“Social Justice” - What does that mean?

It was in 1931 that Pope Pius XI wrote an encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno*, in which the term was used to describe what the Church keeps striving for; i.e., restoring society “on the basis of social justice and social charity.” [126] “Therefore, the riches that economic-social developments constantly increase ought to be so distributed among individual persons and classes that the common advantage of all . . will be safeguarded; in other words, that the common good of all society will be kept inviolate. By this law of social justice, one class is forbidden to exclude the other from sharing in the benefits.” [57] These “benefits” include both economic, social, institutional, family, and individual ones.

A “social” justice is concerned with the care that “free and responsible people” have for one another, and builds a common good instead of just an individual good. It is also achieved through social means, through developing skills that enable groups to do much more than any one individual can do: forming associations, being willing to take leadership of small groups, and developing a habit of cooperating with others. It is through such building blocks of social justice that social transformation (justice and charity) are able to come to pass, in small incremental steps that are socially grounded, socially empowered, and socially achieved. There is also a whole lot of faith and courage thrown in.

Why should I care?

Social justice is something that no one can compel you to do. And it is something that we are probably more conscious of when we need it, rather than when somebody else needs it.

The larger picture is what is involved here, and our part in that larger picture. Jesus gives us some advice: “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40, 45, NIV).

The things that Jesus tells us to do are usually both difficult and worthwhile. This topic is an example of that. And the best way to find out if you care is to take a step in the direction of social justice and see what happens next. Talk to God.
The Brothers’ RULE (2015)
- Deeply moved by the human and spiritual distress “of the children of artisans and of the poor,” . . . John Baptist de La Salle and his first Brothers made a lifelong commitment to God to provide these children with a human and Christian education, and so extend the glory of God on earth. (Art 1)
- In the light of the Gospel, the Brothers always keep in mind the promotion of justice and the direct or indirect service of the poor -- the economically poor, the victims of social injustice, delinquents and those excluded from society -- which is the preferred option of their ministry of education. (Art 29)
- Regions and Districts draw up plans which enable all their works to be really committed to helping the poor and combating the causes of poverty. (Art 29.1)

ROME - Reflection # 3 (2018)
During its more than three centuries of existence, this Institute . . . has spread today to 79 countries where nearly a million students are educated. What are the fundamental principles that have allowed it to continue with such vitality for so long? What can we say about the successful application of these principles in so many and such varied countries and cultures, allowing it to transcend the pre-set differences of race, gender, language and religion?

In general, we could talk about two fundamental principles: the constant preoccupation with the education and empowerment needed to enable the disadvantaged to live with dignity, and the spirit of gratuity and service in the training offered and received in our educational works.

What Does De La Salle Say?
“Have you neglected some students because they were the slowest, and perhaps also the poorest? Have you shown favoritism toward other students because they were rich, or pleasant, or naturally possessing more lovable qualities than the others?” (Med. 206.1)

“You should learn to recognize Jesus beneath the poor rags of the children whom you have to teach.” (Med. 93.3)

De La Salle

As a Community, Seek Creative Ways
Quoting other Church documents, Pope Francis has openly and clearly promoted a turn towards the poor in his Apostolic Exhortation, Evangelii Gaudium: “No one must say that they cannot be close to the poor because their own lifestyle demands more attention to other areas. This is an excuse commonly heard in academic, business or professional, and even ecclesial circles. While it is quite true that the essential vocation and mission of the lay faithful is to strive that earthly realities and all human activity may be transformed by the Gospel, none of us can think we are exempt from concern for the poor and for social justice: ‘Spiritual conversion, the intensity of the love of God and neighbour, zeal for justice and peace, the Gospel meaning of the poor and of poverty, are required of everyone.’ [Libertatis Nuntius, 1984] I fear that these words too may give rise to commentary or discussion with no real practical effect. That being said, I trust in the openness and readiness of all Christians, and I ask you to seek, as a community, creative ways of accepting this renewed call.” [201]
A Little More Background About “Social Justice” (From Oxford University Press)

Using a social justice lens helps organizations to reframe issues generally viewed as individual in origin to include broader social, political, economic, and cultural understandings. The meanings of social justice are far reaching and ambiguous; translation into concrete practice is fraught with challenges. Social justice is a contextually bound and historically driven concept. Political theorists, philosophers, and social workers alike have explored what it means to be in the "right relationship" between and among persons, communities, states, and nations. As researcher Patrick McCormick has said, “There is not even agreement about whether liberty, equality, solidarity or the common good is the primary cornerstone on which the edifice of justice is to be constructed.”

