

Making the Abstract Concrete: Teaching the Catholic Social Tradition through Community Service-Learning

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Abstract

This article offers a model of how to construct a course that makes the abstract principles of the Catholic social tradition more concrete through community-service learning (CSL). Primary source readings from scripture, the Apostolic Fathers, Thomas Aquinas, and the major documents of Catholic social thought provide the academic theory of the course. The application of this theory is demonstrated through exemplars of Christian service that model how the themes of Catholic Social Teaching can be lived out in the real world. Most importantly, this course requires thirty-five hours of service with a community partner that provides students experience with marginalized populations. In explaining the structure and workings of a CSL course, several logistical challenges are addressed and examples are given of how the course has been modified. Combining the abstract Catholic social tradition with real-life experiential learning provides tangible benefits to the students, the instructor, and the community partner.

In June 2019, I was a member of a panel at an academic conference that was discussing the state of undergraduate Catholic Studies, Theology, and Religious Studies programs across Canada. During the question-and-answer portion, an audience member asked all the panelists for trends in program growth. Specifically, which types of courses were attracting students? As a part of my answer, I explained that at my Catholic undergraduate liberal arts university, one of the most popular elective courses in our Catholic Studies program was a community service-learning course that I created in the Catholic social tradition. In this experiential learning course, students learn about the principles of Catholic Social Teaching in the classroom, then apply these concepts to complex real-world problems in collaboration with

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community partners. The audience member expressed great interest in this type of community-engaged course, but admitted that they did not know how to create one. While I was happy to send them a copy of my course syllabus, I realized that they would need much more information if they wanted to create a similar type of community-based experiential learning course at their own institution.

This article offers my pedagogical and practical reflections on teaching a community service-learning course in order to help others in Catholic higher education construct similar courses, either in the Catholic social tradition or in other aspects of the broader Catholic intellectual tradition. To that end, this article makes two contributions. First, it demonstrates that community service-learning is an effective pedagogical approach that helps students deepen their understanding of the Catholic social tradition. The principles and ideas of Catholic Social Teaching can be abstract and difficult for undergraduates to understand, much less apply to their own lives. To make these concepts more concrete, this course integrates the theoretical principles of Catholic Social Teaching with embodied models of Christian service and a mandatory thirty-five hour placement with a community partner. Combining the abstract Catholic social tradition with concrete, community-based service-learning not only deepens the students' engagement with the course material but it also offers a holistic approach to education that promotes civic responsibility and ethical behavior. Second, this article explains the structure and workings of a three credit, one-semester community-engaged learning course. In describing the design of this course, I also address several logistical challenges, from setting up the initial relationship with community partners to evaluating the experience. While the course described in this article is only one example of the many different models of experiential learning, I hope it encourages others to think creatively of ways that Catholic higher education can integrate principles and practice together for the benefit of our students and our communities.

What Is Community Service-Learning (CSL)?

Community service-learning is a pedagogical approach that fits under the broader category of experiential learning. Experiential education is a teaching philosophy "in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop people's capacity to

contribute to their communities.”¹ In community service-learning (CSL) courses — also known as community-engaged learning or community-based learning (different institutions apply different nomenclature)² — the experiential learning comes in the form of a structured volunteer service placement with a community partner. “The idea is to give students direct experience with issues they are studying in the curriculum and with ongoing efforts to analyze and solve problems in the community. A key element in these programs is the opportunity students have to both apply what they are learning in real-world settings and reflect in a classroom setting on their service experiences. These programs model the idea that giving something back to the community is an important college outcome, and that working with community partners is good preparation for citizenship, work, and life.”³

Importantly, CSL courses are distinguished from other approaches to experiential education by their intention to equally benefit both the service recipient (the community partner) and the service provider (the student).⁴ Thus, this type of course is a “collaboration between the community partners and instructors who identify mutually beneficial opportunities for students to contribute regularly to the mission of the organization through job placements and/or project work that aligns with the learning goals of the course and the needs of the organization.”⁵ This approach is distinct from episodic volunteering or community service opportunities, where the emphasis is on the service being provided and the primary beneficiary is the service recipient. It is also

¹ “What is Experiential Education?” Association of Experiential Education, <https://www.aee.org/what-is-ee>.

