DOING Faithjustice

AN INTRODUCTION TO CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT

FRED KAMMER, S.J.

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To Ignacio Ellacuría, Amando López, Juan Ramón Moreno, Ignacio Martín-Baró, Joaquín López y López, Segundo Montes, all of the Society of Jesus, and Júlia Elba Ramos and Celina Maricet Ramos

martyrs for ***Faithjustice*** *in El Salvador, 16 November 1989*

INTRODUCTION

I write this book for those who struggle to make this a better, safer world for all of us and for the generations to come. I write for those who yearn for justice and dream of peace and who are willing to take steps to transform those yearnings and dreams into reality. I write for those who feed the hungry, visit prisons and hospitals, counsel the afflicted, march on picket lines or on Washington, and do the nitty-gritty of mass mailings, telephone trees, legislative newsletters, alternative investments, and whatever else creates more responsive institutions in our world. I write this book especially for those who pursue peace and justice out of a deep sense of faith, and who want to better connect the everydayness of the struggle to those deep currents running within themselves, to the scriptures, and to the history of the believing Judaeo-Christian community.

Many are working to reach out to the poor in our neighborhoods or overseas, to change attitudes and actions, and to reshape the structures of our society. I think, for instance, of friends in legal services and Catholic Charities; of churchpeople across America struggling with emergency aid ministries, food pantries, or legislative networks; of those of various faiths collaborating to staff ecumenical shelters for the homeless or running large food kitchens; and of those in full-time service to the poor and needy as lay and religious professionals or volunteers.

This exhausting and frustrating work is often motivated by an innate sense of what is right and wrong in our communities, coupled with heroic good will, without benefit of the rich prophetic tradition which stretches back to the first pages of the Bible. This tradition is the rightful heritage of those working on the front lines of charity, justice and peace. It can give birth to deeper insight, courage and commitment.

I also write this book to help Catholics and others who are puzzled, shocked, and even angered by what appear to be the more aggressive and recurring voices of the American Catholic bishops and the pope regarding political, social and economic realities. Beginning with the first pastoral letter of Bishop John Carroll of Baltimore in 1792, however, five lengthy volumes of pastoral letters of the U.S. bishops have now been published. The topics over the past two hundred

years span education, social security, economics, refugees, gun control, Vietnam, farm labor, abortion, capital punishment and the world food crisis.[1] This book should help explain where this demonstrably activist episcopal stance originates and how these pastoral letters are an essential expression of our relationship to God and Jesus the Christ.

This year, 1991, marks the observance of one hundred years of what is called "modern Catholic social teaching." In that light, I write finally to share with students of all ages, and with others in the believing community, the Roman Catholic experience of faith intertwined with justice. I intend, not just to promote mutual understanding in a pluralistic society, but to contribute in some small way to the revival of a common language of public or civic virtue that might ground a new and much needed political vision for the 21st century.

My hope is that this book might help the readers better understand their own theology of service and advocacy, renew their commitment to the poor, flesh out their spirituality for the long haul, and incorporate them more fully into a "community of memory"[2] which can share a broad and deep theological and spiritual tradition of justice with our wider society. There are abundant good reasons for this, not the least of which is America's current search for its soul as commentators contrast our lack of common vision and inspiration with the enthusiastic dreams of newly-emerging democracies in eastern Europe and elsewhere.

In the closing pages of the 1985 best-seller **Habits of the Heart**, sociologist Robert Bellah and his coauthors contend that American individualism driven to its logical end leaves "we the people" as "a special interest group," as Ronald Reagan asserted, whose concern for the economy is the only thing holding us together as a nation. "We have reached a kind of end of the line," they argue, where the citizen is swallowed up in "economic man."[3]

Survival of a free people, Bellah and his colleagues contend, depends upon the common hope of such diverse commentators as James Madison, Alexis de Tocqueville and Eugene V. Debs, that there be a revival of a public virtue that is able to find political expression. Public virtue, like every other social obligation or tie between individuals, has become increasingly vulnerable in the grip of an "ontological individualism, the idea that the individual is the only firm reality. . . ."[4]

