

GRIST

Diocese of New Ulm Social Concerns Office October, 2009

from } **The Social Mission of the Parish:
Building Communities of Salt and Light**
by John Carr, in the Spring 2009 issue of *CHURCH*

The social mission of the parish is best articulated in the words of Isaiah and Jesus as they are recorded in chapter four of Luke's Gospel:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.
The Lord has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor,
liberty to captives,
new sight to the blind,
to set the downtrodden free.*

This was Jesus' mission on earth, and it is the mission of every parish today. Jesus announced who he was by saying "this is being fulfilled in your midst." **Parishes announce that they are Christian communities of faith by demonstrating that this mission of Jesus is being fulfilled in our midst.**

This social mission of the parish is not optional, but essential. This mission is not new, but as old as the Scriptures. It is not something for a few parishes, but for every parish. It is not a function of where the parish is or whom it serves. It is not trendy, but traditional, founded on the fundamentals of our faith. It didn't come from Vatican II or recent papal encyclicals, though they advanced and strengthened our understanding of how we carry out this mission in our own times. It is not a product of a particular ideology or ecclesiology, but rather a defining element of what makes a parish truly Catholic.

Unfortunately, Catholic social ministry is too often not seen or practiced as parish ministry. Social ministry is what is done in soup kitchens and homeless shelters, in legislative hearing rooms and community meetings, in marches for life and against war and in visits to poor communities and faraway countries. This view neglects the indispensable role of the parish in forming, strengthening, organizing, celebrating and encouraging social mission and the parishioners who carry it out in a wide variety of ways and places.

What sometimes passes for social ministry in parishes is also incomplete or partial. **Social ministry is not what one committee or group does for the rest of the parish.** It is not simply the way the parish collects money for good causes. It is not just the works of charity and justice that designated leaders do in the name of the parish. **In fact, an essential measure of parish social ministry is how broadly and deeply the church's social mission is anchored, expressed, and carried out as the work of the entire parish.** How does the parish reach out and invite many parishioners into a common social mission?

One major and constructive change over the last quarter-century has been the end of the unnecessary and divisive

debate about the roles and merits of charity or justice, social service or social action, alleviating the consequences or addressing the causes of injustice. The Scriptures, Catholic social teaching, the challenges we face, and the experience of our parishes all make clear these are not competing visions but complementary and essential elements of a truly Catholic approach to social mission.

Another constructive change is much greater focus on the role of parishes by the structures that lead Catholic social ministry. One of the most widely used statements of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops is *Communities of Salt and Light: The Social Mission of the Parish*. Catholic Charities USA carries out a strong, consistent, and persistent national initiative focused on parish social ministry. Catholic Relief Services has made a major ongoing commitment to help U.S. parishes live out the call to global solidarity. *JustFaith*, a demanding program of formation in social mission, is being used in many parishes across the country to ignite and deepen the call to social mission among thousands of parishioners.

Over the last twenty-five years, much community organizing has moved from bringing together neighborhood and community groups and like-minded individuals to "congregation-based organizing," which brings together Catholic parishes with other local religious congregations to build a powerful common voice, to stand up for the poor and vulnerable, and to pursue the common good. This process, often supported by the essential work of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, is changing our communities and our parishes for the better.

Teaching and Tools for Parish Social Mission

Parishes need clear teaching, helpful advice and useful resources. One important asset over the past twenty-five years has been the growing strength, visibility, and power of the Church's social teaching. Pope John Paul II was a prophetic and persistent teacher on human life and dignity. He was the apostle of solidarity; a global defender of unborn children, the poor, workers, and victims of injustice. He was an advocate of peace in a time of war and an articulator of the gospel of life in a culture of death. He was a teacher and pastor who insisted Catholic social teaching was "real doctrine" and Catholic social mission belonged at the center of Catholic life.

Pope Benedict XVI has taken up this mission and extended it. In his powerful first encyclical, *Deus caritas est*, the Holy Father placed love of the poor at the center of Catholic life. He could not have been more clear or direct:

- Love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind is as essential to her [the church] as the ministry of the sacraments and preaching of the Gospel

- The church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the sacraments and the word
- Charity must animate the entire lives of the lay faithful and therefore also their political activity, lived as “social charity”
- The church cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice

Pope Benedict insists that three things make the church the church, and by extension **three things make a parish a Catholic parish: proclaiming the gospel, celebrating the sacraments, and caring for and standing with the poor and the vulnerable.** He also clearly links the obligation to serve those in need with the duty to defend their lives and dignity in political and social life. The Holy Father’s call to place social mission at the center of Catholic life and to practice “social charity” offer both encouragement and challenges for parish leaders.

