

Homily
Seminary Rectors' Gathering
January 30, 2013
Bishop Richard Pates

My brothers and sisters in Ministry,

Today's scriptures blend beautifully with the theme we have been reflecting upon of imparting the principles of social justice in the hearts and minds of our seminarians. The 1971 Synod of Bishops provides full justification for our efforts when it taught – "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel." (6) Justice is derivative of God's very Word.

Because Justice is central to the Christian message, we feel duty bound to integrally incorporate it into the formation and education of those pursuing priesthood as thoroughly and effectively as we can. We are determined to avoid the pitfalls described in today's Gospel of inadequately planting God's Word.

In seminary talk this means incorporating the understanding of social justice across the four pillars of seminary formation and education, - the human, the intellectual, the pastoral and the spiritual. The key, though, is integration of these pillars. Pursued separately they most likely would suffer the fate of the seeds in the Gospel. They would be taken away by Satan, or fall away in the face of challenge and tribulation, or become victim to worldly concerns and desires, and ultimately bear no fruit.

The first place where the seeds are sown that give birth to justice is awakening the capacity which is implanted in the human heart – compassion. The task of the seminary is to put the individual candidate in touch with this gift. Compassion literally means to

suffer with, to experience feelings of identity and solidarity with those unfairly treated – those being impeded from developing their human potential. Compassion is that trait which distinguishes the human from the remainder of the animal world. This particular formation responsibility seems best to reside at college and pre-theology levels of seminary programs.

The universal applicability of compassion which generates the response to injustice in its multiple expressions is written in the consciences of all and is accessible through reason. The Israelite God speaking in today's first reading proclaims, "I will put my laws in their hearts / and I will write them upon their minds."

The second seed to be planted is that which feeds the intellectual appetite. Modern Catholicism is richly blessed with a social justice tradition beginning with Pope Leo XIII and *Rerum Novarum* up to *Veritas in Caritate* of Pope Benedict XVI.

The richness and relevant applicability to human situations based on these and other Church teachings offer a blueprint on how justice can be achieved. In a world torn and fragmented by so many forces, the words of Paul VI resonate with hope, "Peace is not a dream as something utopian, it is possible."

Embracing Church social teaching not only excites the seminarians as to God's intentions for humanity, but offers concrete steps that provide direction for the resolution of conflicts which will inevitably be encountered personally and corporately. The seminaries as documented by the CARA study are to be commended for the significant progress that is being made in creatively developing curriculum that is inserted within the spectrum of course offerings.

The third seed which is planted is that of pastoral formation or field education. This phase foresees the future outcome of priestly ministry or the fruit of the seed described in Gospel denominations of thirty, sixty and a hundred fold.

Eventually to be exercised in priestly ministry, a legitimate question is how will this training and exposure enable the future priest to communicate the proper role of the laity in confronting injustice. Frequently cited is the failure of many nominal Catholic leaders whether they be in business, politics, professions or active citizens to give witness to Catholic faith. We ask then, how are the laity to be formed to embrace their vocation to be light and leaven in the world? How does the priest enable them to lead and serve in a way that exemplifies the social Gospel in action?

In this vein, I was deeply impressed by the courageous witness of a ranking U.N. official whom I encountered in a meeting of highly placed leaders during a pastoral visit to Côte d'Ivoire on behalf of the American bishops.

Originally from the African country of Benin, he was charged with the lead responsibility, in the name of the United Nations, for implementing the almost impossible job of building a durable peace in Côte d'Ivoire after three decades of debilitating civil war.

This individual, in pursuing his mandate, insisted on the implementation of governmental services and economic processes devoid of corruption. He established policies that upheld the dignity of each person, the universal availability of quality education as well as respect for political, religious and social diversity. He created structures designed to guarantee human rights. But for all this to happen, truth needed to be spoken. Only then could forgiveness and reconciliation follow.

Expressing great admiration, I complimented this extraordinary civil servant for his vision and his courageous leadership. He simply responded before a diverse audience, “Well, Bishop, I am Catholic. I fully believe in the New Man redeemed by Jesus Christ.”

Someone along the line, most likely a priest, catechist or teacher had sown this seed which enabled him to bring Gospel light to his important diplomatic and political mission. The efforts of his mentors have produced abundant fruit.

An exercise that might hold special benefit in the training of a seminarian for his anticipated role as catalyst in sowing the seeds of social justice is for seminarians from their earliest days to compose sample homilies. They would thereby become accustomed to connecting experiences which create vivid impressions with Gospel imperatives. This plan has an eye on their eventual call to be agents of formation and transformation of the people they will serve as shepherds.

The fourth seed and the capstone of the integrating process is the spiritual pillar. Should not the seminarian be encouraged to develop a spirituality of being one with the heart of Jesus as it reaches out in love to those who are victimized and suffer injustice and in maintaining full commitment to the Church’s fundamental option for the poor? Such would stir in the seminarian the love and vision to be a champion of social justice teachings.

Retreats, workshops and days of reflection stimulate imagination and serve to embody God’s vision which is more effective than depending solely on human motivation. Moreover, there is an endless roster of saints who serve as role models. Dorothy Day, Mother Theresa and John Paul II are among the contemporary examples.

Association and introduction to communities like Sant'Egidio, Catholic Relief Services, L'Arche, Communion and Liberation, and Caritas demonstrate the power of Christian Community implementing the Church's social justice teaching.

Intrinsic to the devotion of a seminarian is the role of Our Lady. In various manifestations she portrays God's love for all people – highlighting the reverence and respect to which they are entitled. By being introduced to Our Lady of LaVan, Our Lady of Guadalupe, Our Lady of Kibeho, Our Lady of Knock, Fatima, and Lourdes, the seminarian, through Mary, is made privy to God's boundless love. Identification with Mary produces resolve that the life and dignity of each person be protected and respected.

Seminarians are in a transitional phase which seeks to open them to a future ministry characterized by charity and hope. "Those sown on rich soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit thirty and sixty and a hundred fold."