Social Mission and the US Catholic Church

WASHINGTON, D.C. — According to Charles E. Curran, Catholics today are called to serve, advocate for, and empower the poor and disadvantaged. This call is about more than just changing political and economic structures. Catholics should bear witness, serve as role models for living a good life, and work for a better and more just society. Social mission is a constitutive dimension of the faith—without a social mission, there is no Church. But how can Catholics understand this social mission? Marvin L. Mich, STD, director of social policy at the Catholic Family Center, suggests Curran’s new book, The Social Mission of the US Catholic Church, calling it “a ‘must read’ for Catholics who would venture into the fray of public policy debate.”

This book explains how institutions like Catholic Charities and movements like the Catholic Worker Movement are vital to the Church living out its mission, as are the priests, bishops, and cardinals. However, Curran insists that the primary role belongs to all the baptized members of the Church as they live out the social mission in their daily lives. All members of the Church must understand that the social mission is fundamental and a necessary part of being one of the faithful.

Curran devotes particular attention in the book to three issues that have reflected the Church’s strong sense of social mission since the Second Vatican Council: abortion, war and peace, and labor. Curran warns that when Church leaders put too much emphasis on the legal aspects of issues, like with abortion, it distorts the full understanding of Catholic morality. The tension between the moral call to all and the possibility of forgiveness for all sinners will not allow the Church to claim too great a certitude on issues of law and public policy. The Social Mission of the US Catholic Church, therefore, suggests that Church leaders tell the faithful to live out the social mission and fight for equality, justice, and the elimination of poverty; but they should not necessarily tell Catholics how exactly to do so.

Charles E. Curran, a Roman Catholic priest of the Diocese of Rochester, New York, is Elizabeth Scurlock University Professor of Human Values at Southern Methodist University. He was the first recipient of the John Courtney Murray Award for Theology and has served as president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, the Society of Christian Ethics, and the American Theological Society. He is the author of Loyal Dissent: Memoir of a Catholic Theologian, The Moral Theology of Pope John Paul II, and Catholic Moral Theology in the United States: A History, which won the 2008 American Publishers Award for Professional and Scholarly Excellence in Theology and Religion.

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