

Every Day CATHOLIC

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"It Wasn't Me"— Social Sin and Social Responsibility

by Jim and Susan Vogt

When our children were young, we frequently heard, "It wasn't me. I didn't do it!" As adults, insisting on our innocence is still second nature. If I didn't break the computer, start the fight or pollute the river, why should I take responsibility for fixing it?

The answer is found at the foot of the cross. Who killed Jesus? Not you or me. We weren't even alive. Pontius Pilate gave the command. Soldiers nailed him to the cross. And religious leaders stirred up the crowd. But we can't lay total blame on any one individual. Rather, we all participate in the evil of the crucifixion because we too sin.

Sin infects our societal attitudes, institutions, corporations, and political and economic structures. These systems and their policies reflect selfishness, greed, intolerance and other vices taking root in our social fabric. It's called social sin, and it's something for which we all are responsible.

We have never owned slaves (although our children may argue this), directly



killed another or openly discriminated against a minority. Just because we haven't personally committed a wrong doesn't excuse us from responsibility for righting the wrong. If we are white (as we are), born into the middle class and have good health, we benefit simply by living in a society that values these conditions. We had a head start we didn't earn.

Social sin is evident when we explore the reality of poverty in American society. Human nature often leads the privileged to assume that less privileged people are where they are because of

laziness, a poor work ethic or lack of ability. We learned the error of this thinking through following the "Why?" questions of our kids.

When our children were young, we used to ride our bikes around our city. As we rode through different neighborhoods, our children would ask questions like:

Q: Why don't these families fix up their homes?

A: Because they don't have enough money. They may not have a job or may have a low-paying job.

Q: Why can't they get a good job?

A: They might not have had a good education, or maybe their family didn't know how to help them learn.

Q: Why can't they get a good education?

A: Their parents might have been uneducated or sick, or had other problems

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"Cases of social sin are the result of the accumulation and concentration of many personal sins....The real responsibility, then, lies with individuals."

—John Paul II, *Reconciliation and Penance*, #16



Michael Clayton

by Frank Frost

Michael Clayton is a legal thriller that delivers a powerful emotional experience. It also delivers a moral message and illuminates the difference between individual and social sin. The title character (George Clooney) is a “fixer” for a large New York law firm. His job is to solve client problems through pushing levers in governmental, judicial and corporate corridors.

Michael’s latest task is to rein in Arthur (Tom Wilkinson), one of his firm’s partners, a brilliant but manic-depressive attorney, who has gone berserk after six years of “defending the reputation of a deadly weed killer” in a class-action lawsuit. Arthur has had an epiphany: It is indefensible to represent corporate interests that knowingly contaminate the water table, resulting in multiple deaths. When Michael argues that Arthur is only doing his duty as an attorney, Arthur insists, “I am an accomplice.”

With stakes in the billions, the weed-killer company’s top attorney, Karen Crowder (Tilda Swinton, in an Oscar-winning performance), will stop at nothing to win the lawsuit, including murder.

Now, murder is a personal sin. And the movie is rife with other lesser sins committed by many characters, including Michael Clayton himself. But the story turns on a sin that is shared by corporate leaders, who launch a public-relations offensive to deceive the courts and the public rather than correct their deadly activity, and by lawyers, who seek to allow corporate interests to prevail in spite of the harm they knowingly do. This is social sin—being an active or passive accomplice to evil that is a result of not just one person’s actions, but of a complex corporate or legal system.

Nichole Flores

by Joan McKamey

Walking with the two feet of social action—acts of charity and work for justice/social change—is something that Nichole Flores takes in stride as both natural and necessary. A graduate student at Yale Divinity School, she has been traveling this path since her teen years in Denver, Colorado. Her high school required community-service hours each semester. She says, “I participated in a broad range of service and justice-oriented programs throughout the city of Denver, including Catholic soup kitchens, Habitat for Humanity and Building Bridges for Peace, a program that brings young people together from Israel, Palestine and the United States to develop face-to-face relationships in an effort to promote the pursuit of peace.”