At risk is what Bellah calls our "social ecology," the deep relationships between human persons and their societies wherein the actions

taken by individuals and groups have enormous impact on the lives of others:

> . . . social ecology is damaged not only by war, genocide, and political repression. It is also damaged by the destruction of the subtle ties that bind human beings to one another, leaving them frightened and alone. It has been evident for some time that unless we begin to repair the damage to our social ecology, we will destroy ourselves long before natural ecological disaster has time to be realized.[5]

We have committed the cardinal sin for the republican founders of our nation, Bellah argues. "We have put our own good, as individuals, as groups, as a nation, ahead of the common good."[6]

Habits proposes that the litmus test for determining the health of our society, rooted in both our biblical and republican traditions, is how we deal with wealth and poverty. As this book indicates, the United States is in danger of failing that test and betraying its heritage, despite the immense efforts of so many good people. The disparities between rich and poor Americans become worse each year. Our infant mortality rate rivals that of third world nations. And, despite the rush of some in developing countries and the emerging European nations to emulate us, the American Dream of freedom and a decent life eludes tens of millions of citizens of all ages, races, genders, and nationalities.

In 1986, a year after the publication of Bellah's book, the U.S. Catholic bishops concluded a five-year process of widespread dialogue and debate by publishing their second major pastoral letter of the decade. *Economic Justice for All: Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy* spoke to the heart of the American economic system, challenging its assumptions and calling for significant and systemic changes. As did Bellah and his colleagues, the pastoral letter questioned seriously how we as a nation are confronting the problem wealth versus poverty. The letter provoked responses from U.S. Catholics and others ranging from puzzlement, shock, and anger to thoughtful criticism, agreement, and pleasure. Most unfortunately of all, it was greeted by many with complete indifference.

The general public was simply unaware of the long history of Catholic social teaching which the bishops reiterated in the pastoral and applied to the contemporary U.S. and world economic scene. Conservative commentators, whether Catholic or not, responded with resistance, anger, or disdain. In part, **Economic Justice for All** ran directly counter to the Reagan administration's brutal neglect of services for the poor in this country.[7] The pastoral letter further

offended the conservative Republican hierarchy's aggressive opposition to advocacy for, and empowerment of, the poor[8] which the bishops endorsed and actually support financially.[9] Also at risk for the bishops' detractors is our dominant individualistic ethic which translates, in the economic field, into *laissez faire* economics and a consumerist lifestyle.

Other negative reactions to the pastoral on economic justice were fed by a variety of ideological and theological positions which sharply divide the world of socio-economic-political realities from the world of religion and church. A superficial reading of American church-state separation, an increasingly privatized sphere for religion as lived out by contemporary churchgoers, including Catholics, an age-old dualism between the world of the flesh and that of the Spirit, and a post-sixties distrust of authoritative statements, all conspired to promote either polite dismissal of the pastoral letter or an aggressive reaction of, "What do the bishops know about economics!"

The Catholic bishops were not alone in challenging society's obsession with individualism and its segregation of religious concerns from economics, business, and politics. In contrast to a dominant culture and many subgroups for whom the language of economics and the language of faith mix like oil and water, a number of major churches or denominations engaged in an intense dialogue during the eighties about the interface of economics and faith.[10]

The struggle of various religious teachers to articulate the connection between faith and economic justice has given rise to a variety of terms and forms of expression: economic justice for all, Christian faith and economic justice, faith and justice, the faith that does justice,[11] and justice as the acid test of preaching the gospel.[12] The essence of all these efforts is captured in the striking usage of my Jesuit friend Bill Watters, former pastor of Old St. Joe's in downtown Philadelphia and now working in Africa. Bill coined the term "**Faithjustice**," driving home the intimate connection of justice and faith in the Judaeo-Christian tradition by using a single word.

Faithjustice. The single word forged of the two concepts undercuts those who would elevate one concept over the other, render one instrumental to the other, separate the two, or otherwise downplay the importance of one . . . usually justice. As we will see, however, this unitive understanding is actually as old as the Hebrew prophets, was intimately familiar to Jesus of Nazareth, and is critically important to understanding the gospel in today's world. Using a single word, in fact, may even help us better grasp the Hebrew sense of words like *mishpat* or *sedaqah*, both of which actually reflect a rich

range of meaning, but are often translated simply by "righteousness" or "justice."

