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## Centering those on the periphery: Mother Teresa as exemplar of Catholic Social Thought (CST) and social work core commitments to dignity, service, and justice

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# CENTERING THOSE ON THE PERIPHERY: MOTHER TERESA AS EXEMPLAR OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT (CST) AND SOCIAL WORK CORE COMMITMENTS TO DIGNITY, SERVICE, AND JUSTICE

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## ABSTRACT

*The literature is void of scholarship on the integration of Catholic Social Thought (CST) and social work. While social work has been historically devoted to helping those who are marginalized and oppressed and recognizes the impact of religion/spirituality on those served, there are almost no articles published that link CST and social work pedagogy and practice. This article identifies why there is a natural fit between CST and social work values. Mother Teresa is presented as an exemplar of CST in action and an inspiration for further integration of CST into social work education. This integration is needed to help social work continue to center those on the periphery, namely those who are marginalized, vulnerable, and oppressed. An innovative interdisciplinary initiative operating at one university in the United States is described as an example of how Catholic studies and social work are complementary, and formal and informal linkages should be encouraged in the future. The ways in which scholarship in CST and social work can inform one another are presented to assist faculty and students to advance supports to those on the periphery.*

## INTRODUCTION

Society should be assessed based on how it provides and cares for its most vulnerable members. Service to and care for society's most vulnerable persons, those who are pushed to the margins and forced to live on the periphery, is central to both Catholic Social Thought (CST) and social work pedagogy and practice (Council on Social Work Education, 2022; National Association of Social Workers, 2021; O'Neill, 2021; Shank, 2007). Arguably, the act of centering the poor and vulnerable is itself an act of justice (Nicotera, 2019). Pope Francis' urgent call for social justice resurges and re-centers the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable to the heart of the Church's mission (Pryce et al., 2016). This call challenges injustice by challenging the Church to be "a poor Church for the poor" (Pryce et al., 2016, p. 90). This call invites solidarity with and centering of those on the

margins. It summons the Church, and all committed to justice, to do both the work of direct service, in particular with those in greatest need, and the work of structural change, in order to transform the systems and institutions that oppress, create, and perpetuate deprivation, devastation, and dehumanization.

Catholic social work education prepares students for practice consistent with the goals of Christian service and social justice (Shank, 2007). Social work faculty and students should be particularly attentive to the poorest and to those who suffer economic, social, cultural, or religious injustice. Central to the mission of social work is a commitment to promoting individual change (service) and social reform (justice). This commitment embraces micro, clinical, and macro, social change, practice. It asserts that direct service to persons on the periphery, service that centers their inherent human dignity,

nourishes and cultivates the soil that enables the work of justice to take root.

Though social work's core values, ethical precepts, and commitments to service are consistent with primary Catholic Social Thought (CST) principles, there has been limited research and scholarship examining the congruence between Catholic social work education and CST core principles. The integration of CST principles into social work education and practice invites a 'both/and' approach to centering those on the periphery. Persons of faith and good will are called to do both the work of service, meeting basic needs, and social justice, transforming oppressive structures that create need. For both CST and social work, service to those in greatest need and most vulnerable is essential to the work of justice. Those who are poor and those on the periphery cannot exert the power they possess to transform oppressive structures if they do not have the necessities of life, such as food, clothing, shelter, healthcare, and education. Thus, social work aimed at helping individuals meet these basic needs is a form of CST in action. In serving those on the periphery, their dignity is centered, which itself is an act of justice, challenging dehumanizing, oppressive systems and structures.

Social work provides a professional path for students who are dedicated to promoting the dignity and worth of those on the periphery. CST also helps social work faculty with assisting students to understand the reasons that their service is so important. This article provides an overview of the work of Mother Teresa as it relates to servant leadership, a core tenet of CST. Mother Teresa should be viewed as an exemplar of CST in action. Inspired by Mother Teresa, a university has formally integrated CST and social work which provides a home for scholarship and education focused on servant leadership. Continued efforts to integrate CST and social work are needed to create a just society and center those who have been marginalized and oppressed. Ways of strengthening CST in social

**“Social work provides a professional path for students who are dedicated to promoting the dignity and worth of those on the periphery.”**

work and other curricula to carry on the legacy of Mother Teresa are presented.

