



Seal of the  
Society of Jesus

# Catholic Social Teaching (CST) and Social Analysis<sup>1</sup>

by the Rev. Fred Kammer, S.J.

Social analysis in Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is one-half of the answer to the question, “What is really going on in this situation?” Beyond mere description, the focus here is on trying to understand and analyze a situation, problem, or dilemma more carefully. Holland and Henriot define social analysis as “the effort to obtain a more complete picture of a social situation by exploring its **historical and structural relationships.**”<sup>2</sup>

This could seem a complex task. Brazilian Francisco Ivern says social analysis requires use of philosophy and the social sciences, including not only economics, sociology, and political science, but also social psychology, religious sociology, and cultural anthropology.<sup>3</sup> One Vatican source speaks of a “plurality of methods and viewpoints, each of which reveals only one aspect of reality which is so complex that it defies simple and univocal explanation.”<sup>4</sup> The Holland-Henriot approach to social analysis seems to me to be shorthand for “socio-economic-political-cultural-religious-historical analysis.”

Such a broad task suggests the need for experts to do analysis. It also implies transcending any particular expertise in ways that return social analysis to the hands of each of us as concerned citizens. Thomas Clarke concurs:

*Social analysis is not the prerogative of an elite. If a participatory, democratic way of life is to be a possibility, it requires a basic confidence and skill on the part of ordinary people in making critical and informed judgments regarding the social contexts of their lives. To say this is not to deny the importance of specialized knowledge, or the difficulty which most of us have in being reasonably well informed on scores of major and complex issues, and in deciding just what sources of information and analytical helps to critical judgment deserve our trust.*<sup>5</sup>

Clarke argues that specialists in the various disciplines are “helpful mentors,” but not substitutes for our own judgments. These judgments have to be built upon experience and combined with values and commitments that are unique to each one of us.

Social analysis, however, helps us “move beyond personal experience of the milieu and to provide us with the

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empirical and analytical basis for the evaluative judgments and the pragmatic decisions which will represent our response of faith to the needs of our times.”<sup>6</sup> Without such analysis, Clarke adds, we risk “visionary, romantic, or simply misguided and irrelevant” decisions. With such analysis, Joseph Daoust adds, we can “gradually remove the limitations of our cultural blinders, and make us more critically aware of the social structures which must be transformed to ‘make clear the way of the Lord.’”<sup>7</sup>

I like to think of social analysis as asking the journalist’s questions: who, what, why, when, where, and how? The first paragraph of a news story often answers all these questions. The point of social analysis is to ask those same questions about whatever we are involved in, whether it be something in the local news or a matter of national and international public policy. Social analysis, while the phrase may initially put us off, is just that—asking the right questions. Our first task is to apply our senses, understood broadly, to reality around us. It is scientific inquiry; it is

doctors diagnosing patients; it is a child asking, “Why, Mommy?”

When many people hear about social analysis, they protest: “Oh, I can’t do that; I’m not an economist or a political scientist.” The reality is that we are all doing social analysis, and others in the media or on talk radio are trying to do it for us. CST promotes explicit social analysis to call attention to the fact that we do analysis already, and thus to improve what we do in the future.

## The Evangelical Importance of Social Analysis

The complement to social analysis is **theological reflection**. It is the second part of the answer to what’s happening; it builds upon analysis and asks, what are the values here? How do I and my faith community judge what is graced or sinful? What is freeing or enslaving people? What promotes or destroys human dignity and covenant community? We do social analysis to better understand our part in bringing forth the reign of God in history, to better know what is graced or sinful. Peter Marchetti uses the traditional Ignatian spiritual term *discreta caritas* for this endeavor: discerning love.<sup>8</sup> To engage in the art and science of social analysis is to try to love wisely, an exercise in natural and supernatural prudence. This is not just love, but discerning love. It is not just enough to say we love, to feel love, or even to give my body over to martyrdom. This is especially true when we dare to say, “I love the poor,” for whom misguided love is too often like one more instance of deficient housing, second-class medical care, hand-me-down clothing, or shoddy merchandise.

Social analysis says my love is serious enough to want to know, “What is really helpful in this situation?” Social analysis

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is an instrument for standing with the poor, which sharpens the vision that enables us to see differently and clears our thinking to judge differently what we see. Too many well-intentioned people have begun volunteer work or ministry among the poor without understanding “what is really happening here.” When they fail to understand, they often find themselves part of the problem of alienation or paternalism, instead of being part of the solution. Social analysis is an important, necessary step in shaping a response that asks, what is discerning and effective love for me?

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#### FOOTNOTES

- 1 This is adapted from Kammer, *Salted with Fire: Spirituality for the Faithjustice Journey* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1995, 2008), pp. 40-42.
- 2 Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, S.J., *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983), p. 14.
- 3 Francisco Ivern, S.J., “The Future of Faith and Justice: A Critical Review of Decree Four,” in *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesus*, Vol. 14, No. 5, November, 1982, p. 19.
- 4 Instruction on Certain Aspects of the “Theology of Liberation,” Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, August 6, 1984 (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, Publication No. 935), p. 17.
- 5 Thomas E. Clarke, S.J., “Methodology,” in *The Context of Our Ministries: Working Papers* (Washington, D.C.: Jesuit Conference, 1981), pp. 6-9, at p. 7.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Joseph Daoust, S.J., “The Social Dimension of Ministry for the Reign of God,” Address to the Thirtieth Annual National Assembly of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, St. Louis, Missouri, August 13, 1986, p. 18.
- 8 Peter Marchetti, S.J., in an address to New Orleans Province Jesuits, December, 1979.