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PRACTICING SOCIAL JUSTICE: A VIRTUE-BASED APPROACH

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Practicing Social Justice: A Virtue-Based Approach

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If little has been heard about poverty or the poor in this 2012 election year, the same cannot be said about social justice. In light of the vast increase in government spending on the poor and the lack of any evident decline in poverty, perhaps it should have been the other way round.

Social justice is a much used but ill-defined and problematic term in both Catholic social teaching (CST) where it developed and in social work, where it has become a “core value.” Drawing on the traditions of CST, Novak’s (e.g., 1993; 2003) work on social justice, and virtue ethics (Adams, 2009), I want to propose a way to clarify the concept and integrate it into our faith and practice. Social justice is dismissed by some, especially economists, as code for a particular partisan political program or as an all-purpose justification for a new law, right, or program. Conceptually, social justice combines the classical duality of justice as state of affairs and as state of character (virtue). In the case of social justice, the virtue sense has been neglected and the term reduced to a matter of government policies and programs.

As the NASW (2008) *Code of Ethics* has it, the value of social justice involves, as its ethical principle, challenging social injustice, (a state of affairs) “focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice.” The issues identified seem to be states of affairs to be remedied rather than things people do. At the same time, the ethical principle specifies certain activities in which social workers are expected habitually to engage: “Social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people” - that is, social justice involves or constitutes a virtue, an acquired disposition to act in a certain way. In this one short paragraph, the *Code* expresses the duality between regulative principle or state of affairs on one hand and virtue on the other, which critics claim renders the whole concept incoherent and ideological.

The most comprehensive and telling critique of the term and its use was made by Hayek (1976), who sees in it a utopian statism and conflation of ends and means. It becomes in practice an all-purpose justification for any expansion of state power vis a vis civil society. It moves directly from the obligation to relieve or eliminate poverty, on which Christians and others across the political spectrum agree, to the assumption that the way to do this is through Federal programs of social assistance, what John Paul II (1991, #48) called (and warned against), the “social assistance state.”

Those who want to end poverty but see such programs as often counterproductive in their design and consequences, are seen not as sharing a common value but different strategy. They are condemned as unfeeling and lacking in compassion. They are committed to a value of social injustice, in the opinion of those for whom social justice and ever-increasing Federal spending are inseparable. But no-one espouses social injustice as a value, any more than any society adopts injustice or cowardice as a cardinal virtue. Thus Novak (1993) summarizes Hayek's objection: "Those who claim to speak for social justice prejudice arguments concerning means and ends by defining their opponents as 'unjust.' In brief, use of the term social justice is moral imperialism by the imposition of abstraction" (p.77).

Recent work in virtue ethics and Novak's response to Hayek's challenge suggest a way through the conceptual fog by recovering an understanding of social justice as a virtue (Novak, 2009). It is part of the cardinal virtue of justice, but social in its orientation to the common good and in its constitutive practices. Central both to social work and CST, the virtue of social justice requires habits of heart and mind that sustain the intermediary associations and institutions that stand between individual and state. Its aim is to improve the common good beyond the home (the virtue of giving the community its due) and it involves working with others, requiring skills and habits of cooperation and association.

My aim here is not to pursue the argument about the coherence or incoherence of social justice as state of affairs, regulative principle, or criterion against which to measure policies and legislation. Laying that question to the side, I want to examine the other aspect of social justice and to suggest that it is the core virtue of social work *practice*.

As distinct from the view of social justice as ideal state of affairs, the virtue of social justice focuses on the kind of person a social worker (especially a Christian one) should be. It asks how the virtue of social justice is required for and developed by normal, everyday practice at all levels and in all fields.

Practicing the virtue of social justice conforms to the CST principle of subsidiarity, which holds that “needs are best understood and satisfied by people who are closest to them and who act as neighbors to those in need” (John Paul II, 1991, #48). It requires seeing people as active, creative, caring contributors to their families and communities, and hence the common good, rather than as passive recipients and dependents of the “social assistance state” (John Paul II, 1991, #48).

