

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AND CATHOLIC SOCIAL TRADITION: A NATURAL ALIGNMENT

Written by Susan Sharpeⁱ for the Restorative Justice Network of Catholic Campuses (RJNCC),
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*“What does the Lord require of you?
To act justly, to love tenderly and
to walk humbly with your God.” -Micah 6:8*

Catholic social tradition (CST) is central to Catholic faith.ⁱⁱ Rooted in Christ’s teachings, upheld in official Church documents, and alive in the Catholic community, CST principles call on the faithful to create and sustain just relations so that all may thrive. CST therefore is also central to the mission of Catholic education, helping students learn what it means to be vulnerable in today’s world, discern their gifts and responsibilities in response to vulnerability, and deepen their commitment to working for social justice.

Core principles of catholic social traditionⁱⁱⁱ include a *commitment to the common good*, the *dignity of the human person*, a *preferential option for the vulnerable*, a correlation of *rights and responsibilities*, *subsidiarity* and *solidarity*.

All of these principles are evident in restorative justice, “an approach to achieving justice that involves, to the extent possible, those who have a stake in a specific offense or harm to collectively identify and address harms, needs, and obligations in order to heal and put things as right as possible.”^{iv} In addition to repairing the harm done by wrongful behavior, restorative justice also fosters skills and attitudes that make injustice less likely to occur and easier to repair when it does.

Most disciplinary systems take a legalistic approach to justice, upholding the rule of law or a code of conduct by focusing on how to correct wrongful behavior and prevent its recurrence. In that approach, key tasks are to determine which rule or law was broken, who broke it, and what punishment is deserved.

Restorative justice focuses instead on how to repair the harm that wrongful behavior does—to the other, to the self, and to the fabric of community. In this approach, correction and prevention are best accomplished through relationship-building, meaningful accountability and amends. The focus here is on the *common good*, seeking a resolution that will be just and productive for all parties involved and for the community as a whole.

Six core questions^v characterize restorative justice in response to any injustice, and Catholic social tradition principles are evident in each of them:

1. *Who has been harmed?*

The fundamental starting point of restorative justice is a *preferential option for the vulnerable*. In systems that focus on dealing with the accused, those harmed often are enlisted to help with building the case or educating those responsible for causing the harm, while otherwise being left to find their own way to recovery. Restorative justice flips those priorities, calling on offenders to contribute to recovery by making amends for the damage they have caused.

2. *What are their needs?*

Restorative justice recognizes that harmful behaviors are wrong because they violate people and relationships, and that the *dignity of the person* needs to be at the center of a justice response. Restorative justice honors the dignity of those harmed by giving them meaningful voice and by inviting them to determine what they need in order to recover—including to recover the dignity of feeling safe in the world as a person worthy of respectful treatment. Restorative justice also honors the dignity of those responsible by giving them meaningful voice, and by believing in, and fostering as needed, their capacity to make amends and behave more responsibly. Restorative justice sees both parties as whole and capable persons, for whom the harm in question is something to be integrated, not permanently defining.

3. *Whose obligations are these?*

Restorative justice recognizes that *rights and responsibilities* are interwoven, that living justly in community requires being accountable for how our choices affect other people. Thus, someone who has caused harm to another has a primary obligation to help repair it and may be the only one who can provide what is needed (such as an explanation of why they made the choice they did). Yet restorative justice recognizes that some needs are best met by people other than the one responsible (such as accompaniment or counseling to help restore a sense of safety), and that the *common good* depends on community members' sharing responsibility for ensuring that justice needs are met.

4. *Who has a stake in this situation?*

Restorative justice, like Catholic social tradition, assumes that people have a right to *participation* in processes that affect them. As such, restorative justice seeks to include all the perspectives important for understanding an injustice and for deciding what justice calls for in that circumstance. Restorative justice offers meaningful voice to the people holding those perspectives, including those harmed, those responsible, and others who have been touched by the harm or would be affected by how it is redressed. Restorative justice invites people to share their stories in their own terms and to hear others' stories with respect, together seeking a shared narrative of what happened, why, and how best to move forward.

