

“In *Schools of Solidarity*, Mary Doyle Roche provides an engaging and accessible workbook for families hoping to be informed by Catholic social teaching as they practice discipleship together. The book joyfully celebrates families who build up the reign of God in the messiness of everyday life, and challenges families to ever-deepen practical commitments to love one another as well as the neighbors in need outside their doors.”

—Bridget Burke Ravizza, Associate Professor of Theology and Religious Studies, St. Norbert College

“We are so thankful that Mary M. Doyle Roche has written this accessible, thorough, and practical reflection on the ways that families today can grow together through the practice of the principles of Catholic social teaching. We couldn’t agree more with her, that families today will grow in holiness to the extent that they can develop new ways of living what Jesus preached about loving our neighbors and discerning the face of God in that process. We warmly recommend this book for parents seeking to live out faith in the context of family life, and for anyone who is ready to be surprised at the ways that Catholic social teaching takes on new life in the context of the contemporary family.”

—Tim and Sue Muldoon, authors of *Six Sacred Rules for Families*

“Now I have a book I can give to friends and family who are inspired by Pope Francis and interested in applying Catholic social teaching to their daily lives. In down-to-earth language, with elegance, mercy, and grace, Roche offers timely wisdom for families all of shapes and sizes.”

—Julie Hanlon Rubio  
Professor of Christian Ethics, St. Louis University  
Author, *Family Ethics: Practices for Christians*



# **Schools of Solidarity**

Families and Catholic Social Teaching

*Mary M. Doyle Roche*



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Writing a book about families while trying to “do the family thing” at the same time has been a challenge, a rewarding challenge to be sure, but a challenge nonetheless. I write about family life not because my family has become a perfect school of solidarity, but because I see how much I have to learn about the many experiences that families have in striving to live out the gospel together. I write because I hope that the practice of writing as a form of “contemplation in action” will make me more attentive to the needs of my own family and of families who are both neighbor and stranger to me. I am thankful for the many ways that the members of my family, especially Emma Rose and Declan, pitched in so that I could take the needed time and space to write and for the love that sustains our life together.

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# Introduction

## The Classroom of Everyday Life

It is a typical evening in our home in a central Massachusetts suburb. My husband and I are sitting down to review “the calendar” or, perhaps more accurately, try to reconcile the many calendars stored in old-fashioned datebooks, looming large on the kitchen wall, covered with souvenir magnets on the refrigerator, and floating in “the cloud” to be drawn down to earth by the apps on our phones. We have both survived a day at work—he as an information technology professional for a nearby school district (thank heavens, or else I would be lying on my back in the yard, gazing up at clouds looking for my schedule!) and I as a professor of religious studies at a nearby Jesuit college. The dinner has been prepared and eaten, though lingering doubts fill my mind about where the food came from and whether anyone actually ate any of the vegetables. Some dishes have made it to the dishwasher in a happy moment in which everyone pitched in to help, but a Leaning Tower of Pisa of Pots (to which others in my family seem to be allergic) awaits me; they need to soak after all. Our two children persevered through their day in junior high and high school and after-school activities and have reluctantly set about their homework assignments; calls of “I need help” will punctuate the calendar conversation.

We are tired and pulled in many different directions, feeling stretched to the breaking point. What sounds catchy in our parish bulletin, “Time, Talent, and Treasure,” we experience as overwhelming in practice. Who will do the drop-off at (two different)

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schools in the morning? Who will do the pick-up after school? Basketball practice? Art class? Who has to work late and when? There is a conflict with the kids' dental appointments. Is there a weekend available to visit grandparents in New York? How will one of us juggle things while the other is traveling for work? It is our turn to help with the delivery of meals to homeless families in our parish. Someone needs to get to the grocery store (a list to be made) and to the craft store for supplies for the science fair or the medieval castle project (another list). The car needs to be dropped off at the mechanic's on Saturday because we can't live without it during the week. Mounds of laundry are reaching Mt. Everest proportions and the dust bunnies look more like Irish wolfhounds. Date night? We laugh . . . or cry. The calendar conversation is draining; the budget conversation is even worse.

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"The ordinary acts we practice every day at home are of more importance to the soul than their simplicity might suggest."

—*Thomas Moore, 19th c. Irish poet*

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Though every family is unique, I imagine that our experience of being and becoming a family together is not unlike the experiences of many other families. And we are lucky. We enjoy relatively good health. We worry about finances and plans for the future but earn a good living at jobs we enjoy and have important benefits like health insurance and vacation time. Our children attend good schools and play in a relatively safe neighborhood. We have not yet reached the point where we are "sandwiched," responsible for growing children (or grandchildren) and aging, infirmed parents. We receive tremendous support from our extended family and friends. We have a traditional marriage and look like a traditional family, so we enjoy all the social and economic privileges that such arrangements afford. We have time, talent, and treasure even though we are often a bit muddled when it comes to figuring out the best way to allocate those resources for the well-being of

our family, friends, colleagues, community, students, parish, and those in need, some of whom we encounter in our daily lives and the billions of whom we will never meet. We strive to love God, ourselves, our neighbors, strangers, and even our enemies but feel ourselves coming up short.

This is who and where we are as a family. This is the context in which my family and many other families strive to live out the gospel. There are many more who strive to support their families, contribute to their communities, and live out their faith without many of the resources we have. Many families live in the context of material poverty, insecurity, and violence in their communities or political instability in their countries. We bring valuable gifts and talents to family life, but we bring limitations too. What may seem like a clear advantage at first, like economic security, may in fact blind us to the needs of our neighbor families struggling in poverty. Our vulnerabilities, which may appear as conditions we want to overcome, might also allow us to understand more deeply the suffering of others. It is in the context of everyday life that families encounter their strengths, their weaknesses, their sinfulness, and most importantly God's grace and the companionship of Jesus. Everyday life, the classroom of lived experience, is the place where families work out what it means to be and become a family together.

### **What Families Are Called to Do**

The temptation faced by many families who have enough, perhaps even more than enough, is to shore things up, to maximize our security and comfort. We try to make sure that our children have everything they need and desire, to the point of trying to gain advantage over other people's children (going to the *right* schools, engaging in the *right* activities, etc.). There are voices within Christianity who would have our homes become fortresses, suggesting they are places to be walled off, fitted with battlements, or set in opposition to other families and the culture at large. Others think about families as "havens in a heartless world" where members (particularly fathers) enjoy a retreat from the messy and competitive world of work and politics. It can be a rather romantic view

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in which relationships in the home bear the sole responsibility for the emotional gratification of family members, a particularly heavy burden for spouses and children.

Whether considered a fortress or a haven, the family is vulnerable to becoming an isolated unit, turned in on itself. Though there is plenty of material in the traditions of the Catholic Church to bolster these views, there is another picture of the role of the family that emerges as the church has sought to engage the modern world and also reach back with new insight into the message of the gospel. This view is most pronounced in the traditions of Catholicism developed throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. The emphasis is not on a family turned in on itself, but rather on a family turned outward toward others.