A virtue-based approach to social justice brings to social work practice a more adequate Christian anthropology of the human person than that implicit in either individualist or collectivist visions of social reality. As such, and as we will examine through restorative justice and other practices, the virtue of social justice supports an empowerment-based practice that strengthens families and communities, so promoting democracy and the common good (Tocqueville, 2004) by building up rather than substituting for the caring capacity of those closest to the situation.

Social Justice in Practice: Three Examples

Let’s begin by considering three examples of ways of helping that practice and promote the virtue of social justice. They are the kind of microfinance developed by the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, the patch approach to community-centered, locality-based social work practice pioneered in the UK and transferred to various parts of the US, and Family Group Conferencing (FGC) as developed in New Zealand and adopted and adapted in the US and many other countries.

Grameen Bank

Like the Franciscan friars of the fifteenth century and Archbishop McGrath, C.S.C. (1924-2000) of Panama City in the twentieth, the economist Muhammad Yunus (2007) saw the importance of providing small loans at low interest to poor people (primarily women) so that they could use their entrepreneurial creativity and energy to build small businesses. As loans

were repaid, new loans could be made to other borrowers in the community. In the Grameen Bank case, a key aspect of the program is the forming of groups of women “who repay their loans via frequent installments in a group setting” (Feigenberg, Field, & Pande, 2010). As Feigenberg *et al.* say, citing Larance (2001), “Repayment meetings provide clients opportunities they did not have before including ‘walking across the village to attend the center meeting, sitting in conversation with a diverse set of women, handling money for the group and receiving personal address.’”

This approach can be and is discussed in terms of social capital (Putnam, 1993) - the trust, norms of reciprocity, and networks - that is, in terms of the forms of social organization the program develops. But it also illustrates how a program may require and develop, in both its organizers and clients, the virtue of social justice, the personal disposition and habit of joining with others to promote the common good.

Patch

Patch is an approach to delivering social services, including child protection and other forms of social care, that utilizes a locality-based integrated team of human service workers (Adams & Krauth, 1995; Adams, Alter, Krauth, St. Andre, Tracy, 1995; Adams, 2000). I was involved through a Federal technology transfer demonstration grant in the early 1990s in adapting the British approach in a distressed neighborhood in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. The Iowa patch team has continued in expanded and modified form and other patch teams have sprung up in various parts of the country since.

In the UK, a patch team would usually, but not always involve a single agency, the local authority social services department responsible for statutory child welfare, mental health, aging, and other services. The agency’s social work and other staff were redeployed from a central downtown office to a number of small, neighborhood-based teams and given responsibility for work within a locality, usually of about 10,000 residents. The team contained specialists in various areas of practice but, as a team, offered integrated, comprehensive services.

In the context of a more fragmented American urban service system, the Iowa Patch Project integrated staff from five state or local programs: Iowa Human Services (four child protection social workers, Juvenile Court

Services (a probation officer), City Housing (inspector), County Homemaker Services, and a community center) into a multi-agency team located conveniently within the neighborhood. The idea was to take advantage of some decategorization of funding streams in order to offer changed practice on the ground.

The team started with the recognition that most helping in communities is non-professional, involving extended family, friends and neighbors, churches and informal networks, schools and voluntary associations, beauty parlors and natural helping figures, groups, and systems. The task of social work, they concluded, was to identify who else was involved and close to the situation, to enable them to tap into their own wisdom, knowledge of the situation, and resources in order to interrupt problem-perpetuating patterns of relationship. Such an approach requires decentering both the service system and the professional-client relationship. It depends on teamwork among and partnership between the patch members and the residents of the neighborhood.