## **MOTHER TERESA'S THEOLOGY OF SERVICE AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP**

Mother Teresa and the order the Missionaries of Charity became famous internationally for their assiduous service to the poorest of the world's poor and for their solicitous work to alleviate the world's misery, loneliness, and abandonment, one person at a time. Mother Teresa thought and acted concretely. Using what in pedagogy is called a case-based evaluating approach, she focused on finding solutions in specific scenarios, giving full attention and resolution to one case at a time with undivided attention. Mother Teresa, although considered a living saint, was as ordinary as ordinary can get; she did not possess supernatural powers and was not performing supernatural service. Mother Teresa's

service represented by the media, which followed and contributed to making her a world-famous figure of charity, missed the theological substance of her service and works of charity. Her service to the poorest of the poor was read in black and white: she was seen as a religious sister who founded a vibrant religious order to alleviate poverty in a third-world country, India; the media ignored what was behind Mother Teresa's

theology of service and the challenge to which Mother Teresa and her servanthood invite us: a total identification with Jesus and the poor.

What exactly was Mother Teresa's theology of service or the significance of the gratuitous, joyful service that she and the Missionaries of Charity provided to the poorest of the poor? Has Mother Teresa left behind a theology and legacy of service to be emulated by posterity? What is at the core of her theology of service-leadership? How does this theology of service embody both a commitment to centering the inherent dignity of all persons and the work of justice?

Chapter 10 of the Constitutions of the Missionaries of Charity, written by Mother Teresa, entitled “Consecrated Service to the Poorest of the Poor,” presents a refined case for the theology of service, focusing on Christ’s call to wholehearted and free service to the poorest of His poor (Teresa, 1988). Gratuitous, wholehearted service constitutes the fourth vow of the Missionaries of Charity: an additional vow sisters take besides the traditional monastic vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience. The fourth vow is, unique in Church history. For the Missionaries of Charity, the vow of service is triple binding and bonding. Servanthood binds a religious community, but also binds the sisters to the people they serve: the poorest of the poor (Germani, 2016). The Missionaries of Charity are bound to love and serve the poor, and to live as the poor with the poor (Devanada, 1985b), totally identifying with them. But, most importantly, service is binding to Christ, because for Mother Teresa, union with God means giving oneself entirely in loving service to others (Berisha, 2014).

It is only through love that humans accomplish union with God, and this union is made manifest in service and charity (Germani, 2016). Mother’s virtuous works of self-giving, serving the poor on the world’s peripheries, proceed flawlessly because her soul was in union with Christ—she had reached theosis, through which God lives in and through persons, and persons become God-like, without each (God and humans) losing their essence (Murzaku, 2021). Union with God brought joy, a deep-felt spiritual and interior joy which translates into interior peace. Mother Teresa’s joy was real, as one could tell from her gentle touch, broad smile, happy eyes, and radiant face. Her goal for the Missionaries of Charity was to be able to smile 24 hours a day (Champagne, 2016). In her spiritual testament, written hours before her death on September 5, 1997, Mother Teresa wrote of keeping the Little Flower’s trust, love, and joy, which were rooted in the love of Christ (Murzaku, 2022, September 22)—doing not great, extraordinary works, but rather small, seemingly insignificant, ordinary works of kindness and service, with great love. For Mother Teresa, this love, God’s love, was available on earth; it was not distant:

We all long for heaven where God is, but we have it in our power to be in heaven with him right now, to be happy with him this moment. But being happy with him now means loving as he loves, helping as he helps, giving as he gives, serving as he serves, rescuing as he rescues – and being with him twenty-four hours a day. (Teresa, 2001, p. 137)

Mother’s theology of loving service is scriptural, Christlike, and Christ-centered. The backbone of Mother Teresa’s theology of service is based on the theology of the Gospel of Matthew: “Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers [and sisters] of mine, you did it for me” (Bible, n.d., Mt. 25:40), followed by her application or in-action maxim: faith in action is love. Love in action is service (Teresa, 1988). It is in this gospel passage that according to Pope Francis (2020), Jesus, the evangelizer par excellence, and the Gospel in person, identifies especially with the little ones, the least and most vulnerable. It is *the least*, which includes the poor in spirit (Bible, n.d., Mt. 5:3), who have the heart of the poor, the same attitude as the poor, and are dependent on God; they are the little ones (Bible, n.d., Mt. 10:42). The least too are the those who become like children, those who humble themselves (Bible, n.d., Mt. 18:3-4), the persecuted and those who give their lives serving others (Bible, n.d., Mt. 20:26-28).