5. *What are the causes?*

Restorative justice asks not only what happened but also why it did. If there were conditions—in a person, in the environment, or both—that allowed or encouraged the harmful behavior, the *common good* depends on minimizing if not correcting those conditions. If this harm is traceable to unmet needs rising out of previous harms, then restorative justice calls for meeting those needs too, even belatedly. Therefore, many restorative practices are dedicated to strengthening communities by fostering connection and mutual responsibility and by collaboratively affirming positive community norms and standards.

Further, tending to causes can serve the *dignity of the person* harmed, especially when it clarifies that he or she was not to blame for what happened. It also can serve the *dignity of the person* responsible, especially when it clarifies that the harmful action was influenced by more than evil intention.

6. *What is the appropriate process to involve stakeholders in an effort to put things right and address underlying causes?*

Restorative justice expresses a deep commitment to *subsidiarity*, the principle that higher-level associations should not take on what lower level associations could do for themselves. In other words, those closest to a situation should have *participation* in, if not power over, decisions that will affect them. Higher level associations such as educational institutions may have a legitimate interest in how injustices are handled on their campuses; an institution may be one of the stakeholders sharing power in decisions to be made in response to injustice, or at least may have a responsibility to review lower level processes and ensure that new harm is not done. But this can be a supportive role, ensuring that stakeholders have appropriate and meaningful involvement in the effort to put things right.

Overall, restorative justice responds to harm in a spirit of *solidarity*—that is, by “seeing others not as rivals or statistics, but brothers and sisters.”^{vi} Restorative justice sees people not as victims or offenders needing pity or punishment, but rather as people whose lives have intersected through harmful behavior and who need that harm healed and integrated. Restorative justice sees people not as powerless, in need of higher authorities to accomplish justice for them, but rather as people to be supported in the work of recovering their safety, reclaiming their dignity, and renewing their place as whole and responsible members of the community.

Restorative justice sees people as capable of doing that work, and offers practices to help them express their needs, face the effects of their behavior, and take action to restore or strengthen justice—for themselves, for each other, and for the communities they are part of.

Restorative justice is not specific to Catholic contexts. It fits in any community where people recognize that unhealed harm can cause long term damage in people’s lives, in their relatedness, and in the community’s long-term health. Yet it is especially suited to Catholic campuses, which seek to form students in a deep understanding of what it means to live their faith in action. Restorative justice helps us learn what it means to act justly, not only when on our best behavior but also when we, our brothers, and our sisters have fallen short of that goal.

Restorative Justice Network of Catholic Campuses

Recognizing a natural alignment between the philosophy of restorative justice and the guiding ideals of the Catholic social tradition, the RJNCC encourages Catholic campuses to articulate and cultivate restorative principles and to assist each other in strengthening interest, commitment, and implementation of restorative practices on their campuses.

For further information about the RJNCC, visit www.rjncc.org, or Join our RJNCC Google Group for discussion and updates (<https://groups.google.com/d/forum/rjncc>).

The RJNCC promotes...

- Community-building circles practices in classrooms, residential life, athletics, and student organizations;
- Community-concern circles to improve campus climate, particularly around conflicts regarding race, religion, gender, and the red/blue political divide;
- Restorative responses to student misconduct, including binge drinking, academic dishonesty, bias incidents, sexual misconduct, and intimate partner violence;
- Restorative responses to faculty and staff misconduct and conflict that create a hostile workplace environment;

- Civic engagement, including campus support, internships, and community engaged learning for community-based and prison-based RJ initiatives and in K-12 schools.
- Scholarship on the theory and practice of RJ and the convergence of RJ philosophy and the Catholic social tradition.

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ⁱⁱ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops: <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/>

ⁱⁱⁱ For detailed discussion of CST principles in Vatican documents, see the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*:

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html

^{iv} Howard Zehr (2015), *Little Book of Restorative Justice* (NY: Good Books), p. 48.

^v Howard Zehr (2015), *Little Book*, p. 49

^{vi} Pope Francis, [Address during Visit to the Community at Varginha](#), July 25, 2013