In words attributed to Antoine de Saint-Exupery (author of the classic *The Little Prince*), “Life has taught us love does not consist in gazing at each other, but in looking outward together in the same direction.” Families strengthened by love look outward onto the world. But families who have their lives rooted in the gospel message of Jesus are not just looking anywhere at anything; they have their sights set on a particular vision. Theologian Tim Muldoon and his wife Sue Muldoon have insightfully called upon families to look at themselves and out into the world with “kingdom eyes.” Jesus was proclaiming the kingdom of God, a kingdom in which the usual order of things would be turned upside down, in which many of the values of the day (and of our day too) would be challenged. Even the family itself would be challenged in light of a new family of faith in Christ, united not by blood but by the waters of baptism and the eucharistic meal.

The proclamation of the kingdom by Jesus Christ in the first century and the call to a new evangelization by Pope Francis in the twenty-first place the family in a complex relationship with the wider culture. There are important ways in which Christian families are called to be countercultural and to resist the influences of harmful trends in our society toward individualism, consumerism, and violence. They resist cultural messages about what it means to have achieved success, but resistance alone may not be enough. While they resist what passes for success in our society (wealth,

status, advantage, influence), they also offer a different vision of success by how they live their lives. So, there are also important ways in which families participate in and seek to transform the society around them by engaging in service, work, worship, politics, art, the sciences, and so forth, with a view to a life well lived that is just, compassionate, and being willing to stand with those who are suffering.

Within Catholicism, the family has been variously referred to as the first “cell” of civil society, a domestic church, a school of humanity, a school of love, and a school of solidarity. Think of the cells of a living organism that function together for the life of the organism. Cells have boundaries but they also interact with other cells and the environment. Families are the most basic building blocks of society, the smallest and most intimate units in our communities. People, when the conditions are right, come to society through the family. Children are introduced to the world around them by their parents and other family members. Families are part of ever-widening and often-overlapping circles of relationship: building neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, governments, and parishes, and so forth. Indeed, Catholics might think of their parishes as “families of families.”

There are many toy purchases that my husband and I have regretted, but we have never thought twice about the old-fashioned, simple (and expensive . . . it costs money to be simple!), wooden building blocks that arrived under the tree one Christmas and were added to in subsequent years. Our family has built many different structures with these blocks. When the children were little, the fun of course was in knocking them down within seconds of having erected them. But over time, the buildings became more complex: houses, castles, and even fortresses. The most wonderful part was that we could use our imaginations to build anything. We worked with some ideas about what a castle should have to make it recognizable as a castle (turrets, a mote, and bridge) but within those basic guidelines we could build something unique. Like a sonnet or a haiku, poems that must obey certain rules, within those boundaries lies infinite and often spectacularly beautiful variety. This is less true of the many LEGO® sets we have amassed, which

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increasingly have come with such detailed instructions that at the end you have a replica of the Millennium Falcon. Little to no imagination required or encouraged.

Thinking about our family play with blocks has helped me to think about what it means for families and family life to be building blocks for society. Families are not static. Families are dynamic; they change and grow (in members, in age, in depth of relationship). They come in all shapes and sizes. I have found it helpful to think less about what a family *is* (what it looks like, what family forms are acceptable) and more about what a family *does*. What do families *do* that make them recognizable as families? They welcome children and other new members. They care for children into adulthood. They care for aging relatives. They feast and fast together. They celebrate and grieve together, work and play together. They forgive again and again.

It may be the case that some family forms are better able to carry out important responsibilities to family members and to society. Taking an example from a global perspective, one could think of the families headed by children in regions of Africa where generations have been wiped out by the HIV/AIDS pandemic. These families struggle in poverty and are less able to pass along important familial, religious, and cultural traditions. A situation in which families are headed by children is not ideal; and the resilience of individual children in the face of such hardship still requires a great deal of support from others. There are also examples where the form of the family, even if it is the “ideal” form (a married male and female raising children), is itself no guarantee against violence and abuse. The ongoing tragedy of domestic violence, especially against women and children, makes this abundantly clear.

Perhaps “family” is more of a verb than it is a noun. What do families need in order to “do the family thing”? What kinds of conditions are necessary for families to raise children, to care for elders and other vulnerable members, to “stay together” even as they may spread out geographically, to pass on important traditions, and to contribute to their communities (from the local to the global)? What do Christian families need in order to act as domestic churches, as schools of solidarity, of love and justice, and

as vital participants in the Body of Christ that is the world church? Knowing a bit more about what families need from society and the church puts us in a better position to ask, “What do society and the church need from families?”

### **The Personal Is Political**

One of many slogans of late twentieth-century feminism was “the personal is political.” It is an important insight not only for women but for all people and families. Its meaning has two dimensions.

First, “the personal is political” implies that personal, individual choices have political or social implications. What people do influences the world around them for better or worse. There are obvious examples like voting. One’s personal action in the voting booth (when combined with the actions of others) determines which candidates and political parties will have greater influence in public policy making and legislation. But other kinds of personal decisions also have a trickle-up-and-out effect as well. For example, decisions that one family makes about how to spend money can fuel a consumer-driven culture on the one hand or create increased demand for affordable, organic produce in their community on the other.

Influence does not flow in one direction, so the second dimension of “the personal is political” is that broader political, social, or economic factors shape personal, family decisions. Parents have the responsibility to protect and promote the health of their children. Certain lifestyle choices that advance the health of children need to be, as Catholic ethicist Lisa Sowle Cahill notes, “real possibilities.” A parent can provide a child with nutritious food only if it is readily available and affordable. The same could be said about activities that provide physical exercise. Children can engage in play in the outdoors only if there is safe space to do so. Communities that struggle with high rates of violent crime may find it difficult, even impossible, to secure safe spaces for children. And this is where our two-dimensional look at the relationship between individual families and political, social, and economic structures

becomes more complex. The decisions that some families make can either expand or reduce the ability for other families to make healthy choices. Rhetoric that assigns moral praise to families who have many resources at their disposal and moral blame to families who do not fails to capture the complex interplay between personal or familial choices and the social and economic conditions that make those choices possible in the first place.

Families influence and are influenced by the social, economic, political, and faith networks of which they are a part. Within Catholicism, the social teachings of the church address the interaction of these networks and their impact on individuals and communities. Catholic social teaching has been predominately about institutions: about politics and the role of government, and about economics and the role of markets and the meaning of work. Families are impacted by all of these, and families in turn can shape politics and markets through their participation in public life. So it is fitting that an ethic for family life be rooted in these social teachings in a way that could complement, and perhaps refine, perspectives in family ethics that tend to focus on sexual and reproductive issues.

### **The Plan for This Book**

There are any number of excellent books written about marriage and family spirituality and ethics. Many of these have focused on the important issues related to human sexuality and reproduction or on the particular challenges facing families that experience separation, divorce, remarriage, and the blending of families. These are crucial questions for the church and there are many wise and insightful theologians and ethicists who address these complex questions and propose suggestions for pastoral action and public policy.

This text does something different. It takes for granted that families come in all shapes and sizes and will look at family life within the broader contours of themes that recur in Pope Francis's messages about being a church of, with, and for the poor. The media has made much of Francis's commitment to simplicity, his

unassuming way of interacting with the crowds of people who come out to see him, and his presence among the poor and vulnerable. While many are experiencing Francis's papacy as something radically new, his statements about the poor and marginalized are deeply rooted in the gospels and the long tradition of Catholic social teaching.

