

# Work as Key to the Social Question

The Great Social and Economic Transformations and the Subjective Dimension of Work



## From Charity to Justice: The Emergence of a Catholic Social Gospel

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by Jay P. Dolan

Professor of History

University of Notre Dame (Indiana, USA)

This paper examines the rise of a social gospel within the American Catholic community. This development took place in the late nineteenth century when a new industrial economy emerged. With the rise of the factory and the emergence of the industrial age work acquired a moral dimension as workers sought to gain justice in the work place. They organized into unions so that they could gain better wages, better working conditions, and shorter work days. As a result of such activity the labor movement became a major catalyst for a crusade for justice in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Prior to this charity was thought to be a sufficient response to the needs of both workers and the poor. In examining the significance of the transition from charity to justice, or what can be called the rise of a Catholic social gospel, it is important to understand the context in which this development took place.

*The most important fact to remember is that in the United States Catholics were the nation's poor in the mid-nineteenth century.* The only group worse off economically and socially were African Americans. In the early nineteenth century there were relatively few Catholics in the United States. They were a small denomination concentrated in Maryland and Kentucky, both southern slave states. Massive immigration after 1820 changed the situation dramatically. Driven from Europe by poverty and famine, thousands of Irish and German Catholics emigrated to the United States. Within a few decades Catholicism had not only become the largest religious denomination in the country, but it also became a church of immigrants.

Sometimes we tend to romanticize the immigrant experience by recounting numerous rags to riches tales. Most of these are not true. If they are true, it was generally the second or third generation that achieved respectability, but scarcely riches. The immigrant generation of Catholics, the first wave of Irish and German immigrants that arrived in the 1840s and 50s, made up the majority of the nation's poor. A look back at nineteenth century

New York City will illustrate this point very clearly.

At mid century New York was one of the world's most densely populated cities. It also had one of the world's highest death rates. One third of all infants died within a year and death claimed the lives of at least one half of all children under five. Bellevue Hospital, the city's public hospital, was where the poor went to die. Three quarters of its patients in 1855 were Irish-born and they were described as "the worst fed and worst nurtured class in the community." The Irish made up the vast majority of unskilled workers in New York who tried to support themselves and their families on a few dollars a week if indeed they could find work. As a result of poor economic conditions many of the unskilled Irish slipped into a state of poverty. Hundreds of them entered the city's poor house- in fact two out of three persons in the poor house in 1858 were Irish. Such pervasive poverty led John Hughes, the archbishop of New York, to describe New York's Irish immigrants as the "poorest and most wretched population that can be found in the world- the scattered debris of the Irish nation. New York was not unique. In numerous cities across the country the situation was much the same - Irish and German Catholics comprised the urban poor. [1]

One group that was particularly vulnerable were immigrant women. Among the Irish a high male desertion rate and a high accident and death rate among male workers contributed to large numbers of Irish women heading their own households. Once again a poor economy took its toll as Irish women struggled to scratch out an existence for themselves and their families. Many were forced to enter the poor house where they comprised the majority of the female population. They also constituted the majority of the female population in the city's hospital and prison. Irish immigrant women, both married and single, were clearly a population at risk.

A second point to remember about the mid-nineteenth century was that the United States was a Protestant country. By that I mean that Protestantism shaped the culture of the nation. *A key component of this culture was a very negative view of Roman Catholics.* Such an attitude was a holdover from the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. In the nineteenth century it took such forms as anti-nun literature, the sacking of convents and churches, and no popery campaigns that eventually led to the formation of a political party, the Know Nothings, whose entire ethos was rooted in hatred of Catholics and foreigners. The success of the Know Nothing party led Abraham Lincoln to write that "our progress in degeneracy appears to me to be pretty rapid. As a nation, we began by declaring that all men are created equal except Negroes. When the Know Nothings get control, it will read all men are created equal except Negroes and foreigners and Catholics." [2]

Such an atmosphere meant that immigrant Catholics were not well received in such public institutions as schools, hospitals, asylums, and orphanages. Because of their religion they suffered humiliation as well as discrimination. Priests often were not allowed to visit them in some public hospitals; in public institutions they often had to attend compulsory Protestant worship services and were encouraged to abandon their Catholicism and embrace a particular version of Protestantism.

Caring for the poor and the sick was a long standing Christian and Jewish tradition.

But it took on new meaning for Catholics in the United States during the course of the nineteenth century. Because of the pervasiveness of poverty in the Catholic community and the Protestant atmosphere of most public institutions, Catholics undertook a crusade of charity that would prove to be truly remarkable. What took place in New York City illustrates the extent of this crusade.

