

Guidebook for Creating a Social Justice Committee



**CATHOLIC DIOCESE
OF YOUNGSTOWN**

Diocese of Youngstown

Social Action Office

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Introduction

The Social Action Office has created this guide to help you through the process of starting a social justice committee in your parish. This is not meant to be an intensive set of rules, but a guidebook with a suggested method for starting and maintaining a social justice committee. As always, our office is willing to assist you and answer any of your questions or meet with you.

Forming a Parish Social Justice Committee

1. Form a core group
2. Develop a mission statement and objectives for the group
3. Schedule a formation opportunity for the group
4. Create procedural and meeting structures
5. Choose issues to focus on
6. Contact other area justice committees
7. Stay informed

Care for God's Creation

We show our respect for the Creator by our stewardship of creation. Care for the earth is not just an Earth Day slogan, it is a requirement of our faith. We are called to protect people and the planet, living our faith in relationship with all of God's creation. This environmental challenge has fundamental moral and ethical dimensions that cannot be ignored.

This summary should only be a starting point for those interested in Catholic social teaching. A full understanding can only be achieved by reading the papal, conciliar, and episcopal documents that make up this rich tradition.

Print Resources:

Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church,

Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004

Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage, David J.

O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, ed. (Orbis books: Maryknoll, NY; 2003)

Living Justice: Catholic Social Teaching in Action, Thomas Massaro, S.J. (Sheed and Ward, 2000)

Go and Do Likewise: Catholic Social Teaching in Action, Mia Crowthwaite (23rd Publication, 2006)

Doing FaithJustice: An Introduction to Catholic Social Thought,

Fred Kammer, S.J. (Paulist Press, NY; 1991)

Responses to 101 Questions on Catholic Social Teaching, Kenneth R. Himes, O.F.M. (Paulist Press, NY; 2001)

being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable.

Rights and Responsibilities

The Catholic tradition teaches that human dignity can be protected and a healthy community can be achieved only if human rights are protected and responsibilities are met. Therefore, every person has a fundamental right to life and a right to those things required for human decency. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities— to one another, to our families, and to the larger society.

Option for the Poor and Vulnerable

A basic moral test is how our most vulnerable members are faring. In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, our tradition recalls the story of the Last Judgment (Mt 25:31-46) and instructs us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first.

The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers

The economy must serve people, not the other way around. Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God's creation. If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected— the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to organize and join unions, to private property, and to economic initiative.

Solidarity

We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they live. We are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. Learning to practice the virtue of solidarity means learning that "loving our neighbor" has global dimensions in an interdependent world.

1. Forming a core group

Begin by inviting 6-12 individuals to join you in a start up meeting for a social justice committee in your parish. You may choose to place an announcement in the bulletin, send letters of invitation to people who you think could possibly be interested in joining the committee and/or simply talk to fellow parishioners about it. By far, personal invitation is the most effective way to get people involved.

Try to choose a date and time for the meeting that you feel would work out for most people. Once you have the group together for the first meeting, the committee can collectively choose a time that they are more comfortable with if the initial meeting time does not work out. It is suggested that the committee meet once or twice a month for 1-2 hours per meeting.

During your first meeting you may want to discuss why you feel having a social justice committee is important to your parish and community. This is a good time to share educational resources as well. Using the first couple of meetings to learn about and reflect on the basics of Catholic social teaching will help guide future discussions about the mission statement and objectives of the committee. Many people are not familiar with Catholic social teaching, so allowing time to learn about justice teaching and issues is a crucial part of the formation process. The Social Action Office in the Department of Catholic Charities has a list of suggested resources.

2. Developing a mission statement and objectives

It should be noted that developing a mission statement and objectives can be done after the formation day (step 3), or even during the formation day. Some committees may prefer to create a mission statement early on to have a guiding point, while others may choose to wait until they have had more time to learn about Catholic social teaching. This decision is up to each individual group.

A **mission statement** should only be a sentence or two long and explain what your group is going to do and how it is going to do it. A mission statement is a general statement and serves as an inspirational reminder of the committee's purpose.

Objectives on the other hand, are specific actions the committee seeks to take in light of the mission statement. Objectives can and will change or evolve as the group and the parish do. You may also choose to change your objective as you choose new justice topics to focus on. Typically a committee may choose to outline 3-5 objectives to work with and then reevaluate those objectives once yearly.

Example:

Mission Statement:

The Social Justice Committee of St. Blank's, in light of the Gospel message of peace and justice, seeks to enlighten and empower our faith community, to seek justice and promote human development, through education, formation and action.

Seven Principles of Catholic Social Teaching:

Excerpts from Sharing Catholic Social teaching Challenges and Directions

Reflections of the U.S. Catholic Bishops

The Church's social teaching is a rich treasure of wisdom about building a just society and living lives of holiness amidst the challenges of modern society. Modern Catholic social teaching has been articulated through a tradition of papal, conciliar, and episcopal documents. The depth and richness of this tradition can be understood best through a direct reading of these documents. In these brief reflections, we wish to highlight several of the key themes that are at the heart of our Catholic social tradition.

