

**Education for Faith/Justice:  
Some Modest Proposals**

A Keynote Address

by Drew Christiansen, S.J.  
Editor in Chief, ***America***

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## **Education for Faith/Justice: Some Modest Proposals**

Thank you for the invitation to join you tonight and for your warm welcome. As a “Brother’s Boy”, I am delighted to be here. I am proud to be an alumnus of Saint Peter’s Boys’ High School. I confess when I joined the Jesuits—a decision in which the Brothers were always supportive—I found myself at little bit at sea. There was no high school clique to which I could attach myself. I hadn’t shared in my classmates’ highly literary education, so I often had just to standby and listen to the insider conversations common to students in their teens and twenties. But, with the exception of Greek—and I would sacrifice a great deal to have read Homer in the original—I had an equal or superior education, with four years of Latin, better French, more history, more science and the equivalent of five years of math.

### **Encountering Catholic Social Teaching**

It was second semester of my freshman year at Saint Peter’s that I first encountered Catholic social teaching, reading the encyclical letters *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno* for the first time. It was also the beginning—it sounds so quaint today—of “the paperback revolution,” and Doubleday had initiated its line of Catholic publications under the Image imprint. I remember preparing a term paper, reading Jacques Maritain’s **Scholasticism and Politics** and Barbara Ward’s **Faith and Freedom**. God only knows what I took them to be saying when I was 14. Little did I expect that 11 years later I would begin doctoral studies in religious social ethics or that when yet another decade had passed I would be intimately involved with the bishops’ conference, and sometimes even the Vatican, as Catholic social teaching evolved and the hierarchy occasionally elaborated new means to implement that teaching. So, my career and my scholarship owes a debt of gratitude to the Brothers I can never repay.

### **Bethlehem University**

I must also say that it was a wonderful surprise, when I was working on Mideast policy and helping build special ties between the Church of Jerusalem and the Church in the United States, to re-connect with the Brothers at Bethlehem University. There they do outstanding work in the most frustrating circumstances one can imagine, and in their community I always found a second home and haven from surrounding conflict. The Russians have an old folktale about a sinner who is driving a troika through the snow. On the road he encounters a poor old woman fleeing a pack of wolves. He keeps driving on his sleigh but reaches out to the woman with an onion—You have to imagine the onion with a long green stem—and pulls her from the snapping maws of the wolves. The moral of the story is that on Judgment Day the sinful sleigh driver will be saved because of the onion extended to the frightened woman. I think of my collaboration with BU as my saving onion. My work with Bethlehem

University will be the good deed that saves me on the Last Day.

I am honored, too, that you have invited an editor and former church bureaucrat to address Lasallian educators at the beginning of the Huether Conference. It has been nearly 20 years since I was a classroom teacher at the University of Notre Dame. In so far as I am still an educator, I am an old-fashioned one. I believe above all in the engagement of the teacher with the minds of the students, in Socratic dialogue, attentive reading and the practice of the written word. As the opening multinational teleconference this evening suggests, the means of education have greatly evolved in the last generation. What I can offer you this evening is some lessons from one who still loves teaching, one who has worked justice and peace in the international field and who is eager to prepare others to share in that work.

### **Four Lessons**

I have four lessons this evening for justice education:

1) *Stimulate the students' striving.* To become effective, Catholic social teaching, and the wider movements of which it is a part, demand struggle, persistence and imagination. Education for justice needs to nourish the *conative* side of students' souls: their desire for excellence, their potential for self-giving, their disposition for risk-taking.

The day I arrived at the novitiate at Saint Andrew on Hudson there was a note waiting for me from one of the young Brothers who had taught me at Saint Peter's. It contained a prayer card with a quote from the French diplomat and poet Paul Claudel. It read: "Youth is not a time for pleasure, but for heroism." Encouraging that kind of sentiment is essential to education for the faith that does justice.

2) *Encourage students to develop their organizational capacities.* There is a myth that progress in social justice belongs to prophetic individuals. Prophetic "star power" satisfies our desire for clear moral identity. In our fascination with prophets, however, we also risk failing to make steady progress for the cause of justice and peace; we neglect to do the hard thinking, planning and organizing necessary for social change.

We need prophets, but the advance of freedom, of justice, equality and the integrity of creation depends on organizational innovators. Education in organizational skills and institutional intelligence should not be left to chance. They should be part of our education for justice.

3) *Re-enforce students' networking skills.* Networking is a practice in which the students may be ahead of the teachers. The Obama presidential campaign has shown how powerful the networking instinct is among young people. Networking, especially in a universal Church, is a dynamic that needs to be harnessed for the sake of solidarity. Victims of oppression need to be connected to one another as well as to those who can give them a voice in centers of power, and local activists should find ties to national and global networks.

