

Catholic Social Work Models for the Future:  
From Social Worker to Catholic Social Servant?

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As one surveys the field of social work at the start of the new century, one sees a profession that has, over the past hundred years, grown greatly in numbers of practitioners and in its influence on society. As the welfare state model has increased its dominance and the number of casualties of modernity have proliferated, social work has become a central part of our nation's social service delivery system. A measure of good has certainly been achieved by social workers in a variety of efforts to heal wounds and build toward a more peaceful and just world. And due to the enormous variety of tasks that social workers perform (from individual counseling to finding housing for the poor, assisting new immigrants in finding work, helping the elderly locate appropriate services, as well as advocacy for causes from homosexual rights to the availability of abortion services to a national single-payer health care system), it is almost impossible to assess the entire profession.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, despite its devout belief in the rightness of its currently held views and approaches, my humble perception after thirty years of observation is that social work as it now exists is in need of serious reform if it is ever to become capable of genuinely helping those in need.

The Year of Jubilee has ended. However, the spiritual power unleashed in that wonderful year pulses forward into the new millennium. As we begin to perceive small signs of the budding forth of the Great Springtime foreseen by Pope John Paul II (admittedly amidst a great clutter of doctrinal and moral confusion, ethnic hatreds, war, poverty, terrorism, etc.), we Catholics in the field of social work/social service ask the question: How can social workers, with their praiseworthy zeal and concern for the poor, be more thoroughly evangelized to allow

God's love and truth to be the soul of their effort? In other words, how can social workers, through Catholic social teaching and the infusion of God's love, become something much more -- Catholic social servants?

A social worker and a Catholic social servant, as I envision it, would be similar in important ways. (And there can certainly be worthy social servants among evangelicals, Buddhists, Muslims and those of other beliefs. All can work together on a great number of projects and programs of service.) For its own part, the Catholic faith at its best has been able to achieve the kind of "triangulation" which places it above political, ethnic and social categories. The Church tries to be free from allegiances which prevent it from giving freely to everyone who is in need. Social work has always been a fighter for the needs of the poor, the outcast and the suffering. But too often its efforts have been misguided. The profession deeply needs what Catholics and others can bring to it, including faith and reason.<sup>2</sup> Faith allows social work to see more clearly who God is, who man is and what life's purpose is. It helps social work to then see more clearly what helps and what in fact harms families and nations. Reason, including gaining a much more rigorous research component to help verify its claims and its effectiveness, enables social work to see more clearly from the scientific viewpoint. Faith and reason are described as the two wings that allow an eagle to soar toward the heavens and a soul to soar toward God. They can also be described as the two lenses of the binoculars, which allow one to focus clearly on an object. Without the help of the wings and the lenses, to this point social work has been too often off the mark in both its analysis of what is true, good and beautiful and in its application of remedies to make a problem better.

In Romans 12, St. Paul encourages all of us: "Be not conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."<sup>3</sup> In that passage lies a description of the two basic paths that all -- including professionals, professional associations and nations -- must choose between. A great many persons in our modern world have chosen to be more or less conformed to the worldview that tries to build a life and a world with man at the center and with God largely ignored or redefined into an altogether different sort of being. That is, they have chosen the worldview of the Enlightenment. Social work has grown increasingly close to the belief system of the Enlightenment. In very many ways, its members serve the agendas of the world culture built on that man-centered movement. Social work could well be characterized as the social service arm of the "church of the Enlightenment", aiming to bring about world peace and unity but operating from a set of first premises very different from what God has shown us in his revelation. As a result, serious and dangerous flaws in foundational ideas lead too often to the seeking of unhealthy outcomes in personal and societal situations. For example, to treat religion as an emotional disturbance or an obsessional neurosis does profound harm to suffering persons seeking healing. The integration of sound psychological theories and therapies with the Catholic view of the person, marriage and family life can be significantly more effective in promoting healing and peace. Catholic social servanthood would do social work the enormous benefit of providing it the vision, the option of another path (one which seems seldom articulated in its professional journals and schools) -- being transformed by the Gospel of Jesus, by the One who is Love and Truth, thereby raising the profession from an altogether too close adherence to the culture of death upward into the culture of life. And then, social work can truly make the kind of difference it hungers to make and which the suffering cry out for.