Sometimes old insights get lost in the midst of new ways of living and have to be rediscovered and even renamed to grab hold of them again. **Faithjustice** is just such an effort: to claim for contemporary Christians an ancient tradition without which the seas of modern social, economic and political concerns would be rough sailing indeed; or the tradition might even be utterly abandoned to the scientists and secularists, however well-meaning they may be. The hope is, ultimately, to promote *homo serviens* in contrast to the contemporary dominance in American life and myth of *homo consumens* and *homo militaris*. This realistic hope is rooted in coming to know and sharing the experiences of contemporary people of **Faithjustice** in cities and towns across this nation. Their lives defy the individualism and isolation of our society and their actions challenge society's assumptions about who and what is important in life.

America's prescient visitor Alexis de Tocqueville and others are credited with helping to give currency to the word "individualism" even as they analyzed and criticized it in our society in the nineteenth century. De Tocqueville wrote:

> Individualism is a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself.[13]

In a modest contrast, I offer this definition in hope of promoting new civic and religious virtue:

> **Faithjustice** is a passionate virtue which disposes citizens to become involved in the greater and lesser societies around themselves in order to create communities where human dignity is protected and enhanced, the gifts of creation are shared for the greatest good of all, and the poor are cared for with respect and a special love.

To understand its meaning, chapters one and two will explore the biblical grounding for this virtue, chapter three will provide an overview of its historical development in the Catholic Christian community, and chapters four and five will explore its contemporary meaning. The conclusion will describe a framework for living **Faithjustice** in our time.

Whether the **Faithjustice** word survives, the reality of the virtue described is present in the tangible commitments of people who care.

"People who care" are what lawyers call the "best evidence" of the truth which I am trying to describe here and which the nation desperately needs. **Faithjustice**, we might say, is a habit of the believing heart.

I do not write this book impersonally. My thinking has been intentionally informed by my personal biography and geography as a North American, a Catholic, a southerner, a lawyer, and as a Jesuit. Vignettes of life lived in the United States, the south, and the Catholic Church of the fifties, sixties, seventies, and eighties root each chapter's theories in concrete times and places. They also may explain the chapters' acute angles and departures, and they might excuse the inevitable, because very personal, shortsightedness.

As a southerner and an American, it is no accident that race and racism are an important theme in my life, as they remain for my region and the entire country. I also address the challenge of human poverty and injustice in the context of the country where my own work has been, the pragmatic, pluralistic, and yet idealistic United States. As a Catholic whose advocacy for justice has been both outside and within church structures and institutions, I have tried to stretch between the two worlds, recognizing the great goodness of people working in both and the capacities for destructiveness in both political and ecclesiastical realms. As a Jesuit, I am indelibly marked by the vision and strategies of Ignatius of Loyola mediated through a myriad of tutors and friends, with whom I have argued about the contemporary meaning and mission of the Society of Jesus. My references to Jesuits can be taken and appropriated by readers as a combination of family and church, since "the Society," as Jesuits call it, blends both for me.

My thanks begin with the Society: to the New Orleans Province, the Woodstock Theological Center at Georgetown University, and the Woodstock Jesuit Community for critical input and the five months free to devote just to this book. Instrumental to my work were support and encouragement from family and friends, hardware from Tim, Kit, and Katherine, and software from the board at Catholic Community Services in Baton Rouge. My special thanks to Leon Hooper, S. J., of Woodstock and Jim Martin of Atlanta for review of parts of the manuscript, and to Dick Sparks, C.S.P., and Paulist Press for editorial suggestions and encouragement in the task of revision. Six special friends later did a review and editing of the complete manuscript, the incredible loving gift of which I came to savor in the rereading: Jonathan Montaldo, Phil Land, S.J., John Kavanaugh, S.J., Kate Haser, and Ed and Marybelle Hardin.

