Citizens for public justice: Dignity for all

Joe Gunn

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What would you say if you were invited to address a gathering of your former high school teachers?

CPJ’s (Citizens for Public Justice) Joe Gunn found himself immersed in this dilemma in Pickering, Ontario, when invited to deliver three hours of conferences to 35 Spiritans and their associates from all over Canada in early December 2010.

Joe engaged this religious order and the men and women who collaborate with them in reflections about CPJ’s public justice efforts. The day seemed successful until the priest who once kicked Joe out of Grade 12 Chemistry class loudly opined from his wheelchair that the expulsion was “well-deserved!”

(The Catalyst, Winter 2010)

(The priest in question was former co-editor of Spiritan. His initials are G.F. — Editor)

Joe Gunn is executive director of Citizens for Public Justice. He is also a graduate of Neil McNeil Catholic High School in Toronto. His bio reads: “The call to do justice is his life’s vocation. So working at CPJ is, for him, a privilege. Where better to encourage the flourishing of public justice than at an organization which is totally devoted to engage Canadians to work collectively toward this end?”

Based in Ottawa, Joe works nationwide. His current focus is on the elimination of poverty in Canada, under the rallying cry Dignity for All.

Joe began the morning session with one of Jesus’ best-known parables. “Feed the hungry, give the thirsty a drink, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, visit the sick, spend time with prisoners.” It’s all there in Matthew’s gospel — the final judgment: the test that will sort out those who “got it” and those who didn’t.

We read the text from Matthew, and, most likely, think of it as the final exam for each of us individually. Joe suggested another approach: how about applying it to ourselves as a religious community, a parish, a diocese, the Canadian church?

“We need to walk the talk before we squawk.” — Pope John Paul II made ‘solidarity’ — formerly associated with Trade Unions and Communists — into a universally good word in the 1980s.”

We claim to be followers of “the Way” — a word Jesus used when speaking of himself: “I am the Way.” The way speaks of getting there, being further along the road, but not yet arrived. We will always be on the way. So let’s not wait until we have it all worked out.

The way used to be described as a six-step sequence: 1) What is the gospel message about justice? 2) What does that message ask of us in order to change our lifestyle? 3) Listen to the victims of our society and learn from them. 4) Denounce whatever oppresses them. 5) Work with others. 6) Assist the poor and distressed.

Joe Gunn suggests a total reversal of these steps: 1) Reach out to the poor and distressed — feed them, clothe them, give them money, come to their assistance. 2) Spend some time with them, listen to their stories, get to know them. 3) Develop a critical analysis of the society that, at least partly, causes their situation. 4) Make judgments, decisions and plans in light of the gospel. 5) Work with others — be ecumenical.

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“The Catalyst, Winter 2010”

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