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Part IV

Faith-based service provision
Partners in service and justice
Catholic social welfare and the social work profession

Linda Plitt Donaldson

Introduction

The commandment to love God and thy neighbour has inspired Christian communities over the centuries to organise countless efforts to care for poor and vulnerable members of society. Since its inception, the Catholic Church has made caring for the poor one of its central activities as lay and religious men and women have organised charity through Catholic parishes throughout the world. As a global institution, the Catholic Church’s charitable and social welfare functions have touched nearly every corner of the world, and in doing so, it has influenced and been influenced by many other faith-based and secular partners in addressing human need, including the profession of social work.

This chapter will begin by giving an overview of the Church’s global engagement in social welfare, including examples of its mutual and reciprocal influence on the social work profession. Next, the chapter will describe the core principles that guide the social mission of the Catholic Church. The chapter will conclude with some reflections on the papacy of Pope Francis and its potential influence on the social work profession.

Overview of the Catholic Church’s global engagement in social welfare

The Catholic response to poverty and human suffering has been made manifest for centuries by countless men and women, lay and religious, who have dedicated their lives to serving the poor. Early responses to poverty and human need were typically organised at the parish-level on a voluntary basis. Parishes are the basic unit of the Catholic Church, comprising Catholic families who typically live within a particular geographic area and attend the church within those boundaries (Joseph and Conrad 2010). Providing opportunities for parishioners to care for their neighbours through their parish has been and remains a central way for pastors to facilitate the participation of their parishioners in Christ’s ministry. Over time, as the Catholic population increased along with the needs of parish families and surrounding communities, the approach to meeting those growing needs required a more organised and structured response. Today, organised Catholic responses to poverty vary in terms of their founding, structure, level of oversight by Catholic bishops and integration with non-Catholic and/or state-sponsored social
Some Catholic social welfare emerged from the *charisms* of men and women religious and their particular calling as the hands and feet of Christ. Other Catholic responses to need were created through faith-inspired lay movements or emerged through the Catholic bishops and coordinated through national bishops conferences. Each is briefly described as follows.

Most religious orders were founded a century or more ago by men and women who identified a particular gift of the spirit or *charism* around which they carried forth the ministry of Jesus Christ in service to the Church and the world. Examples of such men and women are St. Francis and St. Clare of Assisi (Franciscans), St. Teresa of Calcutta (Mother Teresa) (Missionaries of Charity), St. Ignatius of Loyola (Jesuits), St. Vincent de Paul (Vincentians) and St. Louise de Marillac (Daughters of Charity). Considering themselves the hands and feet of Christ, the majority of religious congregations are engaged in alleviating the suffering and needs of people who are poor throughout the world whether through social services, social development, education, health care, child welfare and or contemplative practices. As a consequence, men and women religious have helped establish many of the basic institutions of society to care for human needs. For example, in 2009, the United States House of Representatives passed Resolution 411 recognising that ‘Catholic sisters have played a vital role in shaping life in the United States’ (United States House of Representatives 2009: para 1), especially in their contributions to education, health care, social services and advocacy for peace and justice.

In addition to men and women religious, many Catholic lay men and women have founded movements to give expression to their commitment to people who are poor and vulnerable. Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker Movement in 1933, was committed to nonviolence and solidarity with the poor (Klement 2011). Most people associate the Catholic Worker Movement with their ‘Houses of Hospitality’, of which there are currently 236 in the US and abroad (Catholic Worker Movement 2016). Catholic workers living in the community commit to voluntary poverty and to extending the works of mercy (e.g. food, shelter, clothing, hospitality) to people in need. Many Catholic worker communities are also engaged in advocating and speaking out for social and economic justice.

Another organised response to poverty started by a lay Catholic is the St. Vincent de Paul Society [SVDP] founded in 1833 by Frederic Ozanam. Mr Ozanam mobilised laymen to provide charity and support to people who lived in the poorest neighbourhoods of Paris, France. By 1840, the society had grown to over 1,000 members, including establishing its first international conference (local associations were referred to as conferences) in Rome in 1836 (McColgan 1951). Over the next 50 years, the Society grew its international presence to over 26 countries, including in Europe, the United Kingdom, Australia, North America, Africa and Asia. Currently, St. Vincent de Paul Societies are in 149 countries with over 800,000 members addressing the needs of 35 million people who are poor and vulnerable (SVDP 2016).