A social worker and a Catholic social servant, therefore, would be similar in significant ways. Yet they would be as dissimilar as Freud and Fulton Sheen or as Lyndon Johnson and Dorothy Day.<sup>4</sup> The social work profession is guided by a set of principles in its Code of Ethics<sup>5</sup> (among them confidentiality, self-determination, competence and professional development) which are essentially sound, but it is animated by some ideologies (among them, I observe deconstructionism, Marxism, radical feminism, radical individualism, post-colonial theory, Freudianism, New Age religiosity) which are not.<sup>6</sup> Social work is fundamentally dependent on secular assumptions, concepts and theories. At the same time, it would seem strongly closed to the influence of traditional faith and Catholic social teaching on its own idea base. In this regard, the profession is much like the other social science disciplines. Social work does helpfully emphasize the study of the person or group in the social environment, which brings a more complete perspective to analysis of problems and situations. However, it also seems to distinguish itself by its rancorous partisanship in promoting questionable political and social points of view.

How different are contemporary social work and this concept of Catholic social work or social servanthood? What constitutes the difference?

Pope Leo XIII<sup>7</sup> observed that "Many today go so far as to condemn the Church as the ancient pagans once did, for such outstanding charity, and would substitute in lieu thereof a system of benevolence established by the laws of the State. But no human devices can ever be found to supplant Christian charity, which gives itself entirely for the benefit of others. This virtue belongs to the Church alone, for unless it is derived from the most Sacred Heart of Jesus, it is in no wise a virtue..."

In short, social workers have as some of their primary roles serving as agents of the modern welfare state in providing the charity and counsel that were not so long ago provided by, among others, Catholic entities with a strongly spiritual basis (some of which still exist, although the degree of adherence to Catholic social and moral teaching can only be evaluated on an individual basis). One thinks of the works of such Catholic stalwarts as Bl. Frederick Ozanam, St. John Bosco, St. Vincent de Paul, Catherine Doherty. One remembers Catholic Charities in the first fifty years after its founding. One thinks of countless hosts of nameless helpers of the poor from many religious traditions. The evolution which has occurred over the last hundred years or so can perhaps be better understood by examining the title of a book published in 1981, *From Character Building to Social Treatment: The History of the Use of Groups in Social Work*.<sup>8</sup>

Gradually, the Catholic and Christian heart of social service programs has been lost or much diminished, and a secular mindset unconcerned with and increasingly hostile to God's centrality in social service has replaced it. This rather breathtaking change is almost complete in many social agencies but less so in others. This change goes hand-in-hand with the larger societal and civilization-wide trend away from adherence to God and his paths and toward a mindset and systems centered on human wisdom, eventually following a logic of growing intolerance of traditional morality and faith-based charitable practice.<sup>9</sup>

The fundamental analysis of the nature of much of modern social work, what it lacks and what it needs to become, is further clarified in these quotes from recent papal social encyclicals.

John Paul II<sup>10</sup> notes that "In recent years the range of [State] intervention has vastly expanded, to the point of creating a new type of State, the so-called 'Welfare State'. This has happened in some countries in order to respond better to many needs and demands, by

remedying forms of poverty and deprivation unworthy of the human person. However, excesses and abuses, especially in recent years, have provoked very harsh criticisms of the Welfare State, dubbed the 'Social Assistance State'. Malfunctions and defects in the Social Assistance State are the result of an inadequate understanding of the tasks proper to the State... By intervening directly and depriving society of its responsibility, the Social Assistance State leads to a loss of human energies and an inordinate increase of public agencies, which are dominated more by bureaucratic ways of thinking than by concern for serving their clients, and which are accompanied by an enormous increase in spending. In fact, it would appear that needs are best understood and satisfied by people who are closest to them and who act as neighbors to those in need."

There is a sense in which professionalism, much valued by social workers, is highly important. There is a certain amount of proven knowledge and wisdom which is needed by those who serve the poor and suffering. At the same time, one can see in the words of John Paul II an aspect to which society as a whole and social service persons as well must return: personalism.<sup>11</sup> The helper as neighbor, using human and Divine wisdom to be sure but a neighbor much more than a professional or bureaucrat.

