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Section 2

**Creating
a Just
Society**

Part 1

Social Sin

For most of us, the idea of extreme poverty seems like a vague concept, but for millions of people in the world, it is an everyday reality. One billion of the world's people suffered from hunger in 2009; that's one out of every six people in the world. In 2008 three million children died of hunger and malnutrition before their fifth birthday. In 2005, the latest year for which this data is available, 1.4 billion people lived in extreme poverty, which means they lived on less than the equivalent of \$1.25 a day (statistics from Bread for the World).

The truth is that these conditions do not need to exist. God created the world to have the resources human beings need to live free from hunger and material poverty. With rare exception, hunger, poverty, and homelessness are the consequence of human sins, sins that directly or indirectly cause an unjust distribution of the earth's resources. To make things worse, over time these human sins create social structures that support injustice and violence. People cooperate with these sinful social structures often without even realizing it.

Christ calls us to take action in response to suffering and injustice. In our globally connected world, this means not only responding to local needs but also responding to the needs of people around the globe. We do this by becoming aware of suffering and injustice, analyzing their causes, and taking appropriate action. Our response might take the form of direct aid to immediately alleviate people's suffering, or it might take the form of working to correct the social structures that led to the suffering and injustice. Both responses are needed.

The articles in this part address the following topics:

- Article 18: The Social Side of Sin (page 84)
- Article 19: Structures of Sin and Social Sin (page 89)
- Article 20: The Circle of Social Action (page 94)
- Article 21: Works of Charity and Works of Justice (page 99)

Article

18 The Social Side of Sin

sin

Any deliberate offense, in word, or deed, or desire, against the will of God. Sin wounds human nature and injures human solidarity.

natural law

The natural law expresses the original moral sense that God gave us that enables us to discern by our intellect and reason what is good and what is evil. It is rooted in our desire for God, and is our participation in his wisdom and goodness because we are created in his divine likeness.

mortal sin

An action so contrary to the will of God that it results in complete separation from God and his grace. As a consequence of that separation, the person is condemned to eternal death. For a sin to be a mortal sin, three conditions must be met: the act must involve grave matter, the person must have full knowledge of the evil of the act, and the person must give his or her full consent in committing the act.

Before we discuss social sin, let's quickly review what constitutes sin. **Sin** is an offense against God, a rebellion against his will and his desire that we live in loving communion with him and with each other. It is contrary to the obedience of Christ to the Father, and it is a rejection of God's love for us. When we sin, we put our will before God's will for us; we make ourselves more important than God.

Sin is also an offense against the truth of God's Eternal Law and against the gift of reason that we use to understand **natural law**. Sin leaves us wounded in body, mind, and soul and wounded in our relationships with God and others.

We can sin through our words, actions, or thoughts—not the thoughts that enter our heads unbidden and that we quickly dismiss, but the thoughts of revenge, lust, envy, or domination that we dwell upon and keep alive. In order to be sinful, a word, thought, or action must be deliberate; something that is truly accidental or unintended cannot be the cause of sin. Deliberately choosing to do something that is gravely contrary to God's Law is a **mortal sin**. This destroys the virtue of charity within us, which helps us to love God and our neighbor. Unless we repent of mortal sin, we cannot enter eternal life.

When judging whether a specific action, word, or thought is a sin, it is helpful to recall the three elements that determine the morality of any human act: (1) the object—that is, the specific thing the person is choosing to do, (2) the intention of the person doing the action, and (3) the circumstances surrounding the act. In determining whether a specific human act is morally good or morally bad, we must consider all three elements together. For a specific act to be morally good, both the object and the person's intention must be good. On the other hand, if either the object or the intention is morally bad, the specific act is sinful, even if something good results from it. For example, if we are generous toward someone not to be kind but to impress others, our generosity is not a morally good act, because the intention is selfish. Similarly, if we steal goods or money from others to help someone in need, the good result—helping another person—doesn't lessen the sinfulness of stealing. The circumstances play a secondary role, as they can affect

the person's moral freedom or determine how good or bad the act actually is.