Jesus did not identify with the one seated at the table waiting to be served. Instead, he was the one who had come to serve. He was a servant leader—“I am among you as the one who serves” (Bible, n.d., Lk. 22:27), “for the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Bible, n.d., Mk. 10:45). Jesus added, “let the greatest among you be as the youngest, and the leader as the servant” (Bible, n.d., Lk. 22:26). Prominence is not found in how many people serve the leader but in how faithfully the leader serves people. Jesus’ leadership was not a domineering style of leadership—“but whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant” (Bible, n.d., Mt. 10:43). Mother Teresa sought to follow Jesus’ teaching. In so doing, she humbled herself, focused on those in greatest need, did not seek fame, fortune,

or honor, but rather sought to be fully present in the here and now to those in greatest need, serving one person at a time, with undivided attention. For Mother Teresa, servant leadership invited and embodied solidarity with the poorest of the poor and emulated Jesus' wholehearted, unceasing, centering of the least, those most vulnerable. Mother Teresa's response was to quench Jesus' thirst for love on the Cross through service to the poorest of the poor (Francis, 2016, September 20). Echoing the words of Jesus in Matthew 25, *You did it for me*, became Mother Teresa's Gospel and prayer (Cantalamessa, 2018), her servant leadership mantra and talisman.

Mother Teresa's servant leadership also centered the human rights and inherent dignity of all persons, challenging a material-centered society that prioritized profit and possessions over people.

All my years of service to the poor have helped me to understand that they are precisely the ones who better understand human dignity. If they have a problem, it is not lack of money, but the fact that their right to be treated humanely and with tenderness is not recognized (Teresa, 2013).

Mother Teresa's service was based on love and dignity— not love that seeks its own advantage (Benedict XVI, 2005, December 25), but selfless love in action, honoring the inherent dignity of all persons, especially the poor. Following the last supper, Jesus instituted a new commandment, a new law: the law of love, which he required his disciples to follow— “as I have loved you, so you also should love one another” (Bible, n.d., Jn. 13:34). The disciples were called to serve by imitating God's love, a love that prioritizes, and preferentially opts for, the poor and marginalized.

There are two identifying marks of the fourth vow of the Missionaries of Charity: their service is offered wholeheartedly—so there is missionary joy in serving, and the service is gratuitous, offered free of charge to all (Teresa, 1988). Someone once told Mother Teresa that not even for a million dollars would they touch a leper. Mother Teresa was quick

to respond: “Neither would I. If it were a case of money, I would not even do it for two million. On the other hand, I do it gladly for love of God”— and this was the source of Mother Teresa's sense of perfect joy in serving (Murzaku, 2021). This response reflects a subverting of the world order, directly challenging systems and structures that would prioritize profit and material possessions over human beings and their inherent dignity.

Though social workers and Mother Teresa prioritize service, justice, and the inherent dignity of all persons, especially those on the periphery, Mother Teresa distinguished the Missionaries of Charity from social workers. The Missionaries of Charity are not like people in the world who are paid for their labour. They exist on charitable support from the Church and people of good will. In this way, the Missionaries of Charity are paid by God, and do their work for the greater glory of God (Devanada, 1985b) and for the love of God (Teresa, 1985). The work of the Missionaries of Charity is not a profession, but a vocation, chosen freely in consecrated obedience and total surrender. Though many, if not most, social workers would consider their work to be a vocation or calling, it is not necessarily a religious or God-centered calling. However, for social workers, as with Mother Teresa, loving service is a way of honoring the inherent dignity of all persons. Mother Teresa would add that service is love of God in action. A social work perspective might use different language, but also talk about being mission-centered, in love, to serve and accompany those in greatest need, to build beloved community. Mother Teresa might call this working to build the kingdom of God.

There are five pillars in Mother Teresa's theology of service: it is scriptural, Christlike, Christ-centered, wholehearted, and free of charge. There was persistence, an unclouded vision, and a thoughtful and balanced style in her servant leadership (Bose & Faust, 2011). Mother Teresa was a clear thinker who never failed to lead by example. Her hands-on servanthood focused on the here and now, one person at a time. She was the servant who led by witnessing (Greenleaf, 2003). A more complete

exploration of the similarities and distinctions between Mother Teresa's theology of service and social work's ethical commitment to justice and mission to serve those in need, with a particular focus on those who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty, would be a compelling topic for further research and reflection.

## **MOTHER TERESA AS EXEMPLAR OF CST IN ACTION**

This paper focuses the common commitment of CST and the social work profession to centering those on the periphery, and to the core principles of dignity, service, and justice. It also presents Mother Teresa as an exemplar of CST in action.