Catholic social teaching has often been called the church's "best kept secret." While many, even those who are not Catholic, know the church's teaching on issues like abortion, birth control, or sex outside of marriage, fewer, even those who *are* Catholic, know what the church teaches about economic systems, the proper role of government in common life, integral human development, immigration, or about the use of force in resolving conflict. It seems that under the leadership of Pope Francis, "the secret is out." He has repeatedly called Catholics, and indeed all people of goodwill, to live joyfully the gospel message that is good news for the poor and vulnerable. This is the lens through which Francis appears to be approaching the many moral issues facing our church and world.

Previous popes and conferences of bishops have written extensively about these themes during the twentieth century. Pope Francis, whose every move is captured by the media, has been a visible and prophetic witness to care for the poor, the vulnerable, and the outcast. To the church's agenda about the pastoral care of families in circumstances including separation, divorce, and remarriage, and the reception of teachings about human sexuality, Pope Francis has added the situation of families living in poverty, families in war-torn regions of the world, and families who are forced to migrate or who are separated by global patterns of migration. Human rights, political instability, violence, globalization, and economic inequality are all "family issues."

The opening chapter, "The Secret Is Out," sets the stage with a brief overview of some of the themes of Catholic social teaching. The core themes that will be reviewed are human dignity, participation in the common good, the option for the poor, and solidarity. It is important to recognize that these themes are not distinct from or independent of one another. Rather, they are related, sharing common resemblances and traits (not unlike a family!), and each

theme is always to be understood in light of the others. For example, to be in solidarity with another, one must be committed to one's dignity as a person.

A commitment to the intrinsic dignity of the person provides the foundation for all of the other commitments the church makes. People possess dignity because they have been created by God, in God's image and likeness. People are social and thrive when they are in relationships characterized by love and justice.

People participate in the world around them so that the dignity of all people is respected. The church talks about this participation in terms of "the common good of society." Even as Christians respect *all* people, the Scriptures also call them to a special concern for the poor and vulnerable. Charity is an important way in which Christians answer this call, but it is not the only way. Christians also live in solidarity *with* the poor. That is to say that Christians not only give *to* the poor, they also stand *with* the poor in order to build the more just world envisioned as the kingdom of God.

Solidarity is not a luxury of privileged families. Many of the world's Christians are living in conditions of material poverty. These families have long been standing with and for one another to secure more just living conditions. They have reached out to one another in times of crisis. They give not from their excess (there often isn't any excess); they give from their need like the widow in the Gospel of Luke, who humbly offers a mere two coins at the temple while the rich are boasting about their generosity (Luke 21:1-2). These families are never merely objects of someone else's charity; they are educators in solidarity. Individual Christians first learn about how to live in solidarity in their families, and families in turn can learn how to live in solidarity with one another and perhaps most especially with families who are struggling in a variety of ways.

Chapter 2, "Learning to Live in Solidarity," proposes a vision in which families both resist harmful aspects of our culture and transform that very same culture in order to make the world better for everyone. Families are also essential for the life of the church and have as much to teach as they have to learn about the gospel message of good news for the poor. Families are schools of soli-

darity, working each and every day to deepen relationships within the family itself and with other families both near and far. Families resist dehumanizing elements of our culture (competitive consumption, wastefulness, violence, etc.) and transform the many arenas of daily life (homes, workplaces, neighborhoods, schools, governments, healthcare institutions, and parishes) so that they honor the dignity of all people, allow full participation in and access to resources, and pay special attention to the poor and vulnerable.

Chapter 3, “*Homework*,” looks for opportunities to apply what we have learned about families and Catholic social teaching. It explores the differences that Catholic social teaching and a vision of the family as a school of solidarity can make when it comes to practical decisions in everyday life. If family is a verb, and we know families by what they do, namely by how they live in solidarity within themselves and with one another, then we can ask about the “who, what, when, and where” of family life. How might Catholic social teaching transform our family habits with regard to people, places, things, and time? With whom are we in relationships? Where do we go each day? What do we *need*, what do we *want*, and what do we truly *desire*? How do we use our possessions and the resources of creation? How do we spend our time? How do we mark the seasons of our lives? Do we observe a Sabbath?

This section includes questions for discussion and reflection and suggested activities to build solidarity within and among families. Families can take the time to notice and to celebrate moments of growth and also to notice where we might have our blinders on. Family life is not a competition; we are walking *together* on a long journey. As Pope Francis has noted, sometimes we will find ourselves leading the way, at other times we will be in the thick of the crowd, and there will be moments when we will be taking up the rear, making sure no one is left behind. One step at a time, families can celebrate together when we move in the right direction, and encourage one another when we stumble on the road to solidarity.

The brief concluding chapter, “Say It Joyfully,” takes a cue from Pope Francis, who, while he has steadfastly called all Christians to be a church of and for the poor (and this is no easy challenge), has

also asked Christians to take up this task joyfully. Families have important work to do, but there is nothing wrong with “whistling while we work”—not to put on rose-colored glasses or a cheery face when times are hard, but to abide in a lasting joy that can sustain us through difficulty. Francis has also called for community of mercy. It is too tempting to be judgmental of other families, often in an attempt to assure ourselves about the moral superiority of choices we have made. It is likewise tempting to see the moral challenge before us as too overwhelming and ourselves as too flawed or limited by circumstance to make any positive and lasting difference. The result is that families either lose themselves on a hamster wheel of activities or they become paralyzed, stuck in habits they would like to change.

In a lecture given to the world’s cardinals, Cardinal Walter Kasper noted the vital role that families play in the life of the church and the world:

Families need the Church and the Church needs families in order to be present in the midst of life and in the milieu of modern living. Without domestic churches, the Church is estranged from the concrete reality of life. Only through families can the Church be at home there, where people are at home. Understanding the Church as a domestic church is, therefore, fundamental for the future of the Church and for the new evangelization. Families are the best messengers of the gospel of the family. They are the way of the Church.<sup>1</sup>

Families are not simply waiting to have the good news preached to them. Families are themselves preaching the gospel wherever they go. Through them the church is at home in the world even as families strive to make the world a more hospitable place for all of God’s creation. Families need support to “do the family thing,” not only from the church but also from other families and every sector of society, so that they in turn can live out their unique vocation to build a world founded on God’s justice and love.

# 1

## **The Secret Is Out**

### **A Primer on Catholic Social Teaching and Families**

Catholic social teaching has often been referred to as the church’s “best kept secret” because its teaching on other issues, most notably its teachings on human sexuality, reproduction,

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“The Lord wants us to belong to a Church that knows how to open her arms and welcome everyone, that is not a house for the few, but a house for everyone, where all can be renewed, transformed, sanctified by his love—the strongest and the weakest sinners, the indifferent, those who feel discouraged or lost.”

—*Pope Francis*<sup>1</sup>

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and abortion (even though they are not always fully understood or accepted) get much more attention from the media and from the pulpit. But the secret is getting out. Perhaps more reserved in his judgments on sexual matters, Pope Francis has nevertheless repeatedly called the church to be a community of the poor and for the poor. He has challenged Christians to go to the “outskirts,” the margins of society, to transform the situation for those who are

suffering. Pope Francis's prophetic words and actions are drawing increased attention to what the church has to say about suffering in the world, and what the church and other organizations can do about it.

