



The Catholic Commitment to Justice: A Summary of the Los Angeles Catholic Worker's Synod Conversations

The Synod conversations we hosted only happened because we heard stories of parish-led Synod efforts that offered no room for those seeking to offer reflections on the place of deep justice work in our Church. Time and time again, the articulated desire for a Church in the streets, for a Church at the margins, for a Church that does justice was met with silence, ridicule, and opposition. Little attempt was made to hear, to understand, and to consider our *sensus fidelium*. Worried that this important but seemingly insignificant facet of our Church's focus might not make its way to future parts of the Synod process, we gathered to be sure that these ideas and experiences with the Gospels and with God were not ignored, forgotten, or erased.

And so we, the people, gathered: vowed religious, ordained clergy, Archdiocesan employees, street outreach workers, writers/authors, people navigating sobriety, widows, members of the LGBTQ community, lapsed Catholics, struggling Catholics, unhoused neighbors, university professors, restorative justice practitioners, seminarians, and more. We gathered not because we believe our naming our priorities and experiences will be centered but because naming our truths is an important part of claiming our faith and a deep part of our Church's Tradition. We gathered in two formal meetings and many informal conversations not simply to try and move structures but to hear each other, to be in relationship, to learn from the Spirit in those around us. We know that only together will we ever hope to approach the fullness of God and only by enfleshing the type of Church we want to be will we ever become the Church Christ invited us into those many years ago.

Social Teaching does not exist with the same depth and power in other churches the way it does in the Catholic Church and yet our Church does always center this gift. We claim responsibility for taking care of our Church, for finding small windows in our experiences and communities from which to do the work Jesus calls us to. We seek to be the yeast of God's love, the whisper on the breeze calling our Church back to itself. "As to the Church, where else shall we go, except to the Bride of Christ, one flesh with Christ?" Dorothy Day once wrote. "Though she is a harlot at times, she is our Mother."

Questions of focus:

1. When we talk about justice in the context of the Catholic faith, what is included in that? What does "justice" mean?
2. What place does justice work have in an authentically Christian church or believer? What is at risk for the institution or the individual by the decision to engage justice work deeply or not?
3. What has been your experience of the Church's commitment to the internal and external works for justice (in all of its forms)? What are some of the works you see our Church (on the local, regional, national, and international levels) committed to and what are some areas you believe our Church is absent in?

What does “justice” mean?

Before we talk about why “justice” must be a central pillar in our religious institution and spiritual practice, we have to get a sense of what it means for us to talk about “justice.” While we are told of the obligation to do the works of mercy - Jesus suggested this will be the rubric for deciding who has and has not earned a place in the kingdom (Matthew 25:31-46) - **justice implies something deeper and more profound than these individual acts of charity.**

Though these acts meet the immediate needs of our neighbors in important ways, they do not **repair the “heavy, cumbersome loads” that are put “on other people’s shoulders”** (Matthew 23:4), leveling the playing field for future interactions. Though they can be powerful places for transformation, they are not the right relationships of “justice, mercy, and faithfulness” (Matthew 23:23) we are called to create and institutionalize in our society.

We exist in systems, and so cannot view our individual relationships as the only ones we have responsibility for. As the Companion of Social Doctrine on the Church names, **social justice “concerns the social, political, and economic aspects and, above all, the structural dimension of problems and their respective solutions.”** Our Catholic tradition is clear that we cannot talk about justice outside the context of structures and institutions. And moreso, any system that does not center these tenants and values is not fit for our Tradition.

Justice implies a **systemic “right ordering” of relationships: with ourselves, with others, with the earth, and with God.** It necessitates an **end to hierarchies of dominance and power, an end to divisions of opportunity.** It is something to be actualized in this life, not a promise for an afterlife. **The peace we want in our world is only possible if we work for justice,** as Pope Paul VI articulated. This world requires our striving to meet the needs of the individual before us and **struggling for a world where no one needs us to meet their needs anymore.**

It requires a **restoration of balance, a commitment to healing, a righting of wrongs, a prioritizing of every need over a process that is expedient or tolerates disposability.** It requires a radical reorienting of our world and ourselves, which includes **repairing every wrong of the past.** It requires a coming together, a humble listening and honest dialogue where **the individual is sacred but the community is centered.** We must demand for every created life that which we seek for our blood relatives.

