

“To All People of Good Will”: Catholic Social Teaching, Natural Law, and Racial Disproportionality in Social Work

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Catholic Social Teaching was developed not only from religious roots, but from natural law ethical theory, which provides an objective philosophical foundation. Thus, it is directed to all persons of good will, not just Catholics or Christians. This collection of doctrine addresses social issues of pressing importance in society, issues important to social workers as they work with systems of all sizes. In addition, the teachings challenge all of us, particularly social workers, to work toward a just society. This article demonstrates the challenge through application to one of the most serious injustices in American society today: racial disproportionality.

THE TERM “CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING” REFERS TO A COLLECTION of doctrines formally developed over the past hundred and thirty years with its ultimate origin in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ as revealed in sacred Scripture and Church tradition. The core principles of this teaching, however, are accessible not only to those who belong to the Catholic Church or even to Christians or spiritual persons in general. Rather, these teachings are accessible to and can be recognized by “all people of good will” (Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* (1963) §1) through the use of reason to reflect on human nature and the role of humans in society. Our purpose in this paper is to articulate the basic principles of Catholic Social Teaching, discuss their independent justification by an objective philosophical theory (natural law ethics), and to demonstrate their relevance to social issues in general and social work in particular by applying them to several codes of ethics in social work and to racial disproportionality in child welfare, an issue of striking injustice that permeates throughout social work.

I: Catholic Social Teaching

Overview of Catholic Social Teaching

Catholic Social Teaching is a body of thought and writings that refer to “a comprehensive tradition of social ethics derived from multiple sources within the Catholic Church tradition, including scripture, papal encyclicals, episcopal statements, and writings of theologians” (Brenden, 2007 p. 472). Massaro (2012) lists 13 documents of the Catholic Church written between 1891 and 2009, most of which are encyclicals, or letters written by the pope that particularly relate to social issues at the time, not only to “the faithful” but to the whole world. The documents reflect the social issues of the times, including political changes (capitalism vs. socialism), changes in the nature of work, and changes in the global economy. It is important to note that Catholic Social Teaching is not a specific set of laws, standards, codes, or even documents, but a body of wisdom that continues to develop, with interpretations offered at a variety of levels, including public homilies on the parish level and political statements on the state and national levels. However, the general agreement of the teachings is collected in the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church (the Compendium), developed by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (Pontifical Council, 2004). The Compendium contains “the most relevant theological, philosophical, moral, and cultural considerations of this teaching” and presents “in a complete and systematic manner...the Church’s social teaching, which is the fruit of careful magisterial reflection” (Pontifical Council, 2004, Introduction, §8). The U.S. Council of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) outlines seven themes (2005) while a particularly concrete variation with ten themes is found at the Office for Social Justice, Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis site (Office for Social Justice, 2006).

Table 1: Themes of Catholic Social Teaching

The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (The Pontifical Council for Justice & Peace)	Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching (The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops)	Key Principles of Catholic Social Teaching (Office for Social Justice, Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis)
Human Dignity	Life and Dignity of the Human Person	Human Dignity
The Common Good	Family, Community, and Participation in Society	Community and the Common Good
Subsidiarity	Protection of Human Rights and Fulfillment of Social Responsibilities	Protection of Human Rights and Fulfillment of Social Responsibilities

The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (The Pontifical Council for Justice & Peace)	Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching (The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops)	Key Principles of Catholic Social Teaching (Office for Social Justice, Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis)
Solidarity	Solidarity among Members of the Human Family	Global Solidarity
	The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers	The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers
	Preferential Option for the Poor and Vulnerable	Preferential Option for the Poor and Vulnerable
	Stewardship of God's Creation	Stewardship of God's Creation
		Participation in the Economic, Political, and Cultural Life of Society
		Constructive Role for Government
		The Promotion of Peace

This table contains more than a simple enumeration of social concerns; it contains a hierarchical expression of the principles guiding Catholic Social Teaching. These principles, however enumerated or organized, address the five systems prominent in social work practice: the individual, the family, societal groups, organizations, and communities. In addition, the principles address the interdependence of these systems and the nature of social justice, particularly noting populations that have been disadvantaged by and/or within current structures (Shank, 2007).

Four Principles (Themes) and Their Relationship with Systems for Practice

In its most simple organization, the most basic principle of Catholic Social Teaching focuses on the individual, while three further principles focus on the larger society. Each of these principles, however, addresses the reciprocal rights and responsibilities between individuals and societies.

