



CATHOLIC SCHOOLS OFFICE

Diocese of Salt Lake City

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING: **Option for the Poor and Vulnerable**

“Catholic teaching proclaims that a basic moral test is how our most vulnerable members are faring.” (USCCB) Our society is characterized by a deepening chasm between the growing prosperity of some and the increased poverty of others. As the Church, we are asked to follow the example of Jesus who identified with the poor and the vulnerable (Mt.25:31-46). With this Gospel mandate our Church and the Catholic schools seek to give priority concern to the poor. The health of the Church and society is strengthened by the way we relate to the needs of the poor and vulnerable. Christopher notes state, “...only when concerned men and women in all walks of life get involved will we create the just, merciful nation and world that God wants for us.”

The burden of poverty is unjust and is a result of the misdistribution of wealth and resources. The Church teaches the need to distribute goods equitably according to the demands of the common good and ensure social justice with a preferential option for the poor. Power, wealth and prestige have become a goal of the modern world. The Church directs us to witness the Gospel through conversion of our way of life. We seek to integrate personal and societal transformation. Catholic Charities USA called poverty “an unnecessary evil and unnatural disaster. Given the nation’s enormous wealth, such degradation is a wound in America’s soul.” Persons who have attained wealth are not to be condemned but the way they use their wealth can be just or unjust.

One of the elements of the Catholic school religion curriculum is social justice. Service becomes a component of this thrust. Charity or direct service is taught and practiced through various projects so that students give of what they have to those less fortunate. You are aware of the way your child participates in school service projects. Often a school is featured in the Intermountain Catholic Newspaper for their charity efforts. Spotlighting the service projects of the schools, we see the tremendous work being done and the lifetime lessons being learned. Some of the programs and activities that the Catholic Schools participate in are:

- collecting cans for St. Theresa Food Bank
- Candy Cane Corner for Road Home
- Raising funds for the Agape Children's orphanage and choir in South Africa
- Keep a Child Alive Foundation
- Invisible Children Campaign- helps build schools in Uganda
- Adopting a family for Christmas
- Donating to Heifer International
- Numerous other activities in the community and abroad.

These projects are but a few which reflect all that is being done annually by the schools of the diocese.

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Indirectly, our students learn to be aware of the poor through study, reflection, and prayer. Celebrations of the contributions of various people, rich and poor are encouraged and bring about a social consciousness in our students. Often the direct and indirect exposure to the poor brings about the real meat of social justice, advocacy or efforts at systemic change. An example of charity and systemic change in the lives of our children is the Heifer Project. It is direct giving but due to the requirements of the program, the gift is far reaching and in most cases helps lift the recipient out of poverty.

Students are taught to be attentive to the most vulnerable which includes more than the materially poor. The elderly, sick, handicapped, and mentally ill are numbered among the vulnerable. Children visiting rest homes often bring cards or gifts but the most important reciprocal gift is that of the sharing and the gift of self. Respect for all people is taught so that the students learn their responsibility to be unselfish. We are social beings, part of the body of Christ, which makes us responsible for each member for the health of the whole body.

Our school system, itself, tries to live the Gospel mandate of “option for the poor”. In each local Catholic school there is a long tradition of inclusivity. We believe that education is a way out of poverty so we make every effort to provide an education to as many poor families as is possible. This policy creates a challenge for the school to fund the assistance that educating the poor demands. The value outweighs the sacrifice. Besides helping a child out of poverty, it also provides an atmosphere in which to mix the various economic and racial groups in a community. There is no better way to learn to live and work together than to rub elbows day after day. What better way is there to learn tolerance than to grow up in a diverse community? What better way is there to learn who my neighbor is than to be involved in the kinds of activities in which our students participate?