LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL
A DISCUSSION GUIDE

NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS
COMMITTEE FOR THE BICENTENNIAL
Introduction
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The objective of this discussion guide is to introduce the theme of "Liberty and Justice for All" to the Catholic community and to the wider American public. The program "Liberty and Justice for All," sponsored by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, is designed to be the principal mode of Catholic participation in the bicentennial celebration of our country. Although sponsored by the bishops' conference, it is not designed to be "their" program; thus far it has been planned by a broadly based group of lay people and religious. It is hoped that through this discussion guide the planning and participation in the program "Liberty and Justice for All" can be extended to the whole Catholic community. To elicit such participation, this short introduction seeks to familiarize the Catholic community with the purpose and nature of the program and to explain how the material included here can be used as one form of participation in that program.

The Purpose of the Bicentennial Program
"Liberty and Justice for All"

The "Liberty and Justice for All" program has a dual purpose. Its primary objective is to stimulate a process of reflection, examination, planning and action by the Catholic community in the United States on the topic of freedom and justice in our society and in the global community. This is a very large order, but the resources are at hand at least to begin the process. Indeed, the resources for Catholics to think seriously and creatively about conditions that promote freedom and equality in our lives and societies have been available for some time now. These resources are to be found in the body of teaching which has been presented to the Church for reflection and action by the last two Popes, by Vatican II, and by the teaching of the Synod of Bishops in 1971. The motivating force behind the program is a desire to have all members of the Church in the United States — bishops and priests, religious and laity — take seriously the task of understanding what has been said and seeking to find ways to apply it to our lives. Pope Paul VI in his letter, A Call to Action recognized the limitations of social teaching taken by itself:

It is not enough to recall principles, state intentions, point to crying injustices and utter prophetic denunciations; these words will lack real weight unless they are accompanied for each individual by a livelier awareness of personal responsibility and by effective action.

The "Liberty and Justice for All" program is designed to allow us to pass from a knowledge of principles to the level of practice. This process involves a creative work of Christian discernment and decision. The task of giving life to the principles of Catholic social teaching is not a mechanical task of applying ready-made solutions to fixed situations. The passage from principle to practice involves both a testing of the situation by the principle and a testing of the teachings by the demands of concrete and complex problems.

By their nature, the social teachings of the Church are addressed to a universal audience and are, therefore, stated in general terms. The concrete implications of the teaching can be made manifest only when a local (i.e., national) Church takes upon itself the task of asking in a systematic way, what do these principles of justice, charity, freedom and faith mean for us in our situation and in our place in the global community? The program "Liberty and Justice for All" seeks to provide the means by which the Church in the United States can ask these specific questions over the next several years.

The second objective of the program flows from the first. If we carry out the process of moving from principles of social justice to practical issues touched by those principles we will be carrying on a kind of dialogue with the structures, systems of power organization, influence and wealth in our own country and in the globe today.

The second objective of the program "Liberty and Justice for All," therefore, is to initiate a dialogue within the Church about freedom and justice in our own lives and to stimulate a wider dialogue with American society about how we move from inequality to equality, from injustice toward justice, on a broad spectrum of issues. Since Catholics came to America, they have been in dialogue with their surroundings; the program "Liberty and Justice for All" could be an important new chapter in this process.

How will such a program be conducted? This is our next topic.

The Process

The total "Liberty and Justice for All" program has three distinct phases:

— in 1975 the entire effort is aimed at involving the broadest possible participation by Catholics in the discussions on the theme of liberty and justice; this effort is aimed at the parish level through the use of this discussion guide and at the regional level through six projected "hearings on justice" to be held throughout the country between February and November of 1975.
— in October of 1976 a national conference on liberty and justice will be held in Detroit; this
national forum is designed to help the institutional Church gather the results of what it has heard in 1975 and to formulate a "policy" on social justice in response to what it has heard and seen.

—the period from 1976-1981 has been designated the time of follow-up in the Church: the objective in these five years is to implement the policy of social justice, to monitor its progress and to test its results.

The entire program is designed to raise up for examination and action those issues of justice and freedom which touch the lives and dignity of people in the United States and in our relations with other people of the world. Specifically, the process is designed to surface these issues so that the leadership of the Church can listen to the voice of the people expressing their ideas on what constitutes inequality and injustice in American society. Hopefully, this listening process will sensitize the Church so that it can plan an effective response to the voices it has heard.

Undoubtedly it is true that issues of social justice which confront us today nationally and internationally go beyond the ability of the Church to resolve by itself. Yet, these structural and systemic questions of how the organization of society impacts the lives and dignity of people are a central concern of the Church's ministry today. In the synodal document of 1971, Justice in the World, the bishops of the Church stated that work to transform the world toward a more just society was a "constitutive" or an essential element of the ministry of the Church. This gives such work a place of equal standing with the preaching of the Gospel and the celebration of the sacraments in the Church. It also makes concern for justice a central element of conscience and responsibility for each Christian. The bishops recognized that the work of justice goes far beyond the boundaries of the Church; yet, they also believed that the Church had a specific contribution to make. The program "Liberty and Justice for All" is designed to help the Church in the United States make this specific contribution more forcefully, prophetically and effectively.