The first of these principles, *human dignity*, recognizes the foundational importance of the individual person, the micro-level of social work practice. The USCCB states that human dignity is “the foundation of a moral vision for society” as well as “the foundation of all the principles of our social teaching” (2005). While human dignity is a fundamental concern in Catholic Social Teaching, it is important to realize that both in divine revelation and in natural law ethical theory, “a person must seek to realize and respect human goods not merely in himself and for his own sake but also in common, in community” (Finnis, 1980, p. 161). A person makes moral judgments not in isolation

from other individuals, but within the context of the various communities to which that person belongs. In fact, the good of the community is essential to the good of the self because the community is “a ‘means’ indispensable to the realizing of most aspects of human well-being” (Finnis, 1980, p. 380). As a result, Finnis observes, “very many, even most, of our concrete moral responsibilities, obligations, and duties¹ have their basis in the requirement to foster the common good of one’s communities” (p. 125).

Three fundamental principles of Catholic Social Teaching address the social nature of human beings, or people in families, groups, organizations and communities:

The common good is defined as “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily” (Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 26: AAS 58, 1046, cited in Pontifical Council, 2004, 164). The principle of the common good recognizes the increasing levels of human associations proceeding from the mezzo-level of families and groups through the macro-level of organizations and communities. This principle is a direct extension of concern for human dignity since “how we organize our society...directly affects human dignity” (USCCB, 2005).

Subsidiarity is the principle that “nothing should be done by a higher and larger institution that cannot be done as well by a smaller and lower one” (Hehir, 2010, 92). The principle reflects that individual freedom and responsibility are best preserved when decisions and actions are made by social entities, including “intermediate groups” and organizations that are closer to individuals. “Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do” (Pontifical Council, 2004, 186). “The principle of subsidiarity protects people from abuses by higher-level social authority and calls on these same authorities to help individuals and intermediate groups to fulfill their duties. This principle is imperative because every person, family, and intermediate group has something original to offer to the community” (Pontifical Council, 2004, 187). In addition, when persons, families, and intermediate groups are not able to provide for and protect themselves, then it is the role of “the State to step in to supply certain functions” particularly when there is great “social imbalance or injustice where only” their intervention could “create conditions of greater equality, justice, and peace.” (Pontifical Council, 2004, 188).

Solidarity “highlights in a particular way the intrinsic social nature of the human person, the equality of all in dignity and rights and the common path of individuals and peoples towards an ever more committed unity. Never before has there been such a widespread awareness of the bond of interdependence between individuals and peoples, which is found at every level” (Pontifical Council, 2004, 192). It is through solidarity, working together, recognizing our communion that we can express Christian love; in fact, “Solidarity is the life and message of Jesus Christ” (Pontifical Council, 2004, 196). Based on the “intrinsic social nature” of human beings and highlighting “the equality of all in dignity and rights,” solidarity is well grounded in the fundamental principle of human dignity as it promotes “the common path of individuals and peoples towards an ever more committed unity” (Pontifical Council, 2004, 192). In fact, the basis of solidarity is community.

The remaining principles of Catholic Social Teaching described in the chart flow naturally from the fundamental importance of human dignity, detailing specific concerns that must be addressed by human associations on the mezzo- and macro-levels to ensure that “human dignity can be protected and a healthy community can be achieved” (USCCB, 2005).

II: The Necessity for Natural Law Ethics in Catholic Social Teaching: Engaging All People of Good Will

In composing the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace made the decision to address the document not only to Catholics, but to the members of “other Churches and Ecclesial Communities, to followers of other religions, as well as to all people of good will who are committed to serving the common good” (Pontifical Council, 2004, p. 12). This address demonstrates the recognition that the Catholic Church cannot singlehandedly bring about worldwide social justice; it is the responsibility of all people of good will, including those who do not accept divine revelation or who interpret it differently than the Roman Catholic Church. This being the case, social teaching cannot be based solely on theology or religion.

The Church therefore provides an independent, secular foundation for its social teachings. In his address at Fordham University School of Law on January 24, 2012, Cardinal-designate Timothy M. Dolan of New York said, “Natural law is a concept of objective truth, not religious preference... natural law theory is not uniquely Catholic, it’s human. Some of the greatest exponents of the natural law, like Aristotle and Cicero, had never heard of the Catholic Church. These things we teach are not true because they happen to be taught by the church. We teach them because they happen

to be true.” Later in the speech he added, “It’s not a Catholic thing. It’s a natural thing. It’s a human thing.” (Catholic News Service, 2012)

Since philosophy, in particular natural law ethical theory, can provide a common ground for all to understand and accept the key principles of Catholic Social Teaching, Catholic authorities were careful to include in their documents a philosophical foundation, in particular natural law ethical theory for their teachings, and to demonstrate the harmony between the conclusions of natural law ethical theory and Catholic theology in Catholic Social Teaching.

Natural Law Ethical Theory

Natural law ethical theory traces its roots to the works of the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle. The classical formulation of this theory is found in the works of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), in particular his *Summa Theologiae*, and natural law ethical theory continues to be a dynamic ethical theory expounded and defended by contemporary philosophers, such as the distinguished philosopher of law, John Finnis (1980).

Natural law ethical theory is based on reflection on human nature and the role of humans in society.² Its first component is a set of basic values, or within this terminology, fundamental ways in which humans flourish and reach their potential (see Finnis, 1980, pp. 23 and 33).