² Terminology for this educational practice continues to evolve. Many American institutions now use the term *community-engaged courses*. Canadian institutions tend to use the term *community-based learning*. Other institutions use the more familiar term *community service-learning* or simply *service-learning*. I will use these terms interchangeably.

³ George D. Kuh, “High Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter,” Association of American Colleges & Universities, <https://www.aacu.org/node/4084>.

⁴ Andrew Furco, “Introduction to Service-Learning Toolkit — Service-Learning: A Balanced Approach to Experiential Education,” Campus Compact, 12, http://www.shsu.edu/academics/cce/documents/Service_Learning_Balanced_Approach_To_Experiential_Education.pdf.

⁵ “Community-Engaged Learning (CEL),” Community-Engaged Courses, Center for Social Concerns, University of Notre Dame, <https://socialconcerns.nd.edu/community-based-course-guide>.

different from field education or an internship, where learning is emphasized, but the primary beneficiary is the service provider. Community service-learning courses ensure equal focus on both the service being provided and the learning that is occurring.⁶

In summary, community service-learning is “an academic program and form of experiential learning where students contribute to their community by participating in professor-approved community service placements related to course learning objectives and then produce corresponding reflective assignments.”⁷ Importantly, these courses are embedded in a reciprocal relationship between the student and the community partner. Both must receive tangible benefits from the experience. For this model to be successful, students must reflect upon their community experience to gain a deeper understanding of the course content.

While many postsecondary institutions in North America have invested in experiential education (and community service-learning courses in particular), this pedagogy has received criticism in some academic circles. In 1998, John W. Eby wrote a provocative article that questioned many of the claims made by service-learning advocates. Specifically, he warned that service-learning is often organized to respond to the needs of the academic institution (the needs of the students, the needs of the instructor, and the needs of the course) and not enough consultation is done with community partners to make the service of real value.⁸ If well-intentioned students are not properly trained, he warned, short-term service-learning “can teach inadequate conceptions of need and service, it can divert resources of service agencies and can do real harm in communities.”⁹ In 2008, John B. Egger publicly challenged his institution’s promotion of service-learning by arguing that CSL exploited students’ sympathy for the less fortunate and did not teach useful skills or develop cultural knowledge.¹⁰ Instead, he maintained, service-learning promotes a “socialist, communitarian philosophy.”

⁶ Furco, 10-12.

⁷ “Community Service Learning Program (CSL): Professor’s Handbook,” University of Ottawa, https://servingothers.uottawa.ca/sites/servingothers.uottawa.ca/files/mjc-gce_csl_professor_handbook_january2020.pdf.

⁸ John W. Eby, “Why Service Learning Is Bad,” (March 1998), 2-3, <https://www1.villanova.edu/content/dam/villanova/artsci/servicelearning/WhyServiceLearningIsBad.pdf>.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁰ John B. Egger, “No Service to Learning: ‘Service-Learning’ Reappraised,” *Reports from the Academy* (June 14, 2008), 183-194, http://ncsce.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/NoToServiceLearning_000.pdf.

Also in 2008, Elizabeth Tryon and Randy Stoecker conducted extensive interviews with community organizations to see the impact of service-learning on communities. They concluded that service-learning partnerships left much room for improvement, specifically in the areas of communication and relationship-building, managing and evaluation of students, cultural competency, as well as the challenge of short-term service-learning.¹¹ Expanding on this research, Randy Stoecker drew upon his decades-long career as a practitioner of community-based research and published a book-length critique of traditional service-learning in 2016 titled *Liberating Service Learning and the Rest of Higher Education Civic Engagement*. Stoecker's primary concern was that CSL courses are too focused on "learning outcomes" (prioritizing and benefitting students) rather than "service" (benefiting the community with limited power and resources).¹² Stoecker also lamented that traditional CSL courses tend to focus on charity (helping needy people) rather than challenging an unjust system and systemic oppression.¹³ Importantly, all of these critiques (with the exception of Egger) are not calls to abandon service-learning, but to more carefully and intentionally design CSL courses that build on potential strengths in the pedagogy and to mitigate some of the challenges. With these constructive critiques in mind, let us turn to a successful model of community service-learning that is beneficial to both the student and the community organization.

