

*Distributive* justice governs the fair distribution of benefits and burdens between a government and its people. The community is to assure the basic rights of all members of the community, especially the needy. *Legal* justice governs the responsibilities of citizens toward the state. Social justice includes all of the aforementioned characteristics, but it goes beyond these three dimensions. Social justice moves beyond the individual person or the manner in which a social group operates. It looks deeper and more comprehensively into the multiple structures that shape human relationships, including the environment and all living creatures.

So then, what is justice? The U.S. bishops refer to it as doing "what is right." Martin Luther King Jr. went to the heart of the matter when he commented upon the difference between "just" and "unjust" laws. He said, "Any law that uplifts the human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust" ("Letter from the Birmingham Jail," 1963). Finally, the Irish bishops were plainspoken about the matter:

Justice is about my work, my business, my commercial dealings, my style of life. Justice is about paying a fair wage for a job, and doing a just and honest job for the wage. Justice is about buying and selling. It is about employing men and women or making them redundant. Justice is about meeting my contracts, promising and delivering what I promise at the promised time. Justice is about fair prices and

just profits. It is about honesty and truthfulness and straight dealing in business, in public service, in political life.

### How Is Sin Social?

We have seen that since the time of Pope Leo XIII at the end of the nineteenth century, greater awareness of the need for justice in all social structures has developed. It is now more clearly understood that the reality of sin is therefore not only personal and private but it is also somehow much broader. Theologians have reflected on the injustices facing the millions of poor people in the developing world and in modern industrialized urban areas, and they realized that the common traditional notion of sin is too narrow and individualistic. Sin, they insist, is more than personal acts of disobedience, dishonesty, laziness, lust, greed, or envy. Evil caused by social interactions or by social factors rooted in human institutions is also sinful, for example, sweatshops, child labor, toxic dumping, and unsafe working conditions, to mention only a few. This implicates sincere and good persons who, by their uncritical acceptance and support of such institutions, indirectly cause the suffering of others. Thus people who may personally and individually be moral and good people and have no intention of inflicting harm on others often share in a collective guilt called "social sin."

Some theologians have linked this insight to the doctrine of original sin because social sin attests to solidarity in sin. In some sense, social sin is an inherited reality. All of us inherit the unjust social structures into which we are born. Sin goes beyond the acts of a simple individual to permeate the collective action of all the members of community. Saint Paul addresses this issue in the NT books of Corinthians and Romans. He speaks of the world and the reign of sin. He writes that sin enslaves humanity because the rulers and spirit of the age oppose God. Although

#### MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., 1962 SERMON

"Any religion that professed to be concerned about the souls of men and not concerned about the city government that damns the soul, the economic conditions that corrupt the soul, and the slum conditions, the social evils that cripple the soul, is a dry, dead do-nothing religion in need of new blood."