An Example of Sin's Social Impact

All sin has an impact on society. Sometimes this impact is easily seen; sometimes it takes some analysis to uncover its social impact. Let's consider price fixing as an example. Price fixing is an economic practice in which businesses that should be competitors all agree to charge the same price for a product or commodity. An example would be if all

Peter Maurin cofounded the Catholic Worker movement with Dorothy Day to help meet the needs of the poor and vulnerable.



Catholic Wisdom

The Dangers of Separating Religion from Society

Peter Maurin, the cofounder of the Catholic Worker movement, wrote a collection of short reflections on society and justice called *Easy Essays* (Steubenville, OH: Franciscan University Press, 1977). This is an excerpt from the essay titled "A Modern Pest."

When religion

has nothing to do with education,
education is only information;
plenty of facts, but no understanding.

When religion

has nothing to do with politics,
politics is only factionalism:
"Let's turn the rascals out so our good friends can get in."

When religion

has nothing to do with business,
business is only commercialism:
"Let's get what we can while the getting is good."

(Catholic Worker Web site)

the movie theaters in a city secretly agreed to charge fifteen dollars for a movie ticket. The motivation for price fixing is that the businesses involved don't have to lower their prices to compete with one another. They ensure a higher profit for themselves because the customers pay more. The problem is that this practice eliminates competitive pricing, a basic principle that free-market economies rely on to work fairly. This is why the United States and other countries have laws forbidding price fixing.

So let's imagine you are a recently hired executive in a company that buys corn from farmers and sells it to consumers. Your boss asks you to meet with executives from other companies that also buy and sell corn. Your assignment is to reach an agreement with the other companies' executives to sell corn at the same price—a high price that all the companies agree to. You realize that what your boss is asking you to do is price fixing, and it is a crime. However, he tells you that this is a common practice that has been going on for a long time. Reluctantly you agree to cooperate; after all, you are only following company policy and earning a living for your family.

Because you are following company policy, is your agreement to participate in price fixing a sin? And who is affected by your decision to follow company policy?

With a clear understanding of what constitutes sin, we conclude that price fixing is a sin, even if it follows company policy. Price fixing forces people to pay more than they should for a product because it eliminates the competition that should be part of a free market. It is essentially stealing, a sin against the Seventh Commandment. The act also disobeys a just law of society and therefore is a sin against the obedience to civil authorities called for by the Fourth Commandment. Therefore the object of the act itself is morally bad, making the act of price fixing a sin. A good intention, such as earning a living for your family, does not make this morally bad act morally right.

The Personal and Social Dimensions of Sin

Every sin has a personal dimension because every sin is the result of a real human person's making a free decision to disobey God's Law. Businesses do not commit sins; nor do governments or any other institution. It is true that some-

times sinful actions can become commonly accepted as ways of doing business or can even be supported by a nation's laws. This is discussed in article 19, "Structures of Sin and Social Sin." The sinful actions that result from unjust business practices or laws occur because one or more individuals have freely chosen to cooperate with such practices.

This personal dimension of sin means that every sin causes a spiritual wound in the person who commits it. This wound harms the person's communion with God, the source of his or her happiness. Until the person confesses the sin and is forgiven, the wound it causes will affect his or her spiritual health. This is why the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is so important for living spiritually healthy lives.



Every sin, even when we think it doesn't hurt anyone, has a social dimension. Who is hurt by the sin of an unfaithful relationship? Who is hurt by someone cheating on a test?

All sin also has a social dimension. This is clear for sins such as murder and theft because of the immediate harm they cause other people. But what about sins that are private, seemingly affecting only the person or people who commit them? For example, the two people involved in an adulterous relationship might think that an act of adultery will not harm anyone else as long as no one finds out about it. But this kind of thinking is a denial of the real consequences of sin. For example, a person who commits adultery will experience guilt, be concerned about keeping her or his sin secret, and find it easier to commit adultery in the future. These things affect the person's ability to maintain an intimate relationship with her or his spouse, causing harm

to the spouse even if the spouse never finds out about the adultery.