The shift in practice - from case by case work to shared teamwork, from reactive to proactive (from crisis response to providing a little help when needed at an earlier stage), from professional responsibility for solutions to shared responsibility among those involved, and to the interweaving of formal and informal helping - is best illustrated by an example. On visiting a house to inspect it for code violations, the housing inspector (who despite her lack of any social work education, was one of the first to grasp the patch concept) found some frayed electrical wiring. In the past this would have been the extent of her professional concern. But she also noticed a single mother, new to the neighborhood, with several children and only one piece of furniture, a sofa. She brought this information back to the team, which sent out an MSW practicum student and a CPS worker to talk to the woman. They put her in touch with a local church which set her up with needed furniture and with a moms' group that the team had initiated. Thanks to "a little help when needed," what might have turned in a few months into a formal case of child neglect never became an official case at all (Adams, 2000).

Responding in this way depended on the role flexibility and shared work of the team members, their proactive approach (the norm would have been for CPS to target more serious cases where bruises were evident, a child had run away or committed a serious offense), and their prior work in the

neighborhood. They were able to involve the church because they had already built relations with the churches in the neighborhood. The moms' group had developed out of a TaeKwonDo class offered free to local kids by the probation officer. The moms would hang around during the class, chat with each other despite their own isolation or shyness, and a regular moms' group formed naturally and continued under its own steam.

Family Group Conferencing

As an alternative to honor killings and vendettas between families, some form of restorative justice practice seems to have been universal across time, place, and cultures prior to the development of the modern state as a way of confronting and correcting injustices and making things right (Braithwaite, 2002). Of the many adaptations across the world to the context of the bureaucratic-professional state, ranging from addressing cases of minor delinquency to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, I want to focus briefly on the use of the Family Group Conference (FGC) in New Zealand and Hawai'i.

In both countries there was a surviving indigenous practice of family group meetings, the *whanau hui* (Maori) and *ho'oponopono* (Hawaiian). In each case the state's child welfare system has drawn on this experience to develop a hybrid process of traditional and modern, formal-legal and informal, to address cases of child abuse and neglect among the whole population, indigenous and other. These processes are the FGC in New Zealand and 'Ohana Conference in Hawai'i. The professional practice in both cases is to plan for and conduct a meeting of the extended family group (*whanau*, *'ohana*) to address the concerns about the children's safety and to come up with a plan to ensure it. The phases of the meeting vary, but include at least introductions, information sharing, private family time, and a decision about the plan, how to monitor it, follow up, and reconvene as needed. The professionals who have been involved, like the conference coordinator, social worker, school counselor, and therapist, share their knowledge of the situation and answer questions. Then they leave the family alone to discuss the situation and formulate a plan. The plan, which may involve (extended) family, community, and agency resources, is nearly always accepted after some clarification and negotiation. Families are far more creative in generating options and utilizing family and community resources than social workers who rely on their own professional skill and knowledge of resources and the situation to develop a plan.

The relation of family and community to state is one Braithwaite (2002) describes, by analogy to regulating business, as “responsive regulation” and Adams and Chandler (2004) call “state-enforced family self-regulation.” In either case, the state does not abdicate responsibility for the “bottom line” (child safety in this case) and retains its full coercive power in the background, but it widens the circle of responsibility for finding and implementing solutions and aims to keep family self-governance and empowerment in the foreground.

Person in Social Environment: A Christian Perspective

If we ask what these three approaches have in common we can see that they all imply a certain view of the human person and her environment that is neither individualist nor collectivist, not laissez faire or statist. Here we may draw upon the work of John Paul II. Central to all of his teaching is the need for an adequate understanding of the dignity and destiny of the human person. Drawing on his major contributions to CST (John Paul II, 1991) and to the theology of the body (John Paul II, 2006), we can discern three dimensions of the theological anthropology of the human person - the personal, social, and societal. All three are necessary components of an understanding of the virtue of social justice.

Personal dimension

John Paul II discusses the subjectivity of the person and the subjectivity of society as key principles of CST. Persons cannot be reduced to their economic functions, either as cogs in a machine or as individual economic actors, without violence to their humanity as persons in *imago Dei*. They are self-experiencing moral agents, with creativity, initiative, resourcefulness, and capacity for innovation and problem-solving. They should never be reduced, he argues, to passive recipients of services or targets of intervention (see also Benedict XVI, 2006). We are all created out of love and for love by God, who is love. Created in his image, we are creative. Our creation out of and for love reveals, in the words of a key passage in the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes*, 24:3, “a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons and the union of God’s sons in truth and love. This likeness shows that man, who is the only creature on earth God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of self (cf. Lk 17:33).”

