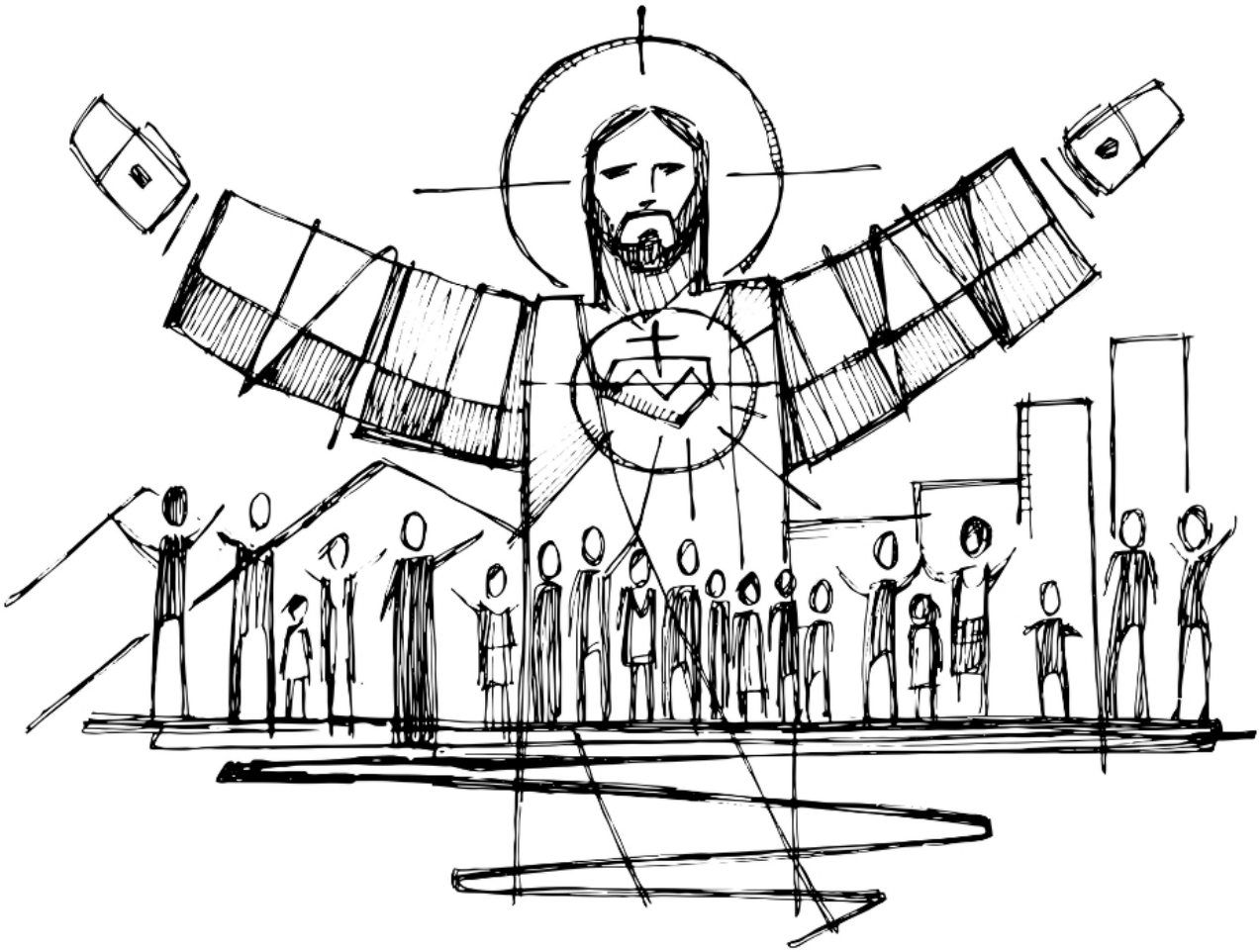
Opinion
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(Dreamstime/Bernardo Ramonfaur)

by Mark Etling

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The 1971 Synod of Bishops made it clear that the work of justice is essential to our Catholic Christian identity. The bishops said that action on behalf of justice is a "constitutive dimension" of Christian living.