The basic values within natural law ethical theory are identified by reflecting on our own experience as human beings. In *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (1980), widely regarded as the definitive contemporary work on natural law ethical and political theory, Finnis explains that according to Aquinas, “practical reasoning begins not by understanding [human nature] from the outside, as it were, by the way of psychological, anthropological, or metaphysical observations and judgments defining human nature, but by experiencing one’s nature, so to speak, from the inside” (p. 34). Natural law ethicists contend that these values, both individually and as a set, are acknowledged, at least implicitly, by everyone and “are in one way or another used by everyone who considers what to do” (Finnis, 1980, p. 23). More importantly, they “can be participated in by an inexhaustible number of persons in an inexhaustible variety of ways or on an inexhaustible variety of occasions” (p. 155).³

The second component of natural law ethical theory is a set of basic principles to guide moral decision-making so that people can distinguish between morally right actions and morally wrong actions (see Finnis, pp. 23 and 100ff). In natural law ethical theory, the basis for moral obligation is the necessity of making reasonable (prudent) decisions about pursuing the basic values. The principles that guide this pursuit require discretion, maturity and wisdom to apply appropriately. For this reason, since the time of Plato (*Republic* IX.582a-e) and Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics*

I,4:1095b5-13; see also X,9:1179b27-30), natural law ethical theorists have explained the moral decision-making process by referring to the notion of an ideal human being, that is, a mature, experienced, and well-disciplined person of good character, who can serve as the model for practical wisdom.

The Philosophical Character of Natural Law Ethical Theory

Finally, natural law ethical theory must be distinguished from divine command ethical theories, in which ethical principles are revealed by and take their moral force from a divine being. Since the foundation of natural law ethics is the experience of one's own human nature, the ultimate origin of that nature, whether by an act of divine creation or some other mechanism, is not a relevant consideration for natural law ethicists. It is rational reflection on the human nature we already possess that enables us to recognize both components of natural law ethical theory, namely, the basic forms of human values as well as the requirements of practical reasonableness³ (Finnis, 1980). Natural law is therefore a philosophical ethical theory, and not a religious or theological theory. It can provide a justification for Catholic Social Teaching that is accessible not only to Catholics, but also to non-Catholic Christians, people of other religious faiths, and all people of good will.

Natural Law Ethical Theory and Catholic Doctrine

If we look at human nature from a religious perspective, we can see that natural law ethical theory is compatible with, and in fact, an extension of the moral law established eternally by God. As F. C. Copleston, S.J. (1972), the eminent historian of philosophy and authority on the philosophy and theology of Thomas Aquinas, observes, "To speak anthropomorphically, God sees eternally in human nature the activities which constitute its objective development or unfolding and the acts which are incompatible with this development" (p. 90). God's awareness of what is good and bad for humanity forms the basis of the eternal moral law established by God and revealed to humanity first through the prophets and finally by Jesus himself. "When the human reason promulgates to itself the natural law, it participates in God's eternal law, in the divine plan for human beings" (pp. 190-191). Natural law, according to Aquinas, is "a participation of the eternal law in a rational creature" (*ST Ia IIae q.91 a.2*)⁴. In this way, natural law ethical theory and Catholic theological ethics proceed by parallel paths to a consistent and harmonious understanding of morality. As a result, Catholic Social Teaching has two independent and complementary foundations, one philosophical and one theological.

Natural Law Ethical Theory in *Rerum Novarum*: Foundation for Modern Catholic Social Teaching

In 1891, Pope Leo XIII laid the foundation for modern Catholic Social Teaching in his encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (“Of New Things”). Like all papal encyclicals, which contain authoritative Church teaching emanating from the pope’s role as leader of the Church, *Rerum Novarum* addressed a controversial topic, in this case, the oppression of the working poor as a result of unbridled capitalism following the Industrial Revolution. During the course of this encyclical, Leo XIII discussed the proper relationship between employers and employees, as well as the appropriate roles of the government and public associations, such as unions, in protecting workers and their families from exploitation.⁵

Leo XIII was a strong advocate of Thomistic philosophy and theology,⁶ and embraced Aquinas’s view that reason and revelation are two independent paths to a common truth, so that neither reason nor revelation, when rightly interpreted, can contradict the other (*Summa Contra Gentiles* I.7). Leo XIII applied this Thomistic viewpoint throughout *Rerum Novarum*, interweaving natural law ethics and Christian theology throughout his discussion of the rights and duties of capital and labor.

While natural law ethical theory is explicitly cited by Leo XIII to justify private property, the need for a living wage, and the right of free association,⁷ *Rerum Novarum* articulates the principle of human dignity as the fundamental principle of Catholic Social Teaching and is careful to provide justifications for this principle arising from both natural law ethical theory and Christian theology.