Various orders of women religious provided the leadership role in this citywide campaign to relieve the distress of the poor. It is critical to understand that these women had a vocation, a spiritual calling, to dedicate their lives to aiding the poor. This was their mission in life and the key to their success as nursing sisters. For the Sisters of Charity, their rule reminded them that the end for which God called them was “to honor Jesus Christ by rendering him every temporal and spiritual service in their power, in the persons of the poor, either sick, prisoners, insane or those who through shame would conceal their needs .” [3] Women of prayer, their religious life motivated and shaped their social work with the poor and sick. This was the spirit that launched the charity crusade in New York and countless cities across the nation.

Since women were especially vulnerable in these days, they became the first focus of attention. The Sisters of Mercy came to the United States from Ireland in the 1840s. Settling in New York they quickly became known for their work with the poor. They visited the sick and the dying poor in their cellars and garrets; they visited male and female prisoners in the Tombs twice a week and provided spiritual counseling as well as a little tea or coffee. Their convent was open to the poor so that the sisters could dispense clothes, shoes, and food to those who came for aid. But their major enterprise was the House of Mercy. Established in 1848, this house provided lodging and job training for poor single women. It was a half-way house where destitute women could stay and learn a marketable skill in order to gain economic independence. The enterprise was a remarkable success and within two years the sisters had placed 2500 women in either sewing or domestic service positions. [4] In other cities where they settled, the Sisters of Mercy established similar institutions to care for poor single women so that they could survive in urban America by gaining financial independence.

By the 1860s and 70s Catholics shifted their focus to the care of poor, orphaned, and delinquent children. During the 1870s the country experienced a prolonged economic depression. In New York City 90,000 people lost their homes; unemployment rose to more than twenty percent with few people able to obtain full time work. As a result of such widespread poverty, many families could not provide for their children. In New York in the 1870s it was estimated that 150 children were abandoned every month. These children ended up roaming the streets as beggars or delinquents.

Believing that illiterate and delinquent children were evidence of the moral failings of their parents, middle class reformers sought to rescue these children from their parents and place them in Midwestern Protestant homes. Fearing the loss of thousands of children the Catholic community responded by founding child-care institutions.

Once again the key actors in this enterprise were the nuns. By 1890 several different

orders of women religious were caring for 13,000 children in eleven child care institutions. [5] These were the children of the poor whose parents could not afford to take care of them. In addition, these institutions received funds from the city government. Such financial support was the key that enabled the sisters to undertake such a vast crusade to save the children of the poor. ***The significant point in this development*** is that the sisters wanted to save the children from being placed out in Protestant homes. The placing out of children effectively broke up families by taking children away from their parents. The Catholic response sought to guarantee the parental rights of the poor by providing a means by which poor families could stay together - namely the temporary placement of their children in institutions established by the sisters. By defending the right of the poor to keep their children rather than having them placed out in foster homes quite distant from the city, the sisters were shaping the nation's welfare system that was developing at this time. In addition, with the help of Catholic politicians the sisters gained public financial support for their work with children. This idea that poor mothers not only had the right to keep their children, but also a right to public aid was clearly the result of decades of working-class activism and Catholic sisters were at the center of that movement.

Another component of the charity crusade was the founding of hospitals. Caring for the sick has a long tradition dating back to the earliest days of Christianity. In the nineteenth century the suffering associated with sickness and disease took on a religious significance within the Catholic culture. Such suffering was to be accepted as part of God's plan for the individual. Death also was part of this religious drama. How a person coped with suffering and prepared for death would determine the individual's eternal destiny. In this context the work of the sister nurse was to care for the soul as well as the body. In the middle of the nineteenth century hospitals were not where people went to be cured. The poor went there to die. To be at the bedside of a sick or dying person was an opportunity for the nursing sister to become a mediator between the individual and God. This opportunity to save souls was a primary reason why so many young women became nursing sisters. To care for the poor and sick was clearly a strong motivation, but to act as a priest in the arena of death and prepare a person for the journey to eternity also had a powerful appeal.