A vague notion about Christian concern for the poor is becoming more concrete as Francis embraces the poor, the outcast, the imprisoned, and those who are ill and disabled. Christians should not think that Francis is talking about "us" and "them." Millions of the world's poor *are* Christian. Christianity is in many ways already a church of the poor who are brothers and sisters in Christ. Francis is making a claim that Christians should be concerned about *all* people who are poor regardless of their religious tradition or culture, and Christians who enjoy some level of power or privilege may have the most to learn from their brothers and sisters who from a situation of poverty are already engaged in the struggle for justice.

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"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house."

—*Matthew 5:14-15*

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Even as the church's commitment to the poor begins to take center stage, many may still be unaware of the key role that families and family life play in Catholic social teaching, not only regarding the procreation and education of children, but also for their participation in building a more just world. While the forms that families take continue to be important to the church, Catholic social teaching tends to focus on what families need so that they can participate fully in society whatever their circumstances. Popes and bishops have written extensively about "the family" and how it is impacted by poverty, violence, discrimination, and unjust working conditions. When the United Nations made declarations about universal human rights and the rights of children, the Vat-

ican contributed (October 1983) a *Charter on the Rights of the Family*. The church has long been an ardent defender of family life, even when people of faith and goodwill have disagreed about the precise conditions that undermine a family's ability to flourish.

It may be helpful to remember in debates about whether the family is in crisis and why that the family does not exist in the abstract. That is to say that there are only *real* families, particular people who have made commitments to one another as spouses, parents, children, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and so forth. A family's configuration may depend on choice, circumstance, local custom, and legal tradition. It is also helpful to remember that the Catholic Church's view is global in perspective, with an eye toward the universal church throughout the world. The issues that make headlines in the United States, important though they are, may be far removed from the day-to-day concerns of families in the developing world. This global view is crucial and impacts how Christians might think about their responsibilities to families near and far.

This chapter explores the emphasis that Catholic social teaching places on engagement in the world and how it asks individuals and families to "see, judge, and act" in order to bring about a more just and compassionate world. In the process of engaging the world and reflecting on experience in light of the Gospel, the church has distilled several major themes that in turn can guide families in their unique mission in the world: an unwavering commitment to human dignity, the common good of society, and an option for the poor and vulnerable. Taken together these themes provide the foundation for understanding the meaning of solidarity for the church today.

## **Social Engagement**

The introduction to this book discussed images of family life that have gained some prominence particularly, though not exclusively in US culture, including "fortress families" and "havens in a heartless world." While Catholic social teaching has maintained the role that families have in protecting their

members, it has also tended to emphasize the relationship that families have *with* and *within* the world. The attitude of Catholic social teaching toward society is characterized more by engagement than it is by isolation. Adopting a more sectarian approach or dropping out of society or the culture at large altogether is neither possible nor desirable for most families.

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“The light of faith is unique, because it is capable of illuminating every aspect of human existence.”

—*Pope Francis*<sup>2</sup>

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For example, some families may seek to insulate themselves from certain aspects of culture or from substandard public schools by home schooling their children. This provides a way to educate children in the context of important values for their family. However, even a choice like home schooling requires certain resources; for example, the family must be able to afford for one parent to be at home with the children throughout much of the day. And even home-schooling parents often need the support of a community of other parents and families to sustain them in this effort. Furthermore, home schooling one’s own children does not necessarily absolve a family from contributing to a system that provides education for all children. The challenge is to balance responsibility as parents of particular children with the responsibility that is widely shared for the well-being of *all* children.

While dropping out may be impractical and even undesirable for most families, complete absorption in the culture is no more desirable from a Christian perspective. Christian families may be “at home in the world” but they might often find themselves called to resist certain aspects of the culture around them, whether that is rampant consumerism, competitiveness, or violence. The question is how best to resist those elements of the culture that run contrary to the gospel message of love. Families who cannot grow all of their own food, make their own clothes, earn a livelihood without working outside the home, and meet all of their other needs (which

describes most families in the United States) will need to chart a different course.

The emphasis on engagement implies that families of faith are open to the world created by a loving God who looked at creation and called it “good.” At the same time they remain alert to its many temptations. In order to live out the gospel, Christian families become involved in work outside the home, in politics, education, healthcare, business, and in other social and cultural activities. For example, in many families, parents have a vocation that is internal to the family: to one another as spouses and as parents of children. They also have other vocations in the world. Though different seasons of family life might mean that one parent focuses primarily on the internal vocation for a time, seasons change. So both parents also have an obligation to minister in the world. It is a juggling act, but this “dual vocation” keeps all members of the family, including children, attuned to the needs of others and allows them to envision their unique participation in the world around them.

### **See–Judge–Act**

The method of Catholic social teaching has been variously called the pastoral circle, the hermeneutical circle (how academics talk about one’s lens or vantage point on the world), or the see–judge–act approach to moral decisions. The key to this circle is where it begins; it begins by “seeing,” by looking around to observe just what is going on. The process begins with human experience. The Second Vatican Council (a gathering of the world’s bishops that met at the Vatican from 1962–65) referred to this fundamental step as reading “the signs of the times and interpreting them in light of the gospel.”

In order to begin with experience, Christians take a long look at their own lives and the lives of others. Theologian and noted homilist, Walter Burghardt, SJ, wrote about a spirituality that takes “a long, loving look at the real.” Christians need not fear looking at their many blessings and also at times in which they experience hardship, suffering, and pain. They pay attention to

the experiences of others, and they *listen* carefully, not necessarily in order to rush in with solutions to problems, but to allow others to have a voice. We might think about the times when we have wanted to share our personal pain with others, not so they could tell us what to do, or how to feel, or to “fix” it for us—we just wanted to be heard as we came to our own interpretations and solutions even though we might need support from others to carry out our decisions.

Moral theologian James Keenan, SJ, has written extensively about mercy as the “heart of Catholicism” and mercy has become a key theme in Pope Francis’s papacy. Mercy is often understood in a limited way, as forgiveness. To “have mercy” is to forgive in spite of wrongdoing. Reflecting on the gospel story of the Good Samaritan, Keenan defines mercy as a willingness “to enter the chaos of another.” Catholics are called to enter the chaos of people’s lives. There is spiritual chaos to be sure, but one might also think about the kinds of chaos that material poverty causes. Jonathan Kozol, advocate for children and teachers, has written powerfully about the chaotic lives of children living in poverty in the United States, particularly about poverty in urban settings that is often combined with racism, crime, high rates of male incarceration, and ill health. This is also the kind of chaos that Christians are called to enter.

In order to respond to the problem of poverty, all Christians must be willing to enter the lives of the poor. They must be attuned to what is going on in the world beyond the front door, beyond the street where they live. Making donations to soup kitchens and homeless shelters is an important element of Christian charity, but visiting the pantry or the shelter to volunteer or simply to be present to those who rely on its services puts a human face on the problem—not just any face. “The poor” is not an abstraction any more than “the family” is. There are particular poor people and families, with unique stories to tell, and listening to their experiences can be transformative; it can change how one sees and understands the problem of poverty that impacts the lives of so many families today.

The second phase of the process involves interpretation or trying to understand what is going on, to make some sound judgments based on experience (but *not* behaving in a judgmental

way). To take the experience of poverty to the next step, a sound ethical plan will require an understanding of how people become poor, what keeps them in poverty, and why some communities seem trapped in vicious cycles of poverty, hunger, homelessness, and violence. If Christians want to make a substantial and lasting difference in the lives of poor people, they will need to understand how economies and markets work and how patterns of unemployment and underemployment influence particular communities. They will also need to understand how other factors impact poor people and families, like the impact of racism and/or sexism.