Finally, for twenty years of experimentation, feedback, and shared experiences in developing **Faithjustice**, I thank my brother Jesuits; the women and men of the Jesuit Volunteer Corps: South; the members of the National Board of Jesuit Social Ministries; and sisters and brothers at the Atlanta Legal Aid Society, in parish social ministry in Louisiana, at the Sangre de Cristo Center in New Mexico, at Catholic Community Services of Baton Rouge, and in Catholic Charities agencies across the United States. They and a number of other friends and coworkers, especially in Georgia and Louisiana, live out daily what I have written about here.

CHAPTER ONE

Ebla and the Cycle of Baal

> The monarch was expected to defend the widowed, the orphaned, and the poor from all exploitation and injustice. According to documents unearthed at Ugarit, failure to protect the poor could cost a king his throne.
>
> HOWARD LAFAY
> *National Geographic*

The bus grew strangely quiet as we passed through a small Mississippi town. In a conspiratorial hush, a voice behind me whispered to his companion, "This is where the lynching was." I was a young teenager riding back across the deep south to New Orleans for the beginning of school, having left most of my family back in Florida on vacation. I was shocked by the harsh reality so near me there in the hot summer; it cast a dark shadow over the near-idyllic memories of family intimacy on the beach. The relative quiet of the fifties was giving way to the turbulent beginnings of the sixties when civil rights sit-ins, marches, and violence would turn our well-ordered world and my young self-awareness upside down.

* * *

Growing up Catholic in New Orleans was not exactly Southern in the traditional sense. True, I had painted large confederate flags on the walls of my bedroom. I fancied myself a Civil War buff. (My younger brother's generation would cover my flags over with late-sixties rock posters.) My family lived in neighborhoods that were racially segregated, although the history and demographics of New Orleans put black and white neighborhoods in closer proximity than in most other large cities of the South or North. My contemporaries and I had no black friends or peers, although we often roller-skated on the same streets as black youth and walked past one another on the way to our separate schools. A series of black maids had cared for my brothers, sister and me since our youngest years, prepared our family meals, and also were second mothers to us. My parents invested them with full authority in their absence; and, in our own way, we had deep affection for them.

Being Catholic, however, put a different slant on things. Our family had Irish, French, Italian, Scotch-Irish, and German lines. We knew about the Klan: that we, along with the Jews, were part of their three Ks of hatred. Though our Catholic schools had been as segregated as the public system in the forties and fifties, articulate voices of reason and compassion in the Catholic community were threatening the social status quo which we young Southerners had imbibed with the air and water.

My awakening conscience was confronted first by a string of young Jesuit teachers in high school who questioned the assumptions that underlay a separate-but-equal mythology. They challenged us to reach beyond the prejudices of our families and society to a civil and gospel equality. The response of some of my fellow-students was often hostile, as parental truths crashed against teacher truths. Archbishop Joseph Francis Rummel also had stunned the church and city when he took a strong public stand against segregation in the fifties, and later excommunicated prominent segregationist leaders—the ultimate Catholic sanction. He in turn received some seventy death threats in an atmosphere that smelled to him of schism at times.[1]

* * *

When the city buses were integrated, many of us confronted our first agonizing break with a tradition that would have us stand rather than take vacant seats next to blacks or get to our feet if a black person sat next to us. Of course, notorious bus incidents were covered by TV and newspapers. But on most ordinary buses of New Orleans' enviable city transit system many young students like me took part in an unpublicized drama of social change. Its scenes were marked by angry words and stage whispers, human courtesy and individual heroism, bigotry and openness. On our better days, we learned to offer our seats to black women tired from a long day of work, just as we had been taught to do for white women. The so-called New South was being born in our impressionable minds, whether we liked it or not.

* * *

One particular night in high school stands out for me in terms of the growing crisis. I had come downstairs to the living room to kiss my father goodnight before going to bed. He asked me about school, and I made the "mistake" of telling him about an article we had been discussing in class entitled "The Immorality of Segregation."[2] *For several hours that night my father tried to educate his second son in the realities of the South as he had grown up in it, and to teach me the rational underpinnings of segregation as it had been passed on to him. It was a mixture of fact, myth, reason, tradition, prejudice, Bible, experience, ignorance and feeling. The scene must have been repeated in tens of thousands of homes across the nation each year.*

It was a failed lesson, however, because of the typical doubts young teenagers have about their parents' views, the strong counter-education we were receiving in school, and the innate fallacies and injustices of segregation itself. Perhaps, too, my father's position had been undermined years before by his own and my mother's moderation of their inherited social views, their wider sense of love and justice in which we were nurtured, and the very prohibition of words like "nigger" in our home. You got your mouth washed out with soap for that one!

