

## *Walking* in the Footsteps of Jesus

The following text is excerpted from [\*In the Footsteps of Jesus: Resource Manual on Catholic Social Teaching\*](#):

There are a number of ways we can walk in the footsteps of Jesus today. We can help in a soup kitchen, visit someone in prison, or help resettle a refugee family. We can contact legislators, work for peace, or support a local community organization that empowers low-income people to address issues that impact them. These examples illustrate two distinct yet complementary ways to put Catholic social teaching into practice: charity and justice. These two types of responses have been called the two “feet” of Christian service. We need both feet—charity and justice—to walk in the footsteps of Jesus.

Catholic social teaching calls us to both charity and justice. Charity meets the immediate needs of persons and families; but charity alone does not change social structures that attack human dignity, oppress people, and contribute to poverty. Pursuing social justice helps us change oppressive social structures; but we cannot ignore the urgent needs of persons while we work for social change. Charity and justice are incomplete without each other; they are two sides of the same coin.

Charity calls forth a generous response from individuals; justice requires concerted communal action to transform institutional policies, societal laws, or unjust social situations. With our emphasis on individualism, we Americans tend to emphasize charity over justice. The challenge for Catholics is to appreciate the demands of both charity and justice.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana—USCCB, 2000, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) reinforces the important distinction between charity and justice. “The demands of justice must be satisfied first of all; that which is already due in justice is not to be offered as a gift of charity” (no. 2446).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* also speaks of both personal and social sin. The “sin of the world” can “also refer to the negative influence exerted on people by communal situations and social structures that are the fruit of men’s sins” (no. 408). “Sins give rise to social situations and institutions that are contrary to the divine goodness. ‘Structures of sin’ are the . . . effect of personal sins. They lead their victims to do evil in their turn. In an analogous sense, they constitute a ‘social sin’” (no. 1869).

The reality of “social sin,” which is imbedded in social structures, institutions, and laws, requires more of us than individual acts of charity; it requires works of justice. Abortion, racism, discrimination, sexism, genocide, ecological devastation, violence, pornography, and excessive economic inequality are all examples of social sin—structures of sin that also demand action for justice.

The following charts compare and contrast charity and justice.

# Charity and Justice

1. Use the top sections of this table to reflect on how charity and justice complete one another and how each is unique.
2. Next, look at the possible responses to abortion and homelessness. How do they differ?
3. Finally, write down some possible ways to work on the issue of hunger. In the first column, limit yourself to acts of charity; in the second column limit yourself to acts of justice.

	Charity	Justice
General Responses	Focuses on the needs of individuals, families and all creation. Looks at individual situations. Meets immediate need. Addresses painful individual symptoms of social problems. Relies on the generosity of donors.	Focuses on the rights of individuals, families and all creation. Analyzes social situations or social structures. Works for long-term social change. Addresses the underlying social causes of individual problems. Relies on just laws and fair social structures.
Responses to Abortion	Give women alternatives to abortion, including adoption. Provide prenatal care and medical services for poor women. Offer crisis pregnancy services, especially to unwed mothers.	Extend legal protection to unborn children. Reform health care systems to make medical care accessible to all. Adopt pro-family public policies that help families with children.
Responses to Homelessness	Shelter homeless persons. Find jobs for homeless persons. Provide emergency assistance to prevent evictions.	Reduce housing costs through tax credits or low-income housing. Increase wages of working poor to make housing affordable. Reform laws to protect tenants' rights and enforce building codes.
Possible Responses to Hunger		

Source: *Leader's Guide to Sharing Catholic Social Teaching*. Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000. This study sheet is designed for group or individual discussion and reflection and may be photocopied.

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# The Two Feet of Social Action

