



CATHOLIC SOCIAL TRADITION *for* THE HEALING MINISTRY

The Sower by Vincent van Gogh A Theological Reflection

Our labors to further the inspiring vision of the Catholic social tradition are like farming, in that they require time, effort, patience, continual cultivation, and attention. Like the farmer who has learned the rhythms of the seasons and years, so too the leader within the field of Catholic health ministry must learn from years since past. Both must attune to dynamic conditions and vulnerably stand amid shifts in creation, and have faith that God's grace will provide whatever is necessary for growth and goodness to appear.

While God wills a bountiful harvest and good things for humankind, the result relies upon cooperation, intellect, and ingenuity. The farmer co-labors with God's gifts in nature to yield a bountiful harvest. In the healing ministry, God provides the ingredients of grace, and relies upon us—our cooperation, intellect, and ingenuity—to co-create and steward the unfolding of God's reign of abundant goodness. Just as a farmer harvests goods from a field so that others may be fed and strengthened, we too, hope our human toiling yields a great harvest, one so abundant that all are fed and experience a flourishing of life.

Van Gogh's painting

Background

The image of a Sower in a field fascinated the Dutch artist Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890). He produced more than 30 renditions of this subject across the years, reflected in drawings and paintings. Art scholars note various symbols and their meaning, which resonate closely with the significant features of the Catholic social tradition.

When van Gogh lived in Arles, France, the beauty of the countryside surrounded him and gave him solace. This painting gives a glimpse into his emotional state as it conveys a mix of hope, ambition, and longing to connect with something greater, if not transcendent, through his art.

The Field

It suggests a vastness and fecundity that springs forth from creation. The image of a field for the purposes of connecting to the Catholic social tradition, evokes the Garden of Eden—a place of harmony, full integration of human life and divine goodness. Living fully and with fidelity to the

Gospels and the vision of the social tradition represents a way for people of good will today to toil for the emergence of a new creation. In that new creation all of humankind will flourish.

The Sower

The painting depicts this individual engaged in work. Farming is work that engages body, mind, and spirit. The work provides goods for both the individual farmer and many others in the farming community and beyond. There is great dignity in this work and that is a theme that runs all throughout the Catholic social teachings. The farming imagery draws to mind those who have long advocated for workers abused in the fields, such as the contributions of Cesar Chavez in the farm worker movement in the U.S.

The Seeds

Van Gogh depicts the Sower with a satchel full of seeds, which will yield much food and sustenance at the time of harvest and processing. The work of the healing ministry is like sowing seeds of God's reign and justice. As the apostle James wrote, "Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness" (3:18).

The House

A home structure appears in the background. It suggests that the farmer's labor enables him to have a home, to provide for his family, and to have a stable place of safety and wholeness. The right to adequate housing, to be cared for, to have and foster a family and to provide for them, are all important parts of the Catholic social tradition. The home also represents the domestic Church, the first place where children learn of God, community, and the community of faith and of heaven.

The Sun

At the center of this painting van Gogh placed the sun. It gives life and light. The sun's dawning also marks the beginning of a new day. As the center of this universe, the sun serves as a metaphor for God, whose love and grace are like a gravitational pull that holds and orchestrates all of creation. The light of God illumines our path and provides a constant, pulsating energy that fuels our efforts to foster God's reign of justice, peace, and love.