Natural law and Christian theology justification for human dignity in Rerum Novarum

Rerum Novarum locates the source of human dignity in reason: “It is the mind, or reason, which is the predominant element in us who are human creatures; it is this which renders a human being human” (*Leo XIII, 1891*, §6). Reason, the distinguishing characteristic of humans, enables them to flourish in unique ways that are not available to animals, and provides human beings with an inherent dignity that must always be respected (cf. Finnis, 194-195). Thus, *Rerum Novarum* asserts “[T]o misuse men as though they were things in the pursuit of gain, or to value them solely for their physical powers—that is truly shameful and inhuman,” and charges employers “to respect in every man his dignity as a person” (*Leo XIII, 1891*, §20; §§36 and 42).

In order to show the harmony between the natural law justification for human dignity and Christian theology, Leo XIII harkens back to the creation of humanity with a rational soul: “It is the soul which is made after the image and likeness of God; it is in the soul that the sovereignty resides

in virtue whereof man is commanded to rule the creatures below him and to use all the earth and the ocean for his profit and advantage” (§40). It is this rational faculty that enables a human to fathom “matters without number, linking the future with the present,” so that “being master of his own acts, [he] guides his ways under the eternal law and the power of God, whose providence governs all things” (§7). Thus, Christian theology, like natural law, asserts the fundamental importance of human dignity so that “no man may with impunity outrage that human dignity which God himself treats with great reverence” (§40).

Natural law and Christian theology justification for the common good, subsidiarity, and solidarity in Rerum Novarum

In accordance with natural law ethical theory, Leo XIII acknowledges the “natural tendency of men to dwell in society” (§51) and that living in society is beneficial for human beings, since the purpose of communities is to foster the common good (§§50, and 51, cf. §32), so that in a well-administered state, “the laws and institutions, the general character and administration of the commonwealth, shall be such as of themselves to realize public well-being and private prosperity” (§32). Moreover, in a well-administered state, the ruler will seek not his own personal gain, but “the benefit of those over whom he is placed” (§35). Fostering the good of the community also promotes individual wellbeing, as members of society share in the common good.

The harmony between natural law and Christian theology with regard to these key principles is also a central theme of *Rerum Novarum*. Leo XIII is careful to cite both secular and sacred justifications for his teachings on social issues, repeatedly linking “philosophy and the Gospel” (§35), “God’s laws and those of nature” (§36), “right reason and . . . the eternal law of God” (§52), and “the precepts of duty and the laws of the Gospel” (§55). Leo XIII directly references Aquinas: “Human law is law only by virtue of its accordance with right reason; and thus it is manifest that it flows from the eternal law. And in so far as it deviates from right reason it is called an unjust law; in such case it is no law at all, but rather a species of violence.” (§52, citing Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia-IIae, q. xciii, art. 3, ad 2m).

Pacem in Terris

An especially influential use of natural law theory in Catholic Social Teaching is found in John XXIII’s encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, “Peace on Earth” (1963). Composed during the turmoil of the Cold War, shortly after the Cuban missile crisis, this encyclical presents a forceful statement of human rights and articulates the principles that should govern the relationships between individuals (§§8-45), between individuals and public authorities

(§§46-79), relationships between states (§§80-129), and relationships between individuals or states and the worldwide community of nations (§§130-145). The heart of this encyclical “was a creative restatement of the Natural Law ethic that has been at the heart of the social teaching” (Hehir, 2010, p. 38). Indeed, in *Pacem in Terris*, John XXIII clearly asserts that natural law is the foundation for each type of human relationship addressed in the encyclical (§7), and explicitly identifies natural law as the source of the human rights and responsibilities described in the encyclical, stating, “These rights and duties derive their origin, their sustenance, and their indestructibility from the natural law” (§28).

Natural law and Christian theology justification for human dignity in Pacem in Terris

Like *Rerum Novarum*, *Pacem in Terris* locates the origin of human dignity in reason: “each individual man is truly a person. His is a nature, that is, endowed with intelligence and free will. As such he has rights and duties, which together flow as a direct consequence from his nature” (§9). Because human dignity originates in reason, all humans are “equal in natural dignity” (§§44, 89, and 132), explicitly condemning racial discrimination (§44). Even when a person falls into moral or religious error, he does not stop possessing a rational nature, and so human dignity can never be forfeited (§158; cf. §9).

In *Pacem in Terris*, John XXIII also takes care to emphasize the harmony between natural law and divine teaching with regard to human dignity. Since God created beings with a particular human nature (§3), and in such a way that humans can discover natural law by reflecting on their own nature (§6), God is the source of natural law. Moreover, there are theological as well as natural law reasons to affirm human dignity: “When, furthermore, we consider man’s personal dignity from the standpoint of divine revelation, inevitably our estimate of it is incomparably increased. Men have been ransomed by the blood of Jesus Christ. Grace has made them sons and friends of God, and heirs to eternal glory” (§10).