Social work from the beginning drew on this need to find ourselves through a sincere gift of self. Jane Addams (1893) speaks eloquently of “The subjective necessity of social settlements.” We have not always recognized this need of our clients also to give, to contribute in association with others to the solutions of the problems they confront. As persons created in the image and likeness of God, they too have a need to make a sincere gift of self.

Social dimension

Persons are social by nature, John Paul II argues. It is natural for them to cooperate with others beyond their immediate families to build associations, to join together as free individuals to take responsibility for the common good. American society, as Tocqueville noted, has been characterized not so much by rugged individualism, as usually understood, as by the virtue of joining with others to achieve a common good, such as digging a well, building a church, or raising a barn. Americans relied not on themselves as lone individuals, nor on the state as the French did, nor on the benefactions of aristocrats as did the English in his view. Instead they relied on the principle of association, which Tocqueville described as the first law of democracy.

The call to be co-creators with God runs through all of CST. In work, we are also co-creators with each other. Even creating something as simple as a pencil is a collaborative enterprise. We live in an economic system defined by creativity and participation with others in transforming goods of the earth to serve human needs. The decisive factor in production in today’s economy, John Paul (1991) argues, is man himself, his knowledge and capacity for perceiving the needs of others, and collaboration.

Societal dimension

Jewish and secular, the Russian dissident and Israeli cabinet minister Natan Sharansky (2006) described Jesus’ response to his questioners, “Render unto Caesar,” as the “anti-totalitarian principle” (p.33). Of the great papal authors of CST, Leo XIII foresaw the dangers of the all-powerful state, Pius XI saw its growth around him, John Paul II lived most of his life under it in both Nazi and Communist forms, and Benedict grew up in a deeply anti-Nazi Catholic family in a totalitarian Nazi state.

Like all the papal encyclicals on CST, John Paul II's stress the importance for human dignity of the state's supporting and allowing the social space between state and individual, the associations or intermediary groups through which people exercise their freedom and their nature as social beings.

The point here is that when people join together in intermediary associations to improve things of direct interest to themselves, they also build a dense civil society, a rich and diverse social space between individual or family and the state. CST consistently warns of the dangers of state hegemony over or domination of civil society. It is consistent in this way with the republicanism inherited from Ancient Rome, which emphasized freedom from domination by the state or sovereign; a mixed constitution with separation and sharing of powers so that the reins of government were not gathered in the hands of an individual or group; and an active role for citizens with contestation and accountability (Pettit, 1999).

Leo XIII, the champion of free associations, saw that these intermediary groups were important not only for their correspondence to the personal and social nature of man, but also for the common good of the society as a whole. The state, therefore, has a special responsibility to ensure the freedom and vitality of civil society and not to seek to subject to its will the structures and institutions that mediate between state and individual.

Origins of 'Social Justice'

With this emphasis, Leo, in his 1891 encyclical letter, *Rerum Novarum*, set up the approach that Pius XI forty years later captured with the term "social justice," deploying it throughout his 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, and thereby making it canonical in CST.

Leo was responding to the social dislocation and dehumanizing conditions of nineteenth-century capitalism, the breakup of traditional society, the threat to family, child labor, the factories, mines, and sweatshops with their inhuman conditions for the men, women, and children who worked in them, and the cold utilitarian ideology vividly portrayed by Dickens in *Hard Times* (1854). But he also offered an alternative to what he argued was the wrong response to these developments, socialism. Leo denounced

statism and egalitarianism in favor of the defense of private (or “several” in Novak’s preferred term) property, which was a condition of common prosperity and freedom of speech and action.

