

# Whatsoever we do ...

An initiative of the St. Basil's Mission and Social Justice Committee

## Christian Service and Social Justice – Our Catholic Faith in Action

Sunday February 15, 2009



According to Joe Gunn, when it comes to social justice, Saint Basil's is a very typical parish community. Typical in the sense that we share the four most common social justice concerns and characteristics that he has encountered in Catholic parishes across the country. These are:

- 1) There's a lot going on.
- 2) When it comes to social justice, we never seem to think we have done enough.
- 3) We can be a bit isolated, in that we don't always know who is doing what, even in nearby communities and parishes.
- 4) We're much better at providing social service than exploring the dynamic of social change.

This is how the Executive Director of the lobby group Citizens for Public Justice and former director of the Social Affairs Department for the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops concluded his February 15, 2009 workshop. Some 40 parishioners took part in a session that began with an overview of the history of Catholic social teaching. Breaking into smaller groups, participants then discussed what is currently done at Saint Basil's to promote

the gospel values of social justice, and how the parish community actually gets that work done.



It was in the smaller discussion groups that these four inter-connected themes emerged.

### **There's a lot going on**

So much, in fact, that we don't know a half (or even more) of it! We need to find creative ways to learn about the full range of activities taking place right now in our community, or activities that have been initiated by members of our community elsewhere. Often, a project can begin as a kind of "pet project" championed by a particular individual. It truly becomes a "St Basil's" initiative when we all claim ownership of it. But we can only do that when we all know the details. We have a lot of communication catch-up to do.

### **We could do so much more**

Concern for the environment was cited most frequently as an area for renewed attention. Starting with an environmental scan, we could develop a comprehensive series of environmentally sound policies for the parish. These would reduce our carbon footprint, and include things from limiting the lights we use, choosing water we drink, and the purchase of the disposable cups we throw away after so many events. And then there's the recent OC Transpo bus strike. Did we really help those most affected? Now, as the economy falters and more and more people are unemployed, should we look to providing some kinds of programmes and service that might make a difference? There was a humbling awareness that no matter what we do, or where we place our focus, it will never be enough.

### **We're a bit isolated**

If you want to develop environmentally effective policies, you first need to do a bit of research and homework. And

it's the same with any initiative. Our impulse is to get down to work right and provide the service. How much more effective, then, if we can find links with what other people or groups are doing! Not only do we avoid duplication, we also develop community. We are not alone in our concerns for social justice and we have much to learn – and offer – others who are addressing the same issues. The key is to be interested enough to want to know what other people are doing. And in this case “other people” can mean neighbouring Catholic parishes, other faith communities, and other non-sectarian groups.

### Service first, analysis second

It's not a bad instinct to address the symptoms of a problem rather than its root causes. However, as Joe Gunn pointed out at the start of his presentation, the Catholic tradition calls for deeper reflection and analysis in order that we become more aware of the justice issues underlying the actual circumstances we are dealing with. More study groups, workshops, presentations, as well as prayer sessions and scriptural reflection were called for.



To help ease the group into discussion, Joe Gunn began his presentation with a comprehensive overview of the documents considered to form the foundations of Catholic social teaching.

He began with Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical, *Rerum novarum*, and showed how this led to recent statements by Pope Benedict. Pope Paul VI and his encyclical *Populorum progressio* received particular attention because, as Gunn explained, this is what led to the creation of the *Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace* in 1967.



After reviewing the papal documents Gunn then explained how the social justice perspective of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops has evolved over time. “These are tools which change over time,” he said, pointing out the first mention of ecumenical solidarity in 1983. The most recent shift, in 2003, is ecological. He explained how these documents illustrate the evolution of an expanded understanding of sin. They begin with a focus on the personal dimension of sinfulness and then, over time, they move on to the social dimension of sinfulness. As Gunn pointed out, social justice teaching is cumulative and each statement builds on, rather than replaces, what came before it.

An important recent development in Catholic social justice, says Gunn, was the creation of the Kairos movement. Bringing together the mainline churches in Canada:

KAIROS unites Canadian churches and religious organizations in a faithful ecumenical response to the call to “do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). Informed by biblical teaching, KAIROS deliberates on issues of common concern, striving to be a prophetic voice in the public sphere.

Inspired by a vision of God's compassionate justice, KAIROS advocates for social change, amplifying and strengthening the public witness of its members.

Responding to Christ by engaging in social transformation, KAIROS empowers the people of God and is empowered by them to live out our faith in action for justice and peace, joining with those of goodwill in Canada and around the world.