The Catholic Social Tradition as Academic Theory

This course in the Catholic social tradition explores Catholicism's moral teachings about the human person and their relationship to the broader social, economic, political, cultural, and religious spheres. The course draws upon four sources — scripture, reason, tradition, and experience¹⁴ — to provide a vision for how humans can live in right relationship with God, one another, and creation. Designed as a community service-learning course, students meet at regularly scheduled

¹¹ Elizabeth Tryon and Randy Stoecker, "The Unheard Voices: Community Organizations and Service-Learning," *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* 12, no. 3 (2008), 47-59, <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.692.6531&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

¹² Randy Stoecker, *Liberating Service Learning and the Rest of Higher Education Civic Engagement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2016), 31-94.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 95-182.

¹⁴ Thomas Massaro, SJ, *Living Justice: Catholic Social Teaching in Action*, Third Classroom Edition (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 57-80.

times to examine critically how scripture, reason, and tradition inform the official papal encyclicals and Church documents on social issues known as Catholic Social Teaching (CST). These documents and the key themes that run through them provide the academic content and “theory” of this course. The fourth source of the Catholic social tradition — experience — is delivered through a professor-approved volunteer service placement that meets a specific community need or priority. Learning in the community and learning in the classroom are bridged through critical reflection throughout the course.

The course begins with scripture. Students read primary source selections from the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament that emphasize the theme of justice and care of the vulnerable in their societies.¹⁵ Emphasis is given to Jesus’ key teachings about the love of God and the love of neighbor (Matthew 22:34-40 and 25:31-46) and how in the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Saint Paul, the practices of charity and justice are of central concern to the early Christian communities. Building off this biblical foundation, students study the rich tradition of Christian thought on social and ethical questions. Working chronologically, students read writings and sermons from early Christian thinkers, such as Clement of Alexandria, John Chrysostom, Basil the Great, and Augustine of Hippo. From the medieval and early modern period, students read excerpts from scholars such as Thomas Aquinas, Marsilius of Padua, and Thomas More and their contributions to the history of religious and political thought. During the section on Aquinas, additional time is devoted to the third source of the Catholic social tradition, which is reason (the “natural law”). Students learn how the Catholic social tradition sees faith and reason as complementary. Thus, natural law reasoning employs rational analysis and philosophy (from both Christian and non-Christian sources) to assess the root cause of social problems and to propose appropriate ethical responses.

Moving into the modern period, the majority of the course is a close study of the official papal encyclicals and Church documents that comprise modern Catholic Social Teaching. Continuing with a historical approach, students read key sections of the documents in the order in which they were written. This approach helps students appreciate that the Catholic social tradition is not a fixed set of doctrines. Rather, it is the dynamic response of the people of God that has developed in

¹⁵ For a selection of key Scriptural texts that inform the Catholic social tradition, see Table 4.1 in Massaro, 64-66.

response to the challenges of the day. Furthermore, this historical approach allows the students to see the shifts in emphasis, direction, and methodology that have occurred in CST since 1891.¹⁶

After working through these magisterial texts, the final course reading is *A Church Seeking Justice: The Challenge of Pope Francis to the Church in Canada*, which was published by the Episcopal Commission for Justice and Peace of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2015.¹⁷ Although each of the major documents of modern Catholic Social Teaching addresses a particular social challenge from a specific historical context, *A Church Seeking Justice* does an excellent job of summarizing the common themes that run throughout this body of teachings. This document brings all the themes that underpin CST together into one place and presents them as a set of unifying principles for how Catholics are called to engage the world around them (the “academic theory” of this course). Moreover, *A Church Seeking Justice* includes helpful reflections on how these themes apply to contemporary social issues in Canada.

Embodiment of the Theory through Models of Service

The assigned course readings help students appreciate the Catholic social tradition as a living tradition that creatively draws upon the Bible, historical texts, reflections by important theologians, and contemporary papal encyclicals to address pressing moral and ethical questions. The challenge is that the themes of Catholic Social Teaching remain abstract and theoretical. While the students can demonstrate an intellectual understanding of these terms, they often have a difficult time applying these concepts to the concrete reality of their everyday lives. For example, after reading John Paul II’s explanation of *solidarity* as a virtue in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, students can provide a working definition of this key term, but they struggle to see how to apply this concept to their own lived reality.

¹⁶ Edward P. DeBerri and James E. Hug, with Peter J. Henriot and Michael J. Schulteis, “An Evolving Social Message” and “A Shifting Social Approach” in *Catholic Social Teaching: Our Best Kept Secret*, Fourth Revised and Expanded Edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 6-17.

