

Catholic Social Work:

Actualizing Matthew 25 in Service to the Church, Society and the World

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The profession of social work is more than two hundred years old, having begun in the early part of the nineteenth century as a volunteer-based, Christian response to social problems too large for individuals to solve of their own accord (J.R. Vanderwoerd, "Reconsidering Secularization and Recovering Christianity in Social Work History, *Social Work and Christianity*, 38[3] [2011], 244-266). Its roots in Judaism and Christianity are deep (W. Trattner, *From Poor Law to Welfare State: A History of Social Welfare in America* [6th edition] [NY: Simon & Schuster, 1998]). Indeed, without Jewish teachings on charity and justice, found throughout the Old Testament, as well as the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels, social work as a profession would not have formed in the United States. Today, Catholic social workers, informed by the charity and justice teachings of the Bible, and guided by the Church through its social doctrine, serve society in the United States and across the globe.

Throughout the ancient texts of the Hebrew Scriptures, God's call for charity and justice for the poor, orphaned, widowed, and shunned reminded the Israelites that love of God meant direct care of the most vulnerable in society (see, for example, Dt 26:12), as well as changes to economic and political systems to ensure fairness in society (see, for example, Ex 23:10; Lv 25:23). In the New Testament, Jesus, in his ministry, perfected God's call to provide help and protection to society's outcasts. Nowhere is Jesus clearer in his teaching about love of and care for people who have been rejected and discarded in society than in Matthew 25:35-40:

"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him and say, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?" And the king will say to them in reply, "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me."

Social work is a vocation for Catholics in which God's call to love the poor and serve the vulnerable may be lived in professional helping.

What Is Social Work?

Social work is the profession of helping. As a profession, social work is committed first and foremost to redressing poverty and vulnerability in society (A.P. Sun, "Perceptions Among Social Work and Non-Social Work Students Concerning Causes of Poverty," *Journal of Social Work Education*, 37[1] [2001], 161-173). Social workers assist people with obtaining means of subsistence, as well as helping people grow toward and thrive in independence from any system of support (R.C. Crouch, "Social Work Defined," *Social Work*, 24[1] [1979], 46-48). Further, social workers help people in society survive, overcome, and solve problems they themselves do not have the necessary capacity to solve on their own, regardless of economic condition. Ultimately, social work is the helping profession that seeks to intervene with and for people who are poor, oppressed, vulnerable, and marginalized due to both individual challenges and concerns as well as the environment within which they live their lives. Thus, social work is also the profession that seeks to change the social environment so that it becomes healthier for people being helped. It is this duality of intervention—with people and their environment—that sets social work apart from other helping professions (M. Gibelman, "The Search for Identity: Defining Social Work—Past, Present, Future," *Social Work*, 44(4) [1999], 298-310).

There are three higher education degrees social workers may obtain. The bachelor of social work (BSW) degree is a traditional, four-year degree in which students complete coursework in the liberal arts, direct practice interventions, theories of human behavior in the social environment, social policy, research, human diversity, and justice. In their social work program, students are required by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), a higher education accrediting organization, to complete no less than five hundred hours of internship in social work practice. The master of social work (MSW) degree is a two-year course of study for students who do not hold a BSW degree. If a student completes a BSW degree, the first year of the MSW program is redundant to the senior year of the BSW degree; thus, such a student need only complete the second year of the MSW degree. In addition to learning everything BSW students learn, the MSW student completes a course of study in a specialized concentration that prepares the student for practice with specific populations or for interventions with specific social problems. Students in the MSW program must complete nearly one thousand hours of internship both at the foundation level of general social work practice as well as at the advanced level in specialized practice. Finally, students who hold an MSW degree may complete a doctor of philosophy (PhD) degree in social work. Typically, the PhD in social work is obtained when a social worker desires to teach and conduct research in an academic social work setting. The PhD in social work significantly concentrates on research methodology and analysis in special areas of social problems, human behavior, social work interventions, and social policy.