Justice is a **verb as well as a noun.** It is a **defiant act of imagination and will;** it is **love in action.** It is an **equitable distribution of resources and care** amongst all life. Justice includes **honoring the holiness and rightness of diverse cultural and human expressions.** It requires **learning from those directly impacted** and picking up our crosses humbly, choosing the sometimes hard path modeled by Christ. It requires us, as Fr. John Heagle names, to **“confront the systems and agents of oppression that create structures of injustice and prioritizes the protection and restoration of the victims of injustice.”** The aim being a world where everyone **lives their life free from exploitation, where people become sacred ends versus objects and means.**

And so it, too, is a **refusal to give up hope,** a commitment not to succumb to the despair and anger we may feel. It is an **obstinate clinging to what the gospels promise is among us right now** (Matthew 3:2)

Dimensions of “justice”

We know justice work has a place in our lives because the Word made flesh made it an integral part of His: it is truly right and just. Though we will surely risk rejection, persecution, and (perhaps) the cross in pursuing it, what we lose by not enfleshing the Gospel call to justice is worse. We risk losing our very souls. The call for discipleship comes with a steep cost, but we enter this faith not for a easy yoke. Though the Catholic Worker tradition has sought to bring greater credibility to the Church, it has had to watch its foundress coopted for a deviant agenda. But that does not lessen the responsibility of the work and so we continue. So, what does this justice look like?

WORKS REQUIRED: The Gospels do not permit us to simply sit in church and pray, for faith without works is dead. How will those who focus exclusively on prayer or personal piety answer Christ when asked about those we fed? How will we defend the locked fences and closed doors of our Churches each night? We must be about making a material change in people’s lived realities or we have lost our integrity and betrayed the witness and stories of Christ. And in the national justice work being done by communities of faith, the Catholic church is noticeably absent. Our Churches have become more like exclusive country clubs than commissioning spaces that take the Gospels into the world

ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN: We cannot wait for the “pie in the sky when you die” promise of God’s kingdom. It is here, now, before us. What is our Church doing to make that today’s reality?

RELATIONSHIPS REQUIRED: We can only approach justice in the world of relationships and our understandings of social issues are impacted by the relationships we have and those we welcome to the table. We must expand and deepen the relationships that keep us accountable and direct our work. We become a stronger Church community when we listen to and engage with each other.

THE WORK OF ALL: Justice work is not a gift of the Holy Spirit, a unique charism for some, or one of many choices to opt into. It is a responsibility and pre-requisite for all the faithful.

THE CONTENT OF OUR CURRICULUM: When our homilists avoid talking about justice for personal piety, when our catechesis programs skip over the subject or oversimplify the place of justice work, we betray a Tradition littered with documents, teachings, and practices for justice work, and our whole church suffers. Our seminaries, religious education offices, schools, and priests must do more.

EVANGELIZATION: It is through our works that we make others aware of Jesus’ life and message, that we “save souls.” This is at the core of evangelization.

FAMILY V. NEIGHBOR: Too often we get consumed or distracted by the personal and familiar. But Jesus’ admonition to “hate our families” and “love our neighbors” does not give us the luxury of getting lost in the comfort of those close to us. We must work and pray for the miracle of systemic transformation and confess our collective sins; an individual focus is not enough.

BUILDING JUSTICE WORK ONRAMPS: Moving into action can be challenging. Our Church needs to not just stand for justice but to create avenues and onramps for people to get into justice work, to build up their skills, to find community around that work, to find models that teach and guide them. There is a unique kind of support people need who have followed Jesus to the margins that is not readily available in our Church.

