



The Social Dimension of Evangelization: Jesus' Praxis of Inclusive Love to All, Social Doctrine of the Church and SSPS History of Social Inclusion

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Social Inclusion: CAN THE BIBLE INSPIRE?

A random reading of some of the books of the Old Testament seems to indicate social exclusion rather than inclusion. Israel is the chosen race, all other nations and peoples are seen in terms of their relation to Israel. It is a recurring theme running like a thread, weaving the different pieces of Israel's understanding of God, self, and others. This idea is succinctly captured in the concept of “election” - a concept that is central to Israel's understanding of themselves as the chosen people of God and all others in and through the instrumentality of the chosen people of God. A few references will elucidate this claim:

“You shall be my own possession dearer to me than all other people although all the earth is mine” (Ex 19: 5). A similar idea can be seen repeated: “for you are a people sacred to the Lord your God for he has chosen you from all the nations of the earth” (Dt 7:6). A few chapters later we hear similar sentiments echoed: “when the Most High assigned the nations their heritage... the Lord's own portion was Israel” (32: 8-9). In Ezekiel 36:23 we read: “When in their sight I will prove my holiness to you”. The mighty arm of God acts on behalf of his people and in the sight of all other peoples (Is 52: 10). The Psalms - Israel's prayer- are replete with invocations to a God whose special care of them has set them apart as “we” and “them” with consequent rights and duties. In summary, Israel knows that it is Yahweh's chosen people and sees other nations in relation to and in view of Israel.

However, as we delve deeper into the prophetic tradition of the OT, it becomes abundantly clear that being chosen by God does not render the people of Israel blessed introverts. Openness to others remains the hallmark of the people of God who makes his glory shine among the nations. In sharp contrast to the “elect” feeling, we have the concept of “universalism” which bears close resemblance to the concept of communion. According to this notion, all nations, not only Israel, will walk in the light of God's glory; all are embraced by the universal love of God. Let us look at a few texts:

“I will give in my house and within my walls a name and a monument better than that of sons and daughters” (Is 56:5); “It is too little for you to be my servant, says the Lord” (Is 49: 6); “Are you not like the Ethiopians to me O people of Israel? Did I not bring the people of Israel from the land of Egypt as I did the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?” (Am 9:7).

According to this schema, the Exodus experience is like any other migration experience; any land is Promised Land and pagan kings are just as good as the kings of Israel. One of the characteristic traits of God is that of one who reaches out in communion to those who are poor and excluded (Ex 3:7). The books of Exodus and the prophets are full of allusions to the compassion and care of God towards those who suffer hunger and injustice (Ex 22:22; Lev 19:34). In the final analysis, what distinguishes the people of God is not that they are a chosen race, but that they are the recipients of God's infinite mercy and care. What abides is the universality of God's love in the face of the universality of human misery.

JESUS' PRAXIS OF INCLUSIVE LOVE

Coming to the New Testament, it must be admitted that Jesus exercised his ministry with Jews and on behalf of Israel. However, he tended to sacrifice a rigid hold on identity for the sake of higher priorities like inclusion, compassion and communion. A glance at the salient features of Jesus' mission of communion with the poor and the marginalized will further illustrate this fact.

Jesus' intimate relationship with God: Calling God, *Abba, Father*, is the example par excellence of deep communion with God. The prayer "Our Father" and numerous other instances of his relating with the Father depict a God who is intimately close to his people.

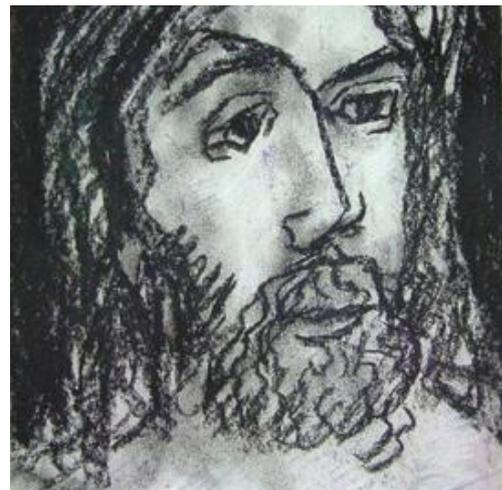
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Jesus' compassion to the peripheral people:

By constantly associating himself with sinners and tax collectors, through his table fellowship and through the entire gamut of his ministry, Jesus pushes the boundaries of the Kingdom to include those at the periphery (Mt 9:10, 11:19; Mk 2: 15-17; Lk7: 31-35). Jesus chose Galilee- a land despised and scorned by the establishment

- to be the locus of his ministry. Jesus' free and open attitude to women, entering into theological discussions with them (Jn 4: 24), including them in his community and accepting their gestures of love and affection were actions taboo for a religious leader (Lk 8: 2-3). Nevertheless they were bold steps in the direction of widening the circle of communion.