Natural law and Christian theology justification for the common good, subsidiarity, and solidarity in Pacem in Terris

Pacem in Terris describes human beings as social by nature (§31), and affirms that the good of the community is necessary for the full development of human flourishing (§58). The common good is “intimately bound up with human nature;” the human person must be “taken into account at all times” in order for the common good to “exist fully and completely” (§55). People also have an obligation to make their own specific contributions to the general welfare (§53), and must “recognize and perform their respective rights and duties” within their communities (§31).

Harmony between natural law and divine teaching with regard to these key principles is demonstrated by identifying God as the source of the order that prevails in human society. “[S]uch an order—universal, absolute and immutable in its principles—finds its source in the true, personal and transcendent God” (§38). Furthermore, it is God who has created human beings to be social by nature (§46), and so God is the author of the nature of human communities. The justification of civil authority is also clearly linked in natural law to God: “Hence every civilized community must have a ruling authority, and this authority, no less than society itself, *has its source in nature, and consequently has God for its author*” (§46). The moral order itself has God as its origin and end. (§47)

In *Pacem in Terris*, John XXIII especially emphasized the foundation of Catholic Social Teaching in natural law ethical theory. The Pope specifically addresses the letter to “all men of good will,” basing Catholic Social Teaching on principles of natural law ethics, which, as a philosophical ethical theory, could be recognized and accepted by everyone. In addition, the Church continues to deal with these issues, providing insight from both contemporary philosophical theories as well as biblical and theological scholarship, to instruct not only Catholics but also all people on these topics.

III: Catholic Social Teaching, Natural Law, and Ethical Social Work Practice: Application to Racial Disproportionality in Child Welfare

Application of Natural Law Theory to Codes of Ethics

While Shank (2007) and Brenden (2007) described the relationship between Catholic Social Teaching and social work ethics, in particular Catholic social work education, we have expanded this analysis by gauging the extent to which the precepts of natural law ethical theory and Catholic Social Teaching are consistent with social work ethics, surveying the ethical codes or statements of five professional associations of social workers: the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), the International Federation of Social Workers/International Association of Schools of Social Work (IFSW/IASSW), the North American Association of Christian Social Workers (NACSW),⁸ the Catholic Social Workers National Association (CSWNA), and the Clinical Social Work Association (CSWA). We first examined their content relative to human dignity, and then to the social principles described above in Catholic Social Teaching.

Human Dignity: Each of the codes examined articulates the value of human dignity.

- CSWNA charges its members to “respect the fundamental dignity and worth of all human persons from the moment of conception to natural death.” (CSWNA, I.a)

- CSWA cites “a commitment to the dignity, well-being, and self-determination of the individual” as a core value. (CSWA, Preamble)
- IFSW/IASSW states that “Social work is based on respect for the inherent worth and dignity of all people, and the rights that follow from this.” (IFSW/IASSW, IV.1)
- NACSW states that “Every individual is a person of worth, with basic human rights and essential human responsibilities.” (NACSW, 7)
- NASW states that “Social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person.” (NASW, Value 3 “Dignity and worth of the person”)

Social Principles: In approaching issues that arise as a result of human association, social work codes of ethics address a variety of concerns. Certain concerns occur consistently throughout these different codes:

- Anti-discrimination: CSWA, VI.a; CSWNA, I.i, III.2; IFSW/IASSW, 4.2.1; NACSW, 16; and NASW, Value 2 (Social Justice).
- Equitable distribution of resources, especially for poor and oppressed persons: CSWA, VI.c; CSWNA, II.j; IFSW/IASSW, 4.2.3 and 4.2.4; NACSW, 14; and NASW, Value 2 (Social Justice).
- Greater sense of community: CSWNA, I.f; IFSW/IASSW, 4.2.5; NACSW, 6; NASW, Value 4 (Importance of human relationships).
- Recognition of diversity: CSWNA, III.d and III.e; IFSW/IASSW, 4.2.2; NACSW, 8; and NASW, Value 3 (Dignity and worth of the person).

These codes of ethics, therefore, stress the importance of the human community and incorporate many of the subsidiary principles cited by the Pontifical Council for Justice & Peace, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and the Office for Social Justice as central themes of Catholic Social Teaching.

Application of Catholic Social Teaching to Racial Disproportionality in Child Welfare

Catholic Social Teaching, as described above, is based both on a philosophical foundation in natural law ethics and in its complementary theistic and Christian foundation, and holds all Catholics, not just social workers, to a standard that values human dignity and the good of the community, and requires Catholics to address injustice at several levels. Social Work codes of ethics are professionally chosen minimum standards set for social work practice. They recognize that social workers as professionals often help and/or represent society’s most vulnerable. Catholic social workers, and indeed all social workers who hold similar values and world views,

are challenged to fulfill the requirements of both. They must engage in protecting and fostering human dignity, promote positive communities, and secure common good for the least advantaged, not only in the United States, but also worldwide.