4) *"Toujours le texte."* "Always the text," l'Abbé Sablé, my college French

teacher used to say, by which he meant always attend to the precise words of a literary passage and to its structure. In educating for justice, a teacher ought not just to know the primary documents of Catholic social teaching, but also have a command of them. For the most part, the language of Catholic social teaching does not translate easily into the American vernacular. In addition, all sorts of people will be spinning as to what it actually means. We need commentaries, handbooks and summaries. There is even a place for “prayer-card versions,” as we used to joke at the bishops’ conference—until we got the economic pastoral reduced to a bookmark. But for teachers, nothing substitutes for the original texts: read and re-read, underlined numerous times, commented upon and dog-eared, just as Mortimer Adler recommended decades ago in his classic **How to Read a Book**. Accurate, advancing knowledge is a precision tool in the service of justice.

Allow me to expand just a bit on each of these lessons: (1) conative formation, (2) organizational skills, (3) networking, and (4) close knowledge of the original texts.

### **(1) Conative Education**

I first stumbled on the term “conative education” in a **Saturday Review** article profiling the educational psychologist Jerome Bruner. Conation refers not to will-power in the Victorian sense, but to a disposition for striving, a combination of aspiration, competitiveness and perseverance. It is the faculty Plato termed *thumos*, the spirited fighting character of “the guardians” of the Republic. Rollo May wrote about similar ideas in his **Love and Will**. (“Will”, he defined, as the discipline to realize our desires.) I believe that the development of disciplined desire is a necessary dimension of education for justice today.

The challenge of conative education is captured in the transition from Aquinas’ notion that we must “avoid evil” to the contemporary one that evil must be resisted. I have argued, for example, that the logical coherence of the current teaching of the church on peace and war, embracing both non-violence and the just war, lies in the realization that everyone is obligated *to oppose grave, public evil*, whether by *nonviolent* or *military* means. In Catholic teaching, acquiescence in the face of grave evil is unacceptable. Action is required.

Often you don’t even know that you are teaching conative skills; but others, including your students, will be watching you. One day I met for lunch with two Catholic Relief Service staffers. They had just finished doing a workshop on leadership styles. They reported to me how they characterized various personalities in the field of social ministry. Suddenly, to my surprise one said, “Then there is Drew Christiansen: ‘casual relentlessness.’” I hardly knew Kate Moynihan; I had met her only once before in a hurried meeting when I was escorting a bevy of bishops in war-torn Croatia, but she had studied me working from afar, and she had nailed my own style right on the head: ‘casual relentlessness.’ That’s how I work. Not with a lot of fuss, but steadily, thoroughly, doggedly; and it has made a difference.

Some Examples:

Allow me to illustrate education for struggle, perseverance and sacrifice with some examples taken from teaching with the old media. When I taught a doctoral seminar on equality first at Berkeley and then at Notre Dame, I tried to show students the struggle entailed in the realization of the ideal of racial equality by assigning Richard Kluger's **Simple Justice**, a history of the fight against segregation from Plessy v. Ferguson to Brown v. Board of Education. I would allow two weeks without class to read the enormous book, but it was always a success. The students got the point of the long and many-sided effort necessary to achieve racial justice.

Teaching undergraduates about nonviolence, I had classes read Phillip Gallie's **Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed**, the story of the nonviolent witness of the Huguenot pastor Andre Trocmé and the townspeople of Chambon sur Lignon, France, who during World War II provided some 500 Jews asylum right under the eyes of German troops. We would also view the film **Weapons of the Spirit** based on the book. The feasibility of nonviolence of which students are often skeptical would come clear, but also the various spiritual qualities and practical stratagems necessary to make nonviolent resistance effective surfaced for discussion. Similarly, Richard Attenborough's film **Gandhi** would fascinate even the most skeptical students, convincing them of the practicality of nonviolence.

An important reason for cultivation of the will—in the large sense of which Plato and Rollo May wrote—is that we can easily become satisfied with a low average level of goodness, what the philosopher Whitehead called “anesthesia.” And from anesthesia, there is only a short step to atrocity, for we have ceased to see the big moral choices before us. To illustrate how complacency with conventional goodness dulled the capacities for moral action, I used to assign undergraduates Langdon Gilkey's memoir **Shantung Compound**, moral tales drawn from his internment in a Japanese prisoner of war camp in China during the Second World War. The moral contrast, Gilkey found, was between the majority of interned Christian missionaries, whose conventional morality prevented them from extending themselves to new inmates, and the prostitutes, monks and nuns who, in very straitened circumstances, would find ways to share limited resources with newcomers.

