
Catholic Social Teaching's Demand for Justice Education at Catholic Residential Colleges

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Introduction

In this paper, I propose that to develop a just society, Catholic higher education systems must educate students by providing integrated learning opportunities to engage with the concept of justice. Justice education is more than fostering a personal virtue as it should involve an appreciation of the social dimension of human life and pursuit of the establishment of a just society. At the university, fostering this virtue requires consistency through students' whole educational experience, and therefore, justice education requires that instructors, staff, and administrators consistently manifest justice. To show this, I will first examine the existing scholarship of justice education, including Catholic Social Teaching (hereafter CST).² I will pay particular attention to Pope John XXIII's *Mater et Magistra* ("Mother and Teacher") and share why and how his brand of CST would be an effective option for deepening and widening teaching justice both as virtue formation and social/ community engagement learning in practice.

Justice Education: Integrating Character and Moral Education into Catholic Social Teaching

One must first understand the fundamental terminology of justice, justice education, and social justice education to understand the concept of providing justice learning opportunities. According to Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, the virtue of justice results from living within a just community, which is to say a setting that provides one with the opportunity to become a virtuous person. The virtuous person is the most truly human being, a person who grows in virtue socially by surrounding themselves with other virtuous people and learning from them, and thereby growing in *phronesis* (practical wisdom).³ Justice education is necessary to found this community, as it paves the way for a rich understanding of the importance of the right kind of relationship needed to build a more just society that must be accompanied with virtues in order to foster the common good.⁴ This vision of justice education has brought leaders of religious education and social ministry together to assess and strengthen community participation when putting their efforts into practice. While this Aristotelian-Thomistic vision of justice education has been a hallmark of the Brothers of the Christian Schools,⁵ the complexity of justice in the contemporary higher educational context signals a need for integrated learning opportunities of justice education on the matter.

For example, social justice falls under the umbrella of justice. This specific branch of justice attempts to articulate *just* elements of society such as distribution of resources, economics, and opportunities.⁶ Educators have responded to the complexities of justice and social justice with the concept of social justice education (SJE): "Among many educators and educational researchers, SJE has become not only ubiquitous but [. . .], the apple pie of contemporary education."⁷ A problem, identified by Lauren Bialystok, is that "dozens of definitions and conceptions of SJE

[exist] in the literature, including ‘full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs’ (Bell, 1997, p. 3) and ‘a disposition toward recognizing and eradicating all forms of oppression and differential treatment’ (Murrell, 2006, p. 81).⁸ Ironically, the difficulty of defining concepts such as justice and social justice education only makes them more relevant for educational systems, teachers, and students to explore for the betterment of society. Additionally, the extension of appreciating this reality in practice goes hand-in-hand with the need for increasing integrated learning opportunities of justice education in higher education settings.

Likewise, Pope John XXIII, in his encyclical letter, *Mater et Magistra*, argues for the responsibility of society to provide integrated learning opportunities for justice education. Providing students with a justice education is essential to their *whole* education. Pope John XXIII argues that students must “be given more assistance, and more free time in which to complete their vocational training as well as to carry out more fittingly their cultural, moral, and religious education.”⁹ While this statement comes from a Christian context, it applies to all humans. Not only is vocational training needed, but “more fittingly” education for the whole individual. Furthermore, providing students with an education that explores justice is not only essential to their education but essential to the future of society.¹⁰ Pope John XXIII writes, “It is of the utmost importance that parents exercise their right and obligation toward the younger generation by securing for their children a sound cultural and religious formation.”¹¹ Here, he calls parents but this call to recognition applies to all individuals involved in providing integrated opportunities for justice education at school – including teachers and coaches and their colleagues in other professions such as university administrators and staff – as they too, have a responsibility to the next generation. This responsibility requires everyone to examine justice and establish their beliefs and values for the future of their students. Those who play a part in education must reflect on their experiences to establish knowledge of justice. The Pope emphasizes that members of society’s institutions “besides profiting personally from their own day-to-day experience in this field, can also help the social education of the rising generation by giving it the benefit of the experiences they have gained.”¹²

In her TED Talk, 2017 teacher of the year Sydney Chaffee states, “social justice should be a part of the mission of every school and every teacher in America, if we want ‘liberty and justice for all’ to be more than a slogan [. . .] because schools are crucial places for children to become active citizens and to learn the skills and the tools that they need to change the world.”¹³ This quotation furthers the argument that schools can provide students with more than the opportunity to gain book knowledge. Likewise, residential liberal arts colleges can be transformational places that nurture the development of citizens and active members of society. In order for that transformation to take place, residential colleges must present students with multiple learning opportunities to understand their role in society and the concept of justice.