Social workers are professionally educated and trained to intervene at the micro (individual), mezzo (family, group, community), and macro (state, nation, globe) levels. In helping, social workers seek first to identify the strengths and capacities of those being helped, be it individuals, families, groups, institutions, communities, or society itself, and then grow those strengths and capacities toward a healthy state of functioning. While myriad ways of helping exist in the profession of social work, ranging from direct interventions in clinical settings to advocacy practice in political settings, in general, social workers (1) engage clients; (2) assess clients' needs, challenges, strengths, and capacities; (3) plan interventions with clients; (4) intervene with clients using practice models; (5) evaluate interventions for success or need for modification; and (6) terminate interventions when clients no longer need or desire help (B. Timberlake, M. Farber, and C. Sabatino, *The General Method of Social Work Practice: McMahon's Generalist Practice* [4th edition] [Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2002]). In order to successfully complete the work that social workers do with people, trust, empathy, and regard are paramount to the helping process. Further, compassion is a necessary, but not sufficient, quality for social workers to possess. Rather, social workers must have the professional "capacity-to-care"; that is to say, social workers must engage in the helping process without judgment, bias, or pity, while approaching their clients with a deep respect for the individual's right to self-determination and autonomy.

Social work, with its focus on the person-in-environment, its attempts to reduce and ultimately eliminate poverty, vulnerability, and marginalization in society, and its interventions at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels, offers endless possibilities for social workers to engage in the helping process. Examples at the micro level include social work in adoptions, mental health clinics, hospitals, schools, homeless shelters, and employment agencies. Social workers engaged in helping at the mezzo level work in family strengthening centers, community-based agencies, local government agencies, and faith-based organizations, for example. At the macro level, social workers intervene through advocacy, planning, evaluating, policy setting, and legislating.

What Is Catholic Social Work?

Catholic social workers are unique and distinct from other social workers in that Catholic social workers are formed in the Catholic intellectual tradition and social teachings of the Church. The identity of "Catholic social worker" is a self-ascribed identity. There is no litmus test or certification that qualifies a Catholic social worker as such. Rather, through faith in Jesus and love for God, and guided through the Holy Spirit, Catholic social workers serve in their profession within the framework of Catholic values and morals. Noting the uniquely Catholic nature of Catholic social workers, Archbishop Charles Chaput, in his address to the Catholic Social Work National Association, remarked,

Being faithful to Catholic teaching isn't something optional for a Catholic social worker. It's basic to his or her identity. We need to remember that Catholic belief is much more than a list of dos and don'ts. It involves much more than simply obeying a Catholic moral code—although it certainly includes that. Catholic teaching is part of a much larger view of the human person, human dignity and our eternal destiny. (June 21, 2014, www.cswana.org)

Chiefly, Catholic social workers practice Catholic social teaching as identified by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) in seven themes (see www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/seven-themes-of-catholic-social-teaching.cfm). Central to Catholic social work practice is the protection of life from natural conception to natural death. Strongly related to the protection of life is human dignity. Catholic social workers serve all people, providing them with regard, respect, and compassion. Poverty, oppression, and vulnerability are primary concerns for the Catholic social worker, particularly because poverty and vulnerability are a direct threat to life and an affront to human dignity. Catholic social workers seek to strengthen families, as families are the fabric of a strong society. Catholic social workers seek to help people become gainfully employed, thereby earning a living wage with health care benefits. In solidarity, Catholic social workers serve abroad in underdeveloped and violence-torn countries, seeking not only to help the individual but also the country in finding peace and economic stability.

The Call to Catholic Social Work

Catholic social work is a calling, a ministry, that serves people, communities, nations, and the world. It is a ministry that emulates Jesus in his role as servant. As with religious life, married life, and single life, Catholic social work is not for everyone. Catholic social work requires sacrifice of time, talent, and treasure. It is a challenging ministry that is both rewarding and daunting. "Love—*caritas*—will always prove necessary, even in the most just society. There is no ordering of the State so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love. Whoever wants to eliminate love is preparing to eliminate man as such. There will always be suffering which cries out for consolation and help. There will always be loneliness. There will always be situations of material need where help in the form of concrete love of neighbor is indispensable" (Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* [Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana [LEV]—USCCB, 2005], no 28). In a world where violence, poverty, disease, prejudice, and oppression render people vulnerable to misery, suffering, and death, the need for Catholic social workers is great, the profession is noble, and the work is holy.