Finally, education for justice requires freeing the imagination and stimulating inventiveness. As I indicated with the examples from **Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed** and **Gandhi**, what often inhibits people about taking moral responsibility is the thought that a goal like non-violent resistance is impossible. Often, I suppose, the lack of feasibility or the size of the obstacles become easy excuses for not rousing oneself to action or for avoiding difficulty; but with better spirits, inhibition may stem simply from a failure of moral imagination, a lack of sense of possibilities. History, biography and drama can free the imagination to visualize opportunities both for doing good and resisting evil. Likewise, role-playing, drafting model programs for action and sketching campaigns for social change can bring the imagination into play, helping

students visualize the practical steps that can be taken, thereby overcoming immobility of spirit.

## **(2) Movements and Organizations**

As you may have detected, I harbor a degree of suspicion of the solitary prophet model of doing justice and making peace. The church does posthumously recognize heroic peacemakers like Franz Jaegerstatter, one of my own heroes, and I would hope one day, Gordon Zahn, another. But by and large, the people who effect change are not singular prophets but leaders of movements and the builders of institutions. The one exception I can think of is Blessed Charles de la Foucauld, who had no followers in his life time but who inspired a host of imitators in later generations. Even Gordon Zahn, who was for many years a lonely voice, and who suffered for his convictions at the hands of both church and state, helped organize Pax Christi USA and contributed to the acceptance of nonviolent witness by the Second Vatican Council.

Let me begin my brief remarks on the need for organizational skills with a word on movements, the dynamic phase of any social change. Marvin Mich has shown how Catholic social teaching closely interacts with social movements. Movements generate ideas, and ideas, in turn, are carried by movements. Movements possess a transformative power in relationships, first on their own followers and then on the wider society. Think of the influence of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement or Jean Vanier and L'Arche have had on the social witness and ministry of the whole church and on the wider society.

For young people, the appeal of the social movement is many-sided. There is the obvious challenge to the status quo and conventional thinking. There is the opportunity for new relationships and for the excitement of collective action in protests and rallies, in what Charles Taylor describes as a distinctive form of postmodern religiosity, "festivity." Most of all there is the call to sacrifice, for discipline, what William James called "the moral equivalent of war," and with it the development of alternative markers of identity, so attractive to the young today, both the newly churchd and the seekers who are unchurched.

The classroom is not the place to recruit for movements, but the study of Catholic social teaching alongside the movements and personalities that have contributed to it and been carriers for it can bring the bare ideas to life. There is also a place in the classroom for acquainting students with the movements and social justice organizations active in your towns, neighborhoods, dioceses and churches and, where possible, to visit their local centers. They are, after all, like churches, part of "the geography of faith."

Institutions:

Sociologists claim it takes seven years for a charismatic movement to become an institution. Sometimes we speak disparagingly of "the routinization of charisma." We might equally speak of the success of a movement as it begins to enter into the fabric of a society—through a variety of institutional

adaptations. Especially for older students, for whom the romance of education is giving way to the desire of expertise and planning for a career, experience of the church's justice institutions, like Catholic Charities, diocesan social action offices and the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, should be one of the goals of justice education. These days, of course, when young people are again considering careers in service, the opportunities in church-related agencies are options at which they ought to look.

I would also add that a few students, especially older ones, should be weaned from the attraction of direct service in favor of more organized efforts. To more sensitive souls, hands-on, face-to-face service is likely to hold strong appeal. Most of our students will go that route and even successful leaders and managers will come through their ranks, but our service will be stronger if our young people understand the importance of institutions, appreciate the complexity of their operations and acquire the skills for institutional development. One of the forms of discipline too lacking today is the willingness to meet the challenges of spreading the good through institutions, so much less engaging than face-to-face ministry. Such training can be had by running chapters in schools or parishes of Bread for the World or Pax Christi, or with internships with Catholic Relief Services or the Holy See Permanent Observer Mission to the United Nations through its Paths to Peace Foundation, or in study with the Catholic Peacebuilding Network.

### **(3) Networking**

Time is running short. Let me say only a brief word about networking. It is a skill in which your students will need little more than encouragement. In the Digital Age, networking is a form of solidarity. At the very least, it is a skill that can have a multiplier effect in our work for justice, peace and creation. To judge by my in-box, there is a lot of noise out there and a lot of friendly gossip that will lead nowhere. But the Internet and the Web can provide extraordinary national and cross-border ties in the struggle for justice. Part of the justice curriculum ought to be exploring how to link with church and other advocacy groups in far away places. Even mapping how appeals from zones of conflict are received, passed on, reported and acted on would provide a lesson on solidarity in action. The USCCB Office of International Justice and Peace and Catholic Relief Services would be nodes students could use to map in both directions, back to the source and out to the field in dioceses, parishes and social action networks. With staffs and budgets shrinking, networking can provide strength to the whole of the church's social ministry. The comparative analysis it provides of concerns and efforts in different regions may also educate students as to the great variety of work the church is doing, and awareness of what others are doing elsewhere could also be an incentive for institutions, parishes and dioceses which have cut back to re-engage in work that is at the heart of the gospel.