Implications for Classroom Settings

The current justice education literature on integral learning opportunities both for advancing whole education and preparing for the future of society is practically reflected in Pope John XXIII’s *Mater et Magistra* in two ways: (i) engaging and experiencing justice education; and (ii) pairing academic learning with character and moral education.

Providing justice learning opportunities starts with the teachers who will provide those learning opportunities. Teachers must acknowledge and accept their role and responsibility. Teachers are role models who provide opportunities for their students to explore justice. Since justice and other topics associated with moral education are complex, students “look to the adults in their lives – parents, teachers, coaches, and relatives – to help them decide what to do.”¹⁴ In the most beneficial justice-oriented learning opportunities, teachers act as guides for their students. They use their knowledge, beliefs, values, and experience to guide students toward the students’ own understanding of justice. Through reflection, teachers realize that there is not one universal definition of justice, so they cannot teach as if there were. Although students are ready to explore these concepts, even from a young age,¹⁵ “they need adult mentors to help them translate their ideas into action. With guidance, they can go from passive spectators to activists, focusing their energy on solutions.”¹⁶ To effectively present learning opportunities to explore justice, teachers must acknowledge their role as a guide rather than an imparter of knowledge. Teachers can use their knowledge to help guide but should do so in a way that enables students to develop their own knowledge. If teachers want to educate their students as people, teachers must educate their students to think for themselves.

With this preliminary proposition in mind and when presenting learning opportunities to explore justice, the teacher must guide students through experiences. Experience and engagement turn the theory of justice education into the practice of justice education. Pope John XXIII states, “It is not enough to merely formulate a social doctrine. It must be translated into reality.”¹⁷ While the Pope speaks of beliefs and values in a religious context, the idea of translating ideas to reality remains true in the educational context. Educational institutions and teachers cannot achieve a quality, whole-student education by just writing guidelines, approaches, or theories. These must be examined and challenged for the actual student and classroom. Engaging and experiencing justice requires learning opportunities that are more than passive assignments. Aristotle writes, “Hence knowing about virtue is not enough, but we must also try to possess and exercise virtue, or become good in any other way.”¹⁸ Justice education provides students with the ability to “exercise” virtue because “we become just by doing,” according to Aristotle.¹⁹ When students engage in their learning, it becomes more meaningful and effective. Pope John XXIII writes, “formal instruction, to be successful, must be supplemented by the students’ active co-operation in their own training. They must gain an experimental knowledge of the subject, and that by their own positive action.”²⁰ Teachers should want their instruction and guidance to last a lifetime, and they should take measures to make sure it does. They should carefully take the time to craft these exploratory, learning opportunities and can do so by examining examples of justice education and learning from fellow educators.

Teachers looking to provide integrated learning opportunities for their students to engage with justice can study and adapt established educational models, theories, and practices. One possible challenge with justice education is providing learning opportunities that go beyond a surface level, background information on a topic.²¹ To practically provide justice education, teachers must weave justice into the learning opportunities they regularly present to their students. Plainly, pairing academic learning with character and moral education provides the students with a more realistic education.²² They should not be taught to think of these concepts separately. They will need to use all their knowledge, academic, social, emotional, and moral, to make decisions.²³ If educational systems do not guide students to adopt these thinking habits, students may have a difficult time

bringing all their experiences together in the future. Hence, teachers should exhibit positive expectations to ensure that integrated justice education is possible. For example, classroom teachers paired with their school librarians to explore the concept of justice in texts. The educators describe the learning opportunity as “a list of books with a social justice theme was curated for students. Each student engaged in finding the book that was right for them and then collaborated with a small group of students to engage in book discussions and activities.”²⁴ This learning opportunity provides an example of integrated teaching and teaching that calls students to act. To complete the learning opportunity, “students collaborated to create a final project that shared the social justice themes in their chosen books.”²⁵ When designing these experiences, students engaged with the material in a way that made the material relevant and meaningful to them without sacrificing deep learning.

Integrated justice learning opportunities can fit into educational expectations established for teachers and students. Many teachers assume character and moral education present just one more element to add to the already demanding curriculum they feel the pressure to address. However, justice education can and should be integrated into the subject matter curriculum. In this way, justice education addresses educational standards, content goals, and enhances students’ learning as they engage with those standards. Social justice educator Schmidt assures educators, “your students will develop and demonstrate skills that are fundamental to a rigorous standards-based approach to social studies. Many teachers report that their students exceed expectations on dozens of standards.”²⁶ Integrating justice education with subject-matter education contextualizes the concept of justice for students so they can apply it to their current and future experiences in more practical ways.