Offering a clarification and correction to some persons engaged in peace and justice work, including those in social welfare (and to nation states as well), John Paul in his 1998 World Day of Peace Message<sup>12</sup> says, "Justice makes whole; it does not destroy; it leads to reconciliation, not to revenge. Upon examination, at its deepest level, it is rooted in love, which finds its most significant expression in mercy. Therefore, justice, if separated from merciful love, becomes cold and cutting."

John Paul II<sup>13</sup> goes on to say, "True mercy is, so to speak, the most profound source of justice. If justice is in itself suitable for arbitration between people concerning the reciprocal distribution of objective goods in an equitable manner, love and only love (including that kindly love we call mercy) is capable of restoring man to himself. Mercy that is truly Christian is also, in a certain sense, the most perfect incarnation of equality between people..."

To conclude this point, the Catechism of the Catholic Church states,<sup>14</sup> "Charity is the greatest social commandment. It respects others and their rights. It requires the practice of justice, and it alone makes us capable of it. Charity inspires a life of self-giving..."

So, then, Divine mercy and all that accompanies it would seem to be one prime element that modern social work so sorely lacks, though not completely, and struggles to discover without being able to do so except in a flawed and incomplete way. Although this mercy and full self-giving are realized in the Catholic faith and in other Christian bodies (e.g., the Salvation Army), yet devout members of the Jewish faith, Buddhists and other religionists and persons of good will can certainly bring something of Divine charity to the service of those in need - and teach Christians important lessons on such virtues as simplicity and hospitality.

In the same way, God's love is inseparable from his truth, his prescribed way of living, set down for us in norms of morality (e.g., the Ten Commandments). Sometimes it seems as if the largest point of difference between the modern social work viewpoint and that of the Catholic social servant lies in the area of morality, sexual and other, including the issue of the right to life. While the social work profession does work with some success to care for the needy (e.g., immigrants, the homeless, the hungry), as a body, social work has rejected many of the fundamentals of Christian sexual morality and norms related to the sanctity of life. Sadly, this

rejection would seem to have contributed more to the widespread brokenness of American families than to healing.

In other words, the profession's (overall) rejection of Divine truth (as set down in Revelation and the Natural law) goes hand in hand with its rejection of the Catholic/Protestant/Jewish full understanding and application of God's mercy. The social worker is in a sense very much in the same situation as is each human person since the Fall: created good but now crippled by the effects of sin, deeply needing Love to be able to move from flawed (and sometimes even destructive) efforts at mercy to a much more effective, genuine redemptive ministry. This ministry would be animated by God's truth about the human person and society and inspired by the Father's own heart of love.<sup>15</sup>

"The supreme good and the moral good meet in truth: the truth of God, creator and redeemer, and the truth of man, created and redeemed by Him. Only upon this truth is it possible to construct a renewed society [or, as well, a renewed profession]."<sup>16</sup>

Regarding a confusion common to modern man and also to modern social work (the embrace of moral relativism): "If there is no transcendent truth, in obedience to which man achieves his full identity, then there is no sure principle for guaranteeing just relations between people."<sup>17</sup> Thus it is that social work must finally come to understand the way home, so to speak: "awareness of the common fatherhood of God, of the brotherhood of all in Christ - 'children of the Son' - and of the presence and life-giving action of the Holy Spirit will bring to our vision of the world a new criterion for interpreting it. Beyond human and natural bonds, already so close and strong, there is discerned in the light of faith, a new model of unity, which is a reflection of the intimate life of God, one God in three persons, is what we Christians mean by the word 'communion'."<sup>18</sup>

Solidarity!<sup>19</sup> Communion! The Father's own heart of love! Along with an emphasis on more rigorous research efforts, this is what Catholic social servants can offer to their more secular counterparts in the field of social work. They reach out with a smile, with respect, with patience and a holy confidence. Love and only love is capable of restoring man to himself. Mercy that is truly Christian is also the most perfect incarnation of equality between people. Modern social work, with all its heart for the poor, its practice wisdom and its talented pool of practitioners, has no option but to return to the source (God's truth and love); on its own it is incapable of bearing rich and lasting fruit. It is hoped that individual social workers will come to embrace this Catholic (and catholic) vision as they see for themselves the theoretical and practical superiority of it, in their own lives and then in their work with the needy. Truly a person cannot give what he does not possess within himself.

