And indeed such recognition is encouraging, a sign that Christian discipleship can provoke admiration and conversion of heart even among those who do not operate out of a Christian worldview. Simultaneously, one gets the sense that Catholicism can easily be reduced to a series of social teachings alone, an organization that exists for the betterment of society but not for the salvation of the world.

In reality, the separation of "religious practice" from "social action" is profoundly non-biblical. The Law bestowed on Mt. Sinai is not an arbitrary series of commands but instead a tangible sign of God's own justice, a reminder of the wondrous deeds that God performed in rescuing Israel from the bonds of slavery in Egypt. God declares to Israel:

You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt. Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but in the seventh you shall let it rest and lie fallow. Let the needy among your people eat of it, and what they leave let the wild beasts eat. You shall do the same with your vineyards and your olive groves. Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall cease from labor, in order that your ox and your ass may rest, and that your bondman and the stranger may be refreshed (Ex 23:9-12).

In this case, the Law itself (concerned with divine justice) becomes an act of divine worship, a bestowal of gratitude offered to God. The oppression of the stranger is not only a failure of societal measures of justice but also a forgetfulness of what God has done. Letting the land lie fallow is not merely the pursuit of ecological justice but a "sacramental" sign that the land is itself a gift from God. Keeping the Sabbath, Israel's supreme act of worship, is intrinsically tied to care for those who labor. Thus, when the prophets decry Israel's neglect for the poor, their forgetfulness of the stranger, their blatant disregard for the Law, they do so precisely because they perceive these deeds as bald-faced acts of ingratitude marshaled against the living God of justice.

Jesus, the anointed prophet of the Father, announces His own mission of salvation through words echoing the prophet Isaiah. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus proclaims in the synagogue in Nazareth:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year to the Lord." And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk 4:18-21).

Our temptation is to read this passage as a reduction of the Gospel to a social or political program. Such a reading is not attentive to the underlying logic of the Gospel of Luke. Indeed, Jesus is concerned about the poor, the oppressed, those in captivity. And Christians who live as if discipleship does not include working to eliminate unjust social structures or offering concrete deeds of charity to those in need require a conversion. But the possibility of this conversion, of a radical opening up of the human heart to the great reversal inaugurated by the Kingdom of God, requires an encounter with Jesus Himself; an encounter with the crucified and now

resurrected Messiah, who reigns not from a throne but from the wood of the Cross. Religious practice and social action are intrinsically connected, precisely because only through our entrance into the life of the Church, our rumination upon the Word of God, our eating and drinking the Body and Blood of the Lord, our life of contemplation, can we deepen our encounter with the Christ who expands our capacity for love. And through the Christian life, our gradual incorporation into Christ's life in the Church, our social action can become a sacrament of the kingdom. As St. Paul exhorts:

**I appeal to you, therefore...by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.**

(Rm 12:1-2)

In Catholicism, social action is Eucharistic, a presenting of our bodies as an offering of love, a gift poured out for the renewal of the world.

Therefore, a necessary goal of the New Evangelization will be an intentional effort on the Church's part to proclaim and perform the intrinsic union between doctrine, worship, and social action. Our understanding of Christ as the God-man is intimately tied to our commitment to human dignity at all stages of life. We denounce and work to end the injustice of abortion, of sexism, of poverty and homelessness, of conspicuous consumption, of sexual slavery, of jingoism, of war and forced migration, and every injustice that emerges from the kingdom of power and manipulation. We enter into solidarity with those that suffer at the violent hands of Babylon. We examine the Church herself through the sober eyes of faith, hope, and love to see where such injustice has entered into our communal life with one another, whether in our Catholic schools, our forms of leadership, or in the "in-groups" that can deform the beauty of parish life. As Christians, we see such work as part of our own Eucharistic vocation, to give ourselves away in deeds of love, to enter more deeply into the Triune life of God. Yet, we work with those who do not share our profession of faith for the common good of country and society alike. A common good that moves beyond hatred and polarization, political parties and platforms, class warfare and the politics of blame, toward authentic human community. And we do so, not as an accessory to our Catholic faith, but as the deepest expression of our identity as adopted sons and daughters of the living God.

This issue of *Church Life* is an exercise seeking to imagine what a commitment to evangelization and Catholic Social Teaching might look like. We have partnered with the University of Notre Dame's Center for Social Concerns (CSC), a sister institute of the ICL, to carry out this imaginative experiment. As such, we feature guest columnist Michael Hebbeler (Director of Student Leadership and Senior Transitions), who writes about the Center's mission of evangelization to Notre Dame's undergraduates. Through the work of the Center, the proclamation that "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8b, 16b) manifests itself in the physical and spiritual commitment to the common good. Thus, we're very happy to have them intimately involved in planning this extended issue of *Church Life*.

In this issue, you'll find articles touching on the vast panoply of issues related to Catholic Social Teaching and the New Evangelization. John Cavadini, in his column, treats the intrinsic relationship between justice and charity. Tim O'Malley offers a Eucharistic reading of Catholic Social Teaching, a reading that might inform the Church's pedagogy in marriage preparation, ecological formation, and service immersion. Margie Pfeil, assistant professor in the Department of Theology, analyzes the evangelical and Eucharistic function of a food cooperative in the city of South Bend. Nick Albares and Gen Jordan (graduates of the University of Notre Dame and alumni representatives to the Institute for Church Life and Center for Social Concern's advisory council) describe through narrative how an immersion in Catholic social thought and action is necessary for the Church's work of the New Evangelization. Pat Reidy, C.S.C., a Holy Cross seminarian, performs a theological reflection in light of an immersion trip he took to El Salvador, a recognition of the radical cost of love fundamental to priestly formation. David Lantigua, assistant professor at the Catholic

University of America, situates the development of the language of human rights in the Church's own reflection upon the evangelization of the Indians in South America, with particular attention to the solidarity and love shown to the natives by many of the missionaries. Finally, Fr. Dan Groody, C.S.C. addresses the spiritual and theological meaning of migration in the modern world.

Thus, each article in this edition of *Church Life* intends to relate theological reflection, with the particularities of Catholic Social Teaching. Precisely because, if the New Evangelization is to work, it must become more than an inculcation into the language of Christian doctrine. Rather, the New Evangelization will result in a concrete encounter with the Christ who offers Himself in the stunning poverty of hungry and thirsty flesh. Happy reading.