The most far-reaching and well-known international/national Catholic social welfare organisation is Caritas Internationalis, which has over 160 member agencies located in seven regions around the world, including Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East and North Africa, North America and Oceania (Caritas Internationalis 2016). Member agencies from each country operate autonomously under their national bishops conferences and take a particular form based on the needs of the local community. Programmes could include social services, child and welfare services, social development, emergency and disaster assistance, or refugee resettlement. All Caritas agencies share the same overall purpose: to end poverty, promote justice and restore dignity. In the United States, the Caritas agencies are Catholic Charities USA [CCUSA] and Catholic Relief Services [CRS]. CCUSA, with its 177 member agencies, is one of the largest social service providers in the US, employing over 60,000 staff members many of whom are professional social workers.
In 2014, CCUSA served nearly 9 million people in the form of providing housing, shelter, health care, food, day care, adoption, refugee resettlement, prisoner re-entry services, employment and other services (CCUSA 2014). Catholic Relief Services, founded by the US Catholic bishops in 1943 to address the suffering and displacement of World War II survivors, remains active today in over 100 countries on five continents on numerous humanitarian initiatives to promote health, human development and peace (CRS 2016).

**Catholic social welfare and professional social work**

The relationship between Catholic social welfare and the development of the social work profession varies by country and its individual historical and socio-political contexts. A rich analysis of the historical, political, social and economic context for the Catholic Church’s involvement in the development of social work in each country across the world warrants a book-length volume. This chapter will provide a few examples.

In the United States, the Catholic Church, through the St. Vincent de Paul Society, was influential in the development and professionalisation of Catholic social welfare in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. At that time, Catholic parishes continued to be important mechanisms for addressing the material, social and spiritual needs of the growing communities in the United States. Volunteers from Catholic parishes cared for women, men and children who were poor and frail, and they welcomed and supported newly arriving immigrants (Joseph and Conrad 2010); the St. Vincent de Paul Society supported such efforts, having been established in the US during 1845. However, the growing rates of immigration, particularly Catholic immigration, strained the resources of parish communities and the Society. Between 1850 and 1906, the Catholic population grew from 5 per cent to 14 per cent of the total population (Byrne 2000). Arriving to urban centres with few resources and skills in urban trades, many of the newly arriving immigrants, largely Catholic, contributed to the worsening humanitarian conditions of the cities.

For example, in 1852, ‘the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor [AICP] in New York City] reported that three-quarters of its assistance went to Catholics’ (Brown and McKeown 1997: 2), and ten years later, the AICP reported that Catholics comprised the majority of people in public almshouses, and half of New York City’s criminal population. The US bishops publicly acknowledged the extent of poverty experienced by Catholics in their 1866 pastoral letter, writing, ‘it is a melancholy fact, and a very humiliating avowal for us to make that a very large portion of the vicious and idle youth of our principal cities are the children of Catholic parents’ (cited in Brown and McKeown 1997: 2).

The dire condition of families and communities in the early twentieth century created a need for Catholic social welfare to transition from a local ‘parish-based ministry of charity to a more professionally organised diocesan-wide ministry’ (Hehir 2010: 34). Consequently, in 1910 members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and several Catholic clerics founded the National Conference of Catholic Charities [NCCC] (now known as Catholic Charities USA or CCUSA) to harness and coordinate knowledge and resources from the experiences of local agencies to improve and standardise their ‘professional social work practices’ (Conrad and Joseph 2010: 52). The founders also felt that a national organisation would facilitate the Church’s effort to speak with a stronger voice on social legislation, and some argued that a national association of Catholic charities agencies would situate Catholic relief efforts in the mainstream of social work and better position them for state and federal funding (Hehir 2010).

The early founders of the National Conference of Catholic Charities believed that the complex nature of poverty alleviation required professional training for social workers. Monsignor
William Kerby, first Executive Secretary of NCCC and a sociology professor at Catholic University of America [CUA], strongly endorsed the emerging models of social work practice referred to as ‘scientific charity’ (Kerby 1921), and helped establish the National Catholic Service School, founded in 1918 to train Catholic women to help with the war effort (Hartmann-Ting 2008). When the war ended, the bishops recognised a continuing need for Catholic involvement in social welfare and professional education so they, through the National Catholic Welfare Council, made the training school for women a permanent institution and renamed it the National Catholic School of Social Service [NCSSS] (Hartmann-Ting 2008). It became a co-educational institution when it merged with the male-only CUA School of Social Work in 1947.