Understandings of social justice in US social work are largely derived from Western philosophy and political theory and Judeo-Christian religious tradition. Conceptions of justice are abstract ideals that overlap with beliefs about what is right, good, desirable, and moral. Notions of social justice generally embrace values such as the equal worth of all citizens, their equal right to meet their basic needs, the need to spread opportunity and life chances as widely as possible, and finally, the requirement that we reduce and, where possible, eliminate unjustified inequalities. As Caputo (2002) remarks, the concept of social justice invoked by social work has largely been one steeped in liberalism, which may serve to maintain the status quo. However, Caputo also contends that social justice remains relevant as a value and goal of social work.

Some students of social justice consider its meaning in terms of the tensions between individual liberty and common social good, arguing that social justice is promoted to the degree that we can promote collective good without infringing upon basic individual freedoms. Some argue that social justice reflects a concept of fairness in the assignment of fundamental rights and duties, economic opportunities, and social conditions. Others frame the concept in terms of three components—legal justice, which is concerned with what people owe society; commutative justice, which addresses what people owe each other; and distributive justice, or what society owes the person. From a distributive perspective, the one most often referenced by social workers, social justice entails not only approaches to societal choices regarding the distribution of goods and resources, but also consideration of the structuring of societal institutions to guarantee human rights and dignity and ensure opportunities for free and meaningful social participation.

Discussions of social justice in the context of social work generally address the differing philosophical approaches used to inform societal decisions about the distribution or allocation of resources. These discussions refer to three dominant theories of resource distribution: Utilitarian, libertarian, and egalitarian. Utilitarian theories emphasize actions that bring about the greatest good and least harm for the greatest number. Libertarian theories reject obligations for equal and equitable distribution of resources, contending instead that each individual is entitled to any and all resources that he or she has legally acquired. Egalitarian theories contend that every member of society should be guaranteed the same rights, opportunities, and access to goods and resources.

(Janet L. Finn and Maxine Jacobson - https://blog.oup.com/2017/03/what-is-social-justice/)

A LASALLIAN REFERENCE

“You must, says Saint Paul, be girded with the belt of truth, and put on the breastplate of justice, that is, a love for the duties of your state.” (Med 22.3)

“This is what God requires of you and how he desires that your justice be more than that of people of the world (Mt. 5:20)” (Med 58.2)

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On this sheet are the three suggested movements for thoughtfully considering the topic.

**REMEMBERING GOD’S PRESENCE**

Let us remember that we are in the Holy Presence of God

**De La Salle**: “We can consider God present in the place where we are, because our Lord says in Saint Matthew’s Gospel, For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”

[PAUSE]

**REFLECTIONS & CONVERSATION**

A) After reading the INFOSHEET, what stands out to you about the topic of “social justice”?

B) How do you see social justice manifested at your institution? Be specific.

C) What else could or should be done to insure that social justice is a priority at your institution in the future?

**CLOSING PRAYER**

Gracious and loving God. All of us at this school work to make the loving and saving presence of your Son, Jesus Christ, a living and effective reality in the lives of those who are entrusted to our care. Be with us in all that we talk about and do, so that all those involved with Lasallian education here may discover your presence in their midst and come to hold dear what we hold dear. It is your work that we do. Help us to be worthy of the task. We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

**FURTHER EXPLORATION**

De La Salle got into trouble with the teachers “unions” and the legal authorities of his day not because he was serving the poor, but because he was serving whoever showed up, insisting that everyone was treated equally, always. Everyone sat on the same bench. The poor were the priority, but everyone was welcome.