



Jasson C. | “The Architecture of Dignity: Why the Bus Stop is a Moral Battleground”

Sargent Shriver has frequently been labeled an American Idealist. Yet an examination of Shriver’s policies will reveal that Shriver’s idealism was not purely rhetoric. His idealism was policy. His idealism was plans. His idealism was the Head Start program, the Peace Corps, the Job Corps, Legal Services and so on. Shriver did not pity the poor from below. He viewed poverty as a broken structure and he viewed solutions as requiring a structural repair. He viewed individual dignity as essential to a changed society and felt that a change in the structure was necessary to achieve that individual dignity. Shriver supported maximum feasible participation. This is the belief that the poor should have a role in designing the programs meant to reach them.

Now it comes back to us to look at our own communities the same way. Our communities are impacted by intersecting problems such as increasing income divides, intergenerational food insecurity, and the invisible but draining plight of parents trying to find three minimum wage jobs in order to pay the heat bill. These are not just economic statistics. These are personal family problems. Through the framework of Catholic Social Teaching, the family is the foundational element of society. The family is the building block of our communities. If the family suffers from societal neglect, then society is failing.

Catholic Social Teaching is anchored by crucial principles: the Preferential Option for the Poor and Vulnerable, and the Call to Family, Community, and Participation. But how do these ancient elements apply to us in this specific place, at this specific time?

It begins by understanding that modern poverty is rarely just a monetary issue; poverty is a profound lack of access. Poverty is a barrier erected between a family and their ability to participate fully in civic life.



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Now imagine a mother who commutes through the city at 4:30 in the morning without a car and relies on a perpetually broken and underfunded public transportation system. She leaves the children at school, waits two hours in the dark for two buses that are often late, and arrives at work exhausted before she even starts her job. She then begins a physically taxing full day of work and returns home later that day on the same long, unreliable commute. When she finally gets home and turns the key in the door she finds that she is too late to help with algebra homework, too tired to cook a nutritious meal, and too anxious about the day ahead to get the rest she needs.

A family trapped within this system is also disengaged from community resources. Transportation deserts result in seclusion. Impossible decisions such as weeks of food or a monthly metro pass must be made. A part of community is then denied. Ignoring the issue of access to safe and fair transportation is not only ignoring roads and buses but also failing families. Allowing food banks to shift from an emergency resource to the primary source of food for an entire neighborhood normalizes a society in which the minimum level of survival is a privilege and not a right.

Sargent Shriver’s expression of Catholic Social Teaching is urgently important here. Shriver recognized the vital importance of charity as the initial step, but he knew that justice had to be the final goal.

Charity is distributing hot meals on a Tuesday or organizing a winter clothing drive on a Saturday. Charity is beautiful and necessary. Justice, however, is having the courage to ask what caused this family to be hungry and cold in the first place. Justice is organizing the community to alter the zoning laws, rewrite the municipal budgets, and reform the labor policies that maintain this brutal status quo. Justice means moving from temporary relief to permanent systemic reform.



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As high school students—and particularly as students who have the unique opportunity to bridge the gap between the classroom and the corporate environment through work-study programs and professional internships- we possess a highly unique perspective. We are the generation navigating both worlds. We see the gleaming boardrooms and the halls of government, and we see the crumbling bus stops and under-resourced neighborhoods. We are currently being trained in the principles of law, political science, government, and sociology. We have a moral obligation to apply these disciplines directly to community development, rather than reserving them solely for our personal academic advancement.

Policymaking is not only the role of elected government officials. Here and now we can start lifting families by changing the public dialogue. We can start by requiring that all local programs (affordable housing, community centers, expanded bus routes, etc.) be critically examined in terms of their impact on the most vulnerable families within our communities.

Catholic Social Teaching teaches the inherent dignity of work. But work cannot be dignified if the worker is not paid a living wage able to provide for their family, or if simply commuting to that job steals away the hours they should be spending with their children. Catholic Social Teaching also teaches that we are all part of one human family, intrinsically connected despite our differences in race, ethnicity, ideology, economic status, or national origin.

In keeping with Sargent Shriver’s extraordinary legacy, we must go beyond surface-level sympathy. We must become relentless advocates who are equally skilled in the languages of both policy and charity. We must demand a seat at the decision-making tables, and when we get there, we must ensure that the voices of the marginalized families in our communities are never left out of the conversation again.



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Sargent Shriver once famously said, “Serve, serve, serve. Because in the end, it will be the servants that save us all.”

True service is far more than a matter of quietly contributing what we can spare. True service is about fiercely fighting for what others need. Service is about insisting, loudly and consistently, that every single family has the economic means, the physical transportation, and the community infrastructure to not only survive the day, but to reach their full, God-given potential.

Let us be the generation that will do the heavy lifting. Let us be the American idealists who look the system in the eye and say that poverty is not an unavoidable fate. And let us get to work right now, uplifting one family at a time, one community at a time, and one policy at a time. Thank you.