* * *

On Easter night, 1963, I told my parents that I wanted to join the Jesuits after high school graduation that summer and study for the priesthood. My father told me, "Your mother always wanted one of you boys to do something like that!" The only other vocational guidance he had given us growing up was that we could be anything we wanted, "except lawyers." He and his father were both lawyers, and he thought there were too many lawyers in New Orleans.

* * *

In December, 1973, I left Atlanta after my first years of legal services practice to study theology in Chicago. As a going-away present, a friend gave me a book by Ivan Allen, Jr., entitled Mayor: Notes on the Sixties. *As mayor, Allen had presided over the progressive transformation of Atlanta during the turbulent sixties. Atlanta's changes stood in contrast for me with the tradition-bound conservatism of New Orleans, which had preferred to be a queen of the Old South rather than a molder of the New.*

Then in my late twenties, I had taught catechism to rural, poor black youth as a Jesuit novice, written an unpublished book on the racial and economic politics of the War on Poverty in South Louisiana while in college, moderated a black Catholic youth group and done volunteer work in a black public high school during philosophy studies in Mobile, and represented hundreds of black clients in Atlanta. When I took up Allen's book, then, I read with a sense of vividness and poignancy about his experience with crossing the color line in Atlanta in 1947 to promote the Community Chest Drive. Allen had sought the advice of his father about an invitation to speak at the kickoff of the drive in the Negro community, to which the elder Allen responded:

> *"Ivan, let me have a very honest discussion with you," he said in his office the day I went to see him. "My generation has completely failed in every way to enlighten or solve the major issue which our section of the country has: the racial issue. We haven't confronted ourselves with it. There is great prejudice, great trial and tribulation over the whole thing. We've kept the nigger not in a*

second-class but in a third or fourth-class position, and as a result we've impoverished him and we've impoverished this section of the country. And the Southeast will never amount to anything until it brings its level of citizenship up. The very idea: here we are advocating human decency and freedom all over the world, and we find ourselves with dirty skirts at home. It's time for some major changes. ***Your generation is going to be confronted with it, and it will be the greatest agony that any generation ever went through.***[3]

By the time I read these lines, many American cities had been burned in the wake of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination, the Kerner Commission Report had described two Americas, one white and prospering, the other black and languishing, and the Vietnam War and the impeached Nixon presidency seemed to have blinded us to the tragic realities of race and poverty at home.

That made the advice from Ivan Allen, Sr., thirty years earlier, all the more prophetic and painful. What he said confirmed the truth of what I had seen and felt as events had swirled around me since grammar school. It also promised that our future pain would be all the more searing the longer we deferred the question of racial injustice in America.

* * *

In the four coldest winters of my life, studying theology in Chicago in the mid-seventies, one lesson came over dinner from a guest in my Jesuit community. A member of our Old Testament faculty, she told us of the discovery of the ancient city-state of Ebla in Syria. Ebla, in turn, became a symbol for me of the depth and breadth of the ancient responsibility of the human community and its leaders for the poor. This same responsibility was woven throughout the Hebrew scriptures and enfleshed in the prophets whom we studied in class.

That awareness later grew ever more tragic and frustrating in the eighties as the nation's leader and spokesman assured us that the "truly needy" were cared for. President Reagan anesthetized us to the growing numbers and worsening plight of the poor, homeless, sick, disabled and suffering in our midst while orchestrating the greatest rich-get-richer scam in the nation's history. The prophets seemed dead.

* * *

During the time in Chicago in which I discovered Ebla, I began in-depth study of The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, *the founder of the Jesuits. The Exercises as a written document is a handbook for directors of individual retreatants turning their lives over to God or deepening their faith journeys. I had made the full 30-day Ignatian retreat ten years earlier as a Jesuit novice, and for eight days each year thereafter. Only in theology*