

# Service and Justice: A Conversion of Heart

When doing social justice education, we commonly begin with the distinction between charity, or works of mercy, and justice, which seeks to address underlying causes of injustice. Though this division is valid, experientially I see five distinct steps on the continuum between charity and justice. These five stages seem to form a natural growth pattern for individuals and school communities.

## The First Three Stages: On the Way to Justice

The first stage focuses on collections: preparing Christmas food baskets, giving monetary contributions to faraway countries, gathering mittens or underwear for a local free store. Collections bring real relief of immediate needs, but they generally do not provide direct contact between students and recipients.

The second stage is direct service work: raking leaves, sandbagging during a flood, providing child care at a shelter, serving a meal at a soup kitchen. These activities push comfort zones and often put participants in direct contact with people whose worlds are very different from their own. It is hoped that the activities break open some stereotypes and widen the circle of compassion. Occasionally, without structured reflection, they reinforce students' preconceived notions about the poor. For teachers and campus ministers, these can be grounding experiences that renew our awareness and commitment.

The third stage engages students in action that empowers them by providing new skills or experiences. Students may volunteer to tutor in ESL, mathematics, or GED skills. They may coach a team of developmentally challenged adults, or be mentors for children who lack positive role models in their lives. This work enables people to take greater charge of and pride in their lives, and has a natural impetus toward breaking down the distinctions between "giver" and "receiver." Action toward empowerment invites a greater level of commitment and engagement on the part of students and teachers, and it usually requires a higher level of skill. Yet it does not risk controversy, and it does not tackle the structures that do so much to create and sustain the inequities in our world.

Some people criticize these first three stages as being somehow second-class engagement, but I believe they are both valid and necessary. They are valid because urgent needs cannot wait for structural change to happen. They are necessary because they provide the pathway of conversion most of us follow in becoming committed to social justice. Our culture, our media, and our human nature do not seem to bring us naturally to the awareness and passion required for social-justice work. The experiences in these first three stages provide the spark that starts most of us on the journey.

## Challenges of Stages One, Two, and Three

Each stage carries its own questions, and I will mention some of these before moving on to the last two stages. The hidden challenge of collections, which can creep up on us and catch us unaware, is compassion fatigue. As faculty and staff members volunteer and develop loyalties to organizations, the number of causes grows. As the school comes to be seen as a resource by social service agencies, it receives more and more requests for help. With collections, there is usually minimal opportunity to form a bond with recipients; contact is generally limited to information distributed via posters and announcements.

Direct service, the second stage, can be geared toward short- or long-term commitments, and in large- or small-group activities. Analyzing the differences between these approaches can help us to plan



our programs more effectively. The shotgun approach—one-time service opportunities in a variety of settings—is a good method for introducing students to service. It allows them to dip a toe in the water and see how it feels. Sustained programs, involving consistent sessions over an extended period, increase students' familiarity with and commitment to a community or agency. Developing an ongoing relationship with selected populations or agencies improves the likelihood of personal investment. Both approaches have merit, and ideally a school would be able to sponsor both types of opportunities.

The challenge in the third-stage programs, which empower people, is that these efforts require more skill and commitment and therefore tend to be time consuming. The ESL programs I have worked with recently have had very limited resources and materials, and I have only basic training in teaching English as a second language. My students and I have struggled to provide services for which we are not well trained and with materials that are inadequate. An effective program thus requires a significant investment of time and money; the corollary is that there is then less time and money available to work on other programs. To be effective we need to set priorities and often invest our own personal time and resources—a perfect opportunity to model the commitment we ask of our students.

## Stage Four: Bridging the Gap

Service has much more power to change hearts if we move into the fourth stage, providing structured reflection for our students. Reflection also begins to build the bridge toward a justice perspective. Journal writing is a common expectation in service work, and it is the reflection method I used when I first began teaching our Christian service class. This basic level of reflection focuses primarily on students' emotional responses to their experiences.