¹⁷ Episcopal Commission for Justice and Peace of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, *A Church Seeking Justice: The Challenge of Pope Francis to the Church in Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops Publications, 2015), <https://www.cccb.ca/document/a-church-seeking-justice-the-challenge-of-pope-francis-to-the-church-in-canada/>.

To demonstrate the lived application of these principles of the Catholic social tradition, students give presentations on key individuals from the history of Christianity who, through the prophetic witness of their lives, serve as important models of the themes under discussion.¹⁸ Students provide a brief biography of their selected individual and they must clearly explain how this person embodies the corresponding theme of the Catholic social tradition.¹⁹ Most of these individuals are intentionally chosen from the modern period to make these examples as contemporary and relatable as possible. To show the diversity of approaches to Catholic social action, individuals were chosen from different states of life (priests, consecrated religious, and laity), genders, and sociopolitical realities.

By learning about these exemplars of Christian service to the poor and vulnerable — such as Dorothy Day, who promoted the dignity of the human person in the pages of *The Catholic Worker* and by operating houses of hospitality, or Saint Teresa of Kolkata who embodied solidarity by ministering among the poorest of the poor in India, or Archbishop Oscar Romero who demonstrated the option for the poor when he was martyred for standing against government oppression — students began to understand how these abstract principles have been applied to the concrete reality of specific times and places. To bring the conversation to an even more local level, our course often hosts members of the community in the classroom as guest speakers — such as community organizers or staff members of local non-profit organizations — to offer students contemporary examples of social problems and how our own community organizations are responding.

Including these real-world stories of individuals who were motivated by the love of God and the love of neighbor helps bring the principles of CST into sharper focus. In telling these heroic stories, the Catholic social tradition becomes less about theological definitions and more about real people who courageously put the radical message of the Gospel into practice. As one student commented on the course evaluation, “The profiles of Catholic activists were very enjoyable. I really liked learning about these different individuals. These student facilitations helped me better understand the course

¹⁸ This approach was inspired by Stephen J. Pope, *A Step Along the Way: Models of Christian Service* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015).

¹⁹ Because the class enrollment is limited to thirty, students have the choice of either facilitating the class discussion on a document of Catholic Social Teaching or presenting an exemplar of the Catholic social tradition.

content.” Beyond the course, these concrete models show students how to live out the Catholic social tradition. While it is important to name the very real problems in our society, there is always the risk of these problems becoming so overwhelming that students fall into despair and hopelessness. These personal models of action awaken the students’ imagination and invigorate hope within them that faith-based social change is possible.

Experiencing the Theory through Community Service

Along with scripture, tradition, and reason, the fourth and final source of the Catholic social tradition is human experience. Through carefully designed service opportunities with vetted community partners, students encounter those living on the margins of society. These experiences are designed to spark compassion. *Compassion* is from the Latin “to suffer with” and means entering deeply into a situation so that another’s pain becomes your own. Feeling this pain and suffering on a personal level becomes a desire to care for others and to make the situation better. Aware of this suffering, the service project provides the students an opportunity to make a positive change in the situation.

According to Jeffrey Howard, the selection of an appropriate community service placement is based on four criteria. “First, the range of acceptable service placements must relate to the course content. Second, the duration of service must be sufficient to enable the fulfillment of learning goals. Third, the specific service activities and service contexts must have the potential to stimulate course-relevant learning. Fourth, community projects must meet real need in the community as determined by the community.”²⁰ Working with our university’s experiential learning coordinator to identify suitable community partners, we focused primarily on social service agencies and local non-profit organizations (both faith-based and secular), as these organizations would provide students with the experience of working with people on the margins, which connected with the course content of the Catholic social tradition. After an initial phone conversation with these organizations, the experiential learning coordinator and I conducted on-site visits to

²⁰ Jeffrey Howard, ed., *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning: Service-Learning Course Design Workbook* (Ann Arbor, MI: OCSL Press, Summer 2001): 16-19; and Carleton University, <http://carleton.ca/edc/wp-content/uploads/Principles-of-Good-Practice-in-Community-Service-Learning-and-Pedagogy.pdf>.