Poverty has root causes, and insight from the social sciences like economics and sociology are vital in formulating responses that will not only be well meaning but effective. Some efforts to assist people in poverty can be well meaning and yet fail to actually help and may even cause greater harm. The “road to hell,” as some say, is “paved with good intentions.” One notorious example concerned donating powdered infant formula to mothers in developing countries (which may have had more than a purely charitable motive). The communities that received the formula did not have ready access to potable water and so prepared the formula with water that caused life-threatening diarrhea among the infants. A better approach may have been to listen to the experiences of the mothers and involve them in solving an urgent issue regarding the health and well-being of their children. Such engagement might have led to addressing access to water and other nutritious foods for the mothers who could then breastfeed—benefitting the health of mothers and children, indeed entire families and communities.

Charitable responses to poverty are a crucial means by which Christians honor the dignity of the poor in the present moment. Working toward a just society that lifts people out of poverty and provides a way for poor people themselves to participate in building such a society requires legislation, public policy efforts, pastoral programs, and institutional change. A Christian moral response will also include engaging in this kind of critical thinking and working for structural transformation that can be guided in part by insights from natural sciences, technology, engineering, and social sciences like economics, sociology, and psychology.

Christians use information and insight from the sciences, to be sure, but the process of making judgments about a problem also includes theological reflection. Christians read the signs of the times and interpret them “in light of the gospel.” So information gleaned through experience and engagement with experts in fields like economics is brought into conversation with the Gospel and the history of reflection on Jesus’ message contained in the work of theologians, the lives of the saints, the ritual and sacramental life of the community, and centuries of pastoral practice.

In trying to address the urgent problem of grinding poverty, Christians have a long history to guide them. The “corporal works of mercy” are one instance. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells a parable in which one group, the “sheep,” has fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, welcomed the stranger, and visited the sick and imprisoned. They are the ones who will inherit the kingdom of God (Matt 25:31-36). Throughout the centuries, Christian communities have looked to this parable to inspire concrete acts of charity that address the suffering of people in the here and now.

Kerry Weber, an editor of *America*, a weekly Catholic magazine published by the Jesuits in the United States, has written about her experiences in trying to live out the corporal works of mercy, of entering into the chaos of others who are poor and vulnerable (and insightfully reminding her readers that we bring a little chaos of our own to this endeavor). Her practice of charitable acts like feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, and visiting the imprisoned was a rich but also unsettling experience that prompted her to ask deeper questions about cycles of poverty and crime and the role that Christians can play in breaking them. The method of Catholic social teaching prompts us then to move beyond charity and toward justice. Those who “have” ought to share with those who “have not.” They must also ask why some always seem to have and others have not. What can Christians do to reduce this disparity?

The final phase of the pastoral circle involves a decision and a plan for action. Christians, steeped in the gospel stories about Jesus and his concern for the poor, look among neighbors they know

and strangers they don't see people struggling in poverty. They enter into the chaos of that poverty, perhaps by visiting a soup kitchen or a homeless shelter. They listen to the experiences of particular people. Why are people frequenting the kitchen or the shelter? Research might reveal patterns of underemployment and unemployment after the closing of a factory or mill or the departure of a major corporation in search of cheaper labor elsewhere. If this research highlights the relationship between food insecurity, homelessness, and employment issues, a Christian community might begin a campaign to bring jobs back to the community, lobby representatives to raise the minimum wage, or extend benefits to the long-term unemployed. They might also focus on improving the school programs so that children can envision a future that includes meaningful work that will also earn them a livelihood.

And so the see-judge-act process comes full circle. Christians who engage in this method of moral reflection and action are not simply right back where they started. The pastoral circle may in fact be better understood as a *spiral* in which the long-standing habits of the Christian community—for example, habits of attention to the poor—prompt Christians to seek out certain kinds of experiences and ask certain kinds of questions in the first place. We don't begin the process from “nowhere” but rather as people already shaped by the life, ministry, passion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Experiences inspire questions about poverty that are answered in the process of research and theological reflection. Christians act—and through that action they change the situation on the ground and the cycle begins anew.

A Christian community may decide to open a food pantry as the fruit of their experience and reflection. Now that the food pantry is operational, there are new opportunities to be present to those who use its services, new questions to ask about the causes of food insecurity, and a new experience of the gospel message of abundant life and the practice of sharing the eucharistic meal. Further action may spiral the community up toward a greater realization of justice for the poor or spiral deeper and deeper to the root causes of injustice.

In contemplating the life of Mary, Pope Francis has echoed this process of moral reflection and action when he describes Mary's practice of listening, decision, and action. Listening "consists of attention, acceptance, and availability to God." This is no passive or docile practice on Mary's part. She is not merely hearing what is going on. She *listens* to the angel, *accepts* God's will for her to bear a child, and then *goes* in haste to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who is also with child in her old age (Luke 1:26-40). Pope Francis continues, "However, Mary also listens to the events—that is, she interprets the events of her life; she is attentive to reality itself and does not stop on the surface but goes to the depths to grasp its meaning." Her listening leads to decision, "Mary does not let herself be dragged along by events; she does not avoid the effort of making a decision." And decision, the pope says, leads to action, which can be the most challenging part:

We likewise sometimes stop at listening, at thinking about what we must do; we may even be clear about the decision we have to make, but we do not move on to action. And above all we do not put ourselves at stake by moving toward others "with haste" so as to bring them our help, our understanding, our love—to bring them, as Mary did, the most precious thing we have received, Jesus and his Gospel, with words, and above all with the tangible witness of what we do.<sup>3</sup>

This see-judge-act process of moral reflection and decision within Catholic social teaching is important for families in two ways. First, it is fruitful for individual families who are striving to live the gospel in the world. Families themselves can use this method in order to decide how they can respond to Jesus' call to strive for the kingdom of God. They can use the method to learn more about the experiences of other families so that they can work together for the good of all. They can use the method in their parishes, as a family of families, to discern what kinds of ministries might be most needed in their communities. The "*Homework*" chapter of this book offers suggestions for activities and reflection questions to assist families as they step into this cycle of experience, reflection, and action.

The see–judge–act method is also crucial for families on another level beyond the practices of individual families and parish communities. The church itself—at the diocesan, national, international, and global levels—benefits from adopting this method in its desire to minister most effectively to families. Beginning with a set of teachings and simply applying them to local circumstances in a “top-down” approach may fail to recognize the complex needs of particular families. Through the see–judge–act method that begins at the grassroots or from the “bottom-up,” the church could come to a deeper understanding of the challenges facing families today and respond with appropriate pastoral and social justice programs. Pastors, bishops, and cardinals would begin by being present to families and listening—listening to families of all shapes and sizes for the wisdom they hold, listening to other experts and theologians—and allowing what they see and hear in this experience to guide reflection on the gospel message of love and mercy. These experiences in turn would help to shape the church’s living traditions, moral teachings, pastoral programs, and social justice ministries.

