

Catholic Youth and Advocacy: A Strange Proposal in Faithful Living

by David Bristow

Over the past hundred years the Roman Catholic Church has become a beacon of advocacy for numerous issues relating to the collective welfare of humanity. Such an understanding has typically been referred to as Catholic social teaching and highlights the Church's concern for themes relating to human dignity, solidarity, and subsidiarity.¹ In an effort to make these themes more recognizable to the Church in the United States, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops created the *Task Force on Catholic Social Teaching and Catholic Education* in order to investigate how its social justice criteria was being met by the faithful. The conclusion proposed by the United States bishops was one of concern: although some parishes had innovative programs in place that dealt with Catholic social teaching, there were still far too many Catholics left unaware of its integral place within the faith.²

Due to the task force's findings the American bishops later issued challenges to the Church's educational centers, which included the nation's youth ministry programs. It was their hope that "effective methodologies" would be developed in an attempt to "enhance the explicit teaching of Catholic social doctrine" for both educators and young adults alike. By doing so the youth in particular would become better formed in the language of Catholic social teaching with the intent of living a more vibrant advocacy. Of course, the question left unanswered was exactly *how* this was going to take place. How were youth ministry communities supposed to form their teenagers so as to advocate on behalf of the poor, the widow, and the downtrodden?³ What ministry practices must be embodied whereby the Church's social agenda can be better heard throughout the world? This article will attempt to engage these questions with pertinent reflections and examples regarding youth advocacy in the area of Catholic social justice. Although by no means exhaustive, it is a confident starting point in which to grow advocacy amongst the youth.

Advocacy as a Strange Proposal

In some ways Catholic youth advocacy can be seen as a strange proposal. It is strange because the language of advocacy frequently carries with it images of secularized political agendas which push religious beliefs into the private realm. Thus, in an attempt to advocate for some perceived social cause in the United States, Roman Catholics can be made to feel as if they must argue on terms other than those set forth by the Church's vibrant tradition. Take for example how Catholic teens are made to debate abortion in public school systems. Because religious beliefs are thought to be divisive and private, the Catholic youth are told to advocate for their cause using only scientific and natural means. The problem with this is not so much that the youth cannot use common reasons to show the evils of abortion, but rather that advocacy is given a modernized twist which too often precludes religious beliefs and practices from ever coming to the forefront of their minds. As a result, many Catholic youth perceive advocacy as first and foremost "making a change in the world" without ever equating it to the reawakening of their spiritual lives *for the sake of justice*.⁴

Youth ministers need to counter this modern mindset by showing the youth how advocacy is a spirit-filled and Christ-driven response. Perhaps there is no better way to do this than by having the youth come to the Lord in prayer and in sacrament before advocating for some social cause. By doing so teens should come to understand how Christ makes the real changes through and because of their openness and devotion.⁵ Notice the implications of this kind of reasoning. Instead of seeing advocacy as mere “noticeable change in the public opinion” the Catholic youth now see it as “change on Christ’s terms instead of on their own.” The Catholic youth thus learn the virtue of patience as much as prayer; Catholics must become a patient people who advocate always and everywhere on behalf of the Lord even when others believe nothing tangible or real is taking place. Certainly this should make the Catholic notion of advocacy appear somewhat strange to those steeped in a secularized viewpoint. To have a people devoted to prayer as much as charity in the name of advocacy can seem to be a backward practice.

Advocacy as Faithful Living

Of course, it would be a mistake to suggest that our Catholic youth should never engage social justice issues in a “hands-on” way. Advocacy for Catholic social teaching in all its many forms was never an option for the believer; it is a central tenet to becoming a faithful witness.⁶ Yet faithfulness to social justice implies a communal dimension. Youth ministers need to approach this issue with the understanding that advocacy is supposed to be a Church-wide activity for the formation of its people. Frequently, youth ministers can isolate their youth from the parish community in order to partake of Catholic social issues by themselves, never wondering if it might be their role to challenge parishioners to aid in a social cause. If done correctly, then, advocacy can become a parish-wide effort; it challenges the local parish community to reinforce the Church’s social justice issues *with and for* the youth in a communal-like fashion. Subsequently, the Catholic youth learn to associate advocacy within a parish-wide model as much as they do a youth ministry one. This is critical to a teenager’s development so that he or she does not see advocacy as merely something tied to youth ministry and not the larger Church at hand.

Understandably, engaging the parish as a whole with social justice concerns can be a daunting task. Some local parishes may not be as willing as others to participate. Be that as it may, youth ministers can still foster advocacy in their parishes by routinely having social justice initiatives as an essential part of their youth programs. One can do this for example by having the youth regularly serve needy parishioners at their homes on Sunday nights instead of always having teens meet for discussion in a youth room. Another idea is to have the youth walk around the Church’s surrounding neighborhoods in silence with candles for the prayer intentions of the local community. Such a witness can work wonders for those going through difficult times as well as serve as an excellent evangelization tool. Or, have the youth advocate by becoming poorer themselves.⁷ With parental permission, have them sell some of their consumer or electronic goods as a sacrifice for the welfare of a local shelter. In these instances advocacy is inextricably tied to a Christ-like witness. Youth learn to embrace sacrifice as a constitutive element in advocating on behalf of another.

Taking up the USCCB Challenge

In an effort to respond faithfully to the USCCB and their concerns over social teaching, youth ministers must familiarize themselves with both Catholic social concerns and their advocacy initiatives as seen through the ‘eyes of faith’. They must teach the youth to be active and patient with their Catholic advocacy, understanding the role of sacrifice and diligent (prayerful) work. Youth ministers should also seek to create a communal dimension to the Church’s social concerns by having the teens engage other parish or local organizations committed to faithful advocacy. Doing so allows the youth to become more connected to the Church by making the parish’s social concerns their own. Finally, form the youth so that advocacy is directly intertwined with prayer and the Catholic faith. Have them understand that advocating social concerns on religious grounds is also a legitimate reason for their undertaking. The bishops have issued a challenge to further advocate for the sake of justice. Let our youth ministers make sure that such a challenge does not go without warrant.

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¹ See Pope John Paul II’s 1999 Apostolic Exhortation, [*Ecclesia in America*](#), p.55.

² See the USCCB Documents [*Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions \(1998\)*](#) and the [*Summary Report of the Task Force on Catholic Social Teaching and Catholic Education \(1995\)*](#).

³ Cf. Luke 4:18, Deut. 15:6, etc.

⁴ See for example Pope Benedict XVI and his encyclical [*Deus Caritas Est*](#) (28) which discusses the role of social justice in relation to spirituality and the common good.

⁵ ref. St. Augustine *De gratia Christi* 25, 26

⁶ See for example *Communities of Salt and Light*, p. 3

⁷ Cf. Matthew 5:3, Leviticus 25: 35-36, etc.