For Mother Teresa, service was integrally interconnected with justice. Her work to serve the poorest of the poor sought to help those in greatest need get to a place where they could feed, clothe, and care for themselves. Once they could do so, she invited others to work in solidarity with the poor to change oppressive structures and systems that defiled their dignity, dehumanized them, and created their poverty and need. Consistent with CST principles, Mother Teresa acknowledged that her call to loving direct service in no way precluded structural social justice work. In fact, she advocated for a 'both/and' approach to, and understanding of, the work of justice as embracing service and social transformation. Her work to feed the poorest of the poor and the soul of society was rooted in love, God's love for those on the periphery, God's love for the unwanted, unloved, uncared for, and forgotten. Mother Teresa believed that love given freely in service has the power to transform hearts and minds, and in so doing, build beloved community, the one body of Christ.

From Mother Teresa, to *Gaudium et Spes*, to Pope Francis, the Church invites and challenges all people of good will to center and embrace a preferential option for the poor. Mother Teresa embodied CST's preferential option for the poor and service rooted in love. She shared that the fruit of love is service, and the fruit of service is peace. Thus, the thread that connects service, justice, and peace is God's love, a love from a social work perspective that

centers those in greatest need and asserts that all persons have inherent dignity and worth. This love also compels both direct service with persons who are poor, and transformation of systems that oppress the poor (A. Nicotera, personal conversation, 1997).

This centering of, and preferential option for, the poor is consistent with a CST commitment to justice, since it humanizes and lifts up the dignity of all persons and in so doing labors to transform systems that would perpetuate poverty (Motte, 2013; O'Brien & Shannon, 2021; O'Neill, 2021). Pope Francis, the day after becoming Pope, centered the poor, calling the church to be for the poor (Motte, 2013). Being 'for the poor' means direct service and a commitment to justice. This loving service arguably is a work of justice inasmuch as it challenges the domination system that would dehumanize, alienate, and oppress the poor. Mother Teresa, in serving the poorest of the poor, was challenging and confronting social structures and systems that maintained and perpetuated oppression and suffering. This is CST in action, as working to transform the systems and structures that oppress them. Mother Teresa embodied a commitment to service, in love, centering the most vulnerable and oppressed. In this way, she sought to transform how we see the other, how we love. In this way, Mother Teresa personified service, dignity, and justice in action, principles at the core of both CST and social work.

## **SETON HALL UNIVERSITY'S "CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT IN ACTION ACADEMY"**

A unique example of a commitment to CST's service, dignity, and justice is Seton Hall University's Catholic Social Thought in Action Academy ("the Academy"). The commitment to service, dignity, and justice as exemplified by Mother Teresa and social work core commitments lies at the heart of the Academy. Pope John Paul II's (1990) *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* calls upon Catholic universities to include the study of contemporary problems such as the dignity of the human person, the promotion of justice for all, the quality of personal and family life, the pursuit of peace, a just sharing of resources, and economic justice in their research

and teaching agendas. In response to this call, the Academy explores the intersection of CST and social work core principles and precepts. The Church's call to universities to teach core values of dignity, peace, and justice is consistent with social work's educational policy accreditation standards, and ethical principles (Council on Social Work Education, 2022; National Association of Social Workers, 2021). Catholic institutions of higher education must be firmly committed to the promotion of social justice. Thus, service from a social work and CST perspective, by virtue of a rootedness in love, and respect for the humanity and inherent dignity of those being served, participates in, and promotes movement toward a more socially just society.

The Academy invites connections between the core values and mission of CST and the social work profession, as promulgated by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), to enhance human wellbeing and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty (National Association of Social Workers, 2021). The Academy is one Catholic university's effort to initiate a unique, innovative double major in Catholic Studies and Social Work, develop university core courses at the intersection of CST and social work; create and implement CST in Action service-learning courses; partner with other Catholic universities nationally and internationally in the work of service and justice; and host conferences, workshops, and presentations, and engage in research, writing, and publishing, at the intersection of social work, social justice, and CST. The Academy gives life to Pope Francis' call to institutions of higher learning to be engaged in the work of shaping environments of creative thinking and dismantling structures of injustice – the work of faith doing justice in loving service of neighbor. Enlightened by Mother Teresa's spirituality in action, the Academy integrates CST principles into the social work curriculum in a way that respects students with diverse religious beliefs. The Academy supports service-learning courses, open to all undergraduate students, and academic,

professional, faith-based, and community-based conferences aimed at generating further scholarship and learning about CST in action.

