

Learning to Act on Behalf of Justice

BY ED GIGANTI

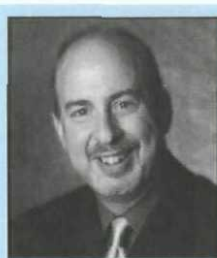
*The spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to
the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free.*

—Luke 4: 18

In July, I had the opportunity to attend the Social Action Summer Institute, a week-long program cosponsored by The Roundtable (Association of Diocesan Social Action Directors), the Department of Social Development and World Peace of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Catholic Charities USA, the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, and Catholic Relief Services. The program, an annual event, was held this year on the campus of St. John's University, Jamaica, NY. The Summer Institute includes outstanding education on the church's tradition and teaching on social justice, and I would recommend it to any health ministry leader looking for a deeper understanding of this rich theology.

On the institute's first evening, John Carr offered his reflections on the work of social action. Carr is secretary of Social Development and World Peace at the USCCB and a participating observer on the CHA board. In his presentation, he reminded us of Jesus' mission, announced in Jesus' hometown synagogue when he read from the scroll of Isaiah. "How do we bring good news to the poor?" Carr asked us. "How do we liberate captives and bring sight to the blind?"

Carr was speaking to an audience of more than 200 persons engaged in various dimensions of social action. But a month earlier, speaking at the Catholic Health Assembly in Orlando, FL, Carr had turned to the same Gospel from Luke, saying that Jesus' mission on earth was now the mission of *all* people who minister in Catholic health care. Like the people gathered at St. John's Uni-



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versity, all of us in the ministry of health care are working to realize a vision of justice. We should, likewise, ask ourselves what we do that brings good news to the poor, liberates captives, and brings sight to the blind.

Carr's challenge to the audience in New York also applies to us in the health ministry. "If we are doing such great work, why is there so little change?" he asked. "Why are we doing such great work, and there is so little justice, so little peace in the world? We have to do more, better and smarter." And ours must be obviously a work of faith in Jesus, he said.

BIBLICAL JUSTICE

Theologian Gina Hens-Piazza, PhD, told the audience that in the Bible justice is a complex concept, "not an isolated phenomenon, but a complex, bundled virtue reality." Our perception of what is justice is always limited, she said. "We must keep working toward justice in the largest, most complex sense."

Hens-Piazza is professor of biblical studies, Jesuit School of Theology, Berkeley, CA. She and Fr. J. Bryan Hehir, president of Catholic Charities USA, taught a mini-course in Catholic social teaching that was a major component of the institute.

After reviewing notions of justice as they appear in the Hebrew Scriptures, Hens-Piazza moved to the teachings of Jesus. "Jesus' parables challenge our concepts of justice, fairness, and equity," she said. "But God's equation for equity is giving people what they need, not what they deserve." The story of Jesus crucified like a criminal really challenges what we know as justice, she said. "But this is where God is most revelatory. What is revealed is a God who must be in relationship with us, who is infinitely available to be in relationship."

The Scriptures teach us that "the only way to work for justice is to invite complexity, other viewpoints, and voices that challenge our own," she concluded.

A COURSE IN JUSTICE

For 15 years, Fr. Hehir has taught the mini-course in social teaching as part of the Summer Institute. His presentations, spread over a day and a half, covered the sources and history of the church's social teaching, a set of categories and concepts for understanding the teaching, the "consistent ethic of life" first articulated by the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, and how Catholic social institutions apply the church's social teaching. He introduced two contemporary social issues—the use of humanitarian and military intervention in foreign policy and the domestic health care debate—as cases for applying Catholic social teaching.

Fr. Hehir named seven social justice concepts underpinning the church's social teaching:

**Human dignity* "All social teaching is rooted in the idea of the unique dignity of the human person," he said.

**Human rights and duties* A *right* is a moral claim to a good that is essential to human dignity; *duties* are responsibilities of humans to one another. Fr. Hehir said that rights and duties are complementary, correlative.

**Social nature of the person* "We believe that every person is social by nature, not by choice," he said. "We cannot become fully human persons without being part of a series of communities. Catholic social teaching is an argument for how to structure the crucial, central communities—family, civil society, the human community."

**Common good and public order* The common good is the sum total of all conditions that are necessary in society if every person is to have a chance to grow into the fullness of his or her dignity. The society as a whole is responsible for the common good. "Public order is the common goods—public peace, basic standards of justice, public morality, etc.—which the state alone can ensure," Fr. Hehir said.

**Subsidiarity, socialization, and solidarity* "Subsidiarity" means, Don't go to the state first to solve problems; go to lesser bodies, then move up," he explained. "Socialization comes from John XXIII's encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, and

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says that there are good reasons at times to expand the role of the state. John Paul II has been strong on solidarity, a firm conviction that we are responsible for one another, a virtue we have come to need."

Voluntary associations Fr. Hehir said that associations such as nongovernmental organizations (sometimes called "NGOs"), labor unions, professional societies, and others, have the capacity to positively affect life, and, in that capacity, the church supports them.

Option for the poor Emerging out of the local church in Latin America where about 70 percent of the population live in poverty, this concept has been absorbed throughout the universal church, Fr. Hehir said. "As we have a concern for the whole—the common good—we should have a weighted concern for the poor."

In looking at Catholic social institutions, Fr. Hehir said that the church in its social presence combines ideas and vision ("Faith," he said, "is about vision, seeing things differently") with institutions. "Institutions are the 'fault lines' where religion, community, and larger society meet," he said. "Our institutions consciously seek to serve all in the larger society, but how do you serve a religiously plural society, and how do you protect your Catholic identity?"

"The Catholic style is to stay in the argument, keep the vision in the argument, keep on providing services to the society through the institutions," Fr. Hehir said. "Catholicism is a 'worldly' church engaged in and sharing the resources of the world."

Turning to the current situation in health care in the United States as an example, Fr. Hehir told the audience that this issue is a complex one for Catholic institutions. "It is a social justice issue, a bioethical issue, and an issue of organizational integrity," he said.

The 2004 Social Action Summer Institute is planned for July 25-30 in Chicago. For more information on the institute, contact Jeffery Korgan at The Roundtable, jkorgan@nplc.org, or 212-431-7825.

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