Furthermore, when education systems provide learning opportunities for students to explore justice, they are not only developing *just* people they are developing independent thinkers. Justice education can, in fact, be unjust if it teaches students one way of thinking. Teachers may impart their beliefs, values, and understanding of justice on their students.²⁷ This argument presents a realistic, potential issue with justice education. *If teachers are not fully aware of their responsibility and the impact their teaching has on students, specifically in the context of the future of society, they may fall into the practice of unconscious bias while approaching moral and character education.* For example, one teacher took their class “to the streets with signs and an oversized *papier mâché* oil pipeline to protest the laying of an actual pipeline in Western Canada.”²⁸ While this teacher made their students aware of a real-life, relevant topic related to justice and allowed them to actively engage in the topic, the teacher left no room for individual thinking on the concept of justice. This teacher taught one understanding of justice instead of guiding students toward their own understanding of justice. The difference between “teaching” personal views and “guiding” students toward individual views separates justice education that will establish a just society and one that will establish a polarized society. However, with awareness and planning, teachers can stay on the side of guiding students to become well-rounded thinkers. Teachers can and should approach justice education as encouraging engagement in learning opportunities as opposed to only presenting already established beliefs and values. Bialystok states, “There is a critical difference between teaching students to think about the world in such a way that may motivate independent political involvement, and requiring students to defend or oppose particular political parties or policies.”²⁹ She proposes an alternate learning opportunity in response to the teacher who led the pipeline protest:

[A lesson] drawing attention to the negative impacts of the pipeline, such as its effects on the environment and on aboriginal communities, is entirely justified by such laws as the Environmental Protection Act (1999) and recent social activism surrounding aboriginal rights in Canada, particularly if accompanied by critique of the political bias in media and government discussions of the issue, such as recent television ads promoting the tar sands.³⁰

This learning opportunity asks students to synthesize multiple perspectives, critically think about the information presented in the context of their personal experiences, and make an individual decision. In this regard, Picower makes the observation that “all teaching is political (Freire, 1993), not just teaching that comes from a social justice perspective. Good teaching, regardless of its ideological lens, should provide students with multiple perspectives about historical events, allowing them to draw their own conclusions based on evidence (Burstein & Hutton, 2005).”³¹ When teachers are aware of their role and responsibility, they can better guide their students toward thinking about justice in the most just way possible. Likewise, when students are exposed to the concept of justice early in life, educational systems help create a just present *and* future because the study of justice, freedom, equality, equity, diversity, tolerance, and integrity supports students in making ethical and just decisions on a day-to-day basis in their classrooms and in the larger community.³² Educational professionals need not even separate social justice education from simply justice education or moral and character education. Plainly, *a just education simply educates the entire human character*. This type of character and moral education asks students to engage, act, and think, much like they will be asked to do as independent members of society. Imagine the just society of the future if education systems not only provided students with knowledge but guided them in how to think, act, and lead with that knowledge.

Implications for Residential Life and Academic Administration

The preceding shows that teachers must manifest justice in order to foster justice education; since justice education is holistic, it should be constant across their experience. This has a broader implication for administrators and staff as well as students. The holistic vision of character and moral education imbued in *Mater et Magistra* relies on a theological understanding of the human persona’s *imago Dei*, and therefore CST is based on the moral imperative of *human sociality* as well as *human dignity*: “human beings are not meant to live in isolation but are meant to live in community with one another.”³³

Ideally, these imperatives of CST should be present in on-ground practical university life and student/ administration dynamics. The renowned virtue ethicist Paul Wadell works through different forms of justice demonstrating that individuals have a responsibility for helping to maintain social justice and that justice is both personal and social. Wadell explains that society can be construed as a network of relationships which imply moral duty: “We owe something to others (and they owe something to us) because our lives are always enmeshed in relationships that carry inescapable moral demands.”³⁴ Wadell identifies the three forms of justice that exist among individuals, and between the individual and larger society: commutative, distributive, and social justice.³⁵ These different forms of justice, especially the latter two, demonstrate that justice must be served by each person and by the larger society. As he explains, distributive justice regards the duties of the society as it “protects the *common good* by insisting that all persons have a right to some share in the basic goods and services of a society.”³⁶ Conversely and also importantly, social

justice regards the duties of the individual as “it focuses on the responsibility every member of society has to contribute to the common good and to work to create a more just society.” Wadell explains that these two forms of justice – distributive and social – “are closely connected because social [or contributive] justice makes distributive justice possible.”³⁷ While the university as a social institution has a responsibility to each student to promote the common good, each person within the university has a personal obligation, imposed by social justice, to support the community. For Wadell, this “justice is both an abiding quality of character and a principle of action. It is, more precisely, a virtue because a person of justice is habitually attuned to the needs of others and characteristically responsive to their good.”³⁸