Nichole strengthened her commitment to work for justice when involved in the Newman Center at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. The Catholic chaplain encouraged “learning about Catholic social teaching and living out the teachings through both service-oriented and justice-oriented projects.”

While busy with her studies, Nichole continually makes time for involvement in justice-oriented organizations. An internship with the University of the Poor School



of Theology gave her “the opportunity to work with poor people’s organizations including the Deaf and Deaf-Blind Committee on Human Rights in Cleveland, Ohio, and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) in Florida.” She says, “My experience in Immokalee, where workers in the tomato fields are organizing for fair wages and against modern-day slavery and other human-rights violations, was particularly instructive in my understanding of Catholic social teaching, especially

the Church’s call to be in solidarity with the poor.”

While in Florida, Nichole also worked at the Beth-El Farmworker Ministry in Wimauma. She says, “I helped build a playground, distributed food and spent time with the children at the mission school. It was during this that I realized that works of charity and works of justice are inextricably bound. We cannot simply provide charity and relief without seeking to eradicate the root causes of injustice and poverty. It’s by pursuing justice and giving charitably that we’re able to walk step-by-step toward a ‘new heavens and a new earth’ (Isaiah 65:17).”

This past summer, Nichole served as a Catholic Campaign for Human Development intern at the Office of Urban Affairs for the Archdiocese of Hartford. She says, “This internship was truly a transformative experience, allowing me to develop a stronger connection between action for justice and Catholic social teaching.”

Nichole says she’s drawn to justice work by the “undeniable presence of injustice in our nation and in our world.” She says, “I’m compelled to work for justice by biblical Scripture and the tradition of our Church which both emphasize our call to treat all people with dignity, especially poor people whose dignity has been undermined.”

Nichole has found her coursework in ethics and theology to be particularly formative in her understanding of the Christian obligation to work toward that “new heavens and a new earth.” She hopes to pursue doctoral work in ethics. Walk on, Nichole.

MOVIE MOMENTS, CONT’D.

Next time you watch *Michael Clayton*, ASK YOURSELF:

- Mentally list the sins committed by all characters in the course of this movie. Which ones are personal sins? Which are social sins?
- When am I a passive accomplice in systemic sin (e.g., silence in the face of racism, contributing to the slow destruction of our planet)?



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Just Being Fair

by Jeanne Hunt

Scenario

Gracie and the other two-year-olds have gathered for their weekly play date. She runs roughshod over the others, grabbing toys, throwing food and finally biting another child. Shedding tears of frustration, Lisa grabs her daughter and wonders where she went wrong: *Why is Gracie so self-centered,*

destructive and mean-spirited? Lisa wants to teach her little girl to be kind and just but feels overwhelmed with the task.

Toddlers have no idea what it means to be just. They function as if the entire world should work to meet their needs: Food, shelter, compassion and even daylight exist simply to please them. There is no way to reason with a terrible two-year-old, who can be enraged when you limit the supply of animal crackers much less propose that he share them.

A response

So, how do parents begin to teach justice to a little child? And why must we do so? We need to consider these basic questions before that two-year-old becomes a self-centered adolescent. Grounding a young child in an understanding of the just life can form an adult who embraces the human dignity of all. The window of opportunity is small. A six-year-old is already well formed in behavior patterns. It is in those early preschool years when

we can teach a child to love justice.

Parents should begin by offering their child consistent ethical responses to daily life situations. The operative word is "consistent." We must *always* respond in the same manner to a behavior. For instance, when a child intentionally spills her snack on the floor, the child should be taught how to clean up the mess (every time it happens). Second, parents should make the child aware of others' needs. For example, parents should explain why we share toys and treats, why we are quiet when the baby is sleeping, why we need to help Mommy when she's tired. Eventually, the child will make the compassionate connection. Third, every child should learn what is right, fair and just. A child should learn that the motivation for keeping moral law is that it is the right and good thing to do. Finally, when a child acts with justice, we must affirm and praise the behavior.

Lisa held Gracie tight as her tears dried. The other mothers, especially the veterans, reassured her that keeping justice with a toddler is a challenge, but "your reward will be great in heaven."