ensure that we properly understood the mission of the organization and to properly conduct risk-management assessments. Aware of the critiques by Eby, Tryon, and Stoecker that CSL courses often do not provide much real value to the community partner, it was paramount that these partnerships were mutually beneficial to both the student in the course *and* to the community organization. During our meetings, the community partner received a copy of the course syllabus (so they understood the learning objectives in the class) and we discussed ways that our students could best help their organization. During these meetings, sometimes we mutually discerned that this partnership was not a good fit for either the course and/or the community partner and we did not proceed further. Other meetings were very positive, but we needed to be creative to ensure that the students would be actually helping the community partner and their clients. For example, in the province of Alberta, for courses to have a CSL designation they must have at least twenty hours of community service.²¹ Our community partners all told us that this amount of time was too low to be of real value to them. Thus, at the recommendation of the community partners, the required community service hours was raised from twenty to thirty-five hours per semester.

These community placements provide invaluable learning experiences to the students. The clients and staff at the placements serve as teachers and conversation partners, providing valuable experiences and insights that deepen and broaden students' understanding of the assigned course texts and in-class lectures and discussions. After thirty-five hours of working with vulnerable people, students better understand the human impact of social injustice. They no longer see social problems in the community as statistics, but as real problems that affect real people. Equally important, they see the application of the principles of the Catholic social tradition (such as the dignity of the human person and solidarity) as a constructive way forward. As one student summarized her experience on the course evaluation, "I LOVED the community placement! It was the best way I learned how to relate CST to the real world." Another wrote, "The community placement made us experience what we learned in class and connect

²¹ "Integrating CSL into a Course," Community Service-Learning, University of Alberta, <https://www.ualberta.ca/community-service-learning/csl-instructor-info/integrating-csl-into-a-course/index.html>. "Community Service Learning," Mount Royal University, <https://www.mtroyal.ca/AboutMountRoyal/TeachingLearning/CSLearning/>

it to the outside world. It showed me how to go out of my comfort zone and serve others.”

An important note of caution about these community placements. While these experiences have the potential to transform the student, there is also the potential that these experiences can do great harm. If service in the community is done without much social analysis or critical self-reflection, the student “may end up seeing oneself in a ‘rescuer’ role to the ‘unfortunate others,’ an attitude that can increase power imbalances and be divisive.”²² Well-intentioned students — often from a white, middle-class, privileged background — may believe that they can come into poor communities as outsiders and “solve” their problems. This creates an “us and them” elitist mentality, which can be experienced by community members as arrogant and condescending.²³ To avoid this ethical problem of “voluntourism,” one of the first class meetings is an orientation led by our university’s experiential learning coordinator about best practices for working in the community. In addition, great emphasis is placed on the principles of Catholic Social Teaching, especially on solidarity, participation and empowerment, and the dignity of the human person. Solidarity, the awareness that we all belong to one human family and the active commitment to the well-being of others and the common good, shifts the focus away from doing *for* the poor, but doing *with* the poor. Working for the poor disrespects the seriousness of poverty and treats them as objects. This mentality makes privileged individuals feel gratitude, thus making us the subject. As an important corrective, solidarity transforms the relationship; beneficiaries are no longer objects but subjects and, in gaining agency and autonomy, they become cooperators in the project.²⁴ By focusing on relationships of equality and reciprocity (to be with and to empower people), solidarity changes a potentially exploitative relationship into one of care and mutuality.²⁵ Thus, the principles of the Catholic social tradition provide the students with the moral and intellectual tools to unpack complex social problems and interactions in a more nuanced way.

²² Susan Crawford Sullivan and Ron Pagnucco, “Introduction: Catholic Social Teaching and the College Campus,” in *A Vision of Justice: Engaging Catholic Social Teaching on the College Campus*, ed. Susan Crawford Sullivan and Ron Pagnucco (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), xvi-xvii.

²³ Helen Fox, *The Highest Vocation: Social Justice and the Millennial Generation* (Pieterlan, Switzerland: Peter Lang Publishing, 2011), 38-39.

²⁴ Maureen K. Day, *Catholic Activism Today: Individual Transformation and the Struggle for Social Justice* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 118-20.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 157-59.

