

Social Justice on Catholic Campuses: Is it Enough?

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There is no questioning the fundamental distinctions that make up a Catholic university. From the environment to the curriculum, the Catholic campus is unique and advantageous. Often adorned with religious statues of saints, crosses in hallways and classrooms, and a chapel resting in the middle of campus; the ambiance of a Catholic university undoubtedly reflects the spirit of Catholicism. The differences in the aura of a Catholic campus parallels the differences in the universities core values and curriculum. A Catholic university will make the effort to promote the value of human life, morality and justice from the philosophies of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition and Catholic Social Teaching. Universities do so by aligning their mission statements in accordance with Catholic values, offering core courses in theology and ethics, and promoting social justice through service works.

Social justice is at the heart of social teachings within Catholicism, and it is an essential framework in Catholic institutions (Himchak, 2005). With the emphasis on social justice and service opportunities, Catholic campuses provide ways for their students to live out the virtues they teach in their everyday lives through community service based learning. These institutions across the United States make the effort to influence their students to be committed to striving for justice and respect for the dignity of all people. Despite this push, it is inevitable that some universities will stray from the core values of Catholic teachings and fail to touch on every social justice issue. Catholic universities teach the importance of human dignity and social justice with their unique curriculum, service opportunities on campus, and push for inclusivity, yet although the selectivity of social justice issues does not reflect the Catholic Social Teaching, the overall push to promote social justice has significant implications.

Over the course of this paper I will provide an in-depth background of the pillars of Catholic Social Teaching and the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. I will then explain how the

cultures at Catholic universities across the United States match those teachings, and how the missions and foundations of catholic universities are met with their curriculum and campus ministries. By utilizing work from theologians, researchers, and educators, I will go on to explain the implications of learning in a Catholic environment, and analyze the values promoted by the campus ministries and Catholic universities. I am going to use various examples from different universities to describe how their actions of volunteer services and works in social justice live up to their teachings. To counter those examples, I will depict how some Catholic institutions fail to promote certain notions that their teachings seemingly stand for, and I will allude the consequences. Finally, I will investigate if there can be a balance in the contention between the diverse issues of social justice, and conclude if the promotion of social justice on catholic campuses is enough.

### ***Background of Catholic Intellectual Tradition and Social Teaching***

Catholic Universities are built upon the foundations of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, or CIT. CIT is the collection of theological and philosophical thoughts, works of literature and art, social topics and political theorizing that make up the tradition of the Catholic faith (Sullivan et. al., 2014). Catholic universities align their curriculum with the CIT to endorse the dynamic heritage of the faith, and offer the benefits of learning these teachings to their students. Within the CIT there is the branch of the Catholic Social Teaching, or CST. CST, as defined by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, is the treasure of wisdom aimed to build a just and holy society, through the tradition of papal, conciliar, and episcopal documents that explicate the social demands of the catholic faith (1998). These teachings are expressed through the seven major pillars: life and dignity of the human being, call to family and community, rights and responsibilities, needs of the poor and vulnerable, dignity and rights of workers, solidarity, and

care for God's creation (Himchak, 2005). These seven themes are the seeds necessary to grow a more just society.

It is vital to be able to understand these social teachings in order to recognize the social justice issues that Catholic church and universities will stand behind. Beginning with the foundation that all human beings have innate dignity, the church emphasizes that human life is sacred, and any act that violates or threatens that life is unjust. As humans are sacred beings, they are also social, and have a vocation to participate in society towards the common good. The next pillar explains that there are fundamental and protected rights that humans entertain, such as the right to life. Human beings also have a responsibility to protect the rights and support the needs of the poor and vulnerable populations. Along with fundamental rights, humans are granted rights as workers as well; the right to join unions, to make fair wages, and so on. Solidarity is the theme that explains how every being is an equal, no matter their background, and it is everyone's duty to pursue justice and peace for all. Finally, the last theme explains that there is a responsibility to care for all of God's creations, including the earth and its creatures, to protect the home of all beings (USCCB, 1998).