Since Catholics viewed hospitals as religious institutions where care for the soul was just as important as care of the body, church leaders would not accept the reality of Catholics dying in public hospitals without the benefit of proper spiritual care. Given the influx of so many refugees from the Irish famine who were in need of medical care, the need for hospitals for the Catholic sick became paramount. The Sisters of Charity founded St. Vincent's Hospital in New York in 1849. Known for their work with the sick during the cholera epidemics of 1832 and 1849, the Sisters soon became famous for their hospital work. In the next fifty years nursing sisters from several different religious orders established thirteen more hospitals in New York. What took place in New York was repeated in many different cities so that by 1910 there were 400 Catholic hospitals in the United States. This represented ten percent of all hospitals. Religious orders of women founded and staffed the vast majority of these hospitals. [6]

What happened in New York was not unique. Wherever Catholics settled they established institutions to care for the children of poor families, orphans, single destitute

women, as well as the sick and the dying. In this manner a Catholic tradition of charity was being established that was truly remarkable. As one writer put it, the Catholic church was “unexcelled in charities.” [7] In this manner Catholics were helping to build a good society distinguished by a concern for the poor and the disadvantaged.

## **Crusade for Justice**

Times were changing, however, and many people believed that charity was not enough. The times demanded justice. What caused this change in thinking was the rise of an industrial economy. This was the age of the machine. With this came the development of the modern factory and the rise of a permanent working class.

As the new economy expanded, the distribution of the nation’s wealth became more and more unequal. Poverty and the unequal distribution of wealth were not something new, but the industrial age intensified them. As a result by 1890 the richest twelve percent of the nation owned eighty-six percent of the nation’s wealth. Another index of such inequality was family income- of the 12.5 million families in the U.S. in 1890 11 million earned about \$380 a year-below the \$600 figure that many believed was the minimum required to maintain a reasonable level of comfort. [8] Such glaring inequality led social reformers to complain continually about the unequal distribution of wealth. This became their mantra. They did not accept the thinking of those who blamed poverty and the unequal distribution of wealth on personal moral failings. Rather than focus on the individual, reformers wanted to concentrate on the social and economic conditions that led to the unequal distribution of wealth, widespread poverty, and unemployment.

*This is a key point-* the crusade for charity centered on the individual and his or her needs. Those who were advocating social justice focused on the society in which the individual lived. They wanted to change the social and economic conditions that caused the unequal distribution of wealth and drove so many people into a life of poverty.

The catalyst for the justice crusade was the labor movement which was getting underway at this time. Workers wanted better working conditions, better wages and shorter hours. Charity was no longer enough. They were demanding justice. Not only were large numbers of these workers Irish Catholics, but the leaders of the labor movement were also Irish. They gained the support of a number of bishops and priests who defended the right of workers to organize. Then, in 1891 Pope Leo XIII published an encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*. This document launched the Catholic social movement and the rise of a social gospel that demanded justice as well as charity.

The encyclical sought to analyze the conditions of labor in an industrial economy and offer a program of reform based on the concept of social justice. The Pope condemned socialism and spoke out against the excesses of capitalism and individualism. In addition, he upheld the right of workers to organize and the need for the intervention of the state to protect the rights of people. In this manner the Pope gave a moral dimension to work. Work

was not an instrument of capitalism but it is for the human person, central to the person's full development. As John Paul II would later put it, "man's life ... derives its specific dignity" from work. [9] *Rerum Novarum* marked a major turning point for Catholics by emphasizing the idea that Catholics must have a social conscience.

Another push for justice came from the American progressive reform movement. Based in the middle class and centered in the cities, it focused on such issues as poverty and better housing as well as political and educational reform. Driving much of this reform was a shift of focus from individual relief work to the more basic issue of the causes underlying poverty and the social distress associated with it. Labeled preventive charity, its rationale was that poverty has "its origins in economic, social or industrial conditions which are inherently wrong but against which the poor are powerless to protect themselves." [10]

During this era of reform there emerged a person who more effectively than anyone else blended together the spirit of progressive reform and Catholic social thought. This was John Ryan. A priest from Minnesota who later taught at Catholic University, Ryan believed that moral principles should shape economic policies. Known for his advocacy of minimum-wage legislation, he helped to write such laws in several states. Writing and lecturing in the early twentieth century, Ryan blended Catholic social thought, best articulated in *Rerum Novarum*, with the American progressive reform movement. He argued for a living wage, the importance of labor unions, and the need of government to intervene and effect change in the social order. One of Ryan's major achievements was to put together a document for the American bishops that articulated a Catholic program of social reconstruction for the nation.