PRAYER

Keeping Justice

by Jeanne Hunt

Preparation: Set a prayer table with a current national newspaper, cards with "Act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly" written on them, a small bowl, an open Bible and a lighted candle.

OPENING HYMN

Sing or listen to a hymn based on Micah 6:1-8.

PRAYER

"Merciful God, infuse within our hearts your mercy. Allow us to act with justice in your name. Encourage us to love with your amazing, sacred heart and drench our spirits in the humility necessary to be your presence in our troubled world. Amen."

SCRIPTURE

Micah 6:1-8.

RITUAL

Give each participant a page of a national newspaper.

"Act justly... (Pause)

Love tenderly... (Pause)

Walk humbly... (Pause)

Is there anything in the paper you hold that speaks to this message, a witness of either justice or injustice, love or hatred, humility or pride?

When you find such a story, tear it out."

Play quiet music while participants look for stories.

"Please come forward to the prayer table. Read aloud the headline of your story and place the paper in our prayer bowl. Then take a prayer card and recite:

'Act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly.'"

CLOSING PRAYER

After all have come forward, lift the bowl of headlines and pray the following:

"O Divine Redeemer, receive this sampling of grace and sin. Bear the burden of this tension and redeem our inadequacies with your saving love.

Amen."



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and couldn't help their kids with their schoolwork.

Q: Well, if they were sick, why didn't they just go to the doctor and get better?

And on and on....

Our family didn't directly cause the poverty of our neighbors. But because we're followers of Christ, we must take responsibility to do something about it. Christ's parable of the last judgment doesn't leave much wiggle room when



CNS/Jim West

the Lord says, "[D]epart from me...for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me....[J]ust as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me" (Matthew 25:41-45).

So, does this mean all will be right if we donate our old clothes to Goodwill, help build a Habitat for Humanity house, work at a soup kitchen and visit the sick—or all of the above? Yes and no. These actions are necessary but not sufficient. Just as we don't commit social sin as individuals, we don't rectify it as individuals. As Kathy and Jim McGinnis say in *Parenting for Peace and Justice*, people of social justice must stand on *two feet*—one foot is direct service; the other foot is social change. Give money to the beggar on the street but *also* ask the "Why?" question: Why is this person poor, homeless, ill or hungry?

No matter how many mouths we feed at the soup kitchen, we must ask our-

selves why, when we're capable of feeding all of humanity, do we lack the political will to do so? Why, in this rich country, is there still poverty? Since most of us would respond generously to an individual in need, the answer often lies in our isolation from those in need. Direct service increases our awareness of the needs around us, but then we must take the next step to change the system that allows these needs to continue.

Following are ways in which an everyday Catholic can make a difference:

- Purify your soul by prayer and fasting. The prayer must be genuine and not heaped with self-righteousness. Fasting puts us in solidarity with those who don't have the luxury to voluntarily forego food or drink.

- Don't engage in "anonymous sinfulness." This is the term the U.S. bishops used in *Brothers and Sisters to Us* (1979) when they wrote about how racism isn't a result of deliberate malicious acts of individuals but rather a result of allowing an unjust system to continue. By sitting on the sidelines and doing nothing we are complicit in the neglect of our neighbor.

- Get to know someone who is poor, a minority, oppressed or vulnerable. It may not be easy to move beyond superficial contact to really get to know an individual's story and struggles, but it will sensitize your conscience and give you perspective. The needy are God's prompt to us to see the deeper needs.

- Take this heightened awareness and use it to propel you to social justice. Commit to taking a step, getting involved in one cause that contributes to systemic change for the common good. You don't have to tackle everything. Start with one step.

- If you get tired, take a break. If you're laboring at works of service and social justice, you will get tired. Take a break, refresh yourself, pray again and come back to take another step.

Once you know the right thing to do, it is wrong to ignore your responsibility. "It wasn't me" will be your condemnation.

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MAKING CONNECTIONS

Name one situation of social sin. What is its impact on you? on others? Do you share responsibility for it in some way?

What are your attitudes about "the poor"? How do these attitudes prevent you from or propel you to action on their behalf?

People of social justice stand on *two feet*—direct service and social change. How will you increase your involvement in a social justice concern?

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