One of the primary injustices that nearly all social workers deal with, at least tangentially at some point in their career, is racial disproportionality: the overrepresentation of children and families of color in our least desirable systems, including child protection systems. While racism and oppression are mentioned numerous times in encyclicals and other papal discourses such as homilies, racial disproportionality provides a pressing and important application of Catholic Social Teaching to social work practice.

What is Racial Disproportionality?

Racial disproportionality describes an overrepresentation of a specific group relative to its representation in the entire population. Racial disproportionality in child welfare, then, is calculated by “dividing the percentage of children in a racial/ethnic group at a specific decision-making stage (i.e., investigation, substantiation, foster care placement) in the child welfare system by the percentage of children in that same racial/ethnic group in the census population” (Hill, 2007, p. 8). For example, the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2008 American Community Survey indicates that there were 10,229,000 Black children under the age of 18 in the general population, totaling 13.8% of the child population, while there were 41,379,000 White children representing 44.7% of the population (U.S. Census, 2010). The most recent preliminary statistics from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System for children in foster care between October 1, 2009 through September 30, 2010 (USDHHS, 2011) show that African American children represent 27% of children entering foster care, 29% of those in foster care, and 29% of those waiting to be adopted, or twice their representation in the population. In addition to disproportionality, African Americans receive disparate treatment once in the child welfare system, leading to longer stays in foster care (U.S. GAO, 2007).

Racial disproportionality, particularly the overrepresentation of African Americans and at times Hispanic/Latinos, is not limited to the child welfare system. A six-year longitudinal study of all seventh grades enrolled in public Texas schools in 2000–2002 found that not only were African American students disproportionately likely to be removed from the classroom for disciplinary reasons for discretionary violations, but 83% of all African American males had at least one discretionary violation, compared with 59% for White males (Fabelo, Thompson, Plotkin, Carmichael, Marchbanks, & Booth, 2011). In addition, students suspended or expelled were more likely to be held back a grade, and then become involved in the juvenile justice system the subsequent year. The Children’s Defense Fund (2007) highlighted

disparities in numerous systems, including education, mental health, health, child welfare, juvenile justice and criminal justice systems. Disproportionate representation and disparities of outcomes have been reported extensively for a number of years (McRoy, 2004, 2011; Lu, Landsverk, Ellis-MacLeod, Newton, Ganger, & Johnson, 2004; Needell, Brookhart, & Lee, 2003; Hill, 2007). A more complete review of the topic can be found in *Challenging Racial Disproportionality in Child Welfare: Research, Policy and Practice* (Green, Belanger, McRoy & Bullard, 2011).

Racial Disproportionality and Catholic Social Teachings

Human Dignity

Catholic Social Teaching requires us to recognize that human life is sacred and each human being, globally, is entitled to dignity and the necessary goods and tools of life (including labor with dignity, freedom, housing, food), to recognize that God shows no partiality (Acts 10:34, as quoted in Pontifical Council, 2004, §144) and that all people have an equal right to dignity (Pontifical Council, 2004, §144).

At the heart of racial disproportionality is the injustice suffered by individuals. Children of color who enter the child welfare system may be or may not be saved from abuse and/or neglect, but are most certainly denied dignity of their birth families and freedom within their own families to grow. In addition, children who enter foster care experience poorer life outcomes than other children, including higher poverty and homelessness, lower educational achievement, and other negative outcomes (Pecora, Kessler, O'Brien, White, Williams, Hiripi, English, White & Herrick, 2006). While there debate about the causes of racial disproportionality (see Bartholet, 2009; McRoy, 2011; Derezotes, 2011), racial disproportionality is an affront to human dignity and requires a just response.

Call to Family

Catholic Social Teaching emphasizes that families are the primary unit of community, sacred, “in the Creator’s plan ‘the *primary place of ‘humanization’* for the person and society’ and the ‘cradle of life and love’ (Pontifical Council, 2004, §209), the “sanctuary of life” (Pontifical Council, 2004, §231), and of central importance for the person and society (Pontifical Council, 2004 §212, 213).

While research often focuses on measurement of disproportionality, causation, and interventions, one of the key elements in understanding entry into the child welfare system, particularly into foster care, is the disruption of the family system. A child’s removal from the home, even temporarily, shatters the family system, in effect punishing struggling families

(Roberts, 2002) instead of providing the support and goods essential for human dignity. Catholic Social Teaching requires us to assess the needs of struggling families, to secure “equal dignity of all people” (Pontifical Council, 2004 §144) and to protect the family, the “cradle of life and love” and “sanctuary of life” (see above). A number of family-centered approaches to reducing disproportionality in child welfare have been reported to have achieved success, strengthened families, and recognized extended family partnerships (Marts, Lee, McRoy & McCroskey, 2011; Richardson, 2011; Schwartz, 2011). In addition, Catholic Social Teaching requires us to engage in preventative efforts to support the most vulnerable families prior to entry into the child welfare system, and to challenge systems that destroy the family.