Central among those parish leaders are our pastors. There can be no effective parish social mission without the leadership, active support, and participation of our priests. My own experience working with priests on the social dimensions of ordained ministry, especially preaching, has convinced me that there is a hunger for mission, especially social mission, among many pastors. Even though they often seem stressed and stretched by growing obligations and shrinking presbyterates, they are not only open, but eager for ways their ministry and parishes can make a difference. *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* outlines the social mission responsibilities of priests clearly and succinctly:

- The priest should make known the social teaching of the Church and foster in the members of his community an awareness of their right and duty to be active subjects of this doctrine
- Through the celebration of the Sacraments, especially Eucharist and reconciliation, the priest helps the faithful live their social commitment
- The priest should animate pastoral action in the social field, giving particular attention to the formation and spiritual accompaniment of lay Christians engaged in social and political life.

Lay leaders can carry out many elements of parish social ministry, but there simply is no substitute for the leadership of pastors. Pastors do not have to attend every meeting or participate in every activity, but how pastors preside and preach, form and educate, lead and serve have decisive impact on the vitality and strength of social mission in the parish.

Perhaps the most significant development over the past twenty-five years is the development of an explicit strategy of integration of social mission within the broader life of the parish, seeking to move social mission from the margins of parish life to its center. This approach insists that the social mission of the parish is not a specialized ministry carried out by some active parishioners in the name and with the support of the larger parish. Rather, it is an integral part of parish life expressed not only in outreach and advocacy, but also in the everyday activities of parish life: how we pray, worship, and celebrate the sacraments; teach the young and form the

community; how we set priorities, allocate our resources and treat our employees, and how we encourage parishioners to live their faith in work and family life, economics and politics.

This strategy of integration is articulated and advocated in the U. S. Catholic bishops’ *Communities of Salt and Light: Reflections on the Social Mission of the Parish*. Over the past fifteen years, this statement (and its accompanying workbook and video) continue to be widely used as parishes seek to develop, strengthen, and renew their social ministry. The central message of Salt and Light is simple:

We see the parish dimensions 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 a reflection of the gospel, more a worshipping and evangelizing people, more of a faithful community. It is an essential part of parish life.

Salt and Light’s overall strategy of integration and the outline of what integration means for parish social mission are helpful. There are lessons and warnings about the dangers for parish social ministry, which continue to be challenges, especially respecting diversity and practicing what we preach. Among the well-founded concerns are partisanship and divisiveness. I fear the intense polarization in American political life and the lack of civility and charity in public life are making their way into ecclesial life and are affecting some parts of parish life. Too often, we can act as competing factions (e.g., social justice and pro-life, direct service and legislative action) rather than one church and one parish.

Too often, we assume the worst of those with whom we differ and turn differences over priorities and strategies into disagreements on fundamental principles. We need to come together to defend human life and human dignity, to meet immediate needs and address broader causes. We need to build a “life and dignity movement” within our church and society that together take on the disrespect for human life and the undermining of human dignity, beginning with unborn children and including the children dying of hunger and war. We can divide up the work, but we shouldn’t divide the church. We are one family of faith and we ought to act like it.

Another concern is the temptation to turn inward, to focus primarily on internal challenges and debates, to hunker down, to lose our voice in public and community life. In tough times, more than ever this is a time for mission, not just maintenance, management or even survival. This is not a time to try to simply preserve and protect what we have, but to engage and persuade, to bring our message of life and dignity, family and community, justice and peace to a nation and world in desperate need to hear it.

In these challenging times, the most important setting for strengthening the church’s social mission is not at the Vatican or the bishops’ conference, not in dioceses—although all these structures are essential. The most important place for advancing social mission is in our parishes: around the altar, in the pulpit, in the school and religious education, speaking out in the community, serving the needy, helping parishioners practice everyday Christianity and faithful citizenship.