Written by Ryan and published in 1919 the *Bishops Program of Social Reconstruction* sought to adapt the principles of charity and justice to the social and industrial conditions and needs of the times. Critical of the American economic system, most especially the unequal distribution of wealth, it advocated minimum wage legislation, a minimum working age, public housing, laws enforcing the right of labor to organize, and insurance against old age, unemployment and sickness. This document was acclaimed as "the most forward looking social document ever to have come from an official Catholic agency in the United States." George Shuster, a leading Catholic intellectual, wrote that "it is almost impossible for people who didn't live at that time to realize the emancipating impact of that document. This was as if the Church had learned to talk to modern America." [11]

By 1919 Catholics had come a long way since the Sisters of Mercy opened their House of Mercy in New York in 1849. The concept of justice was now central to the Catholic idea of reform. In addition to a deeply engrained tradition of personal religion, a new dimension of public religion or what can be called a social gospel had become part of the Catholic tradition. The emergence of this social gospel was a significant moment in the history of American Catholicism. By endorsing a social gospel that sought to reform society as well as care for individuals in need, Catholics were breaking out of their self-imposed intellectual and cultural ghetto. A personal, private religion was no longer adequate. Charity was no longer sufficient. The times demanded a more public religion, one rooted in social

justice, whose goal was the building of a more decent society.

Two developments took place in the post World War I era that shaped the way Catholics would think about a social gospel. The first was the publication of the encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno* in 1931. A key idea in this document was the introduction of the concept of social justice. Unlike legal justice which focuses on individuals, social justice focuses on public institutions that hinder the common good. Such a social concept of justice demands that society's institutions must work on behalf of the common good. The term "social justice" now assumed a central role in the growth of Catholic social teaching. Eventually "action of behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world," or what can be described as social justice, became defined as a constitutive dimension of the church's teaching.

The second development during this period that would shape the future understanding of a Catholic social gospel was the rediscovery of the biblical theology of the church as the mystical body. The mystical body theology underscored the importance of the responsibility of members of the church to each other. The liturgical movement, that was just beginning in the United States at this time, reinforced the importance of this new theology of church. Virgil Michel, one of the founders of the American liturgical movement, was a strong believer in the social gospel. For Michel the theology of the mystical body was the key to the regeneration of society. As he put it, "no person has really entered into the heart of the liturgical spirit if he has not been seized also with a veritable passion for the reestablishment of social justice." [12] By linking the prayer life of Catholics with the reform of society he provided an important social dimension to Catholic piety that for so long had been grounded in an individualist ethos. The liturgical movement also emphasized the religious quality of work by linking it with the spiritual development of the worker.

By the 1930s two streams of social thought had emerged within the American Catholic community. One stream of thought I would describe as charity. This tradition focuses on the individual who is in need of food, a home, or medical care. It is rooted in the gospel mandate to love your neighbor.

Matthew's gospel gives us a vivid picture of the last judgment where the responsibility to love our neighbor is spelled out very vividly. All the nations of the world are gathered together and are divided into those who are blessed and those who are cursed. The blessed are those who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked and visited the sick and imprisoned. The cursed are those who neglected these works of mercy and love.

The other stream of thought is the concern for justice. This focuses on the society in which the individual lives, seeking to make it a more just society, a society which advocates mutual concern and responsibility. This too is rooted in the gospel. As our religion teaches us- blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice for they shall be filled. In modern times, the twentieth century in particular, papal teaching has reinforced the biblical mandate on behalf of justice.

Most often these two traditions, two streams of thought, do not come together. They go their separate ways. In some times and places charity becomes more prominent, more powerful a force, than justice. At other times and places justice becomes a mighty river changing all it touches. But they must be joined together. We need charity, but it is not enough. We must have justice as well.

The Catholic bishops of the world addressed this issue at their meeting in Rome in 1971. They said: “according to the Christian message man’s relationship to his neighbor is bound up with his relationship to God; his response to the love of God ... is shown to be effective in his love and service of men. Christian love of neighbor and justice cannot be separated. For love implies an absolute demand for justice, namely a recognition of the dignity and rights of one’s neighbor. Justice attains its inner fullness only in love.” [13] In other words, these two streams of thought must come together and form a powerful river of justice and love. As long as they remain separate the full force of the Christian tradition is never fully achieved.