We accept that all sins have a social dimension. Even if some sinful actions do not cause immediate harm to someone else, they in some way affect the sinner's relationships with other people. This is because the spiritual wound caused by sin also harms our communion with other people, negatively affecting our relationships with them. According to Pope John Paul II, "There is no sin, not even the most intimate and secret one, the most strictly individual one, that exclusively concerns the person committing it" (*Reconciliation and Penance*, 16).

The social effect of sin is not always immediately apparent. Whether the sin seems private, such as adultery, or occurs on a broader scale, it may take time for the social impact of some sins to take effect. Let's think about the person who thinks cooperation in price fixing isn't really harming anyone. The truth is that because of this sinful action, families are paying more for the product than they would have to pay if there were true competition in setting prices. If a family pays a dollar more a week because of price fixing, that adds up to \$52 over a year's time. So over a year the price fixing is literally stealing \$52 from a family—money

Cooperating with the Sin of Others

We can be responsible for sins that we do not personally commit if, by our actions, we support or participate in the sinful actions of other people. Sin with serious social consequences often requires this kind of sinful cooperation by many people. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) lists the following ways that people cooperate with other people's sins:

- by participating directly and voluntarily in them;
- by ordering, advising, praising, or approving them;
- by not disclosing or not hindering them when we have an obligation to do so;
- by protecting evil-doers.

(1868)

Can you think of a sin with serious social consequences that has been in the news recently? How did this sin involve the cooperation of other people?

that may mean doing without another necessity, especially for those living in poverty. Price fixing also causes harm to others involved in the buying and selling of goods. In the earlier example, the farmers who grow the corn are also not able to negotiate a fair price that covers their cost and allows them to earn a just wage.

Even though all sin has a social dimension, the social consequences of some sins, such as when businesses pay workers less than a living wage or when legislation is enacted to permit abortion, are much greater than those of other sins. The social justice teaching of the Church focuses on sinful actions like these. Confronting sin that has far-reaching social consequences requires an intentional response from Christians. Working for social justice requires persistent and coordinated social action to bring justice to the victims and to change unjust laws and practices. This is the focus of article 20, "The Circle of Social Action." †



structures of sin

Social structures that block justice and fail to protect human life and human rights. They are the result of the personal sin of individuals and in turn lead to personal sins.

Article

19 Structures of Sin and Social Sin

Could you be cooperating in someone's sin by buying tennis shoes or a soccer ball? This was a question in people's minds when a well-known company admitted that children living in Pakistan had made some of their products. The issue had come to light because some organizations committed to social justice had investigated the factories where the products were made. Company officials claimed they did not have direct knowledge that children were working in their factories to make their products, and they apologized that it had happened.

Some people said that an apology was not enough and stated that the company had a responsibility to establish procedures to guard against child labor and other injustices. This group of people and many others who learned about the company's practices also said that they would not buy the company's products until the company showed evidence that they had put such procedures in place to prevent this from happening again. These people were trying to change something that Catholic social teaching calls a **"structure of sin."**

Defining Social Sin

Catholic social teaching often uses the term **social sin**. The term can be confusing because it is used to describe several closely related realities. In his apostolic exhortation *Reconciliation and Penance*, Pope John Paul II teaches us three correct ways of understanding social sin and one incorrect way of understanding it. The three correct understandings are as follows:

1. Social sin can be understood as the impact that our personal sin has on other people. This was discussed in article 18, "The Social Side of Sin." In the Pope's words, "With greater or lesser violence, with greater or lesser harm, every sin has repercussions on the entire ecclesial body and the whole human family . . . every sin can undoubtedly be considered as social sin" (16).
2. Social sin can be also understood as those sins that are a direct attack on another person or group's life, freedom, dignity, or human rights. In the Pope's words, "the term *social* applies to every sin against justice in interpersonal relationships, committed either by the individual against the community or by the community against the individual" (16).
3. Social sin can also be applied to the relationships that exist between communities of people. Whenever one group of people (for example, a social class, a nation, or an ethnic group) attacks the peace or freedom of another group of people, or treats the other group unjustly, this can be called a social sin. This is an analogical meaning because groups cannot really commit sins—only the individuals that are part of a group can do so. But the collective effect of many people's sins over time creates the structures of sin that are associated with particular groups.

