

embrace the vision and program Jesus outlines for his followers in the Beatitudes. They take seriously the command to love God and to love neighbor and enter into dynamic relationship with Jesus. That is, they share his experience of obedience and worship of God, the Father, which is so beautifully expressed in the prayer he taught, the Lord's Prayer. In this manner, his followers receive the gift of the Spirit that transforms hearts of stone into hearts of flesh, connecting them with the human family. In this, the followers of Jesus manifest the heart of the Church's mission. They learn to share in the joy and hope, the suffering and anguish of the human family. This is what conversion and the baptismal promise of "renouncing sin" are all about: liberation from egoism, from self-seeking, and from focus only on one's own advantage. Conversion is a new and graced freedom that enables one humbly and courageously to challenge the spirit of the world that glorifies the minority of rich and powerful while dismissing the great masses of poor, suffering, and hungry. Commitment to social justice requires a faith that is not a simple conviction about a truth, the revelation of God in the Incarnation of Jesus, but rather a faith that is a personal act in which the follower of Jesus turns his or her whole life totally over to God. To do so is to respond to Jesus' invitation: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). That is not a wooden cross but the cross of reality that Christians are called to bear each day; that is the world in which they live and in which they encounter God.

Faith trusts in the mystery of the unlimited love that God has for all. Faith justifies, heals, and makes whole in God's love. This requires great openness of mind and heart and makes possible works of justice. Faith affirms that the mystery of God's love is for all. It proclaims a love that is readiness to give from the very substance of one's

life so that others too may experience and live in that love. This is the social justice that is, at the same time, response to the gospel call of Jesus and powerful experience of the communion of saints. This is the kind of faith Christians experience in the mystery of the Church, which is ever called to be a sign of God's presence in the world and an instrument of unity among all.

Works of social justice that correct the economic and social structures that divide and oppress peoples are more than doing good and avoiding evil. They look evil directly in the eye and attempt to overcome it, or at least to lessen its effects that destroy human community, depriving our neighbors of their food, their health, their families, their education, and their cultural development. Social justice challenges ravenous market systems of economics and excessive militarization of nations. It negotiates with decision makers to protect workers, environments, local cultures, and the vulnerable. Social justice is not then just charitable aid, although that too is necessary, but it is also about policies and structures that make charitable aid necessary. However, although social justice is not just charity, it begins and ends in charity. Thus, for Christians, action for justice begins with exclusion of any kind of violence because it begins with the conviction that love of God and of neighbor is undivided and excludes no one. Working for justice then ends with a profound and even mystical experience of being loved by God, a love that empowers all to love and be loved.

In fact, from a theological perspective, injustice is a denial of God. It denies the image of God in one's brothers and sisters and in the rest of creation. Social justice always rests on the fundamental and opening lines of the Nicene Creed, accepted by all Christians: "We believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth." It follows, then, that every creature and every human person shares in