Despite the persistent call for justice as well as charity, American Catholics remain more committed to charity than justice. The tradition of charity remains very much alive. In the year 2000 there were 593 Catholic hospitals in the United States. They cared for over 77 million patients. In addition, there were 700 long term facilities, 149 orphanages, 1152 day care centers and 2271 social service centers caring for thousands of people in need of assistance. [14] Clearly the crusade of charity that began in the nineteenth century has blossomed in the twenty first century. One survey concluded that only three percent of the Catholics polled disagreed with the statement that “helping needy people is an important part of my religious beliefs.” But when asked to respond to the statement that “Catholics have a duty to try to close the gap between the rich and the poor,” forty-two percent disagreed. [15] A concern for social justice still remains an orphan in much of the Catholic community. Why is this so?

I would argue that the traditional emphasis on devotional Catholicism, which stresses personal salvation through the practice of devotional rituals, is a major reason for the absence of a social gospel commitment among many Catholics. This emphasis on the individual, rooted in the Council of Trent’s key doctrine that the salvation of souls is the supreme law, pushes aside a more social perspective in the religious life of Catholics. Not only does this go against the theology of the mystical body and the spirit of the liturgical movement, but it also stands in opposition to the vision of the church articulated at the Second Vatican Council, most especially in its Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. Moreover, such an individualist ethos undermines any effort to shape a gospel that is capable of morally evaluating the institutions of society that shape its economic life. Linked to such an evangelical evaluation is the concept of work. For if those institutions in which people work do not enable workers to realize their identity as free human beings, then such institutions are flawed. Social justice would demand that they be transformed so that society and its workers may be better served. An individualist ethos or spirituality does not encourage the moral evaluation of such public institutions or corporations. Without a morally and socially critical perspective human work can easily become a demoralizing obstacle to the worker’s personal fulfillment as a human being. A Catholic’s understanding

of work and its relation to society is rooted in the religious perspective of the individual. Failing to realize this will weaken any discussion of how work can support the development of the human person.

American Catholics have come a long way since the early nineteenth century. Unexcelled in their charities, they have also acquired a social gospel during the course of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, a large majority of Catholics still remain unconvinced of the need for a social gospel capable of challenging the injustices of modern society. But as Pope John Paul II reminds us, “the church considers it her task always to call attention to the dignity and rights of those who work, to condemn situations in which that dignity and those rights are violated, and to help to guide” the new developments in technology, economics and politics “so as to ensure authentic progress by man and society.” [16] (ibid p. 38 part one in intro.) What the Pope is saying is that charity is not enough. The gospel demands social justice.

## Notes

[1] Maureen Fitzgerald, “Irish Catholic Nuns and the Development of New York City’s Welfare System, 1840-1900,” (University of Wisconsin, unpublished PhD dissertation, 1992), P. 314; the Hughes quote is in Jay P. Dolan, *The Immigrant Church: New York’s Irish and Germans Catholics, 1815-1865* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), p.33.

[2] Quoted in Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 266.

[3] Quoted in Bernadette McCauley, “Who Shall Take Care of Our Sick? Roman Catholic Sisterhoods and Their Hospitals, New York City 1850-1930,” (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Columbia University, 1992), p. 61.

[4] Fitzgerald, pp. 338-39.

[5] Maureen Fitzgerald, “The Perils of Passion and Poverty: Women Religious and the Care of Single Women in New York City, 1845-1890,” *U.S. Catholic Historian*, Vol. 10, No. 1, p. 56.

[6] See McCauley, abstract, n.p., and Christopher Kaufmann, *Ministry and Meaning: A Religious History of Catholic Health Care in the United States* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), p. 130.

[7] Quoted in Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), p.328.

[8] Charles B. Spahr, *An Essay on the Distribution of Wealth in the United States* (New

York: Thomas Y. Crowell and Co., 1896), pp. 126-29.

[9] *On Human Work: A Resource Book for the Study of Pope John Paul II's Third Encyclical* (Washington D.C., 1982), p. 37.

[10] Quoted in Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience*, p. 341.

[11] Quoted in Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience*, p. 344; Shuster quote is from Robert Brooke Clements, "The Commonweal, 1924-38 The Williams-Shuster Years," (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 1972), p. 3.

[12] Quoted in Anne Y. Koester, "Just Live the Liturgy," *Assembly* Vol. 27 No. 1 (January 2001), p. 3.

[13] "Justice in the World, Synod of Bishops 1971," in David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon (eds.) *Renewing the Earth* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977), p.398.

[14] *The Official Catholic Directory* (New Providence, N.J.: P.J. Kenedy and Sons, 2001) p. 2163.

[15] James D. Davidson et al, *The Search for Common Ground* (Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor, 1997), p.48.

[16] *On Human Work*, p. 38.