Life and Dignity of the Human Person

The Catholic Church proclaims that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. Our belief in the sanctity of human life and the inherent dignity of the human person is the foundation of all the principles of our social teaching. In our society, human life is under direct attack from abortion and assisted suicide. The value of human life is being threatened by increasing use of the death penalty. We believe that every person is precious, that people are more important than things, and that the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person.

Call to Family, Community, and Participation

The person is not only sacred but social. How we organize our society—in economics and politics, in law and policy—directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community. The family is the central social institution that must be supported and strengthened, not undermined. We believe people have a right and a duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable.

6. Contact other justice committees in your area

There may be other parishes with justice committees in your area. It is always helpful to speak with others who are doing similar work to share ideas and cosponsor events. You may even consider creating a social justice “cluster” in your area with representatives from the social justice committees of each parish meeting periodically to share information and collaborate on initiatives. You can contact the Social Action Office for a listing of the justice committees in the Diocese.

7. Stay informed

It is important to continue your educational formation after the initial creation of the group and formation day. Below is a list of websites and print resources that are useful tools for any social justice committee. The Social Action Office can direct you to educational resources as well.

Websites:

Diocese of Youngstown: www.doy.org

Vatican: www.vatican.va

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops: www.usccb.org

Catholic Campaign for Human Development: www.usccb.org/cchd

Catholic Campaign for Immigration Reform: www.justiceforimmigrants.org

Catholic Relief Services: www.crs.org

Catholic Conference of Ohio: www.ohiocathconf.org

Catholic Climate Covenant: www.catholicclimatecovenant.org

Catholics Confront Global Poverty: catholicsconfrontglobalpoverty.org

Bread for the World: www.bread.org

Education for Justice: www.educationforjustice.org

Objectives:

1. To continually educate and inform ourselves about Catholic social teaching and current justice issues.
2. To provide educational resources for the parish in the form of bulletin inserts or informational packets about selected justice issues.
3. To provide opportunities for parishioners to engage in justices through letter writing campaigns and volunteer experiences.
4. To seek out and collaborate with other area social justice committees.

3. Schedule a formation opportunity

Time should be taken early in the development of your social justice committee to set up a formation opportunity. This formation opportunity, typically a morning or afternoon (3-4 hours) is simply a time to learn about Catholic social teaching, to address the differences between charity and justice, as well as a time to talk about the mission and vision of your committee. Each parish and social justice committee is different, so the formation day can be used as a time to better clarify the focus of your committee.

You can contact the Social Action Office to request a speaker or facilitator for your formation day. This person can discuss with you the specific needs of your committee and create a formation day that is appropriate for your group.

The formation day does not need to be restricted to people already committed to the committee. Inviting everyone from the parish to participate in a formation day may actually be an opportunity to get more people involved in your justice work.

It is also a good idea to have your next meeting a week or two after the formation day so that the information and ideas discussed during that time will be fresh in peoples minds.

Sample Formation Day Schedule:

Opening prayer and scripture reading

Basics of Catholic social teaching– speaker

Break

Justice and Charity– speaker and group discussion

Break

Developing a mission and focus for the committee– group discussion

Closing prayer

4. Create procedural and meeting structures

Once the committee has been formed, the mission has been clarified and objectives have been stated it helps to clear up questions of procedure. You may want to take sometime, perhaps an entire meeting to clear up questions like:

- Who will facilitate the meetings?
- Who will take down minutes during the meetings?
- How will decisions be made?
- Is there a budget? How will funds be allocated?
- *Who* will keep the parish informed about your work and activities and *how* will you keep the parish informed?

5. Choose issues to focus on

Social justice encompasses a wide variety of issues. These issues are all part of the same “whole” of Catholic social teaching. While being committed to each of these aspects of human dignity, no committee can address them all equally. Eventually your committee will find certain issues more appealing than others. Choosing a handful of topics allows your committee to have a concise focus and to be more effective. You may find that certain issues come up naturally through a community or parish need, or that your committee chooses to focus on a topic that they know little about in order to educate themselves as well as the parish/ community.

Below is a list of common justice issues. This is by no means an all inclusive list, but may be helpful when your committee begins to narrow down its focus to just a few issues. Like your committee’s objectives, the issues you focus on can and will change.

Social Justice Topics:

Africa	Environmental Justice	Fair Trade
Budget– Federal State	Health Care	Sweatshop Labor
Campaign Finance Reform	Housing /Homelessness	Tax Justice
Children and Child Care	Human Rights	Third World Debt
Citizenship	Hunger	War
Criminal Justice Reform	Immigration Reform	Welfare Reform
Death Penalty	Just Wages	
Domestic Abuse	Labor Rights	
Landmines	Minimum Wage	
Poverty	Racial Justice	
Socially Responsible Investing	Sweatshop Labor	