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***Joseph was a Just Man***

What does it mean to be a ‘just’ person? If Joseph had followed the letter of the law he would have reported Mary and she would have been stoned to death for adultery. What does it mean for a Sister of St. Joseph to be a ‘just’ person? The word justice means different thing to different people and situations. In a recent interview a family was waiting for ‘justice’ to avenge the killer of a family member and was impatient to see him die in the death chamber at San Quentin. Was it justice or revenge that this family desired? Is justice a strict adherence to the law or are we challenged as Christians to approach the right and dignity of all persons with compassion. In recent news reports Pope Francis has been an example of seeing all people, regardless of their sinfulness or state of life through the lens of compassion. It doesn’t exclude or dismiss our responsibility to obey just laws and the moral teachings of the Church. If everyone lived in the spirit of these laws the human community would live in peace and harmony.

The underlying principle of all the social teachings of the church is the acknowledgement that all persons have dignity. While waiting to begin the procession into the Church at St. Theresa I noticed that in a dark corner of the vestibule was a disheveled homeless man sitting in a fetal position. I walked over to him and asked him his name. “I am a nobody.” was his response. I responded, “Well you are somebody to me and to God so what is your name?” “Alan” was his reply. Thus began a relationship and each Sunday he would come to Church and wait for me to greet him. He may have been dirty and smelly but I wanted him to know he had dignity. When Sr. Rose Cecelia Harrinton began her volunteer work at St. Joseph Center’s Bread and Roses she wanted those who came for a meal to be treated with dignity. Thus began a long history of tables covered with clean table clothes and fresh flowers. The homeless women, men and children are provided nutritious meals and are seated and served.

In their pastoral *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* the U.S. Bishops have summarized seven themes that we as just persons are to incorporate into our lives as Christians. The first theme is titled *The Rights and Dignity of the Human Person*. It stress that all life is sacred from the moment of conception to its last breath. In paragraph 45 the bishops state: *Catholic teaching about the dignity of life calls us to oppose torture, unjust war, and the use of the death penalty; to prevent racism, and to overcome poverty and suffering. We revere the lives of children in the womb, the lives of persons dying in war and from starvation, and indeed the lives of all human beings.* Many of our Sisters have been called to focus their time and energy on one or more of these issues because of their commitment in recognizing the dignity of all of God’s children. Each of us is called to treat all persons with dignity. Can we, like St. Joseph and Pope Francis, be compassionate to all we encounter during our daily activities even those who may repulse, irritate or disagree with us?

The seven themes of social Justice identified by the bishops are:

1. The right to life and dignity of the human person
2. Call to family, community and participation
3. Rights and responsibilities
4. Option for the poor and vulnerable
5. Dignity of work and the rights of the workers
6. Solidarity
7. Caring for God’s creation