Synthesis of All Three Components

Arguably, the most important part of a community-based learning course is to provide educationally sound mechanisms to harvest the experience of community learning.²⁶ In other words, careful thought must be given to learning activities that encourage the integration of experiential and academic learning. In CSL courses, credit is given for the demonstration of academic and civic learning that takes place before, during, and after the service. Just because a student completes the service, it does not mean they have earned the credit. To encourage the integration of experiential and academic learning, students are required to submit three short reflection papers (three pages each) based upon their “field experience” (usually they will submit each reflection after completing a block of twelve hours). The reflections are designed to help students process their community experience and critically assess and understand what they are seeing and doing. Using David Kolb’s experiential learning cycle, students are asked three main questions: (1) What? Objectively report the facts and events of the experience; (2) So What? Analyze the experience and make connections the Catholic social tradition; and (3) Now What? Consider future implications of this experience for you and the community.²⁷ To further help students in their reflective process, a set of more detailed sub-questions are also provided.²⁸ It is worth noting that many of my students lack experience extracting and making meaning from experience, let alone merging it with other academic learning strategies. To meet this need, our university’s experiential learning coordinator leads the students through practice activities that promote participant-observer skills during the initial orientation. In addition, examples of exemplary reflections from previous courses are available to current students.

Importantly, time is devoted in class for students to discuss their community experiences with partners, or in small groups, or as a whole class. After the initial offering of this course, several students commented on the course evaluations that they wanted more opportunities to discuss and process their experiences at their community placements. As a response to this constructive feedback, this course now includes

²⁶ Howard, 1.

²⁷ “Community Service Learning Program (CSL): Professor’s Handbook,” University of Ottawa, 7.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

regularly scheduled class reflection times. It is also important to address that working with marginalized populations can be emotionally challenging for students. As Roger Bergman wisely observed after thirty years of experience, “Being formed for justice, undergoing a conversion to the cause of the oppressed, can be, perhaps must be, a painful experience.”²⁹ Once during the semester, a member from our university’s counselling services team and our director of campus ministry facilitate a large group conversation about how to recognize, honor, and learn from the spiritual discomfort and painful emotions that students may be encountering at their placements.

At the end of the semester, students integrate the academic theory of the Catholic social tradition (scripture, tradition, and reason) with their community experience to create a final capstone project. There are two options for this final assignment. The first option is for students to analyze a situation or social issue that they encountered during their community placement. For this option, students must work through the four-step pastoral cycle:³⁰ (1) Experience: Show how this issue has impacted those in our community; (2) Social analysis: Conduct independent research to ask the hard questions about the root causes of the issue; (3) Theological reflection: Conduct a thorough analysis of this issue in light of the Catholic social tradition and connect to themes discussed in the course; and (4) Pastoral action: Students propose an appropriate action plan that could be taken to ameliorate the situation. Students are not expected to actually execute this plan, but their plans are to be realistic. A successful example of this option is a student’s proposal to create an intentional community between the students at our university and the residents at a neighboring long-term care residence to combat isolation. Another powerful example is a student’s proposal to create a Saint Kateri habitat on our campus that would restore native trees, shrubs, and wildflowers, and provide a sacred space for prayer and contemplation. Both of these student proposals are currently under review by our university’s administration. The second option is a personal transformation paper about how the community experience has affected their understanding of the Catholic social tradition. Linking their experience to the scripture readings, social documents, and/or exemplars of the social tradition, students have used this option to describe how

²⁹ Roger C. Bergman, “Journey Into Shame: Implications for Justice Pedagogies,” Saint Mary’s Digital Commons, 2015, 1.

³⁰ Massaro, 74-77.

this course has impacted their own spiritual journey and how their perspective has changed moving forward. As one student wrote in the final paper, “This class has humbled me and broken down barriers. It is easy to be comfortable and not act in the face of injustice. This course has pushed me outside my comfort zone, which has enabled me to work for social justice in my own personal life.” At the end of the term, students are invited to present their research projects and personal transformation papers in a public forum that includes the entire class, the community partners, and members from our broader university community.

Conclusion: Benefits and Challenges of CSL

This article offers a model of how to construct a course that makes the abstract principles of Catholic Social Teaching more concrete through community-service learning. To understand the key themes of the Catholic social tradition, students read scripture, the Apostolic Fathers, Thomas Aquinas, and the major documents of Catholic social thought. These intellectual ideas are embodied through exemplars of Christian service that model how the themes of Catholic Social Teaching can be lived out in the real world. Most importantly, this course requires thirty-five hours of service with a community partner. Ongoing reflection papers and the final project ensure that the service-learning experience acts as a tool to enhance the course material and, in return, the course serves as an instrument to reinforce the placement.