Groups and Organizations

Catholic Social Teaching also recognizes the role of groups and organizations through its principle of subsidiarity.

It is impossible to promote the dignity of the person without showing concern for the family, groups, associations, local territorial realities; in short, for that aggregate of economic, social, cultural, sports-oriented, recreational, professional and political expressions to which people spontaneously give life and which make it possible for them to achieve effective social growth. This is the realm of *civil society*, understood as the sum of the relationships between individuals and intermediate social groupings (Pontifical Council, 2004, § 185).

Groups and organizations are critical in efforts to address disproportionality. In 2005, Casey Family Programs recognized the importance of engaging public child welfare organizations to reevaluate their roles related to racial disproportionality (Miller & Ward, 2011). They invited 13 public child welfare organizations to participate in their “Breakthrough Series Collaborative” in which they developed teams engaged in creating new strategies to address disproportionality. Texas public child welfare also engaged in organizational efforts to assess its role in disproportionality, to reverse the removal of African American children from their families, and to support at-risk families through family group decision-making processes (James, Green, Rodriguez, & Fong, 2011). In addition, they provided Undoing Racism training to teams of leaders throughout the state to change the organizational culture. While other organizations have been created and engaged to address disproportionality, Catholic Social Teaching challenges us to be part of the process: to assess our own organizations for racial bias

and for systems that punish vulnerable families rather than supporting them, and to determine whether there are intermediary groups that could be created or engaged to address disproportionality.

Communities

Catholic Social Teaching is based on a deep understanding of community, not only primarily in the family, but also in groups formed in solidarity. As depicted earlier, the principle of solidarity is itself one of the four basic tenets of Catholic Social Teaching.

Racial disproportionality is a distortion of community, with negative consequences and poor outcomes shared unequally. A number of studies have pointed to indicators that could be considered community as well as family level issues, including poverty, education, employment, and housing (Eamon & Kopels, 2004; Lin & Harris, 2008; Lu, Landsverk, Ellis-Macleod, Newton, Ganger, & Johnson, 2004; Stevens, 2006; Turner & Ross, 2002; Zárate, 2009). Racial disproportionality in child welfare is often engaged with individual and family systems, sometimes at the organizational level, but not as frequently at the community level. However there are many efforts to assess the community's disproportionality, to recognize the community impact of racial disproportionality, the community assets that can be harnessed, and the community interventions possible to challenge racial disproportionality. Harvard scholar Dorothy Roberts (2011) described the complex interactions of child welfare within an inner city Chicago neighborhood in her exploration of *The Racial Geography of Child Welfare* and Dettlaff and Rycraft (2011) conducted focus groups to determine community perceptions of disproportionality in Texas. Texas public child welfare created community disproportionality specialist positions throughout the state to work collaboratively with community stakeholders to successfully reduce disproportionality and improve other outcomes in child welfare (James, Green, Rodriguez & Fong, 2011). Numerous other states have also engaged communities to address disproportionality, including Indiana (Busch, Wall, Koch & Anderson, 2011) and Washington (Clark, Buchanan, & Letgers, 2011).

Communities of faith have been engaged in increasing foster and adoptive homes for children of color, beginning with the One Church One Child movement in Chicago founded by Catholic priest Father George H. Clements in 1980, encouraging churches to become engaged in finding homes for the huge number of waiting children. A number of faith communities, Catholic and otherwise, have helped their members adopt since that time (Belanger, Copeland, & Cheung, 2008).

Catholic Social Teaching and the Call to Address Racial Disproportionality

Catholic Social Teaching requires us to address racial disproportionality at all systems levels—the individual, the family, groups, organizations, and communities—and to engage civically in reshaping our laws and particularly our policies to create just communities in which each life, each family is recognized as sacred, and all have the resources they need to support their families and thrive. Catholic Social Teaching inspires us to act collectively, or in solidarity, to achieve an equal and just society in this country. The following are examples of specific ways in which this call to action can be followed:

1. We can investigate our own biases, and the biases of the systems in which we live, learn and work.

Do we make decisions based on universalization or well-founded moral principles such as those articulated in Catholic Social Teaching (Smith, 2011)? Or do we make them on the basis of our subjective perceptions or even prejudices? Do we interpret studies based on data or bias? Do we question research and use critical thinking? What basic assumptions are used in the policies and procedures of the systems, social work and otherwise, in which we live and work? Do we understand the ties of these kinds of biases to racial disproportionality? Have we taken steps to understand and recognize white privilege?

2. We can investigate the many causes of racial disproportionality, and the many disproportionate actions that occur outside of the child welfare system.