John Paul II goes on to say that the unacceptable way to define *social sin* is to contrast it with personal sin and to imply that somehow social sin is not the result of personal sin. Social sin is always the result of the personal sins of individuals, and each person must take responsibility for the effect his or her sinful choices play in sustaining social sin and cooperating with it.

Structures of Sin

In today's world many complex relationships are involved in producing the products we use every day. Take tennis shoes, for example. There is the relationship between the farmers who grow the cotton used in the shoe's fabric and the fabric manufacturers who buy the cotton from them. There is the relationship between the farmers who raise the

rubber trees and the rubber manufacturers. There is the relationship between the company making the shoes and the workers in their factories. There is the relationship between the company making the shoes and the governments that create and enforce the laws regulating working conditions, sales practices, and environmental protection. There is the relationship between the company manufacturing the shoes and the stores that sell the shoes. There are literally hundreds of people and social relationships involved in providing the shoes we wear every day.

The patterns of relationships that shape society, whether in business or in other networks, are known as



social sin

The impact that every personal sin has on other people; sin that directly attacks others' life, freedom, dignity, or rights; and the collective effect of many people's sins over time, which corrupts society and its institutions by creating "structures of sin."

social structures

The complex pattern of relationships that shape any society. They help determine how justice is lived out in society.



social structures. The relationships needed to manufacture and sell something as common as a pair of tennis shoes illustrate the complexity of the social structures needed to provide the things we need to survive. Government, law, business, labor, education, families—all these are social structures too, because their existence is sustained and shaped by the relationships within and among them. Social structures shape and influence a great deal in our world, including who is rich and who is poor, who is fed and who is hungry, who has influence and who is overlooked, and even who lives and who dies.

A basic principle guiding social structures is found in the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (*Gaudium et Spes*), a document of the Second Vatican Council. It says that our "social nature makes it evident that

the progress of the human person and the advance of society itself hinge on one another. . . . The subject and the goal of all social institutions is and must be the human person" (25). This means that social structures should support and promote just and life-giving relationships. For example, companies buying rubber or any other crop should have policies that ensure that the producers they buy from are paid a fair price for their goods. Workers should have a shared attitude of hard work and honesty. Business owners should have a commitment to provide a safe place to work and to pay a just wage to their workers. The government should have regulations protecting workers from unsafe or unjust working conditions, the environment from damage, and consumers from poorly made or dangerous products and unjust pricing practices. These are some of the ways that social structures help to protect the common good.

When social sin goes unchecked, it can lead to horrendous atrocities such as the Holocaust. What modern atrocities can you identify that are a result of social sin?



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However, it is also possible for social structures to act as barriers to the common good. For example, workers might share an attitude that it's okay to steal company supplies for personal use. Or the owners of a business might have an unspoken policy of paying the lowest price possible for the manufacture of their goods, even if that means workers do not get paid a living wage. Or a country might have laws allowing people to discriminate against people because of their race or religion. The Church calls social structures that block justice and fail to protect human life and human rights

"structures of sin." Pope John Paul II made four observations about structures of sin:

1. They are rooted in the personal sin of individuals. Structural sin does not just appear all by itself; it develops and grows because of the sinful choices of human beings.
2. They are the result of the interconnected choices of many people, not just one person.
3. Modern society avoids the terms *sin* and *structures of sin* in speaking of social structures. But we cannot correct unjust structures unless we think of them in ethical terms and challenge the personal sins that cause them.
4. The root causes of structures of sin are "on the one hand, the all-consuming desire for profit, and on the other, the thirst for power, with the intention of imposing one's will on others . . . at any price." In other words, selfishness is the basic attitude that builds and sustains structures of sin.