Jesus' interpretation of the law: His intentional breaking of the Sabbath sends a powerful message about his order of priorities which puts the human person above all else. Sabbath is subordinate to human need for food and human longing for wholeness and health. The man with the withered hand (Mk 3:1-6)



and the bent-over woman (Lk 13: 1-17) are healed on Sabbath. He placed tithing laws subordinate to weightier matters like justice, mercy and compassion. Jesus' Kingdom ministry dissolves alienation, breaks down the wall of hostility and exclusion and sets the paradigm for a universal and unifying mission.

Jesus' ministry of healing and exorcisms:

These miracles help define his praxis of inclusion. People who are excluded from the mainstream society through physical ailments or psychological afflictions are brought in to experience a God who is the ultimate answer to their suffering and tears. In casting out devils, (Lk 11: 20, Mt 12:28) Jesus proclaims himself to be the power of goodness that conquers Satan and his diabolic powers, and inaugurates a new era of the inclusive and universal love of God.

Social Doctrine of the Church

AND PROMOTION OF INTEGRAL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Following Christ's example and teaching, the Church has always found in him the inspiration to reach out to others in justice and love. The Vatican Council II affirmed that "the joys and hopes, the sorrows and the anguishes of the men of our time, especially of the poor and of those who suffer, are both joy and hope, sorrow and anguish of the disciples of Christ" (GS 1).

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The Social Doctrine of the Church (SDC) is rooted in the same History of Salvation. When we live out our social commitment because of our faith, we know that our social practice belongs inseparably to the History of the People of God. It has its roots in the Word of God, in Jesus and his attention to the marginalized and excluded, in the preaching of the Kingdom and in the experience and witness of the first Christian communities, which continues later in the teachings of the first fathers of the Church.

Initially, the Church offered its service of charity and social assistance without questioning much the causes that produce the inequalities to which it tried to respond.

Then, the accumulated experience and doctrine has cemented the moral teaching that began to be organized systematically from the end of the XIX century with the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* written by Pope Leo XIII (1891), known under the name

of "Social Teaching" or "Social Doctrine of the Church", a set of principles for reflection, judgment criteria and guidelines for action.

In the year 2004, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace compiled the rich and precious treasure of the Catholic Social Doctrine systematically and published it in a Compendium of SDC.

Summarizing, the SDC is:

- *A body of teaching developed within the Church* as historical response to economic and social problems, which objectively extends to the entire panorama of temporal realities that shapes and conditions the life of the human person in society and its relationship with Creation.
- *An essential part of evangelization.* The social message of the Gospel should not be considered as a theory but, above all, a foundation and stimulus for action (CA 57) that will be credible only by the testimony (James 2:14-18- CA 57- SRS 41).

