The Second Vatican Council, particularly its document *Gaudium et Spes*, made popular the expression “reading the signs of the times.” Documents of Catholic social thought, before and since, have embarked on this task in the modern world. In this week’s reading from *Octogesima Adveniens*, we see Pope Paul VI acknowledging the difficulties of such efforts, given the diversity and complexity of the world in our times. With humility he states:

In the face of such widely varying situations it is difficult for us to utter a unified message and to put forward a solution which has universal validity. Such is not our ambition, nor is it our mission. It is up to the Christian communities to analyze with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country, to shed on it the light of the Gospel’s unalterable words and for action from the social teaching of the Church…. It is up to these Christian communities, with the help of the Holy Spirit, in communion with the bishops who hold responsibility and in dialogue with other Christian brethren and all men [and women] of goodwill, to discern the options and commitments which are called for in order to bring about the social, political and economic changes seen in many cases to be urgently needed (art. 4; emphasis added).

In quotations like this we see not only the importance of social analysis by Christian communities, but its integral relationship with Christian tradition within theological reflection. Paul VI further insists on the co-responsibility of Christian communities with their bishops and others to engage in such analysis for the sake of urgently needed changes in the systems that cause suffering and injustice.

How to do this? The *diagram* from the 8th Day Center for Justice, a Catholic organization in the United States, provides a clear encapsulation of the major, interrelated areas to be included in social analysis. The Center names each of these as a “reality or system” that affects people’s lives, shaping the nature of their experiences and situations. The questions provided for each system help us to probe it to address the larger “Why?” question.

Do you remember my example in Unit 1 of the church group that founded a shelter for homeless families? The group was formed because one member, Mary Jane, had a friend who lost her apartment and became homeless, along with her children. Mary Jane could have simply responded to her friend’s misfortune with compassion, like the Good Samaritan on the road to Jericho, and lent her money to pay her rent. Instead, she formed our group so that we could do social analysis of the situation and try to address the needs effectively. We discovered that the economic, political and social systems...
were interrelated in ways that increased the chances that low-income people would lose their housing:

- **Economic**: The affected people usually worked very low-paying jobs. When landlords began to raise rents, they quickly became too high for these people to pay. Thus the people were evicted from their homes.
- **Political**: the state’s financial assistance program provided money for homeless families to be placed in local motels, but not to assist with rent.
- **Social**: in the motels, often in distant locations on highways, families were isolated from their communities and their children’s schools. Lacking transportation, they were unable to obtain and keep jobs.
- **Thus**, once families became homeless, the government programs put in place to help also made it extremely difficult for them to regain permanent housing.

Through theological reflection that highlighted Catholic social teaching on the human right to adequate housing, the church group first raised money and awareness to create a temporary, community-based shelter for some of the homeless families. As a later step, guided by their social analysis, they formed a non-governmental organization to build new, permanent housing that these low-income families could afford.

Examples like this provide evidence that Christian communities can discern good “options and commitments,” in Paul VI’s words, to bring changes for greater justice in our world. I hope that your work in this course has also surfaced such examples, and you have gained some skills in theological reflection to enhance your work for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation.
The Social Justice Process: notice that in the very center is the Greek letter “chyros”, which stands for Christ. Out of our faith in Christ we have an experience. Then we think about it (social analysis) and consider how God is present (theological reflection). Finally, we do something (action). Notice that this process is a spiral because our action then becomes a new experience which we think about and which prompts us to do something else.

This is not a new process because we do it every day, usually in an unconscious way. But the key to a social justice process is to do it together and with purpose. Only in this way can we have an impact on the social problems that face us today. We can’t do it alone no matter how smart or courageous we are. The problems are just too big. So, in the social justice process our emphasis is upon US and the SYSTEMS and ACTION: for us to look at systems that affect our lives--political, social, economic, etc.-- because these are the ways we belong to community.

(adapted by 8th Day Center for Justice from Social Analysis, J. Holland & Peter Henriot, SJ, The Center of Concern)