I serve on the adult faith formation committees at St. Nicholas Parish in O'Fallon, Illinois. Over the past several months, we have been discussing how we as a parish can normalize the work of justice, make justice part of "the way we do things."

The people of St. Nicholas have an excellent track record when it comes to doing the work of charity. Whether it be the St. Vincent de Paul Society, the Soup Bus that feeds people in East St. Louis, Illinois, the ministry to sick and homebound persons, or many others — the willingness of the St. Nicholas faith community to share time, talent and treasure with persons in need is impressive.

But we have also come to realize that we are not good at doing the work of justice. We've uncovered several reasons why social justice isn't on our radar screen:

It's big. The social justice teaching touches every aspect of our personal and communal lives — family, parish, diocese, workplace, local community, nation, world.

It's complicated. The social teaching is based on a web of interactive moral values and principles — the dignity of the human person, human rights and responsibilities, stewardship of the Earth, the common good, the preferential option for the poor, peacemaking. The interplay among these various values and principles makes the social teaching difficult to understand and apply to specific issues.

It's "idealistic." The social teaching presents a hope-filled vision of the world as God intends it to be. That leaves it open to the criticism that "it's pie in the sky — that's not how the real world works."

It's "political." Issues like the death penalty, care of the environment, and immigration are often considered taboo. So they're rarely addressed from the pulpit and quickly shushed when they come up in everyday conversation.

It's threatening. Who among us wants to admit our own prejudices? Who is willing to challenge the views of family and friends who believe the government is "giving away everything for free" to poor people? Who would dare challenge the profit

motive, free enterprise or any of the other principles upon which our economy is built?

It's countercultural. It challenges some of the bedrock assumptions and values of our economy, our culture and our politics. Most of us assume that the cultural status quo is acceptable, or even the way things ought to be.

It's hard work. The principles of social justice demand that we make changes in the way we think and act. Who likes to call out sexism and race prejudice? How many of us want to live more simply? Who is willing to change the way they think about whom to vote for and against?

The members of the adult faith formation committee know that action on behalf of justice is something we need to do as a parish. So far, we've reached consensus on three elements of a strategy to normalize the work of justice.

First, we need to become more aware of the social teaching. The principles of the social teaching should become part of our standard operating procedure.

Msgr. Bill Hitpas, pastor of St. Nicholas, has begun to make social justice a more intentional focus of his homilies. He knows that his homilies reach more parishioners than any other form of parish communication — and that his words carry much weight.

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We need to read about it and talk about it in discussion groups, study groups, and small Christian communities. We've concluded that it's not enough to have a group of 15 parishioners participate in JustFaith or some similar program.

Throughout the fall, St. Nicholas is hosting a series of Scripture studies on the prophets, and on the prophetic role of the laity in the church. The prophets were heralds of God's justice, and the Second Vatican Council clearly articulated our baptismal calling to exercise our prophetic role in the world.

We have scheduled an evening meal through an organization known as Welcome Neighbor STL. We will be served a meal prepared by a family of refugees from Afghanistan. We will then hear their story, and engage in dialogue with them about

the challenges they have faced as they start a new life in this country.

Second, we need to internalize the social teaching. We need to reflect on it and pray about it regularly and repeatedly. It should shape our worldview, become a primary lens through which we interpret our personal and social experience.

We need to challenge ourselves and our lifestyle. Do I own more possessions than I truly need? Do I choose to live in my neighborhood because it's not integrated? Do I send my kids to Catholic schools so they won't be a minority at their public school? Does the company I work for treat its employees justly, pay its fair share of taxes, help to protect the environment?

Third, we need to act on the social teaching. There are many things we can do — organize a meeting, join a march, seek signatures on a petition, call or write our legislators. This will be an ongoing topic of conversation.

Jesus came to establish the reign of God on earth — to transform the political, social and religious status quo in such a way that God's loving justice is visible and available to all. It is a necessary part of our Christian vocation to help make the reign of God on earth a reality. We are called to shake up the system, to turn the world's unjust normalcy on its head. This is not an option for us.

The reign of God will not come about in its fullness, and the peace that is the result of social justice will not happen, unless we make it happen.

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