

Paying Citizenship's Price:  
Confronting Obstacles to Solidarity and Civic Engagement  
Among 21<sup>st</sup> Century U.S. Catholics

Project Proposal: Democracy, Culture, and Catholicism International Research Project  
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I. In this study I wish to pursue three analytic and historical questions:

1. What understandings of or principles for 'citizenship' and 'civic engagement' operate in recent (1981-present) Vatican and U.S. episcopal social teaching? How are these distinct from, or related to, evolving understandings of solidarity and preference for the poor/vulnerable one also finds in this teaching? To what degree are practices of solidarity and civic engagement presented as desirable or morally required for Catholics and other Christians?

2. What circumstances (cultural, socio-economic, and political) have shaped understandings and practices of civic engagement among U.S. citizens over the past three decades? Here, I will engage competing claims among social scientists and political theorists concerning the purported decline of the 'informed citizen' and erosion of civic participation in the U.S. during this period, and their possible causes. I will pay particular attention to claims about civic disengagement and political disempowerment in the face of globalizing markets, technologies, and communications. How are understandings, ends, and forms of civic participation and solidarity being affected by these changing circumstances, both locally and on larger societal scales?

3. Given these circumstances, how have U.S. Catholics responded (or not) to official teachings about solidarity and civic engagement? To get at this question I will

consider and evaluate selected examples of national leadership and on-the-ground civic engagement around two signature Catholic social issues: working families' right to a decent livelihood, and the protection of life 'from womb to tomb.' What do U.S. Catholics' action or inaction in these two areas reveal the about types of civic engagement their church's social teaching warrants motivates, advocates or requires?

II. As my title suggests, my interest in this project goes beyond the historical or analytical. Among the relatively affluent Catholic community in the United States, official Catholic social teaching too often remains safely ensconced in the pages of little-read documents, and too infrequently translated into concrete, persistent action by Catholic citizens on behalf of justice and the common good. To put this more sharply: most U.S. Catholic institutions, leaders, pastors, educators and people in the pews have apprehended Church social teaching in ways that have kept costly practices of solidarity and civic engagement at arms length. When civic sacrifice is mentioned at all in local parishes, it is in connection to supporting and praying for the safety of military personnel. That civic engagement in the name of solidarity is a duty incumbent on all citizens, and that this engagement will entail costs--of time, attention, comfort, or resources-- is a possibility that is ignored or at least severely downplayed. Thus do most U.S. Catholics sidestep any serious confrontation with a constitutive element of the cost of discipleship: costly civic engagement for justice and the common good.

This state of affairs is directly contrary to the arc of recent Catholic social teaching through Pope Benedict XVI's *Caritas in Veritate*, which suggests (though perhaps not explicitly enough) that undertaking the responsibilities of civic engagement

for the common good means accepting what Jacques Maritain has called ‘the sufferings due to solidarity.’ I intend to address this problem, to probe its causes, and to propose what may and should be done about it, and by whom. I hope to articulate a constructive and contextually-attuned case for U.S. Catholic civic engagement grounded in a capacious and multifaceted understanding of solidary practice. My constructive argument will be informed by practical and theoretical resources in the areas of contemporary social Catholicism, virtue ethics, and the scholarship emerging from contemporary liberationist movements.

III. The Democracy, Culture and Catholicism International Research Project offers unique opportunities to set this study within a rich, comparative context. I am eager to seek out, and to converse with international colleagues concerning resources that will enable me to compare and contrast the circumstances and reception of Catholic teachings on civic engagement in the U.S., with the circumstances and reception of these teachings among Catholic leaders and citizens during this same period in the national settings (Lithuania, Peru and Indonesia) represented in the DCCIR project. Given the tight relations and interdependencies among nations and cultures in the present era, and the complications of my U.S. social location within the history of international power disparities, I hopefully expect the dialogue and collaborative study that the DCCIRP will facilitate to challenge, expand, and improve my analysis, interpretive claims, and constructive argument in humbling and valuable ways.

IV. The anticipated outcome of this work is a scholarly research paper suitable for publication in such venues as *Theological Studies*, *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, *The Journal of Catholic Social Thought*, or *the Journal of Church and State*. I will also consider expanding this work into a monograph-length piece whose target audience would include upper level undergraduate and graduate courses in social or political ethics and the interested Catholic public.