(Adapted and quoted from *On Social Concern [Sollicitudo Rei Socialis]*, 36–37)

People often view unjust social structures as permanent or unchangeable. Confronted by images of hungry and starving people, we might be tempted to say, "That's just the way the world works." But the social structures that shape society can be changed. Whether our social structures promote

Pray It!

Give Me a Just and Compassionate Heart

God of love and justice,

Give me a heart of compassion

so that I am moved by the suffering of others.

Give me eyes that see as you see

so that I can see the structures of sin that lead to social sin.

Give me a well-formed conscience

so that I am honest about my cooperation with social sin.

Lord,

I am so sorry for my sin and the harm it has caused other people.

Forgive me, and strengthen me to love and serve others,

rather than harm them or use them;

and strengthen me to work for justice,

rather than to perpetuate injustice.

Amen.

greater justice or whether they act as barriers to justice is always the result of decisions made by individuals. And if individuals who have been supporting a structure of sin change and start making good moral choices, then a structure of sin will eventually change to a more just social structure. 🙏

Article

20 The Circle of Social Action

A student wrote this moving reflection on the helplessness she felt while volunteering at a soup kitchen:

There was a man there, I didn't catch his name, but he had an obvious mental problem. . . . There was no one there to help him, and probably no one who cared. It hurt to realize that I was sitting among society's forgotten. The people I read about every day at school and in the newspapers. I wanted to cry but I didn't, I couldn't, they didn't need my pity. They needed my actions, and I didn't know what to do. (James Youniss and Miranda Yates, *Community Service and Social Responsibility in Youth*, page 65)

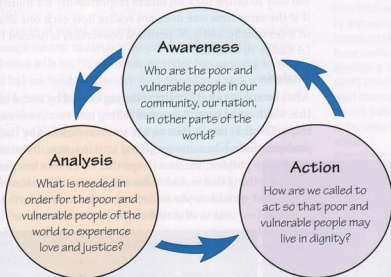
The suffering caused by social sins and perpetuated through structures of sin is very real. Christ calls us to respond to our neighbor's needs and especially to those people with the greatest needs. Indeed he tells us that if we truly wish to be his followers, we must be aware of other people's suffering (see the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man, Luke 16:19–31) and respond to it (see the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, Matthew 25:31–46). But like the student at the soup kitchen, many people do not have regular direct contact with poor or hungry people, and if they do, they do not know how to respond. Taking action requires us to be intentional in responding to the social needs of others. This article introduces an approach to taking social action called the circle of social action.

Awareness, Analysis, Action

In 1971, on the eightieth anniversary of the first social encyclical of the modern era, *On the Condition of Labor*, Pope Paul VI issued an apostolic letter titled *A Call to Action* (*Octogesima Adveniens*). The letter encourages Christians and all people of goodwill to continue their work for social

justice. Throughout *A Call to Action*, the Pope urges awareness of important social needs and social injustices, analysis of the most appropriate responses to those needs and injustices, and most importantly, action to help meet those needs and to correct injustices. These principles have inspired the development of a concept that some people call the circle of social action. People have developed elaborate explanations of this concept, but the most straightforward explanation is this: our faith calls us to be aware of social needs and injustices, awareness requires analysis, analysis results in action, and action leads to deeper awareness and the circle begins again. These three stages—awareness, analysis, and action—are the circle of social action.

The Circle of Social Action



Awareness

Before we can work for justice in the world, we must open our eyes and our ears to the suffering of others. This may be harder than it sounds. Many people are shielded from having any regular contact with people who are poor, homeless, jobless, sick, or suffering in any other way. How does this

happen? People with enough money buy homes in areas where there are no poor people. Social codes and civil laws keep homeless people off busy streets and out of affluent neighborhoods. In addition, the news media focus on stories that are new and sensational and rarely explore chronic social problems.