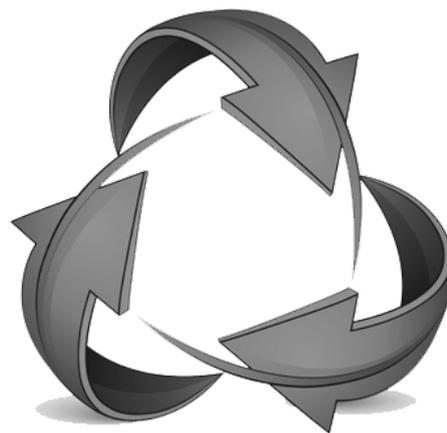
TABLE OF THE PAPAL AND CONCILIAR DOCUMENTS ON SDC

Year	Document	Author	Main Topic
1891	Rerum Novarum (RN)	Leo XIII	The labor question, worker rights
1931	Quadragesimo Anno (QA)	Pius XI	New social order: gap between rich and poor
1961	Mater et Magistra (MM)	John XXIII	Criticizes the growing gap between rich and poor nations.
1963	Pacem in Terris (PT)	John XXIII	Call to build peace on ethical principles.
1965	Vat. II -Gaudium et Spes (GS)		Dialogue with the world, reformulates the relationship between the Church and the political community.
1967	Populorum Progressio (PP)	Paul VI	Authentic and integral development
1971	Adveniens Octogesima (AO)	Paul VI	Postindustrial society: critical reflection of the underlying ideologies in the socio-economic models force.
	Justice in the World	Synod of Bishops	On injustices in the world
1981	Laborem exercens (LE)	JP II	Central key social issue: human labor.
1987	Sollicitudo Rei Socialis (SRS)	JP II	Updates and deepens the theme of development
1991	Centesimus anno (CA)	JP II	From the ineffectiveness of capitalism and Marxism, committed to a society based on participation, democracy and free labor.
2009	Caritas in veritate (CV)	Benedict XVI	Justice must be applied in all aspects of economic life
2015	Laudato Sii (LSi)	Francis	Comprehensive Ecology, human beings are connected together and with all creation.

Along with the papal documents, we find also numerous documents and initiatives of the Episcopal Conferences, as well as of theologians from different part of the world who help us to get a deeper understanding of the social concerns.

This is a complex matter as it is related to the constant changes in society, to ethical principles and the need constantly to discern God's action within our human history. The SDC proposes principles aimed at creating 'right' social, economic and political relationships and the construction of social structures and institutions based on justice and respect for human dignity. The key principles are:

- Primacy of the human person
- Principle of solidarity
- Principle of subsidiarity
- Right / duty to democratic participation
- The common good, without neglecting environmental responsibility
- Primacy of work over the benefits of capital
- Universal destination of goods
- Defense of life
- Preferential option for the poor
- Fight for justice
- Exercise of freedom and liberation from the structures of sin
- Peace, fruit of justice



The Church responds to social issues by applying an inductive method known as the Pastoral Cycle: **SEE, JUDGE** and **ACT**

See: perceiving reality with sensitivity, intelligence, to learn and understand the problems, situations of injustice, the causes, the factors and mechanisms that produce them. To analyze what we see, we need the help of human and social sciences.

Judge: our faith in the Triune God gives us the light to read and interpret the reality to discern God's plan in the concrete life of individuals, peoples and creation. We need to listen to the word of God, reflect on scripture and the SDC, particularly through the eyes of the poor and marginalized. It is important to realize that the whole process – not merely the reflection – is a theological act.

Act: to put our faith into action, to make concrete our choices in line with God's Kingdom values. It is about praxis.



AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

We cannot look for rationale or justification in our tradition and history to support our communion with the marginalized and excluded, because care and closeness to the poor belong to the inner structure and character of being a Christian.

It is the *sine qua non* of discipleship. The invitation to widen the circle of communion comes directly from the gospel invitation to follow Jesus. Therefore, in this section we are not looking back at our past for reasons to defend our communion with the poor and the excluded; instead, we are looking at the abundant and encouraging examples in our history and tradition which show that the present chapter directions do not stand isolated but are extensions of the Congregation's founding values and purposes. Our history is replete with the on-going process of widening the circle to embrace those at the margins and frontiers. We need only to read the general chapter documents to trace the congregational trajectory of inclusion and openness that guided our decisions.

Having said that, it may seem presumptuous to look in Fr. Arnold or in our Mothers for an elaborate body of social teachings or a clear cut stance on social inclusion. We will not come across great and fiery speeches from the mouth of the founding generation on social justice or communion with the marginalized; what we do encounter are deeds, decisions, the charity services of the Steyl community that relentlessly widened its circle beyond the confines of Steyl to embrace the concerns and needs of the poor, especially in the missions.

Notwithstanding industrialization and the consequent economic boom, Europe had a lot of poor at the time of Arnold. The Mission Seminary in Steyl was a place of refuge for the poor and the needy where their physical as well as psychological needs were attended to with respect. The generous and dignified distribution of food and clothing to the needy was an act of love dear to the heart of the Founder. The Steyl Mission House became a regular supplier of provisions for the needy around it, especially in winter when the need was greater. It is important to note that the poor who came knocking at the door were not only tolerated, but the poor in the vicinity were sought after and a list of them compiled. His close association with the Vincentians and inviting his Vincentian friend Medits to be the novice master in Steyl, are eloquent testimonies to the fact that Arnold wanted the young candidates to priesthood (and religious life) to be formed in deep compassion and closeness to the poor and the marginalized.