Monsignor John O’Grady succeeded Kerby as Executive Secretary for NCCC, and held that position from 1920 to 1961. He also served as Dean of the CUA School of Social Work from 1934 to 1938 and oversaw the growth, influence and professionalisation of Catholic social services during his tenure.

In addition to educating American social workers for professional practice, NCSSS has educated a number of Catholic social workers that became pioneers in their home countries. For example, in 1928, NCSSS trained Australia’s first professional social workers, Norma Parker and Constance Moffitt, who, upon returning to their home country, established medical social work in St. Vincent’s Hospital in Melbourne and Sydney as well as the Catholic Social Services Bureau in Melbourne (Crisp 2010). The number of Catholic agencies in Australia blossomed in the 1970s, and now Catholic agencies are one of the largest providers of social welfare services in Australia (Crisp 2010).

The development of professional social work in Ireland was challenged by the tension between perspectives that viewed social work as a voluntary versus professional endeavour. Catholics felt strongly about the voluntary and spiritually-based nature of charity, and felt that professionalising social work reflected a more Protestant approach to charity provision (Skehill 2000). As opportunities for professional social work training began to emerge in the United Kingdom, the Catholic Church resisted sending their volunteers for more professional training. Irish Catholic women who wanted to pursue advanced training in family welfare casework needed to obtain a dispensation from their bishop to attend Trinity College, Dublin, a ‘protestant’ institution. However, by the 1960s, the Catholic Church became more supportive of professionally-trained workers, and the professionalisation of the social work profession expanded and solidified in the late twentieth century (Skehill 2000).

During the 1960s, the Catholic Church also fostered social work education and the development of the profession in other countries. For example, in 1964, the Jesuits established a school of social work in Harare, Zimbabwe, which grew into a full bachelor’s degree programme offered at the University of Zimbabwe (Chogugudza 2009). In Central America, ‘the Catholic Church played a major role in promoting social work education’ (Julia 2008: 5), whose curriculum was largely influenced by the established programmes in the United States. Consequently, the universities were largely based on Western ideals, values and individually-based models that often clashed with the collectivist and macro-oriented approaches to poverty of the Central American people. However, at the grassroots, local church authorities were reading, interpreting and preaching the gospel in light of the experience of the poor, referred to as liberation theology. Liberation theology coincided with the reconceptualisation movement in Latin America, which rejected capitalism and American influence, and for a time, ‘social work became more political, more radical, and more focused on political consciousness’ (Healy 2008: 156). These are just a few examples of how the Catholic Church influenced, for better or worse, the global development of the social work profession.
Overview of Catholic Social Teaching: guiding principles for the service and justice dimensions of the Catholic social mission

That body of work that provides the theological foundation and inspiration for Catholic action for service and justice is referred to as Catholic Social Teaching [CST]. CST is rooted in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ who was sent by God to ‘bring good tidings to the poor … to proclaim liberty to the captives … and to let the oppressed go free’ (Luke 4:18). Jesus identified the two greatest commandments as loving God and loving one’s neighbour (Matthew 22:37–40). When asked who is our neighbour, Jesus responded by telling the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37), which demonstrates that everyone is our neighbour regardless of race, ethnicity, political affiliation or economic status. Jesus also said that we would be judged by how we cared for the poor and vulnerable among us (Matthew 25:31–46). Through word and deed, Jesus identified with people who were poor and marginalised and challenged leaders and structures that oppressed the poor, sustaining himself through prayer.

Modern Catholic Social Teaching traces its beginnings to 1891, when Pope Leo XIII wrote the first papal encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, to respond to the harsh living and working conditions of industrialised Europe. By issuing this encyclical, he set in motion a tradition of preparing papal and church documents that address social issues thought to be of great significance during a particular time in history. *Rerum Novarum* is the first of a set of official church documents that comprise the ‘body’ of Catholic Social Teaching. The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004) is an overview of CST that draws from the body of CST until its publication in 2004 but does not include some of the important documents since issued by Pope Benedict XVI or Pope Francis. Donaldson and Belanger (2012) include an abbreviated list of some of the earlier church documents that may be of most interest to social workers.

Several core principles are associated with Catholic Social Teaching. These principles serve as important guideposts for discerning right action in a particular situation. These core principles are described as follows.