CSL courses have numerous benefits for everyone involved. Students increase their understanding of the Catholic social tradition through their community experience. They are able to apply these themes to real-life situations, which in turn increases the usefulness and meaningfulness of this tradition.³¹ CSL also provides a unique opportunity for students to become engaged in their community. As students develop a personal identification with those they serve, they are more likely to commit themselves to the work of social justice. According to one student on the course evaluation, “This course was a life-giving experience. The course challenged me in a good way....

³¹ “Post-Secondary Service Learning in Canada: A Report for the Association of Catholic Colleges & Universities of Canada (ACCUC)” [unpublished], 4.

It should be required for all students as it encourages us to make a difference in the world.” These courses also allow students to gain practical experience and build networks outside the university. After the course is over, many of the students continue to volunteer at their community placement. In some cases, students have been hired at the organization.

As the faculty member teaching this course, I find that students in my CSL courses are more engaged with the course material than their peers in traditional courses. Students come to class excited to talk about their experiences, which allows for more interactive teaching methods than the traditional lecture. One student commented, “The classroom felt like a community. The class discussions really enhanced my understanding of the course. Discussing contemporary topics related to our community experience was most helpful.” Also, teaching this course as a CSL course has improved recruitment and retention. Student enrollment in this course has increased from sixteen to twenty-four to thirty (the course cap).

Community partners gain additional human resources needed to achieve their organization’s goals. Students also bring new energy, enthusiasm, ideas, and perspectives.³² Having students in their organization increases the partner’s volunteer pool as students share their experiences with others. Perhaps most importantly, these community placements educate students about important community issues while addressing any misconceptions or stigmas around these issues. Since nearly all of our community partners are local non-profits, education is often a key part of their mission.

It is also important to be aware that teaching community service-learning courses is not without its challenges. Compared to more traditional course offerings, the workload is higher for students and instructors.³³ Faculty need extra operational support (for example, an experiential learning coordinator) to handle the logistics of vetting suitable community partners and making sure that students have completed the necessary ethics clearance (from the university) and volunteer screening (from the police department) to work with

³² Ibid.

³³ Rhonda Lenton, Robindra Sidhu, et al., *Community Service Learning and Community-Based Learning as Approaches to Enhancing University Service Learning* (Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2014).

marginalized populations. Also, working with vulnerable people is often emotionally difficult and upsetting to some students. To meet this challenge, I collaborate with our director of campus ministry and our university's counselling services. With careful preparation and planning, these challenges can be met and overcome. Creating a successful CSL course not only helps students better engage with the Catholic social tradition during the course itself, but also has the potential to transform how our students interpret and engage the world after they leave our institution. Teaching at a Catholic university, this course helps our university fulfill its mission statement, "Through the pursuit of knowledge and service to the community, we prepare our students to become lifelong learners, engaged citizens and compassionate members of society."³⁴ Educating students to be of service to the common good and to work for justice is a core aspect of our identity as a Catholic institution of higher learning.

Table 1. What Is Community-Based Service Learning?³⁵

	Community Service	Service Learning	Internship
Primary Intended Beneficiary	Recipient	Recipient and Provider	Provider
Primary Focus Intended Educational Purposes	Service Civic and Ethical Development	Service and Learning Academic and Civic Development	Learning Career and Academic Development
Integration with Curriculum	Peripheral	Integrated	Co-Curricular/ Supplemental
Integration with Curriculum	Based on Social Cause	Based on Academic Discipline	Based on Industry or Career

³⁴ "Who We Are," St. Mary's University, <https://www.stmu.ca/about/>

³⁵ "What is Service Learning," Service Learner, Service Learning, Marquette University, <https://www.marquette.edu/service-learning/service-learner.php>.