The ultimate test of this process of involvement now beginning is whether it can elicit the interest, the participation and the sustained commitment of the community of Catholics who constitute the life-blood of the Church. This community of believers is the fundamental resource of the Church. Indeed the most significant contribution the Church can make to social justice is the formation of a community with a conscience.

The process of forming a community with a conscience is not accomplished by a "top-down" approach to the complex issues which make up the agenda of the bicentennial observance program. While initiative and leadership on the part of the episcopal magisterium are essential and imperative, the equally essential role of dialogue between the bishops and the wider Catholic community must be given its necessary scope and weight.

This discussion guide is designed to acknowledge and bring together these two basic elements of Catholic life. Its purpose is to inform the local church of the initiatives being planned by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops for the bicentennial program on liberty and justice, and to involve the local church in the substantive discussion and structuring of this endeavor. The heart of this guide is not a set of conclusions to be accepted, or even a well-defined position to be examined by the local church. Rather, it offers a series of discussion outlines and questions meant to engage reflection and dialogue throughout the Church.

In order to promote this dialogue, the general theme of liberty and justice has been delineated in the discussion outlines into eight topics: the Nation, the Church, Humankind, Ethnicity and Race, the Neighborhood, Work, the Family, and the Person. The guiding motif are the communities in which we live, grow and develop as persons. The idea that the person is radically social, that he or she cannot develop as a human being outside a social context, is a fundamental element of Catholic philosophy, theology and social teaching. Hence it seemed not only analytically useful but thoroughly appropriate to organize the broader discussion of liberty and justice in terms of these various communities of human life.

It cannot be too strongly stressed however that the intent of the discussion guide is to organize the topics only in order to advance a discussion of them, and not to foreclose further debate and dialogue. The discussion outlines seek to present to Catholics in the local Church the question: What do you think constitutes liberty and justice in the following eight areas? The total process of discussion is designed to raise the questions of freedom and justice which touch the lives both of people in the United States and those in other parts of the globe who are impacted by American power, wealth and presence. The document is intended to help the leadership of the Church to listen to the voices of people expressing their ideas about freedom and justice in American life, and to plan an effective response to those voices. Undoubtedly, the structural, social and systemic issues which comprise the fabric of liberty and justice go beyond the ability, competence and resources of the Church to solve. But, as the Synodal document Justice in the World makes clear, the Church has its own limited but distinctive contribution to make to the wider human struggle for a more free and a more just world. The "Liberty and Justice for All" program is the attempt of the Church in the United States to share more fully and effectively in this universal quest.

The Resource Papers

The resource papers found in Part II are designed to stimulate discussion of the eight topics. They are not meant to present a brief to be accepted nor are they intended to provide a set of conclusions or a finished statement on a given topic. Rather, the papers manifest diverse approaches to the theme of liberty and justice, and differing views of the specific topics included in this document.
No attempt will be made here to offer a summary of the resource papers or a critique of their content. While they are to be taken as individual statements to the various subjects they will hopefully provide a substantive framework in which those subjects can be discussed at the local level.

It should be noted that a brief biographical sketch of the authors of the papers is included in Part II.

In addition to the eight topics proposed for discussion, an additional paper by a consultant to the Justice Subcommittee of the Bicentennial Committee has been included to provide a view of "Liberty and Justice for All" from the perspective of a person outside the United States.

Conclusion

Having set forth a brief explanation of the purposes and process of the "Liberty and Justice for All" program, we offer this discussion guide for use by all who are searching for freedom and justice and who believe the Church has a contribution to make to this quest.

The interaction between the principles of Catholic social teaching and the practical possibilities in the political order involves a creative process of reflection, analysis, and choice by the community of the Church. Such a process makes clear that the Church's social teaching is never a finished product, never provides final solutions for Catholics or others, and always requires discernment and application by the whole Church. Engaging the whole Church in such a process is the purpose of this document.

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Acknowledgments

The program for the Catholic observance of the United States' 200th anniversary was outlined in late June of 1974 by the Bishops' Committee for the Bicentennial.

The first phase of the program called for the publication of this guide to help stimulate Catholic discussion throughout 1975 on the concept of liberty and justice in American life. Due in large measure to the concerted labors of many gifted and energetic individuals, the Committee was able to assemble within the relatively short period of allotted time the rich collection of thought-provoking material presented here.

On behalf of the Committee and its distinguished Chairman, John Cardinal Dearden, I would like to express profound gratitude to those who have contributed to this work, either in the form of authorship or by providing practical suggestions regarding its content and format. Among those who offered such suggestions were representatives of over fifty national Catholic organizations who met on September 20-21, 1974 to discuss this facet of the Church's bicentennial program.

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