At the same time, Leo insisted on the right to a living wage, something made realistic by the economic dynamism of the industrial market economy. Our understanding, since Adam Smith, of the cause of the wealth of nations makes poverty no longer an unavoidable condition and for that reason a sin. Without that understanding of the cause of wealth as a principle of CST, “social justice Catholicism” and the “preferential option for the poor” tend to a static view of poverty as something which continues to be a permanent feature of the human condition. Compassion readily turns into a matter of feeling sorry for the poor, sustaining them in their poverty, and having the State do something to provision them. The poor themselves remain passive objects of assistance in a social assistance state.

The right of free association, first defended by Aquinas ([1256] 1902) in *Contra Impugnantes*, was an essential part of Leo’s vision and Leo was its great champion. It was the guarantee against a Leviathan state, the absolute sovereign over every sphere of life as proposed by Hobbes and Rousseau. The associations or intermediary groups of civil society are the hidden gem of CST, overlooked not least by those who advocate for CST and “social justice” precisely as an argument for the increased reach and power of the state over civil society.

Pius XI recognized the great gains made since Leo’s time in living standards and working conditions, but saw also the rise of the totalitarian state in Italy and Germany, against which he urgently and repeatedly warned. At the same time there is an ambiguity in his use of the term “social justice,” where both its senses - virtue and ideal state of affairs - are present but unreconciled (Novak, 1993) .

Social Work and *Rerum Novarum*

Both Leo’s *Rerum Novarum*, the first great work of modern CST, and social work as a practice, were late nineteenth century responses to the conditions of labor in an industrial market economy. Both were anti-socialist but pro-labor, both expressed concern for the poor and for workers as persons, and opposed their reduction to economic units or functions, considered only in the utilitarian terms espoused by Dickens’s memorable character Thomas

Gradgrind in *Hard Times*, a “practical man” who believed only in cold, hard facts.

Social work’s pioneers saw the inadequacy of random handouts - “not alms but a friend” was the slogan of the Charity Organization Societies, which sought to provide help that really helped, that built on a relationship with and understanding of the person helped, her situation and needs. In this they opposed not only random almsgiving that made the giver feel good but also compassionate but did little or nothing to address real needs and the “liberal” approach of another Dickens character, Ebenezer Scrooge, who declined to contribute to charity, believing that the government should take care of social problems and that was what he paid taxes for.

The Settlement House movement, like the COS but with different methods, sought to build relationships with poor people. The urban ‘settlers’ both practiced and promoted social justice, joining with others and stimulating the formation of groups and associations of various kinds to work for the common good of the immigrant neighborhood residents and of the city. They assisted and supported labor unions, the development of the fields of public health and labor law, cultural groups and projects (most lasting of which, perhaps, was the *Settlement House Cookbook*). They organized and campaigned against government corruption and the spoils system. They saw their poor immigrant neighbors as creative members of the community with much to contribute. They offered and worked for an alternative both to class conflict - they aimed to bridge the gap between the classes - and to a cold indifference or casual ‘charity.’

Both COS and Settlement House movements saw the need for social reforms but neither saw the way forward in terms of increased government spending or state-run, tax-funded social programs or what John Paul II called the social assistance state. Both might have said, with Pope Benedict XVI (2006), “The state which would provide everything, absorbing everything into itself, would ultimately become a mere bureaucracy incapable of guaranteeing the very thing the suffering person – any person – needs: namely, loving personal concern” (p. 69).

Social Justice as a Virtue

Just as social work and CST emerged as responses to the new social conditions, with their new freedoms and new dislocations, insecurities, and

needs, so social justice emerged as a new virtue, a new form of the cardinal virtue of justice for the new times. As a virtue, it involves giving others their due, not individually as when one justly pays one bills, but socially as when one gives the community its due. It is the virtue of joining with others to achieve common purposes. It is the virtue Tocqueville noticed in the United States, where citizens relied on their own resourcefulness and initiative to achieve a common purpose. It is social both in its aims (the common good) and in its constitutive practices.