HYPOCRISY: Often it is articulated that our Church should be a humble institution disconnected from the institutions of the world. And yet it has often wielded its power, directed its resources, and mobilized its people to do political, economic, and social things that impact other dimensions of the Church. Isn’t dignified work with a decent wage (for example) something our Church stands for? Yet we don’t even demand our own faithful to practice these values, let alone our political leaders. We can use our power without aligning ourselves with political parties or institutions, without creating a synthesis between empire and Church. Unfortunately, many Church leaders have aligned themselves

with monied interests, efforts, leaders, and institutes that betray Christ and undermine our credibility. Trusting the Spirit and deferring to obedience are incompatible. Too often, the Church has been willing to lose its integrity so it won't lose its income, influence, or power. As an institution, its conservative nature is not surprising (nor its rules, desire for control, and clear consequences for breaking rules) but incompatible with the focus and mercy of Christ. We can no longer kick God's people to the curb.

LEVERAGING OUR PLACE AT THE TABLE: With millions of Catholics, hundreds of churches and schools, and dozens of social service agencies, our Church in Los Angeles will never lose its place at the bargaining table. We must not exploit our power but neither can we ignore it nor be afraid of it.

LEFT OUT, COOPTED, AND SILENCED: Worse than the silence of the Church on issues of justice, efforts from the laity (and some ordained) to do this work are sometimes unsupported, opposed, stopped, or forbidden by our hierarchy. Our Church must not inhibit its faithful from wading into murky waters nor fear distracting from the agenda of the ordained. Too often priests serve as gatekeepers ruling with iron fists, unwilling to trust the Spirit to move us as we go. Dialogue and seeking is a crucial part of an informed faith. Our congregations can hold more than one work of justice and the roots of all injustice are common. Our Church must not fear those without vows of obedience but must uplift the prophetic voices so rare in our Church. We must stop adorning the graves and uplifting the names of prophets while simultaneously murdering their legacy, erasing that which they gave their bodies for, and coopting their witness for a personal agenda.

A DUTY TO REMAIN: Though the silence around (and sometimes perpetuation of) injustice in our Church can understandably leave many to leave our Church, this only leaves our Tradition and graces to those who care little for Christ's legacy. Our departure causes its own wound to a Church that needs our witness and voice. There is nowhere we can run that will keep us out of complicity with harm, and so we are asked to stay though we are heartbroken and frustrated. In hope, many remain.

AN UNTAPPED RESERVOIR FOR PEOPLE AND LEARNING: In a Church closing schools and hemorrhaging young people aching for greater integrity, a commitment to justice work would be a powerful reflect of our values and would cultivate the kinds of bonds only being part of a community of change work can provide. Additionally, by growing our empathy, deepening our understanding of the lives of the marginalized, and expanding our commitment to justice work, we transform our character, recognize our complicity and fallenness, and humble our egos.

A PLACE FOR APOLOGY: As an imperfect institution, it is necessary that we name our past wrongs and seek clear opportunities for reckoning and repair. Unfortunately, it is often only through public or legal pressure that these things begin to happen. Why won't our Church accept the same sacramental graces offered to individual believers through reconciliation? And if we are asked to confess to our ordained, why won't our ordained confess to us?

THE GIFT OF JUSTICE WORK: When we open ourselves up to encountering something out of our experience, to building relationship with those who see things we don't, to expanding our understanding, we open ourselves to a transformational experiences that could very well turn our lives upside down in the most profound and reorienting way. This, in turn, might affect our participation in the work of collective liberation. Let us not see this work as a burden but an opportunity that might just change everything.

Where have we seen (or might we see) the commitment to justice in our Church?

For too long, Catholic Social Teaching has been our best kept secret. Absent from most of our formation processes, these crucial components of our Tradition have been pushed aside for other more Biblically-nebulous priorities.