### ***Catholic Social Teaching and Social Justice in Curriculum***

Much of the literature on Catholic higher education emphasizes three main themes that Catholic universities follow, which includes "the importance of interdisciplinary inquiry, the need to translate classroom learning into purposeful action, and the duty of Catholic institutions to teach their students about Catholicism" (Rizzi, 2019, p. 6). Reflecting those themes, the majority of Catholic universities' mission statements exclaim a commitment to a holistic education aimed to enhance the minds of their students not only intellectually, but spiritually and morally as well (Ackerson, 2018). Along with holistic education, mission statements of Catholic

institutions also encourage a commitment to seek the truth and meaning of life in accordance with Catholicism, and work towards the common good of all creations (Gray & Sullivan, 2008). In order to do so, they have a responsibility to aim to incorporate the ideology of Catholic Social Teaching into their curriculum and their culture.

The curriculum taught at a Catholic university can vary drastically from other institutions. A majority of Catholic institutions require students to take core courses in theology, religious studies, philosophy, ethics, and even courses that delve into Catholic Intellectual Tradition (Heft, 2006). Along with providing these courses, Catholic universities take the initiative to expand the Catholic Social Teaching into a wide array of disciplines, aside from philosophy and theology (Heft, 2006). By implementing the CST into various fields of study, students obtain a deeper grasp on Catholic tradition, and they are given the resources to apply it into their own disciplines, in both the present and future. This inter-disciplinary learning is fundamental to Catholic education, in that the end goal is to bring the learner closer to an understanding of the ultimate spiritual and intellectual truth (Rizzi, 2019).

Catholic higher education institutions aspire to implement not only the Catholic Social Teaching, but ideas of social justice into their curriculum as well. This is done by creating foundations in course programs that surround the concepts of social justice, advocacy and service (Calley et.al., 2011). Pedagogical activities create framework for social justice across the curriculum. These activities include adding books that give account to social justice issues, such as justice for the poor and oppression of the marginalized, and implementing justice-focused reflection questions in courses to spark deeper dialogue (Calley et.al., 2011). It is the role of a catholic university to be a place where professors and students can carry intelligent and critical explorations of Catholicism's understandings of the common good and social justice, and study

the implications (Hollenbach, 2010). Through the integration of Catholic Social Teaching into curriculum and the discussions that stem from them, students who receive a Catholic education are further equipped to live out those teachings.

### ***Implementing Catholic Social Teaching in Campus Activities***

A Catholic university's success can be seen by the degree its students integrate the lessons they learned into their everyday lives (Rizzi, 2019). By emphasizing the importance of the Catholic Social Teaching through coursework and curriculum, Catholic universities will take the next steps to practice what they preach in their actions to fully promote social justice on their campus. One way in particular this is done is through campus ministry. Campus ministry on Catholic campuses contributes to the development of mission and Catholic identity through student service programs, campus-wide collaboration, and the values of the Good Samaritan parable (Gray & Sullivan, 2008). Campus ministries teach students to work together to integrate Catholic visions and values into their present and future lives (Gray & Sullivan, 2008). The Good Samaritan parable offers four actions that represent the ethical priorities of campus ministry, Catholic Social Teaching, and the work towards justice in Catholic higher education. These four actions include to see, to feel compassion, to act, and to sustain the good (Gray & Sullivan, 2008).

The activities of campus ministries at Catholic universities are put in place to promote those four actions of seeing, compassion, action, and work towards the common good. To see means to recognize the humanity of the poor and the marginalized. Feeling compassion for another is identifying the emotional connection and bond through Christ. Action follows recognition and compassion, and is the remedy in which students are called to live out the Catholic teachings and help one another. Finally, sustaining the good means to not only perform

a charitable act, but to work towards a fully just society in every action, to result in peace and harmony with all of creation (Gray & Sullivan, 2008).

### *Social Justice Through Mission and Works*

The culture of a catholic campus aims to exemplify the Catholic Social Teaching in ways by creating an environment where the dignity of all humans is respected. As the CST identifies that there are certain themes that the gospel exclaims Catholic's should live in accordance with, Catholic universities involve their students in programs and services that endorse these teachings. The three specific themes of Catholic Social Teaching that are very distinct in Catholic universities across the United States are the dignity of human beings, the call to help the poor and vulnerable, and the concept of solidarity. A crucial way that themes are lived out in Catholic universities are in volunteer programs and community service work. Offering service learning opportunities is common in Catholic universities, because social justice requires community participation and solidarity with others (Seider, et. al. 2011).