Developing a justice perspective requires another, much more complex kind of reflection. Many of us have heard the story of the picnicking family on a riverbank who hears a drowning man call for help. They rescue the man and return to their meal. Soon two women are heard calling desperately from the river, and again family members plunge in for the rescue. The women are followed by ever more people floating down the river crying for help. Eventually someone asks the obvious question, "Where are all these people coming from?" and heads upstream to investigate. After a service experience, it's not difficult to invite students to ask, "Where are all these people coming from?" Leading them through the underbrush to discover the answer is another story altogether.

As religion teachers or campus ministers, few of us have the necessary training in economics and political science to be able to do a sophisticated analysis of issues such as the World Bank or national welfare reform. Some of us have had the humbling experience of being shown up by an exceptionally well informed student who argues the other side with a wealth of opposing statistics and facts. We are equipped to lay out the basics: There are people who are disenfranchised and economically poor through no fault of their own. It is the responsibility of those of us with the resources and skills necessary to succeed in our society to share what we have with others and to alter the structures that perpetuate inequity.

By providing students with experiences that stretch their capacity for compassion, we help them move emotionally toward this basic awareness. A 1998 statement from the U.S. Catholic Bishops, "Sharing Catholic Social Teaching," distills the essence of Catholic social teaching into seven principles to use as a foundation in examining injustice:

1. the sanctity of life and the inherent dignity of the human person
2. the call to family, community, and participation
3. a balance of rights and responsibilities



4. the option for the poor and vulnerable
5. the dignity of work and the rights of workers
6. solidarity
7. care for God's creation

We can teach these principles much as we have taught the Beatitudes in the past: by requiring students to memorize them and by explaining the meaning of each concept. But applying the principles to the problem of homelessness today is like applying a memorized mathematical formula to a word problem: it's tough.

We also must remember that providing an analysis is not the same as teaching students to analyze. Students need to learn media literacy and how to navigate the Internet for reliable information. Strategies for teaching critical thinking and a disciplined approach to complex questions are essential to effective teaching. In our rapidly changing world, students desperately need to acquire tools for intelligently assessing new situations as they arise.

Working with other departments also helps to convey the message that social justice is not just a "religion teacher thing." A partnership with social studies departments can be invaluable because those teachers are trained in economics, history, government, and geography.

## Stage Five: Action for Structural Change

The fifth and final stage is taking action to bring about structural change. Analysis without action will not help the poor, and our students can only learn to act through practice. "Sharing Catholic Social Teaching" says, "There is need for Catholic educational and catechetical programs not only to continue offering direct service experiences but also to offer opportunities to work for change in the policies and structures that cause injustice" (p. 12).

First, it is essential that we research an issue thoroughly before we embark on any action with students. Student research is an important part of the learning process, but it must be overseen and evaluated by an adult. We not only need to research the facts about an issue but also to study and pray over the possible repercussions of any action we may take. There are reports, for example, that some of the early efforts to end child labor in developing countries resulted in children being put out of factories and forced into prostitution or begging to support their families. If we lead students in an effort that later turns out to be counterproductive, we may reinforce rather than reverse their sense of powerlessness in the face of injustice.

Thorough research, and student-based research, is also an important component of the objectivity we need to bring when presenting issues to students. Students quickly tell us they will respond only to an approach that does not pre-empt their right to make judgments for themselves. We need to make sure that we invite students to action without communicating judgment about students who choose not to join us.

We need to have our information readily available for any parents who may be concerned, or for students who voice disagreement with our action. Quotations from papal and episcopal documents that support our work can be very helpful.

Action needs to be nonpartisan and remain focused on issues. Although many strategies we take may be supported more by one political party than another, it is both bad policy and bad strategy to identify ourselves too closely with one political group.



## God's Call

The complexity of social-justice education makes sex education look easy. The conversion of heart that underlies service and justice education is a lifelong process for us as well as our students and their parents. The needs are enormous, the forces against us sophisticated, and we are all too often made aware of our personal limitations.

This is one of the many moments when we are reminded that we must rely on God's strength and not our own. We are not engaged simply in political activism—we are answering God's call for our life. God invites each of us according to our gifts and our circumstances, and we can answer this call in many ways. The good news is we aren't in this alone. God and committed colleagues over the next hill and across the country are on our side.

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