In sum, Catholic social teaching in its analysis points out the inadequacies of modern social work in the areas of truth and charity, acknowledges and praises the areas where the profession has been effective and shows how, with God's truth in morality and his model of solidarity and communion, the modern social worker may become a Catholic social servant. As this higher kind of servant, he will be much more effectively equipped to bring help to the suffering and truer peace to families. As well, the potential for causing harm to individuals, groups and societies through the application of faulty analyses and methods will be greatly diminished. There is a sense in which this proposed renewal of social work can only take root and flourish in a renewed society - one more prayerful, patient, simple, humble, chaste, stable, one with stronger family and community bonds. Even so, the effort must begin and continue even in a society as darkened, confused and fearful as our own. It might be possible to guess that

even in today's social assistance state model, of every 100 currently employed social workers, perhaps 25-50 are really helpful to the common good. Activists of all kinds would not be needed, nor would professional agitators; the nation is so awash in "therapists" (many of dubious helpfulness or positive harmfulness to morals and sound healing) that we resemble a "therapist-ridden race" - in the same way that James Joyce complained of Ireland being a "priest-ridden race." We could safely do without a sizable majority of social work therapists but add a sizable component of Catholic priests skilled in spiritual direction and the "care of souls" seldom provided since 1960 or so; in addition, the vast bureaucracies operating in welfare departments and elsewhere could be trimmed back in numbers of social workers - others could perform that function. But as mentioned, in a society even halfway renewed by Catholic values, perhaps only ten of the one hundred social workers might be needed, with those ranging from Catholic counselors working in tandem with priest spiritual directors, to a variety of people serving the poor and needy in a variety of roles - but with much less of the destructive radicalism and the alienating striving for professional status and power and money. In addition, quite a few persons looking to counselors for help with difficult family and personal problems would be more appropriately served, at least first, by a trip to the Confessional and then to the Eucharist, receiving both thereafter on a regular basis. If a problem persists requiring more skilled attention, then a Catholic social servant/counselor could be consulted, with a priestly spiritual direction also provided. In addition, societal renewal would also allow for the return of greater amounts of more traditional means of helping and supporting, provided by extended family, by wise neighbors, by helpful fellow-parishioners. The hoped-for growth of orthodox religious orders would be another source of help for those in need. In short, the field that was largely abandoned to Freud and his successors and to cadres of increasingly secular and anti-Catholic

activists would gradually be re-taken as Catholic social teaching (enriched with the best of psychological insights) and societal renewal help produce a reinvigorated "Catholic psychology" and Catholic servanthood.

As to the issue of training and retraining future Catholic social servants, there has to be an assessment of how possible it is to form such servants in the presently established schools of social work. To be able to successfully do so would seem a highly challenging task. I have perceived, in my own experience and that of some others, that schools of social work are presently operating almost as centers of indoctrination into secularist, Enlightenment values and ideas. Some valuable psychological wisdom is passed along, though with a highly dangerous amount of anti-Christian ideas as well. Unsuspecting students may go into a setting where sexual activity outside of marriage (both homosexual and heterosexual) is encouraged, where radical feminist views are pressed upon one, where defending abortion rights is seen as an essential lesson to be learned, where Catholic doctrine and morals are fairly often held in contempt, so that the student wonders if he will receive his degree if he dares to say what he truly believes. Students seeking a setting where the integration of faith and psychology is both allowed and, what is more, facilitated, may decide to enter separate training schools. Much more study must be done to assess how best to form Catholic social servants, gradually inject Catholic wisdom into the marketplace of ideas in the field and ultimately make progress toward renewing in Christ the social service delivery system.