Although everyone in the university community is bound by this social justice, university leaders and administrators and staff are also bound by justice in a distinctive way since they are proactively charged with the high and grave duty of state which determines the common good. Hence, leaders and administrators are arguably more responsible for attending to the demands of distributive justice than others. As leaders and members of society, university leaders have a moral and practical duty to both distributive and social justice. Leaders should exhibit this awareness of their obligations to others given the unique nature of their relationship to others in society.³⁹ The imperatives of justice are a consequence of “the deep connections that exist between us and everything else that lives.”⁴⁰ Since those connections are broader and of a unique nature for leaders, they have a special call to “recognize the obligations and responsibilities those bonds create.”⁴¹ University administrators and staff, especially the leaders, should acknowledge their role as contributors to society by attending to how the benefits of society are justly distributed.

Above all, there is something to be said about the way that a failure of virtues in institutional leaders and administrators may vitiate a call to virtue in the bodies that they lead. We fail in teaching justice in some important ways when we treat it as a set of principles an individual might uphold while the communities or institutions to which they belong violate them without objection. Further, the fact that there is no present concrete metric scale to measure virtues, or traits like social justice, does not mean that virtuous traits and actions are not needed in the administration of higher education and in service for the common good. In fact, they are needed since their absence is inevitably linked to failures to fully engage justice education.

Conclusion

Justice education requires everyone involved in the educational experience to be just. Thus, character education should support teachers, administrators, and staff as well as students. To show this, this paper has discussed that to develop a just society, higher education systems must educate students by providing integrated learning opportunities for them to engage with the concept of justice. As a further step working toward this goal, this paper has explained justice education within CST, as it has emphasized that fostering the virtue of justice in practice requires consistently through students’ whole educational experience, and therefore, justice education requires that everyone involved in education – staff and administrators, as well as instructors – manifest justice. Therefore, this justice education is a useful resource for both administrators and teachers who are interested in developing strategies for promoting ethical reasoning and character development among their students. Indeed, Lasallian institutions envision this education not as an end in itself, but as a means of fostering a virtue-guided space for integrated learning opportunities – by offering

illustrations for how virtues can be introduced into, and ultimately enrich, the university's curriculum, as well as through making a consistent effort to enhance the university's educational potential for serving the common good in practice. Inasmuch as the residential college shows much interest in forging a culture of this justice education, it should similarly show much interest in facing the real challenges of building community, a good that depends on both an abiding quality of character and a principle of action.

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Endnotes

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2. Catholic Social Teaching (CST) refers to a range of literature produced by popes, bishops, and other Church leaders that addresses social issues and challenges from a Christian faith perspective. CST seeks to offer ways in which Catholics and other people of goodwill should attend to those challenges by laying down principles grounded in or compatible with the Christian tradition that should inform social practice and way of life.

3. Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. Trevor J. Saunders and T. A. Sinclair (London: Penguin Books, 1981), 1323a21.

4. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1984), II-II, q.58, a.1, 6, 11; and II-II, q.58, a.7, 8. (Hereafter cited as *ST*).

5. For details on the case study of at least one Lasallian institution, see Gerald J. Beyer's grant-funded research report, "Catholic Universities, Solidarity and the Right to Education for All: Two Case Studies in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia." Program for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society Report. University of Pennsylvania (April 2007).

6. Lauren Bialystok, "Politics Without 'Brainwashing': A Philosophical Defense of Social Justice Education." *Curriculum Inquiry*, 44, no. 3. (June 2014): 415.

7. Bialystok, 416.

8. Bialystok, 418.

9. John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra* (1961): n. 94.

10. For details, see Deirdra Grode, "Teaching Social Justice," *Education Update* 51, no. 10 (October 2009).

11. John XXIII, n. 195.

12. John XXIII, n. 233.

13. Fitzgerald et al., 2.

14. Laurel Schmidt, "Stirring Up Justice," *Educational Leadership* 66, no. 8(May 2009): 33.

15. Some educators and psychologists believe justice and other elements of moral and character education are too abstract and complex for young students to explore; they think these are concepts that will come later in life with more experience. See Grode, "Teaching Social Justice." However, young students themselves challenge that belief. Martin Luther King Jr. once wrote of a five-year-old who asked, "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?" Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," para 12. Even as young as five years old, children's minds ask these questions. Laurel Schmidt, the renowned educator, echoes this when she writes, "Active, inquisitive citizenship can begin when learners are young. They should act out early and often, until championing worthy causes becomes a habit they can't break." Habits, whether academic, social, emotional, or moral, can and should develop in youth. For details on this position, see Schmidt, "Stirring Up Justice": 32-36; and Erin L. Papa, "Bilingual Education for All in Rhode Island: Assuring the Inclusion of Minoritized Language." NECTFL Review, no. 86, November 2020: 45-61.