Through the practice of seeing and listening to lived human experience, interpreting that experience by engaging in thoughtful research, and reflecting on moral issues in light of the gospel, the church has distilled a number of key themes that provide the foundation for assessing ethical action. Catholics do not begin at square one each time they encounter a new problem; there is an accumulated wisdom to guide them. Among the major themes that are touchstones for moral reflection and action are commitments to human dignity, the common good, solidarity, and the option for the poor.

### **Human Dignity**

At the heart of Catholic social teaching is a deep and abiding commitment to the intrinsic dignity of every human person. To say that dignity is *intrinsic* is to say that dignity is not based on any particular characteristic or quality that people possess, such as gender, age, race, ethnicity, economic class, health status, sexual

“God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.”

—*Genesis 1:31*

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orientation, citizenship, and so on. *All* human beings have dignity because they have been created by God in God’s image and likeness. Catholics refer to this as the *Imago Dei*, the image of God within us. God gives us dignity, and though we can fail to honor that dignity in ourselves or others, often in some horrifying ways, we cannot give it or take it away in any ultimate sense.

The book of Genesis reads, “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in *our* image, according to *our* likeness’” (Gen 1:26, italics added). God refers to God’s self in the plural. This could have a number of meanings in light of the time and place in which the book of Genesis was constructed. For Catholic Christians, who are monotheistic and believe in *one* god as opposed to many, this notion that God is somehow plural is understood in terms of the Trinity, three persons in one God. A lot of ink has been spilled down through the centuries about just how to understand the Trinity properly, but the take-away point is this: God is relational. God, in Godself, *is* relationship: Father, Son, and Spirit, three persons who create, redeem, and sanctify. If human persons are made in God’s image and likeness, then human dignity must also be understood in a relational way.

In the second creation story in Genesis, God says that it is not good for the human creature to be alone (Gen 2:18). Even with all of the gifts of creation about us, we need one another. We are profoundly social, interdependent creatures. That we need one another in order to truly thrive may be obvious, but it is significant and provides an important corrective to many of the messages we hear in a hyper-individualistic culture. We may experience periods of relative independence and dependence, but human beings are always *interdependent*, always in relationships without which we could not thrive. That we need one another is not merely a *fact* of our existence; it is also a profound *good* of our existence. It is good to need each other.

There are times in our lives when we are extremely dependent on others. Infancy is one such season and infirmed, advanced age is another. At other times we may feel more independent, indeed we crave more independence. Any parent of an adolescent knows this from experience; teenagers want to go out on their own, to borrow the keys to the car, to have more privacy, and to make more of their own decisions. And parents of adolescents also often desire that their children take on more responsibility to do things on their own so that they can thrive in adulthood, in spite of the increasing tendency to delay adulthood for as long as possible.

US culture makes much of the desire for independence. It has become part of the very warp and weft of its national story. This culture admires people who succeed by “pulling themselves up by their boot straps” and overcoming whatever odds have been stacked against them (rather than asking why the odds are stacked that way in the first place). People fear losing their independence through aging, illness, or disability and spend considerable sums to remain young and healthy. “Dependence” has become a bad word, as has weakness and vulnerability. No one wants to become a burden on others. We are inspired by people who overcome a tragedy like the Boston Marathon bombing by learning to walk and even run again with prosthetic limbs. We might also think though of the painful conversations that people have with their aging parents about relinquishing car keys, letting someone else do the yard work or cooking, or moving to an assisted living community.

In an individualistic context, dignity, independence, and freedom go hand in hand, but dignity is often talked about in terms of control and autonomy, the ability to choose and decide for oneself. Giving in to vulnerability is a sign that dignity has somehow been lost or diminished. Similarly the concept of freedom can be reduced to the absence of obligations that hinder one’s pursuit of happiness.

In the Catholic tradition, freedom is more complex, and indeed may even present a bit of a paradox. The tradition talks about two kinds of freedom: freedom *from* and freedom *for*. Human dignity demands that people be free *from* conditions that undermine that dignity. These include freedom from poverty and hunger, discrimination, persecution, and violence. We might think of President

Franklin D. Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms" speech, given to the US Congress in 1941: "We look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms. The first is freedom of speech and expression—everywhere in the world. The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way—everywhere in the world. The third is freedom from want . . . everywhere in the world. The fourth is freedom from fear . . . anywhere in the world."

Famed American artist Norman Rockwell captured these four freedoms in a series of paintings, two of which have families as their subject. In *Freedom from Want*, generations of a family sit down happily to enjoy not just a meager meal but a feast, replete with turkey and trimmings. *Freedom from Fear* depicts parents tucking their two children into bed at night in an atmosphere of warmth and security, even as the father holds a newspaper with headlines about the horrors of war in a distant place. To be free from these assaults on human dignity is crucial to the Catholic vision of human flourishing.

But freedom does not stop there. Freedom from want and fear provides a context in which people can exercise freedom *for* relationships based on love and justice. They are not free from commitments and obligations, but rather are free to take on responsibilities toward intimate others like friends and family, and to more distant others who are in need. This essential freedom is not really about the ability to do whatever one wants, whenever one wants, but a freedom to become a certain kind of person. The paradox is that relationships and responsibilities do not hinder freedom, but allow persons to enjoy a deeper freedom that comes from being in union with others and with God. Even unjust limitations on our freedom, though they must be challenged, do not necessarily eradicate the core freedom persons enjoy as children of God. In the wise words of Nelson Mandela, who in spite of decades of imprisonment under apartheid in South Africa remained truly free, "For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others." This is a crucial insight for families, which might also be said to be schools of freedom for all members of the family. We

learn how to exercise our freedom in the context of the family, always holding freedom and commitment together.

Human beings possess an intrinsic dignity that is both profoundly interdependent and free. Yet we know that millions of the world's people are not free from want or fear. They are in relationships, even marital and familial relationships, that are unjust and fail to recognize the intrinsic dignity of all people. This is particularly the case for women and girls globally who are frequently victims of violence and abuse within their own households.

Given that the dignity of human persons and communities is often under assault, the Catholic Church has become an ardent supporter of basic human rights, both economic rights (like food, shelter, housing, and healthcare) and political rights (like freedom of speech, freedom of association, and freedom of religion). Along with its advocacy for human rights, the church wanted to share its wisdom about the profoundly social nature of the person and the family as a building block of society that can make certain claims on the wider community for its protection and support. So in 1983 the Vatican proposed a *Charter on the Rights of the Family*. The *Charter* notes “the family constitutes . . . a community of love and solidarity, which is uniquely suited to teach and transmit cultural, ethical, social, spiritual and religious values, essential for the development and well-being of its own members and of society.” Furthermore “the family is the place where different generations come together and help one another to grow in human wisdom and to harmonize the rights of individuals with other demands of social life.”<sup>4</sup>

The *Charter* enumerates rights that include the right to marry and found a family; the right to educate one's children in ways consistent with religious and cultural values; the right to social and economic conditions that support their development and their role as participants in the common good of society (a point discussed in the next section). It also outlines rights for families who are immigrants and refugees, families who possess the same dignity as other families and who can make the same claims for protection and support in the communities in which they seek refuge.

