

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A, catechist - RCLB Lectionary



To prepare for this session read all the readings.

Isaiah 58:7-10

Psalm 112:4-5, 6-7, 8-9

1 Corinthians 2:1-5

Matthew 5:13-16

Spend a few minutes reflecting on what these readings mean for you today. Was there a particular reading that appealed to you? Was there a word or image that engaged you?

Read the Word in Liturgy and Catholic Doctrine sections. These give you background on what you will be doing this session. Read over the session outline and make it your own. Check to see what materials you will need for the session.

The Word in Liturgy

The theme of light shining in the darkness is found in three of today's four readings. The metaphor of a dawning light suggests a public presence, a social reality that is available to and can be experienced by all inhabitants of the earth. This suggestive image is a powerful reminder of how deeply ingrained in our Judeo-Christian tradition is the notion that God's chosen people are called to be a force for good in society. Today's catechetical focus on the Church's social doctrine, specifically on our preferential option for the poor, reflects the way our Catholic tradition has captured this scriptural teaching.

The historical setting of today's reading from third Isaiah is the late sixth century, following the return from Exile, when the inhabitants of Jerusalem were experiencing considerable disillusionment over the social and religious chaos to which they had returned. Their penitential fasts had not yet won God's favor, apparently, and they were asking why their prayers were not being heard. The prophet answers them (in the verses immediately preceding today's reading) with a powerful indictment of their self-serving piety. Then he tells them just what kind of fasting God actually wants: action to alleviate the suffering of the poor and powerless. The evil the prophet deplores is societal—systemic ills afflict the nation—even if the focus of his remarks seems to be on what each individual must do. Feed the hungry; shelter the homeless; clothe the naked; remove injustice—these are the concrete actions that constitute a “fast” pleasing to Yahweh, and that will result in light dawning for the entire nation.



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Against this background, it is not hard to understand that Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount that his disciples must be the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world" would have been recognized by his Jewish audience as an invocation of concern for action on behalf of the poor ("so that they may see goodness in your acts"). Even more, in the context of Matthew's theological perspective, the new Moses (Jesus) is here speaking to the new Israel (his disciples), telling them that they "are" (not "will be") what the ancient prophets called Israel of old to be. By observing the commandments of the new Law (these verses follow immediately on the Beatitudes), the disciples of Jesus become the light that has dawned on the world. Thus, the Church's social teaching is not about mere humanitarianism. Rather, in our concern for the poor, we actually become agents of the in-breaking of God's reign, an intrinsic part of the power of love which will, we believe, transform all reality.

Catholic Doctrine

The Social Teaching of the Church:

Preferential Option for the Poor

The Church has always been concerned with the problems and potentials of human society. In the nineteenth century, however, with the growth and expansion of the modern industrial society, the Catholic Church developed a more detailed social teaching. This teaching is concerned with the fundamental rights of persons and how the temporal goods of society are ordered toward not only the common good but God and the kingdom in the light of the Gospel of Jesus.

Catholic social thought and teaching uphold a preferential option for the poor as a key characteristic. What is this preferential option? It is the commitment on the part of individual believers, of communities of the faithful and the institutional Church itself, to not only work for the alleviation of poverty but to assist all those in society who are marginalized and oppressed. Thus, in making moral decisions in any particular circumstances, the needs and concerns of the poor should be given priority over others. In addition, the preferential option for the poor goes beyond economic terms to include all those who are exploited or who have been robbed of their basic human dignity.

It is important to note that this option or choice for the poor is being made by those who have greater material wealth or possessions, that is, those who are not stricken by poverty or oppression. Individuals and groups who are relatively well-to-do exercise this option when they make a free choice to give up some of their wealth or privileged state in order to more



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closely (to some degree) identify with those less fortunate. Those who are already poor may also exercise a preferential option for the poor by identifying with other groups who are oppressed or marginalized or who lack the basic human necessities.

As members of a Catholic community that is inclusive and that exercises a preferential option for the poor, how does an individual or a group make a commitment in taking action to overturn structural injustice in society? There are four steps involved. First, careful analysis must be made of the situation being addressed so that before action is taken energy is not wasted on superficial change without addressing root causes of the injustice. Second, this analysis should stop collusion with the causes of oppression and thus promote a distancing of the individual or group from those others who are causing the injustice or who contribute to it. Third, concerted and organized actions should be planned and entered into at the political level, gradually escalating in scope and intensity, in order to challenge the injustice. Fourth, realistic alternatives to inhumane and unjust structures should be designed and brought to birth in society by believers.

Thus, the modern social teaching of the Catholic Church, especially its preferential option for the poor, enjoins upon believers that they truly become salt of the earth and light for the world. This is not a poetic image alone, but a clarion call to concrete action in society.