- **The Life and Dignity of the Human Person** holds that all human beings have inviolable dignity and worth because they were created in the image and likeness of God. ‘The Church sees in men and women, in every person, the living image of God himself’ (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004: n105). CST reminds us that all human beings are the temple of God and the spirit of God dwells within them (1 Corinthians, 3:16). Our ability to see the face and presence of Christ in all people should compel us to treat everyone with tenderness, care and justice, and to act in a manner that reflects our own dignity.

- **The Common Good** is the ‘sum of all social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily’ (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004: n164). Conditions for the common good include ‘commitment to peace … a sound juridical system, the protection of the environment, the provision of essential services to all … food, housing, work, education … transportation, basic health care, freedom of communication and the protection of religious freedom’ (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004: n166).

Social conditions that are just enable people to participate in family, community, spiritual, economic, political and social spheres of life. One’s ability to participate in those spheres of life is directly proportional to one’s capacity to exercise and fully realise one’s sacred dignity. Catholic action for justice has often been directed at creating conditions
where people can reasonably participate in all spheres of life, particularly family and community life (e.g. advocacy for living wages, worker protection, child care, affordable housing and/or safe communities).

Important for the common good is the condition of labour and the rights of workers. Modern CST began with an encyclical on the condition of labour, speaking to the rights and duties of employers and workers including the right to form unions and be paid just wages to support a family and attend to spiritual needs. Subsequent encyclicals have deepened and clarified the Church’s understanding of the relationship between work and labour, underscoring that 1) work is for the person, not the person for work; 2) labour has priority over capital; and 3) industry should neither oppress humanity nor compromise the health of the planet.

- **Solidarity** is ‘a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good’ (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004: n193). At a deep level, solidarity recognises the interdependence of all, and is found in ‘a commitment to the good of one’s neighbor with the readiness to lose oneself for the sake of the others’ (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004: n193).

- **Subsidiarity** offers a vision for the ordering, functioning and governance of a society where people or institutions closest to a situation should have the autonomy to exercise their proper role in that situation. For example, families should not do for an individual, what an individual can do for him or herself. Communities should not do for a family, what a family can do for itself. Governments should not do for an individual, family or community, what each of those can do for itself. However, CST allows that certain situations require action by governments, such as when there is ‘a serious social imbalance or injustice where only the intervention of the public authority can create conditions of equality, justice, or peace’ (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004: n188).

- **Preferential Option for the Poor** refers to the Church’s view that those who are poor or vulnerable deserve our priority and special consideration. ‘A basic moral test for any society is how it treats those who are most vulnerable’ (USCCB 2015 n53). Jesus made this clear through his life example, and also through his teachings, particularly his teaching on the Judgment of Nations:

  I was hungry and you gave me food,  
  I was thirsty and you gave me drink,  
  A stranger and you welcomed me,  
  Naked and you clothed me,  
  Ill and you cared for me,  
  In prison and you visited me …  
  What you did for the least of these brothers of mine you did for me.

  (Matthew 25: 35–40)

Catholic Social Teaching provides a lens for viewing the world and framing a set of questions around a particular social condition. The See-Judge-Act model created by Belgian priest Cardinal Joseph Cardijn in the early twentieth century (Zotti 1990) is one social analysis model that invites us to observe current conditions, analyse contemporary situations in light of their historical and structural context, assess them against our values (e.g. human dignity, common good, impact on the poor and vulnerable), and take action. Action could take the form of services and social support for an individual or family, action to address the structural causes of human suffering, or both. Catholic social teaching invites us to ‘walk with two feet of love in
action’ (USCCB 2012) and engage in direct service and social justice activities to respond to human needs.

**The ‘Pope Francis Effect’ and social work**

Pope Francis has had a galvanising impact on people across the world. In 2015, he was the second most followed world leader on Twitter, nearing 20 million followers, and is considered the most influential world leader based on an average 9,929 retweets of his postings as compared to the nearest contender at 4,419 (Lüfkens 2015). A Pew Research poll posted his favourability ratings among American Catholics at 90 per cent, all Americans at 70 per cent and those claiming no religious affiliation at 68 per cent (Masci 2015). Pope Francis’ popularity is linked to his authentic and radical commitment to living and teaching the gospel values rooted in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. People first glimpsed his radical embrace of the gospel in the moments after his election when he took the name Francis after St. Francis of Assisi, whom he described as ‘the man of poverty, the man of peace, the man who loves and protects creation’ (Staff Reporter 2013). Throughout his papacy, Pope Francis’ words and deeds have reflected the spirit of his namesake.