Involving students in service work allows them to understand the importance of social justice, and fully grasp the concepts of human dignity. An example of the importance of community service work is seen in The Pulse Program at Boston College, a Catholic University in Massachusetts. A research design study was conducted to find the implications of implementing a community service program on a Catholic campus. The Pulse Program states that their mission is to “educate our students about social injustice by putting them into direct contact with marginalized communities and social change organizations and by encouraging discussion on classic and contemporary works of philosophy and theology. Our goal is to foster critical consciousness and enable students to question conventional wisdom and learn how to work for a just society” (Seider et. al., 2011, p. 106). The programs mission statement is deeply

rooted from the pillars of the Catholic Social Teaching. By placing their students in direct contact with members of society who are underprivileged, they are witnessing their human dignity, and catering to the needs to the poor and vulnerable. Community service learning also allows students to work in communities where they are able to learn by addressing problems and issues within that community (Seider et. al., 2011). The Pulse Program was noted to have significant effects on those students who participated. The research study concluded that the students were able to change their perspectives on poverty and inequality in order to recognize the structural factors, which can help them increase support for programs and policies to reduce the number of Americans living in poverty (Seider et. al., 2011).

Another example of social justice through faith and service can be seen at DePaul University, a Catholic institution in Chicago. With their Faith and Community Service Program, their students have the opportunity to utilize their learned Catholic values and implement them in service to the poor and neglected (Dalton, 2006). The community service at this university provides a context to explore various social justice issues. This program offers a welcoming environment for students to participate in open discussion to address the call to civic engagement and analyze how faith and values are necessary tools to fight for social justice (Dalton, 2006).

### ***Finding Solidarity with Marginalized Communities***

By implementing open dialogue and call to justice into the campus life and environment, universities act on their commitment to the Catholic Social Teaching. Along with offering community service opportunities to promote social justice, Catholic universities are known to create an inclusive environment to promote and respect the dignity of all their students on their campus (Sullivan et. al., 2014). In regard to dignity and solidarity of all beings, St. Francis College in Brooklyn creates opportunities for the marginalized on its campus. They offer a



prison re-entry program, which awards scholarships to those who were previously incarcerated and have goals to earn a degree (Elfman, 2019). This program is undoubtedly consistent with the Catholic Social Teachings of dignity of all persons and the vocations to help serve the community.

A group that has faced wrong criticism within Catholicism is the LGBT community. Catholic universities take the initiative to stand with students and faculty who are a part of the LGBT community, despite disapproval from outsiders. This is because, according to the Catholic Social Teaching, the dignity of all humans is to be recognized, and it is the goal as a Catholic institution to strive for solidarity among all beings. One example is seen at Fordham University in the Bronx. The LGBT community at this university has faced criticism by outside groups when they were going to hold a drag fashion show. The backlash received on social media argued that an event like that should not be held at a Catholic University. The university supported their students, however, and issued a statement exclaiming that the Catholic teachings honors the individuality of their students, no matter their race, sexuality or gender (Elfman, 2019).

Catholic theologian and ethicist, Teresa Delgado, reflects on her experiences with the LGBT community at Iona College in New York, in her work “A Delicate Dance: Utilizing and Challenging the Sexual Doctrine of the Catholic Church in Support of LGBTIQ Persons”. Delgado explains how her institution holds a “Coming Out Week” every year as a testament to their LGBT community. One year, Delgado recalls that her colleague Mary, who is a transgender woman, spoke about her experiences at the event. She explains how this event had the highest turnout she has ever seen at the school, and how Mary claimed she has found the most welcoming and affirming environment at this Catholic campus (Delgado, 2014). This university,

along with many other Catholic institutions, has shown that it is possible to stay rooted in Catholic heritage while being willing to engage in dialogue that will strive for justice, support and a loving environment for all.

