

# REFLECTIONS ON SOCIAL JUSTICE

BY GWEN ROHRER (03)



It is difficult to say when I first began to understand the often secularized term “social justice” as an integral part of Christian discipleship. As with many strong convictions, it has undoubtedly emerged from a formative process involving intellectual study, theological exploration, and real life experiences in a broken world.

Perhaps the discourse of “social justice” first caught my attention when I embarked on a LoveWorks mission trip to Costa Rica, determined to do my best to help the “less fortunate” of our hemisphere. However, this displacement from the leather sofa and big-screen TV of my upbringing failed to produce the rewarding feeling of serving the needy. Rather, it forced me to question why those I was serving were “needy” in the first place. My eyes were soon opened – and subsequently filled with tears – by the realization of the power dynamics in our world that allow the rich to get richer while the poor get poorer. More poignant still was the recognition of my own complicity with these systems of power and domination – as an individual from a privileged background and as a member of the Church in America. Individually, I became aware of how my seemingly innocent coffee-drinking habit daily supported an industry that oppresses coffee farmers to get the lowest price. And as a Christian, I was forced to confess my membership in a Church that so often fails to challenge its own comfortableness for the sake of the poor and oppressed.

While these stark reflections of a brief three-week period in Costa Rica were drastic changes to my naïve 19-year-old perception of the world, they were only the beginning of my formation within a community of God’s people that has made me the only slightly-less-naïve 25-year-old medical student I am today.

This spiritual formation that has reshaped my understanding of what it means to partake of the Body of Christ can be simply understood in two words: relationship

and response. Over the years, a variety of relationships has structured my spiritual formation: relationships with the diverse group of children in City Heights, San Diego who met me every Tuesday for a tutoring program in the basement of a church; relationships with the Somali refugees in Mid-City who shared with me the struggle of making a new life so far from what they knew as home; relationship with the homeless woman whose abusive childhood had made it nearly impossible for her to understand or accept gestures of love.

Yet, merely building these relationships was only half of the formation process, because I soon found that these relationships – which illustrated on a small scale the vast injustices in the world – demanded a response. As a Christian, the only model I could see for such a response was and is the love of God, as revealed to us through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. I soon began to read the Gospels as the radical, subversive narrative they are – depicting Christ, in all his godliness, taking on humility and living with “the least of these” in an attempt to overturn the societal structures that oppress the poor. Christ’s call to “follow me” was not an easy one to hear. Yet, contextualized in the relationships in which I have found myself, it is one I am compelled to answer.

So I press on, amidst a world of incomprehensible suffering, with the hope of God’s promise to restore creation. It is this hope that strengthens me to respond with my whole being – mind, spirit and body – to the injustice that lives among us. It is this hope that helps me understand “social justice” as Christ’s call to the Church today. It is this hope that leads me to seek justice in an unjust world. ■

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