Social justice is the virtue required for and developed by civil society. It empowers the mediating structures (Berger & Neuhaus, 1996), the space between individual and state, the free associations admired by Tocqueville in America and championed by Leo XIII. From this perspective, it is a mistake to think of those key principles of CST, solidarity and subsidiarity, as opposing or balancing each other, such that solidarity is associated with the common good which in turn is associated with state power, while subsidiarity is associated with the market and private property. They are different kinds of concept. Both apply to the duties of the state, as John Paul II (1991, #48) says, but both apply also to communities of a lower order, that is, those that constitute civil society or the intermediary groups.

Subsidiarity is a principle of social organization, according to which “a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to coordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good” (John Paul II, 1991, #48). Solidarity is the principle of love or *caritas*, of friendship and willing the good of the other as other. Like “a view to the common good,” it should characterize social practices and structures at every level from neighborhood initiatives and local religious associations to Federal programs.

The heart of solidarity, as of social work, is relationship. In this respect, central government, though sometimes necessary to meet needs and address problems that cannot be handled at lower levels, as well as to support and protect those lower levels from its own bureaucratic and controlling tendencies, is at a distinct disadvantage. As Archbishop Chaput (2009) argues, “Government cannot love. It has no soul and no heart. The greatest danger of the modern secularist state is this: In the name of

humanity, under the banner of serving human needs and easing human suffering, it ultimately, ironically—and too often tragically—lacks humanity” (p.29).

Speaking to the personnel who carry out the Church’s charitable activity and warning them against being diverted into a radical utopian activism in the name of justice, Benedict sees that, more than anything, these workers (and we could say Christian social workers in any setting) “must be persons moved by Christ’s love, persons whose hearts Christ has conquered with his love, awakening in them a love of neighbor” (p.85).

The social worker whose character is formed in Christian love has, as a deep part of her character, a radical humility—which is necessary both to the virtue of love and to professional competence.

My deep personal sharing in the needs and sufferings of others becomes a sharing of my very self with them: if my gift is not to prove a source of humiliation, I must give to others not only something that is my own, but my very self; I must be personally present in my gift (Benedict XVI, 2006, p.87).

Benedict invokes here the radical humility of Christ on the Cross, which in Christian understanding redeemed us and constantly comes to our aid. In helping we also receive help, Benedict (2006) says—being able to help is no merit or achievement of our own. “This duty is a grace” (p.88).

The virtue of social justice expresses two aspects of the human person in society emphasized by John Paul II in *Centesimus Annus* and which, as we saw, find expression in the three programs we discussed, the Grameen Bank, Patch, and Family Group Conferencing. The first he calls the *subjectivity of the individual*. The person as self-experiencing agent cannot be reduced to his economic functions. From the Christian vision of the person as co-creator and unable fully to find himself except through the sincere gift of self (*Gaudium et Spes*, 24:3; Lk 17:33), arises the correct view of society.

This second aspect refers to the social nature of man, the fact that persons are social, not as bees in a nest or cogs in a machine, but precisely in their full humanity. This is what John Paul calls the *subjectivity of society*. From this conception follows the need for “structures of participation and

shared responsibility” (*Centesimus Annus*, #46) as well as the understanding of all CST that our social nature is not subsumed under the state, which is one expression of it. The intermediary groups that we form in the social space between individual (and family) and state are expressions of our human nature that call for respect and forbearance on the state’s part.

Social Work and the Virtues

Since the virtues have been neglected in social work theory and education for more than fifty years, notwithstanding the revival of virtue ethics in other fields like medicine and law, it may be helpful, before discussing social justice as a uniquely social work virtue, to examine the relation of social work to the virtues in general (Adams, 2009).

In the preamble to the NASW Code of Ethics, the term “well-being” occurs three times. “The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being.... A historic and defining feature of social work is the profession’s focus on individual well-being in a social context and the well-being of society.” According to the 2008 version of EPAS (CSWE, 2008), “The purpose of the social work profession is to promote human and community well-being.” For Aristotle, *eudaimonia*, translated as well-being, flourishing, or happiness (which in its classical sense resembles health in that it is not simply subjective—I could be wrong about being happy as I could about my health) connotes the good life. The virtues, in this tradition, are necessary for and partly constitute the good life, that is, the well-being of individual and society—the mission of social work.