Too many of us were taught to care for justice and peace in the abstract, but not to **engage real, complicated questions about and processes in our world and the social relations within them.** Thus we require help **deepening the political consciousness and social analysis of the faithful (including our ordained).**

Justice requires **examining all systems of oppression that distribute power, opportunity, and safety** in different quantities. Things like racism (white supremacy), sexism (patriarchy), classism, ableism, heterosexism, and so many other social divisions are layered and nuanced.

Our current religious education and spiritual formation programs - from the Archdiocesan level to the national USCCB Catechetical Office - focus almost exclusively on virtue and personal holiness to the exclusion of Catholic Social Teaching. This is the agenda of publishers and think tanks who see no place for expansive justice work in our Church. **Thus, our formation programs fail us.** If we aren't teaching these concepts to the youth how can we expect it to be a central part of our future Church? Similarly, we can't simply center teacher certification programs for Catholic teachers that center a very regressive, anti-justice orientation.

Programs like **JustFaith** have moved parishioners to shift careers and orient themselves towards justice work in profound ways. Why isn't it part of all faith formation programs?

The time for writing great documents that few lay Catholics read is over. We have enough Tradition to stand for racial justice, healthcare justice, indigenous justice, economic justice, women's justice and more but we don't engage them. **We need to engage our rich tradition.**

Rather than ensuring our schools teach students obedience and rout Catholic teaching, **we need minds who can ask meaningful questions, who see their own power in altering the reality before them, and who claim the role they have to play in our Church.**

In order to avoid the appearance of funding groups that angered loud, conservative Catholics, the California Conference of Bishops stopped **funding justice-minded organizing groups** through the Catholic Campaign for Human Development in order to make grants available for local churches doing charity work.

Similarly, in the Called to Renew diocese-wide fundraising campaign, there is absolutely no **commitment of resources to the justice work needed in our communities.** Similarly, programs like Operation Rice Bowl, the Cardinal McIntyre Fund and other collections seek to address immediate needs which, though important, do not mirror Christ's labors to reorient institutions.

What **structures of accountability, input and review can be put in place for the programs and spending of the Archdiocese** given 10% of the collections individuals give to their own parishes is redirected there?

Resources for this needed work have been diverted to pay for our Archdiocese's mishandling of the sex abuse crisis. At least \$750 million dollars has been paid in L.A. because our Church's legacy.

While there has to be some efforts towards accountability with resources of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, other **pools of resources (like the Catholic Community Foundation Los Angeles) serve as a way to keep money off the books** to be used for the personal projects, priorities, and biddings of the Archbishop and the wealthy philanthropists who spearhead this effort.

When grassroots efforts in faith communities seek to offer valuable programs in our communities,

pastors are able to determine what continues and what does not. **Clerical hegemony limits the faithful and the formation of consciences.**

Our Church must be committed to doing the internal work of **examining our history, listening to victims, proactively seeking restoration and repair for those we have harmed**: victims of clergy sexual violence, the Native people at the California missions, the Black community, and more. To go **beyond public apologies into real reparation and healing** is hard work but it is the work we were born for.

Why isn't **participation in justice work a core component of parish life** in every Church?

When individual political issues become the focus of our Church, it can align itself with very anti-life political parties for the sake of a singular priority. **Single issue thinking is dangerous.**

How many priests who struggled for social change (Fr. Luis Olivares, Fr. DuBay) got punished by the Church for their efforts for justice work? **How can our magisterium be encouraging and not fearful of leaders of conscience?**

We have mastered charitable works but **we cannot stand forever on only one foot of social action.**

Only having staff members who do policy work is insufficient. We need whole communities **learning how to organize**: building power, developing leaders, and pressuring decision makers.

Los Angeles has **the largest unhoused populations, the largest incarcerated mental health population, the largest jail system**, yet our Church is often silent on these.