Just as letting students follow their own interests has a place in education, so also steering them to less popular topics, causes and conflicts, like the plight of Christians in Iraq, Catholic peacemaking in Colombia, the

work of Caritas Internationalis for the Millennium Development Goals or the U.S. role in nuclear proliferation, also a component of justice and peace education. Next week the annual demonstrations will take place at the School of the Americas in Columbus, Georgia. Protesting the teaching of torture has its place, but there are many other problems out there, a lot more suffering, and students in our schools need to be learning more about more of this world's problems. Students' entry points into social responsibility should be as diverse as the world's suffering. The Web makes it possible to access many other points and discover many other ways to begin social involvement.

#### **(4) Command the Text**

This last point, I confess, is a very personal one, namely, that justice and peace educators should command the text. A couple of examples from my own experience may help. First, following the development of Catholic teaching on nonviolence led me to an invitation to participate in the International Mennonite-Catholic Dialogue and then in helping draft "Called Together to Be Peacemakers," the dialogue's final report, a breakthrough document both for ecumenism and for peacemaking. Second, I have been very active in defending Christians in the Holy Land. After following various waves of assaults on Christians there with a variety of local sources, I have been able several times to ward off false propaganda efforts to blame Muslim authorities for the attacks. In brief, following issues and knowing the facts makes a difference for doing justice and making peace.

Educators for justice should know the primary sources of Catholic social teaching, watch their development, be ready to pick up changes in their formulation and execution, and be prepared to steer students and audiences around misrepresentations, even ones that have some official standing.

Spinning goes on outside and even inside the church. Again, let me cite some examples of the spin on Catholic social teaching. First, In the U.S., a particular risk is trying to fit Catholic social teaching to the terms of American politics. At the time of the invasion of Iraq, for example, neo-conservatives spent a great deal of energy, trying to square the circle on preventive war to make it acceptable under the Just War Tradition. Second, at the time of its release, no one commented on the passages in Pope John Paul II's encyclical letter *Centesimus annus* endorsing nonviolence. Third, the same encyclical was even widely misconstrued as an endorsement of the unfettered free-market. Fourth, readers of the early edition of **The Catechism** might be forgiven for thinking the only thing that mattered in the church's environmental ethic was that animals had no rights. As I remember, it was the only topic treated, and the bases for denial of animal rights in the tradition were slight. Fifth, the evolution of nonviolence from a position denied to Catholics during World War II to one that the church not only advocates but makes nonviolence the foundation of teaching of war and peace still does not sit well with many for whom the Catholic position is identified exclusively with the Just War.

Only if you have read the primary texts and read them closely, only if you follow statements proceeding from them, especially the annual World Day of

Peace Message and the pope's yearly address to the diplomatic corps, will you be able to help students see beyond the vigorous statements of the special pleaders and the certainties of the self-appointed defenders of orthodoxy. It is necessary to be up-to-date. In the area of peace, for instance, that means reading beyond "The Challenge of Peace" to *Centesimus annus*, "The Harvest of Justice Is Sown in Peace" and a succession of USCCB statements on 9/11, Iraq and Afghanistan. "The Challenge of Peace" was a landmark document. It still has important things to say about nuclear weapons, and it remains a good tool for teaching the Just War; but it is 25 years old, and the church's teaching and the problems of peacemaking have evolved. The progress of the church's social mission depends on the accuracy of teachers' knowledge of Catholic social teaching. Accurate, advancing knowledge is a precision tool in the service of justice and the promotion of peace.

### **The Future of Justice Education**

I have spoken more about education than about justice. I have only hinted at some of my war stories, and I have real war stories to tell. But I have honestly talked about some missing components of education for justice, skills I think you and your students need to help advance the church's social mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and to build solidarity between the U.S. church and churches and people in need around the world. If you prepare your students with the discipline for a long struggle, equip them with movement and organizational skills, guide their explorations on the Web in the interest of human solidarity, and present them with models of justice educators in command of the church's teaching and of the facts, then the church's social ministry will be greatly strengthened in the decades ahead.

May God prosper your work.  
Thank you very much.