### ***Where Catholic Universities Fail***

Catholic universities do excel in preaching ethics and values to their students, and offering programs for their students to promote justice. However, the university institution itself may sometimes fall short ethically (Keenan, 2015). Despite the values from the Catholic Social Teachings, that all are rooted in the notion that all beings are to be treated with dignity and respect, many Catholic institutions fail to promote justice for workers, in particular, adjunct professors. A pillar of the Catholic Social Teaching states that the dignity and rights of workers are to be respected. Catholic teachings on worker's rights further explains that workers have the rights to a just wage, to affordable healthcare, to rest, to unionize, to pensions, and to safe working conditions (Beyer, 2017). As this pillar is meant to be followed and upheld by all Catholic institutions, some universities fail to give their adjunct professors all the rights they deserve.

Adjunct professors have been subject to unjust treatment, as it has been reported that 22% of adjuncts live below the poverty line (Beyer, 2017). More often than not, adjuncts face low wages, scarce benefits, and huge workloads (Lefebvre, 2019). This treatment is the complete opposite of what is endorsed by the Catholic Social Teaching. Catholic universities are becoming more reliant on adjunct professors, specifically because they are a lot less expensive and save universities money. However, as more adjuncts are turning to unionize to improve their benefits and pay, many Catholic universities do not welcome that idea (Lefebvre, 2019).

Despite Catholic support for collective bargaining, Catholic administrators attempt to block their adjuncts from unionizing (Lefebvre, 2019). Some universities have even gone as far as using legal means to prevent unionization by enlisting law firms (Beyer, 2017). As the National Labor Relations Act mandates that there be a hostile form of collective bargaining between unions and managements, yet some Catholic institutions claim this infringes on their religious freedom because the conflict it brings could oppose the Catholic Social Teachings notion of solidarity (Beyer, 2017). This argument uses one pillar of the CST, solidarity, to avoid siding with another pillar, rights of workers. Those administrators who deny their adjuncts the right to unionize are violating the Catholic teachings that they align with, and in retrospect, committing a sin (Beyer, 2017).

There is irony in Catholic universities that argue that in order to protect its religious freedom, it should be exempt from federal labor laws protecting unionization (Keenan, 2015). The irony lies in the fact that the universities are ignoring an essential part of their Catholic identity that fights for the rights and justice for workers. This is an ethical issue that needs to be solved to respect the lives of the adjunct professors, as all church institutions are supposed to recognize the rights of workers to emphasize their dignity (Lefebvre, 2019).

### ***Conclusion***

Catholic institutions of higher education do promote the importance of justice and dignity through its diverse curriculum, various service opportunities, and culture of inclusivity.

However, acknowledging the shortcomings of Catholic universities is an important first step to take in order to right the injustices. When an institution aligns their values and missions with a certain belief system and pedagogy, it is unjust to pick and choose what they deem is moral. In order to find a balance in the contention between what social issues should be promoted, there

needs to be open dialogue and discussion from all sides, and recognition of all stories. The pillars of the Catholic Social Teaching need to be processed and examined, and ultimately aligned with how they can be utilized to value the dignity of all humans, no matter the situation. When Catholic universities promote the Catholic Social Teaching, and they implement its pillars into its curriculum and culture, they need to take into account the weight that those ideas hold, and must stay true to them in all that the university does.

Concerning social justice with the values of Catholic Intellectual Tradition is essential to providing a holistic education to students of Catholic universities. Over the course of this paper, I have explained the themes and background of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition and Catholic Social Teachings. After setting the basis of the CST pillars, I explained how they are implemented into the curriculum at Catholic universities. I then presented the importance of campus ministries in promoting social justice in student life. By providing examples of different service learning opportunities that further uphold social justice ideals, I illustrated how the universities practice what they preach. I went on to explain how universities find unity on their campus with their marginalized communities, and encourage a culture of inclusivity. Focusing on rights and justice for adjunct professors, I explained how Catholic institutions fail in certain aspects, and still have room to improve and acknowledge the dignity of all members of their institutions. Overall, the foundation of the Catholic Social Teaching in Catholic universities across the United States is sufficient in arming students with the tools they need to live on the right side of justice.

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