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3-19-2013

## Catholic Social Learning: Educating the Faith That Does Justice

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### Recommended Citation

Jacinto, G. A. (2013). Catholic Social Learning: Educating the Faith That Does Justice. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 16 (2). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.1602122013>

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## Catholic Social Learning: Educating the Faith That Does Justice

Roger Bergman  
New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2011  
203 pages, \$24

*Reviewed by George A. Jacinto, University of Central Florida*

**C***atholic Social Learning: Educating the Faith that Does Justice* is a significant contribution to the literature about social justice education. Bergman presents an engaging discussion of his ideas and insights from 30 years of experience as an educator. He has used several approaches to assist students in reflection on their faith as it relates to justice in the world. He is well versed and creatively integrates the practice of Ignatian pedagogy, Catholic moral philosophy, and the encyclicals of the Catholic Church into his educational approach. The process used by Bergman includes experience and analysis in regard to social justice, reflection, and action. This review will focus first on the strengths of Bergman's model, and then discuss areas of concern with suggestions for strengthening the justice and peace studies (JPS) certificate program.

The first sections of the book articulate the foundation upon which the JPS certificate program at Creighton University was developed. An essential part of the process used in the JPS certificate program is the pedagogical circle, which is associated with Ignatian educational practice that focuses on the students experiencing a personal encounter with individuals who are oppressed. As students progress through the JPS program they meet with people who are marginalized, dialogue about roles, reflect on problems and solutions, and plan a response that results in action. The process leads to direct assistance for those who are oppressed, reflection on the oppressed individuals' experience, and a decision to take action regarding injustice. Bergman presents several rich examples of students' transformative experiences while completing course work.

Bergman adroitly explores the importance of life experience from which social learning emerges. In the process of exposure and awareness to injustice many students experience shame and guilt. In the liminal space of undergraduate education the processing of shame provides students with a chance to develop critical skills in order to cope with feelings of ambivalence as they

address injustices that they have not created. Bergman asserts that an awareness of the stages of faith can assist students in their reflective work to understand that critical consciousness leads to understanding the demands of mature faith-filled people in response to injustice in the world.

In the JPS experience students encounter individuals and environments that are different from theirs. Students are invited to reflect on their experiences and read about the thoughts, values, and actions of historical figures who are exemplars of human responses to social injustice. Students recognize that in all time periods individuals have come forth to address injustice and have used a wide range of tactics and approaches. This process helps most students become more culturally sensitive, while some truly master cultural competence as part of their educational journey.

Some areas of concern with this model include how students interact with the host communities they are serving in El Salvador, Dominican Republic, and Appalachia. Moreover, a more balanced look at the involvement of the Catholic Church historically and the various theologies that have been used over time in regard to the question of justice is needed. While the book elegantly outlines the rationale for Catholic social justice education based on the teaching of the Church and the individual faith of the students, it needs some fluffing to grasp more broadly the existential situation of the host community. The shortcomings are found in the assessment and reflection phases of the pedagogical circle where students seem to be using a first world perspective and not the host community's point of view. Jesus admonished us to love one another, which suggest that we should walk in the shoes of the other, perceive the world through the eyes of the other, experience the pain of the other (empathy), and view the dreams of the other. This will likely shift one's understanding of injustice and lead to more realistic strategies to empower others to transform their life situations using their own theological understandings.

Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* provides a vehicle to process these ideas in a culturally competent fashion. For example, he assisted people in critiquing their reality through their eyes and understandings. He discussed the subject-object relationships the poor encounter and advocated for dialogue between the oppressor and the oppressed. When going into the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, or Appalachia as outsiders, there is a danger of being perceived as establishing a subject-object relationship. Working on the development of subject-subject associations leads to a meaningful dialogue about the host community members' experiences. Some questions for reflection might include: Were the people visited empowered to change some part of their situ-

ation? Is the cultural immersion mutually beneficial to students and members of the host community? In the case of JPS students this dialogue can become the intersection of theological reflection that is based on the theology of the students and the theology of their hosts. A robust and meaningful theological reflection must include the existential understandings of both parties.

In order to balance the curriculum it would be helpful to understand the various theological approaches across Catholicism. Exploring the variant theologies that sanctioned the Cathar genocide, the Spanish Inquisition, the collusion of the Church with the U.S. government genocide policies toward Native Americans practiced by well-intentioned missionaries, or the obstruction of justice by Church officials in the recent scandal involving pedophile priests are a few examples of the painful footprint the Church has left in world history. Asking questions such as: What justice was served in these and other examples like them? How was the theological rationale alike or different from contemporary Church theological understandings and justifications?

In conclusion, the work of Bergman is laudable and offers a practical approach to Catholic social learning. Providing students with rich experiences can incorporate several perspectives. An understanding of the Catholic approach to justice historically reveals times of darkness as well as times of tremendous light and demonstrations of the highest levels of care, compassion, and goodwill.

*George A. Jacinto has developed the Spirituality in Clinical Social Work Practice course at the University of Central Florida and Arkansas State University. His research interests include mental health, forgiveness, the use of the labyrinth in clinical practice, and spirituality in clinical social work practice. Correspondence regarding this review can be sent to Dr. Jacinto at [George.jacinto@ucf.edu](mailto:George.jacinto@ucf.edu).*