

The Prophetic Ministry of the Deacon VI: *Faith-based Grassroots Organizing*



(Cesar Chavez, United Farm Workers)

Some years ago I was speaking to a parishioner about Catholic Social Teaching. He remarked to me, “If the Church figures out how to organize around this teaching it could be a very transformative agent of our society”. I told him that many people and groups in the Church have organized to make significant change in their communities. I remember taking a course with the late Msgr. Philip Murnion and the late Mr. Harry Fagan on how to work for justice and peace in a parish setting. Both men had the same advice, organize, organize, and organize some more! **1** I was told that without making efforts to organize Catholic Social teaching will probably remain our best kept secret.

I am of the mind that Catholic Social teaching is not as much of a secret as it once was some years ago. Thanks to the efforts of the U.S. Catholic Bishops, recent pontiffs, priests, deacons, religious and laity committed to the Catholic social vision of justice many people are aware of the basic principles of this vision. However, what many lack are the skills and opportunities to help realize the vision of our teaching. When people hear of or see the suffering of others and the great injustice all around them without something they can do they are left with their pain and anger. Some will numb themselves to the pain, not because they are apathetic but because they cannot bear the pain any longer while feeling powerless to make a difference! Others will find ways to do something about their concerns, but so many do not act because of their busy lives; they just cannot afford to take the time to find out what they can do! The deacon can be of immense help in directing members of the parish to the diocesan office that coordinates legislative lobbying efforts and the justice and peace activities of the diocese.

If deacons, priests and bishops are going to raise up the vision of Catholic Social Teaching to the faithful it is important that the faithful be guided, and educated with the skills, for effective parish social ministry. Many dioceses offer training for establishing a parish social ministry program. However, this training usually is taken by those parishioners already involved with justice and peace ministry. Often the result is a small *marginal community* that many parishioners have no real relationship with in the parish. Certainly, that would be preferable to no social ministry group. However, there is another form of parish social action that many deacons, priests and lay people have not had the opportunity to experience known as, *faith-based grassroots organizing*.

Grassroots organizing is usually characterized by a number of parishes soliciting the services of a professional faith-based organizer. The organizer then sets out to organize a number of parishes in a particular region or area. These may include Protestant and Catholic parishes, or it may be an interfaith group dedicated to working justice and peace in the local area. Members of the various churches and groups are sent for a week long training to learn about faith-based grassroots organizing. It may take up to one year to get the group to the point where it is ready to have its *issues assembly*. It is here that representatives of all the parishes and groups meet to decide the three issues they will work on for the year. After that is decided a *public action* is held with the hope that nearly one thousand people from the combined parishes and groups are in attendance to address their concerns to their local policy officials. Usually church groups work with professional organizing groups, such as, the Gamaliel Foundation out of Chicago, Faith Center for Community Development, Inc. in New York City, the Pacific Institute for Community Organization and many others.

Such organizations are about *empowerment*. At Pentecost the Church was empowered for the mission of the gospel in the world. In order for the mission to be accomplished the Church needed to have power to accomplish its mission. These groups seek power to effect change. People of faith often recoil from the use of the word and the acquisition of *power*. For some it is as if this was a dirty word, or an *unclean* thing. But there are different forms of power. There is the power of domination and oppression which people of faith reject. But there is also the power of kenotic love that transforms a situation from injustice to justice because of the sacrificial love some are willing to offer for effectuating the Gospel in the world. Power is about taking effective action so that policymakers say “yes”, when they may be desirous of saying “no” to a proposed policy change.

There are five basic types of power that most human beings are familiar with which consist of; nurturing power, shared power, exploitative power, manipulative power and competitive power. Nurturing power and shared power are considered positive forms of power because they are interested in empowering other to use the talents they have been blessed with for themselves and the good of others. Exploitative power and manipulative power are considered negative forms of power because they are interested in controlling others not in having others act of their own free will and conviction. Competitive power can be either positive or negative depending upon the reasons for such power. In some instances competition within specific rules of play can bring out the best in oneself and one’s opponent. In circumstances of ruthless competition the most vile of human traits can emerge such as, greed, avarice and violence of all kinds.

For Christians concerned with promoting the Gospel the absence of some kind of power would result in very little getting done and would not point to the present and future Reign of God. Hence, God gave the Church the power of the Holy Spirit to inspire, guide and correct the Church as it prosecutes its mission through history. It seems clear that Nurturing power and shared power reflect the concerns of the Jesus Christ in the New Testament. They promote the development of the gifts God has given to individuals for

mission and group cooperation and community building. Such is the foundation for effective *faith-based grassroots organizing*.



How many times have we seen that the greatest and most compelling moral arguments often fall on deaf ears until large groups of people insist on being heard? No elected official can afford to ignore large numbers of people advocating for justice! This is an appropriate use of power guided by Christ's non-violent love and insistence that justice is at the heart of Christian prophetic ministry, Matt. 5:7. Of course, one of the most challenging aspects of this ministry is the fact that sometimes it may require some level of confrontation. Confrontation should not be confused with conflict. Confrontation is about bringing the truth of the situation to all the parties that need to confront this truth in order to begin to change the unjust situation. Truth may not always be a pleasant thing but it certainly is a necessary thing. Sometimes one party may resist this truth because it may appear that that party may lose something. But as history demonstrates, we sow the wind and reap the whirlwind in such situations. Often enough those working for a more just world may need to use methods that confront the unjust situation. This can be very uncomfortable for many, but the price is too high to allow injustice to remain. It is not a matter of just being nice, we have to be courageous and sometimes confrontational to save lives! That is what we saw with the nonviolent methods of Ghandi, Dr. King, Lech Walesa, Archbishop Tutu, Cesar Chavez and others.2



The deacon can have a vital role in this process by helping his parish to join a *faith-based grassroots organization* and helping to summon forth talented lay people to assume their role in the social mission of the Church. Of course, the deacon is tasked with bringing the needs of the poor and vulnerable to the attention of the community, but what a bonus to have a deacon who knows how to guide others in how they can act in a

concrete, gospel-based fashion to correct injustice and build peace! This truly is a very important aspect of the prophetic ministry of the deacon. What could be more prophetic than talking the talk and walking the walk with the People of God to build a more just and peaceful world starting in one's own parish?

It is often said, "Think globally and act locally", indeed, that is the heart of this article. However, we are also called to think locally and act globally! That is, to pray and act on those concerns having global impact. One such item is the present quest among of the world religions for a *global ethic* to which all peoples and nations will be held accountable to for the building up of a more just and humane world. This will be the topic of our next and final article in this series.

Notes

1 Harry Fagan, *Empowerment: Skills for Parish Social Action*(New York, Mahwah), Paulist Press, 1979 and Fred Kammer, S.J., *Doing Faithjustice: An Introduction to Catholic Social Thought*, rev. ed., (New York/Mahwah, N.J.), Paulist Press, 2004.

2 Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall, *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York), Palgrave MacMillan Press, 2001.