For Aristotle, then, as well as Aquinas, and for that matter, the Dalai Lama, ethics is rooted in “real” happiness, understood as human flourishing or well-being, as distinct from pleasure (Aquinas, 1981, 2005; Aristotle, 2002; Pinckaers, 1995). The key New Testament term “joy” clearly does not mean anything like the utilitarian concept of happiness as pleasure. As is the case for other animals, flourishing is about what, given our nature, is necessary for humans to thrive as individuals and— inseparably from that—as communities. Aristotle thus roots the human need for the virtues in biology, in what it takes for humans to flourish given their nature (including above all the capacity for reason).

Virtues are not simply means to human flourishing, however, but partially constitute it. For Aquinas, building directly on Aristotle but sixteen hundred years later in the very different context of Christian theology, there were three types of good inherent in our nature as humans that defined our telos. Like all animals, it is a good for us 1) to maintain ourselves in existence and 2) to reproduce ourselves and care for our offspring. In contrast to other creatures, it is also a good for humans 3) to develop and use the powers of rational thought and, in consequence, to know and love God (*Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae 94.2; Williams, 2005).

In social work where the character of the agent has long been understood as inseparable from the professional act or intervention performed, the virtues refocus attention on the character of the practitioner and the professional use of self. This reorientation accords well with the growing body of research suggesting the importance of the client-practitioner relationship as distinct from the specific theories or methods employed (Drisko, 2004; Graybeal, 2007; Wampold, 2001).

In the classical view, then, ethics is fundamentally about individual and community well-being or happiness, *eudaimonia*. The virtues are key to and partly constitute human well-being. Social work aspires to serve human goods that are important for individual and community well-being. To that extent as well as because of the importance of the social worker's character, social work is, no less than medicine, a virtue-based profession (Adams, 2009).

From these considerations, we can see that achieving the purpose of social work (to "promote human and community well-being") requires both promoting the virtues in others and practicing them ourselves. Among the virtues, however, that of social justice holds - or should hold - a distinctive place in social work practice. As the disposition to form associations, to join with others to achieve common goods, it both requires and develops in practitioners and those with whom we work those "habits of the heart" (Tocqueville, 2000) that protect the true social nature of man, the "subjectivity of society," against the excesses both of individualism and collectivism. Its practice helps protect the mediating structures (Berger & Neuhaus, 1996), the associations of civil society, against the state's direct custodianship.

Promoting Social Justice

Promoting social justice necessarily requires work at multiple system levels and includes attention to the social conditions in which the virtue (and other virtues) flourishes or withers. The moral-cultural, political, and economic systems interact either to discourage or encourage initiative, creativity, responsibility, and the civic virtues that build social capital. The discouraging kind of configuration of cultural, political, and economic systems has been documented in the feudal structures that reduce serfs to a passivity that limits responsibility to the dictum, “pray, pay, and obey;” in the Mafia-influenced world of southern Italy studied by Putnam (1993), where trust and civic responsibility do not reach beyond the extended family; and in the kind of cultural-political-economic structures described by John Paul II (1991), where “by intervening directly and depriving society of its responsibility, the Social Assistance State leads to a loss of human energies and an inordinate increase of public agencies, which are dominated more by bureaucratic ways of thinking than by concern for serving their clients, and which are accompanied by an enormous increase in spending” (*Centesimus Annus*, #48).

On the other hand, political and economic policies and the culture can encourage initiative, creativity, responsibility, community, practicality - civic virtues and social capital by sustaining

- economic freedom in the framework of law (property rights, including patent laws - Art.I, sec.8 of the U.S. Constitution; restriction of child labor; right to organize, etc.). The importance of these things for economic development and fighting poverty worldwide are well described by DeSoto (2000), Collier (2007);
- political freedom: from torture or slavery, but also respecting the subjectivity of society and intermediary groups as opposed to seeking state control of all;
- cultural freedom: to think, investigate, create, in the arts and sciences, in journalism and other fields, and to practice one’s religion and exercise one’s conscience freely.