Themes from Pope Francis’ papacy could be conceptualised as the four Ps: People, Poverty, Planet and Peace (O’Loughlin 2015). Like Jesus, Pope Francis has emphasised the importance of mercy, compassion and care of people, particularly the poor. He often uses the word ‘encounter’ and its importance for our physical, intellectual and spiritual growth. ‘We come from others, we belong to others, and our lives are enlarged by our encounter with others’ (Pope Francis 2013: n38). He urges all people of good will to encounter people who are poor:

> We have to learn to be on the side of the poor and not just indulge in rhetoric about the poor! Let us go out to meet them, look into their eyes, and listen to them. The poor provide us with a concrete opportunity to encounter Christ himself and to touch his suffering flesh … the poor are not just people to whom we can give something. They have much to offer us and to teach us. How much we have to learn from the wisdom of the poor!

(Pope Francis 2014: n3)

And it is not only through the corporal works of mercy (e.g. feeding, clothing, visiting) that we are called to encounter the poor. Pope Francis urges people to restore ‘solidarity to the heart of human culture’ (Pope Francis 2014: n3), to recognise our interdependence, and to organise for social justice. ‘The future of humanity does not lie solely in the hands of great leaders, the great powers and the elites. It is fundamentally in the hands of peoples and in their ability to organize’ (Pope Francis 2015a: n3).

In his encyclical *Laudato Si: on care for our common home*, Pope Francis (2015b: n10) highlights the ‘inseparable bond … between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace’. He repeatedly states that ‘everything is connected’, and throughout he underscores the ‘intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet’ (2015: n16). He also writes explicitly about the impact of pollution and dangerous waste producing ‘a broad spectrum of health hazards, especially for the poor, [that] cause millions of premature deaths’ (2015b: n19). In particular, Pope Francis addresses the warming effects that compromise ‘their means of subsistence [which] are largely dependent on natural reserves and economic systemic services such as agriculture, fishing, and forestry’ (2015b: n19) and adds that the suffering of the poor is compounded because they have no financial resources to help them adapt to the effects of climate change. Pope Francis also takes to task multinational corporations who ‘do
[in developing countries] what they would never do in … the so-called first world … leaving behind great human and environmental liabilities’ (2015b: n51).

The four themes of Pope Francis’ papacy coincide with the general mandates of the social work profession found in many of the Codes of Ethics of national associations of social work. Many country social work codes speak to the inherent dignity of human beings, and the importance of community and social relationships that are related to the Pope’s call to encounter those who are poor, vulnerable and marginalised. The International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW] and the International Association of Schools of Social Work [IASSW] define social work as a profession that ‘promotes social change and development, social cohesion and the empowerment and liberation of people’ (IFSW 2014). Many country Codes of Ethics speak to having a special concern for vulnerable populations, including those who are poor. The preamble of the Code of Ethics of National Association of Social Workers in the United States says:

The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty.

(NASW 2008: 1)

While there is tremendous convergence between Pope Francis’ words and deeds and the social work profession, there remain areas of dissonance as well. For example, the social work profession generally supports a full range of human rights including reproductive rights, and the right to marriage for same-sex couples. Many in the international social work community also view the use of condoms as an important public health strategy and that efforts to curb the incidence of HIV and other diseases are adversely impacted in developing countries with large Catholic populations because of the ban on condom use. While Pope Francis has not changed Church teaching on these topics, he is encouraging dialogue and bridge building, recognising there is much work that can be done in areas where stakeholders share common ground. Perhaps the leadership of Pope Francis may create space for greater dialogue and increasing partnerships between Church officials and a wider range of stakeholders who share a desire to address human needs and suffering.

Despite disagreements one has with the Catholic Church, no one can deny its far-reaching impact in meeting human needs and promoting social development throughout the world. Social workers of all stripes have been inspired by the wisdom and courage of Pope Francis, who has demonstrated that he is not afraid to walk in solidarity with the poor and outcast members of society. Standing on centuries of Catholic Social Teaching, Pope Francis provides a challenge to social workers everywhere to once again prioritise the central tenets of our profession.

Note

1 The Ladies of Charity was the counterpart association for women.

References


Catholic social welfare


