“The Catholic Church’s Best Kept Secret”:
Its Social Justice Teaching

The Reverend David L. Smith, C.S.Sp., professor emeritus and former director of the Simon Silverman Phenomenology Center at Duquesne, recently shared information about the Spiritan dedication to social justice in his article, *The Catholic Church’s Best Kept Secret: A Concise Survey of Papal Social Justice Teaching*. Here, he gives basic information about social justice, the Spiritans’ longtime dedication to it and how the Duquesne community promotes social justice.

Q: What exactly is “social justice” as defined through the lens of the Catholic Church?

A: I would say that there are four bare-bone principles. The concept of the *common good* is the most basic. It rests upon the reality that human beings are never islands unto themselves—we are all by nature social beings and share a common humanity and responsibility for one another. From our common humanity flows the principle of *solidarity*. Solidarity anchors the conditions necessary for all citizens to enjoy the means to support a decent human lifestyle. The question of how these basic rights are to be respected and fulfilled in any society brings us to our third principle, *subsidiarity*—the notion that no one can pull themselves up by their own boot straps if they don’t have a pair of boots. A fourth principle, *preferential option for the poor*, was already implicit in Pope Leo’s teaching when he wrote that it is the obligation of the government to protect and promote the “welfare and comfort of the working people.” This preferential option demands that the poor and powerless always be taken into account when decisions are made that will affect their lives.

Q: The Spiritans were teaching about social justice many years before the Church began to formulate an explicit formal body of doctrine on the topic. Why did it come to the forefront for the Spiritans so early?

A: The founder of the Spiritans, Claude Poullart des Places, was a wealthy young man who realized that his material wealth was not something to be clung to for himself alone, but to be used generously for the good of others. He devoted his life and his fortune to educating poor young men for the priesthood who in turn would lift up the poor by their own service of educating them. It was this same type of empathy for the underdog that motivated Francis Libermann, Poullart’s successor almost 145 years after his death, to devote his own life and ministry to social justice. Long before Rome jumped on board the train, he supported the new democratic political movements in France (1848) against the monarchical systems that had oppressed the poor, and he became a stout defender of religious freedom and diversity.

Q: What are some general examples of social justice issues at play in the world today?

A: The daily news media inundate us with numerous examples. At the root of many of them is the extremely inequitable distribution...
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of wealth. The top 10 percent of the population owns two-thirds of the national wealth while middle class incomes have been stagnant for decades. While at least 35 million individuals in the U.S. go without health insurance, the health insurance industry reaps windfall profits. In his recent encyclical, Charity in Truth, Benedict XVI reminded us that all economic decisions are moral ones, issues of social justice, since they impact the lives of human beings.

**Q:** What are some examples of specifically Spiritan work in the area of social justice?

**A:** In more than 60 countries almost 3,000 Spiritans are working to promote social justice. The Spiritans partially funded and co-founded the Center for Haiti to advocate for the people of that country and they were a founding member of the African Center for Peace and Justice. Today a Spiritan serves as dean of the Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies at the University of San Diego and another works for Catholic Relief Services. In Africa they are involved in advocacy for refugees, education for young Masai women and air medical service for the poor. Nearly every Spiritan parish in the United States is in service to some minority group, and in numerous countries from Australia to Zimbabwe, they dedicate their ministry to the service of the poor and oppressed.

**Q:** Why do social justice concerns touch the very heart of Duquesne University and how does the total Duquesne community promote social justice?

**A:** As a Catholic University in the Spiritan tradition, a passion for social justice expresses the very soul of the University’s mission and identity and ratifies its motto, “It is the Spirit who gives life.” Several Popes have reminded us that if we want peace we must work for justice. In the Spiritan tradition, the University, with all due regard to its academic nature, harnesses its resources to liberate people from all that oppress them. It has advanced these goals in recent years with the inauguration of numerous new initiatives: a revitalized office of Mission and Identity, the Center for the Study of Catholic Social Thought and The Center for Health Care Ethics; a chair in the School of Nursing for underserved populations; and sustainability programs in the Palumbo Donahue School of Business. At the same time, thousands of students, faculty, staff and administrators continue programs of service to the poor, often through the offices of Campus Ministry and the division of Student Life.

To learn more about the Spiritans, please visit www.spiritans.org.