It all depends on the path taken, as the previous quote from St. Paul illustrates. Will it be conformity to the man-centered worldview of modernity, or will it be the broad, deep renewal that merciful love alone can accomplish? Very different outcomes proceed from these two distinct paths. The departure from the road of a sound Christian model for social service, taken

over the course of the past century, can indeed be reversed in time, and those with the call to serve the needy as a social worker can become Catholic social servants-doers of the works of mercy. Givers of mercy as paid personnel or as non-paid, with families or as sisters, brothers (or priests to provide the accompanying spiritual direction and leadership) -- but always as neighbors first, as friends first. Social workers, in their understandable desire to be respected as much as psychologists and psychiatrists, were never meant to be analysts or professionals who charge great fees and maintain their distance from the one seeking help. Some boundaries must be observed. However, let us concentrate not only on delivering services but on transforming lives.

This transformation of lives -- one at a time -- may seem an overwhelming task to those who know the seemingly insignificant minority who exist now as Catholic social servants. But one then thinks of the Holy Father's challenge to bring a "new evangelization" to places like Europe, which seems almost spiritually comatose, of his call to establish a "civilization of love" in a world which has perhaps seldom been farther from such love and peace, of his announcement of a "great springtime for Christianity" in the days ahead of us, when we seem in the grip of a dark winter of hate and pride which shows as yet no sign of passing away.

What does Pope Paul know that emboldens him to utter such words, which the average person may not even consider worthy of his attention? This writer is not sure. But the pope seems to have penetrated very deeply to the heart of the Gospel and to the Lover who shows himself there. He can speak with a clarity and serene confidence that moves us who listen to lift up our hearts and cast our nets into the deep water once more. Discouragement gives way to anticipation. The Catholic social servant can take his place behind the pope, ready to serve in the place assigned to him together with others of like mind, confident<sup>1</sup> that great good can come from the renewed profession we are working toward.

- <sup>1</sup> Roland Meinert, et al., *Social Work: Seeking Relevancy in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: The Haworth Press, 2000), 4
- <sup>2</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*, September 14, 1998.
- <sup>3</sup> Romans 12: 2, The New American Bible (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1970).
- <sup>4</sup> Dorothy Day, *On Pilgrimage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 100.
- <sup>5</sup> National Association of Social Workers, *Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers* (Washington: NASW Press, 1993).
- <sup>6</sup> Roland Meinert, et al., *Social Work: Seeking Relevancy in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: The Haworth Press, 2000), especially pages 1-23.
- <sup>7</sup> Pope Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum*, May 15, 1891.
- <sup>8</sup> Kenneth E. Reid, *From Character Building to Social Treatment: The History of the Use of Groups in Social Work* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981).
- <sup>9</sup> Thomas E. Woods, Jr., "Assimilation and Resistance: Catholic Intellectuals and the Progressive Era", *The Catholic Social Science Review*, Vol. V, 2000, 297-312, especially 302-303.
- <sup>10</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*, May 1, 1991, 48.
- <sup>11</sup> Dorothy Day, *On Pilgrimage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 100.
- <sup>12</sup> Pope John Paul II, World Day of Peace Message", January 1, 1998, 1.
- <sup>13</sup> Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Dives in Misericordia*, Nov. 13, 1980.
- <sup>14</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994, United States Catholic Conference, Inc. Libreria Editrice Vaticana, p. 462, 1889 (see also 1880-1888).
- <sup>15</sup> Thomas E. Woods, Jr., "Assimilation and Resistance: Catholic Intellectuals and the Progressive Era", *The Catholic Social Science Review*, Vol. V, 2000, 297-312, especially 304-306.

<sup>16</sup> Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor*, August 6, 1993, 99.

<sup>17</sup> Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor*, August 6, 1993, 99.

<sup>18</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, December 30, 1987, 40.

<sup>19</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*, May 1, 1991, 10.

Yves R. Simon, *Philosophy of Democratic Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951) 319.

Pope Paul VI, Encyclical Letter, *Populorum Progressio*, March 26, 1967.

Pope Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Octogesima Adveniens*, May 14, 1971.

Pope Pius XI, Encyclical Letter, *Quadragesimo Anno*, May 15, 1931.

Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae*, March 25, 1995.