The vision of the Academy also centers the insight of Mother Teresa – namely peace is not possible if there is not a strong commitment of belonging to one another. Through service, research, writing, presenting, publishing, teaching, conversation, and conferences, the Academy challenges students, and all persons of good will, to honor the inherent dignity and interconnectedness of all human persons, all life. In the spirit of Mother Teresa (Murzaku, 2021; Teresa, 1997, 2007), King (1967, April 4), Nhat Hanh (1993, 2014), and Kaur (2020), the Academy spurs pedagogy and practice of holiness, belonging, beloved community, interbeing, revolutionary love, and a spiritually sensitive, socially just, transformative social work practice (Canda & Furman, 2020; Dudley, 2016; Nicotera, 2022; Pyles, 2018) rooted in love of those in greatest need, for they are us. The Academy prioritizes CST and social work's commitment to centering social justice and a preferential option for the poor; respecting the inherent dignity of all persons; meeting people where they are, from a person-in-environment perspective; and engaging in healing work that is empowering and transformative personally and socially. The Academy centers the inherent dignity of the least, and labors in service, the fruit of love, for peace and justice. In this way, the Academy seeks to be a continuation of Mother Teresa's witness to a faith that does justice.

## CONCLUSION

The social work profession and CST hold in common core commitments and values. These core values include a commitment to the inherent dignity of all persons, service, and social justice. Despite these common principles, there has been little research at the intersection of CST and social work pedagogy and practice. There is a need for additional research and scholarship on this intersection, especially at Catholic educational institutions that have social work programs. With respect to these core values, historically, both the Church, and the profession of social



work, have struggled to confront the reality of failure to fully adhere to them, and at times their respective participation in structures and systems of oppression. Additionally, there has existed in both the Catholic church and the social work profession a tension between a commitment to service and social justice. Both the Church and social work emphasized one over the other at certain times in their respective histories. Exploration of this historical tension is also important in understanding the current moment and invitation to the coexistence and complementarity of service and justice as presented in this article. However, additional research and scholarship are needed to continue to understand the synergies and inherent challenges with strengthening the connection between CST and social work.

Mother Teresa's love in action and theology of service offer one example of CST in action and servant leadership, as dignity for the poorest should be the basis of service and justice. This is a powerful, inspiring, even saintly witness to core social work values and CST principles made manifest in action. However, inasmuch as social work is a profession and CST is a source of guidance for persons of faith in a particular religious tradition, further study of what Mother Teresa's theology of service can teach the profession of social work, as well as the limitations of lessons to be learned, is warranted. There remains an important, arguably significant distinction between the practice of the profession of social work and ministry or faith-inspired service.

Additionally, tensions historically have existed both within the Church and the profession of social work with respect to definitions of charity and justice, and whether and to what extent service is a form of social justice or exists in tension with it. This article endorses a both/and approach to CST and social work that understands the inherent dignity of all persons, emphasizing and centering the dignity of those on the periphery, as the thread that weaves together and connects service and justice. Thus, CST and social work notions of service and justice are held in creative tension without devolving into destructive polarities inasmuch as they both center

the dignity of all persons, with a particular emphasis on centering those on the periphery, the poorest of the poor, and those most vulnerable and oppressed.

Arguably, persons practice social work and commit to faith-inspired servant leadership as a response to a calling, inspired by a commitment to mission and core values. However, clearly there are both similarities and differences with respect to a religious calling rooted in faith, as opposed to a calling to the profession of social work. These commonalities and distinctions are being explored by the CST in Action Academy, and will hopefully provide additional insight into how dignity, service, and justice are to be understood and practiced at the intersection of social work and CST. A helpful tool for this exploration, being utilized by the Academy, is the Circle of Insight's See, Reflect Act framework (Nicotera, 2018), which is inspired by and rooted in CST principles. The Circle process invites gathering data and examining the complementarity and creative tension at the intersection of CST and social work; critically reflecting on this data, in light of core social work values and CST principles; and acting in a way that invites deeper liberation and insight. This model might help inform further research, writing, teaching, and practice.

Centering those on the periphery is an act of love. Mother Teresa lived this call to love in service to the poorest of the poor as a matter of faith, as a response to Jesus' love. Social workers live this call to love in micro, mezzo, and macro practice. Centering those on the periphery offers not only social work and Catholic faculty, students, and practitioners, but all persons of conscience and good faith committed to dignity, service, and justice, an opportunity to have a greater impact, to learn from one another, and to join together in the work of deepening transformative, liberatory practice. CST can help social work understand more fully the mission-driven center of the profession, as a labor of love and a calling. Social work can help inform CST about practical, practice and evidence-based practices. Both CST and social work can help inform the other with respect to notions of inherent human dignity, service, and social justice.

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