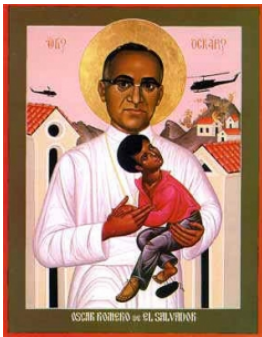
([www.kairoscanada.org](http://www.kairoscanada.org))



The words of Benedictine sister, Joan Chittister, continue to inspire Gunn. He said that she reminds him that often

“doing” and “saying” and “being” do not always harmonise. We can be engaged in global social justice issues but not be that connected to our local communities. “To support social change,” wrote Chittister, “is not to epitomize its vision.” She also reminds him that it’s important not to be morally outraged all the time. “We have to learn to be celebratory and not only accusatory in social justice work,” explained Gunn.

“Social justice work is where a few can influence the many,” said Gunn. The final image on the screen behind him was a contemporary icon of Gunn’s favourite social justice “saint,” Bishop Oscar Romero, assassinated in 1980, and someone who continues to inspire him. Gunn’s final words to the group were words of encouragement. He concluded that we can find solace in one another and in our common commitment to Christian service, social justice and the active dimension of our Catholic faith. “None of us has the final answer. We live knowing that together we can make a difference. Here at Saint Basil’s you have a committee in place. Join it, support it. Encourage it.”



In his concluding remarks, Fr Bosco Wong reiterated that here at Saint Basil’s we all faced “huge social justice challenges, but it’s clear we can work together and that change is indeed possible.”



Finally, here are some of the observations from members of the Mission and Social Justice Committee who attended this event:

One of our goals was to bring the community of St. Basil's together on a social justice wavelength, and I sensed that the meeting really achieved that. Everyone had some issue of justice that they felt keenly about. The meeting provided the opportunity to share and to support each other's interests. The environment was the strongest topic in our group.

*Maureen Ramsay*

This was a very informative and interesting presentation on social justice, Development and Peace, and on how individuals as part of a faith community truly make a difference. A good mix of parishioners attended. As a result, the discussions and the suggestions were diverse and well thought out. It provided lots of good material for the Missions and Social Justice Committee at St Basil’s to follow up on.

*Alice McClymont*

I had the sense that folks loved the opportunity for this kind of a Town Meeting event, and that these could happen more often at St. Basil's. What impressed me was how much insight, expertise and passion was to be found in the community on various important issues. In our group, these would include support for the unemployed and the environment.

*Jim Ramsay*

In the discussions it became evident that as well as many social justice actions already being done by various parish groups, here are also many other social justice actions being taken by individuals in the parish. In deciding on priorities, the participants agreed that any action is good. However, they agreed that a focus on certain projects, particularly on those needing funding, would be an appropriate direction for the Committee. All parishioners need to have more information about what is happening at St. Basil's in this area. This includes the work of Development and Peace. Perhaps more

communication from the pulpit, in the bulletin, or on posters in the narthex might help, especially as

we approach Lent. I think we need to find ways to include even more parishioners, not only those with a particular skill or talent. We might start with a request for volunteers with specific tasks to work with the committee on specific, time-dated projects. In this way, their commitment of participation will be limited to a specific time. This approach enables each of us to make commitments based on our sense of responsibility, as well as on the constraints of our particular individual time schedules.

*Alice McClymont*

I was very encouraged by the animated discussions in small groups because it shows that within the parish there is a high level of concern and awareness and commitment to social justice. Joe's reminder to us about "social sin" also spoke to me - the recognition that even if we haven't had a direct role in causing injustices in our society, we do have a personal responsibility for working to make things better, that doing little or nothing about poverty and hunger and isolation and other such conditions is sinful.

*Rosemary Williams*

I was impressed with:

- 1) Joe's overview of the Social Teaching of the Church in such a capsulated form - leaving the participants to search the documents later
- 2) The interest shown by the participants to give some of their precious "days off" to attend this event
- 3) The commitment to follow up, especially regarding the present economic situation and those who are affected by the loss of work.

*Sr. Jean Goulet, c.s.c.*

Yes, there were many suggestions. But with limited resources not all can be acted on.

The committee will have to decide on which ones we can do something about. I was very impressed by all the "environmental" suggestions – since so

many of them can actually be carried out at the parish level, for example:

- Earth Hour with its lights out for an hour
- Elimination of plastic and paper use
- An energy audit, etc.

It truly is a matter of "Whatever we do...."

*Robert Gates*



The next event organised by the Mission and Social Justice Committee at St Basil's in the *Whatever we do ...* series:

Friday March 27, 2009: All parishioners, especially our youth, are invited to attend an evening of fun and reflection on the topic of Faith and the Environment. After a Solidarity Supper beginning at 6 p.m., Dr. John Dorner, the Liaison for Environmental Stewardship in the Archdiocese Office of Social Justice, will give a keynote presentation. Joining him is Andrew Di Capua, a 13-year old student and engaging public speaker. Students from Notre Dame High School will then lead everyone in prayer, reflection, music and song. This event will take place in the church hall in the basement of St Basil's Church.