Because of these realities, each of us must take deliberate steps to raise our awareness of social needs and injustices. We can do this by volunteering with agencies and programs that serve people in need, such as soup kitchens, food pantries, Habitat for Humanity projects, and work camps. We can visit the impoverished areas of our cities, our country, or even other nations. We must find media sources that tell the real stories of people's needs and the social injustices that cause them. When we do these things, we will raise our awareness of our own personal responsibility to do *something*. Pope Paul VI reinforces this point in his letter: "It is too easy to throw back on others responsibility for injustice, if at the same time one does not realize how each one shares in it personally, and how personal conversion is needed first" (*A Call to Action*, 48).

Analysis

After becoming aware of the suffering caused by social injustice, we must be careful to avoid falling into two common traps. The first trap is that we are so overwhelmed by the problem that we become paralyzed into inaction. In other words, the problem seems so huge that we cannot imagine doing anything that would make a difference. The second trap is that we rush to do something without considering what the best course of action might be. In this case we could end up wasting our time or even making the problem worse. The way to avoid both of these traps is by taking time for analysis.

We can use two related sets of questions to help our analysis. First, we ask questions like these: What are the primary causes of this suffering and injustice? What sinful social structures support this injustice? What ways do I support or cooperate with these sinful social structures? Second, we ask questions like these: How can we bring God's love and justice to this situation? What personal action can I take immediately that will help in some way, however small?

What long-term actions must be planned to change the sinful social structures that support this social sin?

This analysis also serves as a time of personal **discernment**. For complex social injustices like poverty and homelessness, many responses are possible, more than any one person could possibly act on alone. In prayer each person must ask God to direct his or her personal response. In relation to this, Pope Paul VI taught that “in concrete situations, and taking account of solidarity in each person’s life, one must recognize a legitimate variety of possible options. The same Christian faith can lead to different commitments” (*A Call to Action*, 50). And the Pope called Christians to respect one another’s decisions about how to act: “From Christians who at first sight seem to be in opposition, as a result of starting from differing options, [the Church] asks an effort at mutual understanding of the other’s positions and motives” (50).

Action

The circle of social action is complete only when we follow through on our analysis with concrete action. The Epistle of James tells us, “If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,’ but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it?” (2:15–16). Pope Paul VI tells us, “It is not enough to recall principles, state intentions, point to crying injustice and utter prophetic denunciations; these words will lack real weight unless they are accompanied for each individual by a livelier awareness of personal responsibility and by effective action” (*A Call to Action*, 48).



discernment

From a Latin word meaning “to separate or to distinguish between,” the practice of listening for God’s call in our lives and distinguishing between good and bad choices.

By meeting immediate needs, such as working at a soup kitchen, and by addressing the causes that lead to these needs, such as developing agriculturally underdeveloped communities, we can participate in the circle of social action.

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Our social action typically takes one of two forms. The first way to respond is to take direct action to help alleviate people's immediate needs. This can mean helping to build homes for low-income people, volunteering in homeless shelters, or giving financially to parish programs that help people pay to their bills during times of economic hardship. The second way of responding is to work to change the structures of sin that perpetuate social injustices and the suffering they cause. This might mean lobbying for more affordable housing in your community, advocating for an increase in U.S. foreign assistance to poor developing countries, boycotting companies that exploit workers or the environment, and educating others about the causes of social problems and urging them to take action. Both forms of response are needed—both are very important. Each is considered in greater depth in the next article, “Works of Charity and Works of Justice.” ✚

Live It!

Checklist for Social Action

Here is a checklist based on the circle of social action to help us to reflect on our responses to social issues.

Awareness

- How aware am I of social issues affecting the life and dignity of people in my school, city, or state? Can I describe what these are and how they affect people?
- How aware am I of social issues affecting the life and dignity of people in other parts of the world? Can I name countries experiencing widespread hunger or seriously impoverished populations?

Analysis

- Can I describe some of the personal and social causes underlying serious social problems like the lack of basic health care in parts of the world or the absence of religious freedom in some countries?
- Am I able to identify possible responses to a serious social problem like hunger? Have I prayed for God to direct me in discerning my own personal response to that issue?

Action

- Can I name specific actions that I am committed to taking in response to a social issue or problem? How well am I living out those commitments?
- How willing am I to sacrifice some of my own comfort, money, and time to serve others in need?