Do we understand how the criminal justice system works in our own communities, regions and states? Are we aware of disproportionate sentencing, of linkages between criminal justice and literacy? Have we investigated disproportionate negative consequences in our own school systems? Have we investigated disproportionate positive actions in our school systems (students in advanced courses, gifted/talented programs, students encouraged to apply to colleges)? How are the health systems in our own communities, regions and states working to advantage or disadvantage certain populations? How is housing arranged in our own communities? Is it racially segregated? What safety issues might there be related to housing that impact disproportionate entry into the child welfare system, in spite of quality parenting?

3. We can examine how faith communities can help address racial disproportionality.

How might bias, prejudice, and racism be evident in our faith communities? How racially segregated or integrated is your own faith community? What actions has your faith community taken to address injustices based on race? How is the common good addressed in solidarity between communities of faith? Is your faith community specifically involved in helping children waiting to be fostered or adopted?

4. We can make a conscious decision to address racial disproportionality in our own life and practice.

When we recognize or are called to recognize bias in our own lives, how do we react—with humility and determination or with anger and defensiveness? Do we speak up when we encounter bias, prejudice, racism, and distortions in our systems? What are we called to do?

As we are informed in the Compendium (Pontifical Council, 2004 §167), “*The common good therefore involves all members of society, no one is exempt from cooperating, according to each one’s possibilities, in attaining it and developing it...* The common good corresponds to the highest of human instincts, but it is a good that is very difficult to attain because it requires the constant ability and effort to seek the good of others as though it were one’s own good.” As social workers, those on the front line of social helping and justice, we can do better—individually, through our associations and groups, in our communities, and in our organizations. We can act like Christ. ❖

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ENDNOTES

1. Collectively, these obligations are described by Finnis as the requirements of justice. A key element in Finnis' account of justice is the concept of equality, or more precisely, proportionality, in the sense that, in some way, each person must be treated appropriately with regard to relevant circumstances. (pp. 162-163)

2. "As far as Aquinas is concerned, it should be clear that the term "natural law," as used in the present context, has not got the same sense as 'law of nature' when the law of gravitation, for example, is described as a law of nature or a natural law. If we talk about irrational things such as stones, obeying a natural law, the word 'law,' Thomas insists, is used analogically. For he regards law as a rule conceived by reason and promulgated with a view to the common good. And it hardly needs saying that stones neither promulgate any law to themselves nor recognize and consciously obey any law promulgated by a lawgiver. They can be described analogically as fulfilling laws of nature; but the ethical natural law is the totality of moral precepts promulgated by the human reason as a result of reflection on the nature of man in society" (Copleston 190).

3. Thus, these basic human values are self-evident (in the sense that everyone recognizes their truth without requiring a proof) (Finnis, 1980, p. 32; cf. Grisez pp. 348-349). Natural Law ethical theory recognizes that there is a wide variety of human opinions and practices regarding these basic values. Despite these differences, however, natural law ethical theorists, such as Aquinas and Finnis, assert that the basic values (forms of human flourishing) "at least to the extent that they concern [a person's] own good ... are recognized by anyone who reaches the age of reason and who has enough experience to know what they refer to ... [This assertion] amounts to no more than saying that any sane person is capable of seeing that life, knowledge, fellowship, offspring, and a few other such basic aspects of human existence are, as such, good, i.e., worth having, leaving to one side ... all questions of whether and how one is to devote oneself to these goods." (Finnis, 1980, p. 30)

4. "Theologically, Thomas exemplified a theme that Charles Curran has described as the importance of the Catholic *both/and*. By this is meant Aquinas's fundamental conviction that faith *and* reason are compatible; that nature *and* grace are complementary; and that church *and* world are distinct but called to collaborate for the good of the human community" (Hehir, 2010, p. 31).

5. Because of the influence of this encyclical both within the Church and in society as a whole, it is regarded as the "foundation and catalyst" of modern Catholic Social Teaching (Hehir 32).

6. Leo XIII had placed Thomistic philosophy and theology, including Aquinas's view of the harmony between faith and reason, at the center of the intellectual life of the Church in his encyclical *Aeterni Patris* ("Of the Eternal Father"), issued during the first year of his pontificate (1879).

7. Parallels among natural law as a justification for private property, the necessity for a living wage, and the right to enter into private associations may be found thusly: private property §§6-15; living wage §§44-46 (e.g. "natural right to procure what is required to live" §44); right to enter into private associations (§§50-53).

8. The core values of the NACSW are expressed in their "Statement of Faith and Practice." <<http://www.nacsw.org/statement.html>>, accessed January 5, 2012. The NACSW does not have a separate code of ethics; as is stated on their website, "*The Statement of Faith and Practice is misperceived by some to be a professional code of eth-*

ics, replacing or in competition with the NASW and other codes of ethics. NACSW has never intended to portray itself as a competitor with or alternative to NASW, nor our Statement of Faith and Practice as an alternative to the NASW Code of Ethics.” <<http://sites.google.com/site/nacswconvention/member-application-update>>, accessed January 5, 2012.

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Key Words: race, disproportionality, social work, religion, Catholic, Catholic Social Teachings, ethics, natural law