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9 Books on Social Justice: What Every Jesuit College Graduate Should Have Read

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9 Books on Social Justice

What Every Jesuit College Graduate Should Have Read

Let's imagine that we wanted to establish a basic course that would pool the wisdom of faculty and alumni on what the graduate of a Jesuit college or university should know about the Society's commitment to social justice. I asked a cross section of teachers to share their judgments on what is both a best and a basic book that their students should read for this course. Here is what they said. Ray Schroth, S.J.

Americans Are Hard to Love

Back in the 1950s I switched majors from accounting to history in senior year, when I took a great books seminar and read Alexis DeTocqueville's *Democracy in America*. After that I decided I would go to graduate school because DeTocqueville confirmed my experience that Americans are really interesting. He taught me that democracy is not just about politics but about everything in American life. As promise and very uneven practice, democracy is at the heart of those dreams we call American. Why read it in Jesuit schools? Because democracy, in DeTocqueville's time and in ours, is about how faith with its option for the poor might somehow work out or even bring about "liberty and justice for all." Christian faith is about love of God and neighbor, and American studies, beginning with

Democracy in America, open our minds and imaginations to our neighbors. Americans are hard to love sometimes, but without them the Kingdom of God, the beloved community, will have a very hard time coming.

David O'Brien is emeritus professor of history at the College of the Holy Cross.

Tell No Lies

If there is but one reason for daring to ask a student to read Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, it is so that student might encounter the challenging yet luminous words of the Elder Zossima in Book Two's "A Lady of Little Faith." Who among us has not fantasized about heroically saving the world while neglecting to attend to the unglamorous daily works of active love? What if Zossima's command, "above all avoid lies, all lies, especially the lie to yourself," became a daily discipline? For me the building blocks of social justice are found in this hopeful yet all-too-human book: tell the truth, love all whom you encounter, and be merciful and forgiving.

Anna J. Brown is chair of the political science department and director of the social justice program at Saint Peter's University.

A Harsh Reality

What is each individual person able to do and be? Martha C. Nussbaum's *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* places this question in dialogue with the prevailing theories of social justice and argues that when these theories reference indicators like an increase in GDP as evidence of "progress" this means very little to the billions of women, men, and children worldwide who daily go without the basic necessities and freedoms that so many others take for granted. The capabilities approach to international development provides not only an eye-opener to the harsh reality of global poverty and exploitation but also serves as a call to action to any reader interested in creating a more just society.

Tom Regan, S.J., is professor of philosophy at Loyola University Chicago.

Our Broken World

When our students assume their place in the world of work, we hope they understand they are doing something more than just earning a paycheck. Blessed John Paul II's *Laborem Exercens* is a powerful reflection on the meaning and dignity of work. According to the encyclical, all work should help "to realize [our] humanity." Through our work, we also participate in God's mending of our broken

world. Many workers today regularly encounter exploitation. *Laborem Exercens* gives them hope by insisting that all workers have the rights to unionize and to a just wage, affordable healthcare, and other benefits necessary to “ensure the life and health of workers and their families.” This great encyclical helped inspire Solidarity in Poland and evinces that the Church stands in solidarity with workers everywhere.

Gerald Beyer teaches theology at Saint Joseph's University.

Prophet and Pastor

Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* is eighty years old, published in 1932 when Niebuhr had moved to New York to join the faculty of Union Theological Seminary. It expresses how our group and national interests shape our application of moral and religious ideals to contemporary society. Niebuhr combines the moral demands of the prophet and pastor, the sarcastic perceptions of the social analyst, and the confessions of the sinner (especially when discussing American racism and imperialism). His comments manifest the ruthlessness of his honesty and the intensity of his passion for justice. He does not give us a nice orderly map of what justice requires. Rather, he gives us a compass that swings around as we do but which ends up pointing true north. His love of irony corrects the rationalistic confidence of Catholic ethics; his honesty in the face of history corrects the delusions of American exceptionalism and self-regard.

John Langan, S.J., is a philosophy professor in Georgetown's Walsh School of Foreign Service.

A Hidden Priest

One of Dorothy Day's favorites, Ignazio Silone's *Bread and Wine* (1936), explores something often overlooked: the shared values that frequently shape secular and religious movements for justice. Pietro Spina, its central character, is a disillusioned 1930s Italian radi-

cal pretending to be a priest in order to evade capture by fascist authorities. As the poor and dispossessed seek his spiritual aid, Spina, no longer a believer, unexpectedly rediscovers the Christian inspiration that formed his understanding of human dignity. Spina's sojourn eventually reunites him with his boyhood mentor, Don Benedetto, a real priest who regards his unbelieving pupil's secular political activism as “his way of serving God.” This book's great virtue is that it never sacrifices moral complexity in telling the story of these two men's painful struggles for justice.

James P. McCartin is director of the Center on Religion and Culture at Fordham University.

Fear's Walls

Racism is America's original sin. Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* requires readers to witness the results created by fear and ignorance of the unfamiliar. Harper Lee's imaginary Maycomb County in Alabama in 1935 provides prisms through which to study society. The narrator's childhood fear of a local recluse bookends the fight of her lawyer father to defend a black man wrongly accused of raping a white woman. Atticus Finch makes it clear why: “I couldn't go to church and worship God if I didn't try to help that man.” A country where fear and ignorance continue to create walls, real and imagined, between races and classes 50 years after the book was published can still learn from it.

Tom Curran is associate editor of the Newark Star Ledger.

To Uncomfortable Places

In *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times*, Dean Brackley, S.J., draws deeply upon his personal experiences working with the poor living amidst violence in Central America. This moving interpretation of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius presents us

with the challenge of finding a Call—something worth living for that is deeply rooted in love and helping others. Identifying and accepting the Call isn't easy, especially if we are set on a comfortable path. Brackley guides us in discovering how we might choose a freer, more generous, community-oriented way of life. The issues Brackley raises can take us to uncomfortable places and force us to question our core commitments. However, the process of discovery he unlocks can help us find our place in the projects of civil rights, equality, and justice.

Diana Owen is in the department of communication, culture and technology at Georgetown University.

On Finding God

A child is born, and shepherds and angels visit him. His parents are confused. He grows up, asks his cousin to baptize him, and finds he has a following. He tells stories. A shepherd with 100 sheep loses one, and he turns all his energies into saving that one. A rich man in purple and linen feasts all day, while a poor man Lazarus covered with sores lies starving at his gate. A traveler finds a robber's victim in a ditch. Religious leaders have passed him by, but this man binds his wounds and takes him to safety. A father stands on a hilltop every day waiting for a son who took off and threw away his money on a good time to return. The young preacher is crucified and buried, but he begins to appear again in different forms. He meets two travelers on the road who once believed in him, and shows them, at dinner, while breaking bread, how it is that he lives on. Luke's Gospel has several clear meanings. One is that we must find God in the weak and the poor, in strangers on the road.

Ray Schroth, S.J., is an associate editor of America magazine; Father Schroth served as editor of Conversations for ten years.