



## CHAPTER TWO

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# MOVING FROM CHARITY TO JUSTICE

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**M**OVING FROM charity to justice in an educational setting is a complex process. There seems to be a growing willingness on the part of administrators, teachers and campus ministers across the country to make the shift, but this good will is mixed with hesitance. The concern is legitimate. No one is likely to raise much dust by planning a Christmas basket drive, but start talking about welfare reform and life quickly gets interesting. The challenges involved in creating structural change are daunting to all.

While the image commonly used of the “two feet” of charity and justice is valid, experientially there actually seem to be five distinct steps on the continuum between charity and justice. These five stages form a natural growth pattern for individuals and for school communities. Each carries its own possibilities and challenges.

### *Stage One: Collections*

The first stage focuses on collections: Christmas food baskets, monetary contributions for countries far away, gathering mittens or underwear for a local free store. Collections bring real relief of immediate needs, and many people in communities have grown to depend on Catholic schools’ efforts in this arena.

The hidden challenge of success with collections, which can creep up and catch participants unaware, is sometimes called

“compassion fatigue.” As faculty and staff members volunteer and develop loyalties to organizations, the number of causes grows. As the school comes to be seen as a resource by social service agencies, it receives more and more requests for help. Collections usually offer minimal opportunity to form a bond with recipients; contact is generally limited to information distributed via posters and announcements. In some highly active schools, response to the traditional collections eventually begins to decline due to the large number of new drives during the school year.

To maintain a generous student response, it may become necessary to monitor the number of causes adopted. While it is difficult to turn down requests for help, leaders need to assess the resources available to the school community and make prudent judgments about allocating them.

### *Stage Two: Direct Service*

Direct service is the familiar work of raking leaves, sandbagging during a flood, providing child care at a shelter, or serving a meal at a soup kitchen. It generally involves students going out to community sites and directly filling needs.

These activities push comfort zones and often put participants in close contact with people whose worlds are different from their own. For teachers and campus ministers, ongoing service opportunities can be grounding experiences that renew their awareness of their relative privilege and strengthen the commitment to help. Direct service fills real needs in the community while providing wonderful opportunities for students to learn and to grow. It is the bread and butter of most school programs.

Direct service often breaks down some student stereotypes and widens their circle of compassion. However, without reflection, these programs may simply reinforce students' prejudices. Structured reflection greatly enriches these experiences and provides an effective bridge toward making this activity a truly Catholic experience.

Running an effective service program requires a significant investment in staff time. Students need to be kept safe, held accountable, and given support in new and challenging experiences. Administrative support in adequately staffing service programs can

mean the difference between longterm sustainability and burnout.

An awareness of the different types of service opportunities available can help educators plan programs more effectively. Direct service lends itself to either short or long-term commitments. The shotgun approach—one-time service opportunities in a variety of settings—is a good method for introducing students to service. It allows them to dip their toes into the water and see how it feels. Sustained programs involving consistent sessions over an extended period increase students' familiarity with and commitment to a community or agency. Developing an ongoing relationship with selected populations or agencies improves the likelihood of personal investment. Both approaches have merit, and ideally a school would sponsor both types of experiences.

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Awareness of personality styles is also important. Introverts and extroverts have different preferences. Some prefer working with tutoring programs because they foster long term relationships with a relatively small group. More extroverted students thrive on meeting everyone who walks through the door of a large soup kitchen and learning to handle unexpected challenges. What may look like lack of generosity in students' response may simply result from service opportunities that do not match their personalities. Just as teachers need to incorporate a variety of learning styles in the classroom, they must be aware of variation in teenagers' "serving styles."

### *Stage Three: Service for Empowerment*

The third stage engages students in action that empowers its recipients by providing them with new skills or experiences. Students may provide tutoring in English as a second language, mathematics, or GRE skills. They can coach a team of developmentally challenged adults or be mentors for children who lack positive role models in

their lives. In a more developed effort, they might organize a sewing cooperative for immigrant women who could sell their work and thus generate income and independence.

Service geared toward empowerment enables people to take greater charge of and pride in their lives, and has a natural impetus toward breaking down the distinctions between “giver” and “receiver.” Action toward empowerment invites a greater level of commitment and engagement on the part of students and teachers, and usually requires a higher level of skill. Although it brings about more lasting change, it does not yet risk controversy and it does not tackle the structures which create and sustain the inequities in our world.

Programs that empower people require more skill and commitment and often tend to be time-consuming and expensive. The corollary is then less time and money available for other programs. Again, other school-sponsored programs such as tutoring may well have limited resources and materials, and have supervising teachers not trained in the academic discipline being taught. However, the minimal resources and supervisory training need not prevent such programs from being successful. Thus, teachers must set priorities and often invest their own personal time and resources—a perfect opportunity to model the commitment asked of students.

Some people criticize these first three stages as being somehow second-class engagement, but they are both valid and necessary. They are valid because there are urgent needs that cannot wait for structural change to happen. They are necessary because they provide the pathway of conversion most people follow in becoming committed to social justice. Generally an awareness of the need for action comes from some kind of direct experience with people in need, and then awareness grows of the causes behind the need. Human nature combined with the messages of today’s culture and media do not seem to bring people naturally to the awareness and passion required for social justice work. The experiences in these first three stages provide the spark starting most people on that journey.

### *Stage Four: Reflection and Analysis*

Service has much more power to change hearts if it moves into the fourth stage of providing structured reflection for students. Structured reflection also begins to build the bridge toward a justice perspective.

Journaling is a common expectation in service classes. Journal questions commonly focus on students' emotional responses to their experiences and toward developing social, organizational, and problem-solving skills.

Developing a justice perspective requires another, more penetrating type of reflection. Moving students toward critical analysis of their service experiences requires a deliberate type of reflection which seeks an understanding of the structures which create the need for this ongoing service.

Many have heard the story of the family picnicking on a riverbank when someone notices a baby floating down the river. In a panic someone leaps in to rescue the baby. The group dries and comforts the infant and then returns to their meal. In a few moments someone notices two babies floating down the river, and again family members plunge in for the rescue. Soon more and more babies are seen floating down the river, and the group is overwhelmed with swimming out to rescue them. Eventually someone heads upstream to find the answer to the obvious question, "Who is throwing all these babies in the river?!" After a service experience, it is not difficult to invite students to ask, "Where are all the babies coming from?" Leading them through the underbrush to discover the answer is another story altogether.

The fourth stage involves teaching students to analyze the situations they encounter through direct experience or through the media, and to discover the causes of the inequities they observe. It is a complex process and demands that teachers have the skills and knowledge to guide the conversation. It begins to make the shift toward an awareness that may challenge students' way of life and assumptions. It should be undertaken with care.

***Stage Five: Advocacy for Structural Change***

The fifth stage takes the brave step of engaging in political action. It includes actions like writing letters, mounting information campaigns, protesting, and meeting with legislators.

Advocacy is the natural outgrowth of the first four stages, and Catholic schools are just beginning to explore this work. The first four stages provide the inspiration and new awareness which prompt political action. Schools cannot deliver the complete message of Catholic social thought without somehow addressing the issue of advocacy. And yet maintaining appropriate boundaries, remembering that schools are educational rather than political institutions and that adolescents are not yet adults, is a delicate matter. This territory is new and demands competence and the appropriate spirit.

The following chapters provide guidance for integrating the last two stages of analysis and action for justice into religion classes and other disciplines. They also address the personal qualities which can help educators witness to the transforming potential of Catholic social teaching on life. 