The focus that has been given to immigration work has focused almost exclusively on legal immigration (asylum seekers) rather than those who flee because of NAFTA and the impacts of neo-liberalism and globalism. Prioritization has also been given to provide aid to white refugees (Ukrainians) over nonwhite refugees. **We need a more expansive lens on immigrant justice.**

We have permitted too many spaces for wealthy Catholics to justify and expand their wealth (like Legatus). **Too many bishops sound like politicians playing to the rich base rather than shepherds looking out for the vulnerable sheep.**

Synodality must become our new way of operating as a Church.

Among other areas that require reflection on **the place of women** (as deacons, as ordained priests, etc.), the three female Parish Life Directors who had worked in Los Angeles last year are all no longer employed by our Archdiocese. We have lost holy women because of this.

In a Church that proclaims its commitment to life, **we are too silent on nuclear weapons and far too celebratory of war and military**, which wreaks havoc across the globe, steals resources from the mouths of the poor, and only serves to destabilize peace and justice.

We are often a Church unwilling or too afraid to **wield our institutional power and resources to demand political leaders and structures meet the full needs of our communities. And yet that is part of our tradition.** We are a church who has worked to hold politicians feet to the fire on things like abortion and to close the statute of limitations for those who were abused by our clergy. Why not also for building housing or stopping the criminalization of poverty?

The Church has no reason to be anything but bold on **gun control** issues, yet too often its voice is imperceptible in national conversations.

Simplistic teachings on issues like divorce run the risk of trapping people in relationships of violence and abuse.

Issues of labor - the rights of workers, the abuses of employers, the conditions of the workplace, the benefits made available, a living wage - are as crucial for focus today as ever before. To be barred from supporting the unionizing efforts of housekeepers in the Archdiocese of LA buildings because the Archdiocese received too good a deal on the rental price reflects the self-interest of the misguided and

fear-driven Church.

With capitalism being the connection between so many social injustices, working towards the cultural and economic roots must be a requirement for our justice work. As Dorothy Day identified, it is a “rotten, decadent, putrid industrial capitalist system which breeds such suffering.”

Our Church has **much to learn from some of the communities of women religious**.

Why are Catholic community so absent in local organizing efforts by communities of faith (LA Voice, Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice)?

Clerical silence from the pulpit drives Catholics of conscience away from our churches.

Our church has done work around **restorative justice** but have they sought to **dismantle jails, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim liberty to the captives?** Where has our church been on the war on drugs, the war on poverty? Our system of mass incarceration has been met with too much silence from our Church.

Why does it feel like we must wait for Pope Francis to appoint a justice-minded Cardinal or write a liberation centered document to hear the importance of this work? **Justice is a full-Church responsibility.**

Our Church celebrates people and supports careers/industries that have long legacies of harming our local and larger communities?

A **just distribution of resources** that gives to each according to their need and asks from each according to their ability.

Our church, my ancestral church was primarily responsible for colonizing the world and thus the genocide of countless indigneous people.

It is time for our Church to cease its incessant support of nationalism and patriotism.

We must **stop spending money on buildings for worship** and start investing in people.

Where is the Church in the struggle for **climate justice**, the most imminent crises before us?

The only thing Jesus says about acquiring resources is our obligation to redistribute them. Greed, hoarding, nuclear family self-interest need to be talked about.

The Church's preoccupation with sexual ethics comes both from a preference for standards with easily measurable boundaries and from the privilege, wealth, and detachment of the Church from the raw needs and cry for justice of our world. **We must spend more energy defining greed, identifying usury in our congregations, on naming our responsibility to give all we have to the poor.**

The series of lines the Church has drawn in the sand around same-sex couples denies the dignity, sacredness, and Spirit-discerning capacity of these beloved people made in God's image and likeness.

The need for justice manifests itself in crises like the pandemic, where faulty structures showed their true priorities. **The Church must better articulate the problems with our current systems.**

Our Church has neither committed itself to **build structures of accountability** nor to **learn alongside the expanding wisdom of social movements.** **We must be more transparent.**