That is, as John Paul II argues, a free economy - capitalism rightly understood, in which the economic sector is “circumscribed within a strong juridical framework which places it at the service of human freedom in its totality, and which sees it as a particular aspect of that freedom, the core of which is ethical and religious” (*Centesimus Annus*, # 42) - is the system in

which people are best able to exercise and develop their creative potential. Such an economic system, appropriately circumscribed, “recognizes the fundamental and positive role of business, the market, private property and the resulting responsibility for the means of production, as well as free human creativity in the economic sector” (*Centesimus Annus*, #42).

Practicing Social Justice

For a social worker, practicing social justice involves habits of joining with others (teamwork) to work for change in multiple systems, seeing families (supported by decision-making and self-governance processes like FGCs) as building blocks of democracy, not passive recipients of services. Practitioners learn to listen to, deliberate with, and support others involved while modeling and reinforcing those practices in the families and communities with which they work. As a virtue, social justice entails a disposition to practice and develop the skills of collaboration, partnership practice, and empowerment for the common good.

Pellegrino (2008) has developed a list of virtues required for and developed by the practice of medicine. Virtuous doctors in his view are those who apply their knowledge and skills by exercising such virtues as prudence, benevolence, compassion and caring, courage, intellectual honesty, humility, effacement of self-interest, justice, and trustworthiness (Pellegrino, 2008, and Pellegrino & Thomasma, 1993). A similar list could be developed for the virtuous social worker, with social justice working in unity with the other virtues to form her character and practice. In social work (but also in medicine) equanimity needs to be added to the list.

Joining with others in a decision-making and problem-solving process like FGC requires self-mastery (the cardinal virtue of temperance or moderation) with respect to the occupational tendency to assume an ultimacist attitude - e.g., here’s the plan and here’s what you have to do if you want to get your kids back. Equanimity is the virtue that recognizes, in this context, that I am not the family’s boss, I have a limited mandate (which, however, cannot be abrogated) to ensure that the family’s plan offers a good chance of keeping the children safe (Fisher, 1994). But that responsibility does not extend to determining the content of the plan, substituting my better idea for the family’s, or requiring services or treatment that I think helpful for a parent though not evidently needed for the child’s safety.

Joining with others in collaboration to improve a situation and achieve a common good requires, at every system level, recognition and acceptance of the fact that one may not and should not always get one's way. Negotiating care in the community at the level of individual families and their networks requires the devolution as close to the front line as possible of authority to make agreements and commit resources. Otherwise, if workers agree to negotiated decisions that are subsequently countermanded by managers who were not involved in the negotiation, families and communities will become disillusioned and cynical about the public agency's commitment to partnership and empowerment (Adams & Nelson, 1997; Smale & Tuson, 1993; Adams, 2000).

For this reason, Hawaii's Department of Human Services modified the rules for its statewide family group conferencing program, called 'Ohana Conferencing, to prohibit supervisors from overruling conference decisions if they themselves had not been present at the conference (Adams & Chandler, 2002; 2004). In New Zealand, the family's plan stands unless the social worker successfully challenges it in court. Where such safeguards do not protect the decision-making process, and collaborative decisions are vetoed, the result is not to practice or promote the virtue of social justice, but to undermine it by making joining with others in such processes seem pointless.

Practicing social justice as a professional social worker involves working with those closest to the situation to enable them to tap into and strengthen their own cultural, material, and network resources. The aim is to share (but not abdicate) responsibility for resolving problems with others, not only addressing the immediate problem but also leaving the caring capacity of families and communities stronger than before. Practicing social justice as a virtue, as an abiding state or part of one's own character, also entails promoting that virtue in those individuals in families, small groups, formal and informal associations, and communities with whom we join.

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