16. Schmidt, 33.

17. John XXIII, n. 226.

18. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publisher, 1999), 1179b4.

19. Ibid., 1103b1, 1181a10.

20. John XXIII, n. 231.

21. For details, see Bree Picower, "Using Their Words: Six Elements of Social Justice Curriculum Design for the Elementary Classroom." *International Journal of Multicultural*

Education 14, no. 1 (2012): 1-17. Although Picower’s work originally targets K-12 education, it also reasonably applies to higher education.

22. Of course, Catholic residential colleges, including but not limited to Lasallian institutions, often face a practical challenge such as how justice education could lay groundwork for or mediate Catholic Social Teaching or faith-based character education to a pluralist environment. Accordingly, justice education needs to develop in a comprehensive and consistent manner, as Derek Bok notes, “Precisely because its community is so diverse, set in a society so divided and confused over its values, a university that pays little attention to moral development may find that many of its students grow bewildered, convinced that ethical dilemmas are simply matters of personal opinions beyond external judgment or careful analysis. Nothing could be more unfortunate or more unnecessary.” Derek Bok, *Universities and the Future of America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 100. Above all, some values enjoy widespread support among students (and their parents) and faculty members, but I nevertheless argue that their consensus, while important, is an insufficient reason for incorporating particular values into the curriculum. Instead, I argue, the values incorporated into a university’s curriculum must somehow enhance its academic mission. For a similar argument, see Ivor A. Pritchard, *Good Education: The Virtues of Learning* (Macon: Judd Publishing, 1999).

23. Rebecca Bauer and Helen Westmoreland, “What is Whole Child Education?” The Center for Family Engagement: A National PTA Initiative. (2019): 1. For a similar argument yet in the context of higher education, see Bok, *Universities and the Future of America*; and James Keenan, *University Ethics* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

24. Fitzgerald, et al., “School Libraries,” 5.

25. Ibid.

26. Schmidt, “Stirring Up,” 36.

27. Bialystok, 413-414.

28. Ibid., 432.

29. Ibid., 430.

30. Ibid., 432.

31. Picower, “Using Their Words,” 9.

32. For details, see Pritchard, *Good Education*. Also, for more on the practical implications of the CST’s everyday character development in education, see Carol Cimino, et al., *Integrating the Social Teaching of the Church into Catholic Schools: Conversations in Excellence* (Washing, DC: National Catholic Educational Association, 2000).

33. Kenneth Himes, *101 Questions & Answers on Catholic Social Teaching* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2013), 27.

34. Paul Wadell, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 240.

35. Wadell, 241-246.

36. Wadell, 242. Pope John XXIII's *Mater et Magistra* (n. 65) offered what is now considered the classic definition of common good; the common good is "the sum total of those conditions of social living whereby [human beings] are enabled more fully and more readily to achieve their own perfection." This definition shows that the common good is a comprehensive concept that broadly encompasses all the other moral and social concepts such as human dignity, human sociality, commutative justice, distributive justice, social justice, and moral and character education.

37. Wadell, 245. Wadell interchangeably uses social justice with contributive justice. I keep social justice for the sake of consistency through the paper although Himes' understanding of social justice seems broader than Wadell's understanding of social justice limited to that of contributive justice.

38. Wadell, 240.

39. James Keenan refers to this unique nature as "fiefdoms, a perfect description of the university, inasmuch as both are deeply rooted in the medieval world. Moreover, structural fiefdoms, like universities, are not related horizontally, except at the top." For example, he observes that "Plant managers, cafeteria workers, student affairs' deans, financial aid officers, admissions boards, custodial workers, trustee members, campus ministers, university police, and librarians each have their own definable domain and their members know mostly what happens within that domain. Rarely are there occasions to go beyond one's domain [. . .]. The university might think of itself as a community, but it's a thin one at best. [. . .] the university's structure is very clear in its vertical direction; each cluster knows without a doubt who answers to whom in the upwardly oriented structure of unilateral accountability." Keenan, *University Ethics*, 63; and for details of his account on the "fiefdoms" in the American university landscape, see *Ibid.*, 64-68.

40. Wadell, 239-240.

41. *Ibid.*