Because the church understands the dignity of the person both in terms of the uniqueness of individuals and in terms of our

relationships to one another, the church's commitment to human *rights* is always kept in balance with *responsibilities*. Individuals and families have rights and these are the claims that they can make on the community for protection and support. They also have responsibilities to one another and to contributing to the community's ability to offer that support in the first place. Parents may know this intuitively; as children grow and want to have a greater voice in making family decisions, they must also take on greater responsibilities for creating a home in which everyone is supported and heard. Strictly speaking, children do not *earn* the right to be protected and supported, they have that right because they are human, but they do learn to exercise responsibilities that are consistent with their age and ability. So too do all people have responsibilities in their communities according to their circumstances (everyone may not bear identical responsibilities).

Human dignity is at the very heart of Catholic social teaching. All human beings have dignity as persons created in God's image and likeness. Our dignity is fully recognized in our relationships with one another, relationships that begin in the family and extend out toward the community. Our dignity is fully recognized when we are truly free: free *from* injustice and free *for* responsibility and participation in social life. In the ideal, this freedom is first experienced in the family. Our dignity is fully recognized when we are assured certain rights that are both economic and political, and when we are supported in exercising our particular responsibilities. Families also thrive when they are endowed with rights to protection and support on the one hand and full participation in social life and in decisions that impact them on the other. Within Catholic social teaching, it is the tradition of the common good that speaks most energetically about the importance of participation for the well-being of individuals and families.

### **The Common Good**

There is much debate, especially around election time, about the intentions of our "founding fathers" when it comes to the rights of individuals and the responsibilities and the limits of government.

Jane Addams, peace activist and winner of the Nobel Peace prize in 1931, may have had the right idea about our interdependence with one another. Her words would be echoed decades later during the Civil Rights Movement by another winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” We are bound together and the goods of our common life must be widely shared. Furthermore, all people must be able to participate in that common life, in building up the goods that benefit everyone.

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“The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life.”

—*Jane Addams*

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To paraphrase the Second Vatican Council, the common good may be defined in this way: the conditions of social living that allow both individuals and communities to readily achieve their flourishing. There are social conditions that keep people from flourishing as individuals, as families, and as larger communities. They include grinding poverty, racism, sexism, political instability, and violence. Conditions that advance the well-being of individuals, families, and communities include economic and political security; racial, ethnic, and gender equality; and peace. It is the responsibility of all people, in light of their particular abilities, to work toward making these conditions a reality for everyone.

Grounded in the gift of human dignity and interdependence, the common good requires that individuals and families pursue goals beyond those that benefit only themselves. As ethicist Thomas Massaro notes, there are many goods that can be achieved only with widespread participation. Some concrete examples of common goods are quality education, public safety, or a sound health-care infrastructure. One form of participation in the common good of education, for example, is paying taxes that go to support schools. Other people participate in making quality education a

reality by becoming teachers, administrators, coaches, mentors, and support staff. They take on the challenges and expenses of acquiring the credentials they need in order to teach and work with students. Many parents volunteer their time in schools, assisting teachers, chaperoning trips, and supervising playgrounds. Finally, and ironically often forgotten, is the students' participation. Children are not merely the recipients of what a school has to offer. Children themselves are moral agents who contribute to an atmosphere of respect that creates a space to learn. We all rely on one another for the education of children in our communities.

Because education is a common good it means that it must also be shared. All people have a right to participate in building up a sound public education system, and all people have a right to enjoy the fruits of that participation. Some will benefit because their children are being educated in the schools. People without children, or whose children have grown, or who send their children to private or parochial schools, benefit from having young people educated to be doctors, nurses, lawyers, legislators, business people, public safety officials, ministers, and so forth. Furthermore, *all* children ought to have access to quality schools regardless of the means by which or the degree to which their parents and other adults in their communities are able to participate in building up a school system. On a global scale, all children should have access to a minimum of primary education as a basic human right. Sadly this is not the case, and the lack of primary education has a disproportionate impact on girls that has a ripple effect in terms of women's participation in the common good.

In US culture, which prizes individualism, the concept of the common good is often discredited because it is confused with forms of collectivism or utilitarianism in which the person is valued only insofar as he or she contributes to the group. People have value or dignity because they are useful. The group is more important than the individual, and this creates conditions that easily undermine the dignity of the unique person. But the common good is not utilitarian. The common good maintains the dignity of the person and protects the most vulnerable persons. The common good requires sacrifice, to be sure, but that sacrifice is also shared

and never comes at the expense of the dignity of the person. In a situation of injustice, sacrifices are disproportionately shared, with burdens falling most heavily, and repeatedly, on those who are least able to carry them. This is not the common good, but often the exploitation of many for benefit of a relative few who have power and privilege in a society.

Another key concept in Catholic social teaching related to the common good is the principle of *subsidiarity*. It is a bit of a tongue twister, and its root meaning is *assistance*. It is a principle that has often been marshaled to safeguard the rights and autonomy of the family against intrusion by the state. The gist of the concept is this: when problems exist (and they often do) it is best to try to attempt solutions as close to the problem as possible. Society is made up of many different levels of social organization. We have already noted that the family is the smallest, the most basic, building block for all of the other levels and institutions. From families, there are neighborhoods; local and state governments; and national, international and global organizations. The Catholic Church is unique because it exists at all of these levels from the domestic church of the family, to the parish (a family of families), to the diocese, to transnational relief organizations like Catholic Relief Services, and so on, to the Vatican and the global church.

According to the principle of subsidiarity, problems are addressed as locally as possible and larger institutions, like the government, should not interfere or take on responsibilities that are better exercised by smaller institutions like families. For example, as a rule, families are best at raising children. State-run orphanages are not preferable to families. When a family is unable to care for children, another family is sought out (sometimes with the assistance of government agencies). Orphanages are a measure of last resort. Larger institutions like governments offer assistance when necessary, but should not overreach their competence.

Families enjoy a degree of autonomy. Yet families are not immune from interference from other organizations including the state. As an example, it is the proper responsibility of parents to discipline their children and mediate their almost inevitable squabbles. It is the case, however, that in some families the arguments

require outside help in order to be meaningfully addressed. Some require the assistance of therapists, and others may even require the intervention of the police and the courts. The painful reality of domestic violence was too long glossed over on the grounds that it is a private family matter. Families are not free to undermine the intrinsic dignity of individual members.

Subsidiarity protects families and local communities from undue interference, but it also requires that other institutions help when necessary. Sometimes local initiatives, to improve a school or playground, for example (which would address important needs of children in the community), will require funding and expertise from others in both the public and the private sector. Parents work with local business people, a town's recreation department, the school board, and maybe with religious congregations, larger philanthropic foundations, and state resources to accomplish this goal. Families and school personnel might design the play space (hopefully with the input of children), businesses and foundations could help fund it, and the local municipality could help maintain it and insure that it meets the requirements for safety and accessibility for children of all abilities. This interdependence creates a space for flourishing; good things happen when people work together. This particular example also might prompt families in suburban neighborhoods to pause and reflect on the tendency to build playgrounds in their backyards for the children in their families. Children whose families have resources need only step outside to find fun, stimulating, and safe places to play where they and their parents may never encounter children who rely on public spaces for recreation.

A Catholic vision of the common good requires participation from all families, and all families in turn, should share in the fruits of what communities can accomplish together. However, Christians pursue the common good for all people with "kingdom eyes" as the Muldoons remind us. Catholics expand the notion of the common good in the here and now to our ultimate common good that is union with God in the kingdom. We might recall the image of the Peaceable Kingdom in the book of the prophet Isaiah:

“The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them” (11:6).