Table 2. Major Documents of Modern Catholic Social Teaching and Corresponding Themes³⁶

Date	Document	Author	Key Sections and Corresponding Theme of CST
1891	<i>Rerum Novarum</i>	Pope Leo XIII	#1-3, 20-21, 31-38: Rights of Workers
1931	<i>Quadragesimo Anno</i>	Pope Pius XI	#76-87: Subsidiarity
1961	<i>Mater et Magistra</i>	Pope John XXIII	#51-77: Proper Role of Government
1963	<i>Pacem in Terris</i>	Pope John XXIII	#8-38: Dignity of the Human Person
1965	<i>Gaudium et Spes</i>	Second Vatican Council	#109-119: Peace and Disarmament #12-18: Dignity of the Human Person #26-32: Common Good #47-52: Family Life #68-75: Participation
1967	<i>Populorum Progressio</i>	Pope Paul VI	#77-82: Peace and Disarmament #12-42 and 76-80: International Development
1981	<i>Laborem Exercens</i>	Pope John Paul II	#1-10 and 16-23: Dignity of Work
1982	<i>Ethical Reflections on the Economic Crisis</i>	Canadian Episcopal Commission for Social Affairs	Option for the Poor
1987	<i>Sollicitudo Rei Socialis</i>	Pope John Paul II	#35-40: Solidarity
1991	<i>Centesimus Annus</i>	Pope John Paul II	#30-43: Property Ownership
2009	<i>Caritas in Veritate</i>	Pope Benedict XVI	#21-33: International Development
2013	<i>Evangelii Gaudium</i>	Pope Francis	#186-216: Option for the Poor
2015	<i>Laudato Si'</i>	Pope Francis	#137-162 and 202-246: Care for Creation
2020	<i>Fratelli Tutti</i>	Pope Francis	#87-127: Common Good

³⁶ This table is a reformulation of the “Key Texts for Nine Themes in Catholic Social Teaching” in Massaro, 82.

Table 3. Models of the Catholic Social Tradition

Topic	Model of the Catholic Social Tradition
Biblical Foundations of Justice	Amos
Early Christianity	Saint Basil the Great
Pioneers of Social Catholicism: Charity to Justice	Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam
<i>Rerum Novarum</i> : Rights of Workers	Cesar Chavez
<i>Quadragesimo Anno</i> : Subsidiarity	Lech Wałęsa
<i>Mater et Magistra</i> : Proper Role of Government	
<i>Pacem in Terris</i> : Dignity of the Human Person	Dorothy Day
Peace and Disarmament	
<i>Gaudium et Spes</i> : Dignity of the Human Person	Bartolomé de Las Casas, OP Helen Prejean, CSJ
<i>Gaudium et Spes</i> : Common Good Family Life	Catherine de Hueck Doherty
<i>Populorum Progressio</i> : International Development	Bishop Dom Hélder Câmara
<i>Laborem Exercens</i> : Dignity of Work	Father Moses Coady
<i>Ethical Reflections on the Economic Crisis</i> : Option for the Poor	Saint Marguerite d'Youville
<i>Sollicitudo Rei Socialis</i> : Solidarity	Saint [Mother] Teresa of Kolkata
<i>Centesimus Annus</i> : Property Ownership	Saint [Pope] John Paul II
<i>Caritas in Veritate</i> : International Development	Rigoberta Menchú
<i>Evangelii Gaudium</i> : Option for the Poor	Saint Martin de Porres, OP Saint Óscar Romero
<i>Laudato Si'</i> : Care for Creation	Saint Francis of Assisi Dorothy Stang, SND
<i>Fratelli Tutti</i> : Common Good	Gregory Boyle, SJ

Table 4. Examples of Community Partnerships

Community Partner	Purpose/Volunteer Details
Humanities 101	Tutoring in our university's free humanities courses for low-income adults who have experienced barriers to learning
Aga Khan Education Board	Tutoring first-generation immigrants and refugees (grades 1-12)
Ability4Good	Support worker for children (ages 3-17) with physical or developmental delays in community programs
L'Arche	Support worker for individuals who have intellectual disabilities in community programs
Society of St. Vincent de Paul	Community outreach assistants for family visits, shadowing counseling, food delivery to community
Catholic Family Services — Family & Schools Together	Facilitating activities for children (5-10) and mentoring older kids (10-14) to build self-esteem and social skills
Next Step Ministries	Helping women exiting sexual exploitation through direct care programs or administrative support
Calgary Immigrant Women's Association	Helping female immigrants practice English, build friendships, and learn about life in Calgary
Father Lacombe Care Society	Visiting seniors in residence and/or assisting with the adult day program
Calgary Alliance for the Common Good	Assisting community organizers as they build coalitions to change public policy around pressing social issues