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WIDENING THE CIRCLE OF COMMUNION

Women's vocation, by nature being non-clerical, had placed them in a more advantageous position to explore ways of reaching out to persons who live in poverty and exclusion. Women primarily saw their vocation as religious rather than professional and it is this character of their work and service that placed them right in the midst of people where life's realities were unfolding. If the charity of the Church shone brighter than its teaching it is thanks mainly to the women religious and their extensive humanitarian and social services through formal and non-formal structures. Problems of poverty, hunger and violence were gendered

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issues that needed to be addressed mainly by women because they had access to the strata of society which was largely inaccessible to men. Care of the sick which fell almost exclusively to the domain of women, homes for children, the elderly and women with disabilities

were the primary locus of their mission and ministry.

Helena Stollenwerk came from a family of mixed generations and mixed relationships and not a few physical handicaps, endowing her early on with the gift of deep compassion especially towards the sick. Similarly Hendrina Stenmanns found a way to reach out to the hidden sick and the needy villagers of her locality. Our Co-foundresses, who spent well-nigh five to six years in the mission seminary kitchen as maids before being accepted as postulants, have had a first-hand experience of what it means to be at the margins.

Early on, collaboration in the retreat ministry in Steyl brought the Sisters in direct contact with people and their needs. Preparation for mission work and early mission departures to Argentina, Togo, Papua New Guinea, United States, and Brazil had all but one aim: to make known the love of God to all people, especially those who live in poverty - be it material deprivation

or spiritual poverty. It invariably brought our pioneering missionaries to education and health - two conventional areas of apostolates and their offshoots: informal education, adult literacy programs, health and hygiene projects particularly for women and children, ministry among the black population, working for racial equality, children's rights, orphanages, leprosy centers, freedom struggles and self-empowerment programs, to mention a few. Successive mission initiatives followed basically the pattern set by the first five missions. The First SSpS Constitutions makes it abundantly clear: "Holy love of God does not consist in pious feelings but in motives and deeds" (First SSpS Holy Rule, 1891).

The two World Wars (WW I, 1914-18 and WW II, 1939-45) were like the crucibles where SSpS national and international loyalties were tested and tried. Forgetting their national enmities back home, in the missions the SSpS worked together to push the boundaries of narrow patriotism by standing united against the atrocities of war. To have Sisters from "enemy" countries living together under the same roof and having to live with Sisters who lost family members to war, constantly challenged them to look beyond

their immediate and known circle to the deeper values of unity and solidarity in community. Contact with the grim realities of suffering, sickness and ignorance during the War shaped the Sisters and their attitude to embrace all peoples with openness, courage and compassion. SSpS presence and services during the Wars not only helped to improve the physical scenario of suffering and diseases outside, but also broke open inner mental blocks of pride and prejudice to unite as one family. It is estimated that during the First World War alone around one hundred and fifty SSpS were exclusively dedicated to care of war victims. An even greater number gave their dedicated services during the Second World War. It meant disruption of normal and regular set patterns of liturgy,

relaxing the rules on cloister to accommodate people and families and initiating people-oriented apostolates that embraced the human and social aspects of life.

Widening the circle is an ongoing process that involves hearts and minds and hard work. As a Congregation we are fortunate to have structures and programs intrinsically built into our organization and planning that provide a naturally conducive atmosphere to extend solidarity and support. The international and intercultural character of the Congregation, the common programs, opportunities for cross cultural education and experiences, real and direct contact with the poor in the missions and the chapter directions set us on the right route to widen the circle of communion with the marginalized and excluded. Having helpful structures, of course, does not necessarily guarantee communion but sets us on a journey with others who follow the same goal.

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Points for Reflection and Action

1. Share the significant insights that you gained from this reflection material.
2. In my personal inner circle, whom do I include? Why? Whom do I exclude? Why?
3. What efforts am I willing to make in order to widen my circle in this year of communion with the marginalized and excluded?
4. Identify persons, groups or situations of social exclusion in your locality. What have you/ your community done about it?
5. Are my/our responses inspired by the SDC? Are we familiar with local theological reflections/contributions on Social Issues?