When the goods of creation and our common life are shared, even natural enemies can live in peace with one another. And there is another surprise: a little child will lead them. While the privileged and the strong surely have a role to play in bringing about the common good, it is the weak and vulnerable who may have the most to teach us about interdependence and God’s vision for the world.

### **Solidarity and the Option for the Poor**

From the start of his papacy, Pope Francis has been calling the church to greater solidarity with the poor, who are not objects of our charity but subjects or agents of the new evangelization. The experiences of poor families are the starting point for the church’s moral deliberations about how best to live the good news of God’s love for us in Jesus Christ. He has asked Christians to listen to what the poor have to teach us about suffering and about liberation. Pope Francis claims “God is not afraid of the outskirts” and neither should Christians be. The outskirts are where Christians meet one another and the poor among us as friends.

Building on the commitment to the intrinsic dignity of all people and working for the common good, the tradition of Catholic social teaching has elaborated this “preferential option for the poor” and a call to solidarity. These are not abstract theological or philosophical concepts, but are rather the fruit of reflection on experience, particularly the experiences of the poor in Latin America who have suffered under colonization, cruel dictatorships and oligarchies (ruled by a few wealthy families), and exploitation by foreign corporations in search of natural resources and cheap labor. The ministers and theologians who worked with the poor in Latin America, listening and looking around, saw Christ crucified again and again in some of the poorest people in the hemisphere. They lived in grinding poverty, toiled at backbreaking work, and

lacked any meaningful participation in the governance of their countries. Resistance to these conditions was frequently met with state-sponsored or paramilitary violence.

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“The word *solidarity* is a little worn and at times poorly understood, but it refers to something more than a few sporadic acts of generosity. It presumes the creation of a new mind-set that thinks in terms of community and the priority of the life of all over the appropriation of goods by a few.”

—Pope Francis<sup>5</sup>

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There were instances in which the institutional church failed to speak up on behalf of the poor and helped to maintain the status quo. This did not stop people from gathering to break open the word of the Scriptures and to break bread together in the Eucharist. The God they encountered there—in the story of the Exodus from Egypt, in the words of the prophets calling for justice, in the proclamation of the kingdom by Jesus who came to bring liberty to captives and good news for the poor—was a God of justice and liberation, a God who hears the cries of the poor and acts decisively on their behalf.

If God in Jesus Christ has made an “option for the poor,” that is to say to stand with the poor in their suffering, then this is what Christians are called to do as well. The measure of any personal or family decision, pastoral plan, public policy, or economic theory is how it will impact the lives of the poor who have the most urgent claim on our resources of time, treasure, and talent. Choices that primarily benefit those who have power or privilege at the expense of the poor are immoral. They fail to meet the demands of the gospel. This solidarity means that Christians will listen and look around and will work *with* the poor, who are often already giving from what little they have by way of material goods to support one another and are already engaged in the struggle for justice.

This may also mean that Christians will forever find themselves on the outskirts challenging the status quo—it is not often a popular place to be.

Physician Paul Farmer, who has dedicated his life's work to the destitute poor of Haiti (and through the organization Partners in Health to the destitute poor all over the world), speaks about “the O for the P,” his shorthand for the option for the poor and what it will cost those who make this option with their lives: “How about if I say, I have fought for *my whole life* a long defeat?” He continues, “You know, people from our background . . . we're used to being on a victory team, and actually what we're really trying to do in [Partners in Health] is make common cause with the *losers*. Those are two very different things. We *want* to be on the winning team, but at the *risk* of turning our back on the losers, no, it's not worth it. So you fight the long defeat.”<sup>6</sup>

Farmer's insight into solidarity and the option for the poor is important. When Christians strive to work for justice, to make a real change in the world, they may experience victories along the way, but they will also have to face loss and will need courage so as not to give up hope. Solidarity needs to be steadfast in a world that tempts us to success that often comes at a price paid by the poor. Saint Pope John Paul II wrote of solidarity: “This then is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.”<sup>7</sup>

Watching the evening news is enough to move people to “vague compassion” and “shallow distress” until we change the channel to something more comforting. Concern for others living in poverty or amidst violence and persecution remains superficial because making an option for the poor asks so much of us.

Because making an option for the poor is so challenging, solidarity may be best thought of as a virtue. Virtues are habits that we acquire through practice. They don't come naturally but by trying again and again, even if we fail on our first attempt. It is a lot like exercise: we try a new regimen slowly at first so that we

test, but don't injure, our muscles. We might start out with a walk around the neighborhood and once we do that with relative ease, we work our way up to a jog. We go farther and farther as our stamina increases. Our time improves. We might join a club or run with a friend. We try the 3K, the 5K, and the 10K, and some enter a marathon. Friends, family, even strangers, cheer us on at the finish. If we really want to transform a sedentary life and run a marathon, we don't start by running 26.2 miles! That is a road to injury and the chance that we might return to the couch and the remote control. Solidarity, the "long defeat" described by Farmer, is not a sprint, but rather a marathon and it requires training and a community of support if we are to stay in the race.

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"This is why I want a Church that is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us. Not only do they share the *sensus fidei*, but in their difficulties they know the suffering of Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them. The new evangelization is an invitation to acknowledge the saving power at work in their lives and to put them at the center of the Church's pilgrim way."

—Pope Francis<sup>8</sup>

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Charity, as people say, begins at home, but doesn't end there—likewise, solidarity. With young children, a family might remember the poor at prayer before meals or contribute to Catholic Relief Services' Operation Rice Bowl during Lent. Families might gather up outgrown clothes for donation to the Saint Vincent de Paul Society or take a tag from the parish "giving tree" during Advent. They learn about people in need, and they learn that they have a role to play in helping them.

With these habits established as children grow, new possibilities can be tried. Families can work in the food pantry or the soup

kitchen, deepening their relationship with the poor. They might go together to a Habitat for Humanity site or help tutor children in a nearby shelter. They might lobby for homeless families at their state house or stand with members of Pax Christi to oppose capital punishment or violent conflict. Families that give from what they have might begin to make more sacrifices, to change how they view success, to live without things they had previously taken for granted. They can recognize the ways in which many of the advantages they enjoy are linked to the suffering of others (like affordable food and clothing, or technological devices that require much fought-over natural resources).

Slowly, but surely, the option for the poor and solidarity can become second nature. Members of a family that first learned to care for one another, learn then to care for others, especially the poor. They learn that *their* participation in the struggle for justice is necessary and they are ready to run the marathon, together. Christians learn habits of solidarity in the family so that they may befriend families who are suffering. Families learn to see, judge, and act. This engagement with the world around them provides families with insight about the dignity of all people, about what is needed to build the common good, and how they can stand in solidarity with the poor and vulnerable. Families are sustained in these habits by the church, a “family of families.”

Families are schools of solidarity—or training grounds. It is in the family that we learn to flex our muscles. Parents try to set an agenda for the growth of the family, seeking out experiences that will be challenging but not overwhelming. As in any other kind of school we begin with our ABC’s, not with *War and Peace*. Members of a family first learn that they are loved, then to care about one another, neighbors, strangers, and even enemies, especially those who are poor and suffering. Members of a family also learn that the family itself is a kind of common good—where everyone is loved and respected, where everyone must pitch in, and where everyone can enjoy the home they have “built” together.