

## Expectations

The students will:

- analyze two issues related to social justice: poverty and respect for life.
- demonstrate how solidarity and care for people who are poor and vulnerable relate to upholding the dignity of people who struggle with mental health.
- recognize and appreciate the shared responsibility to participate in efforts to protect human rights.

## Note to the Teacher

This topic begins with an introduction to human rights as the foundation for understanding social justice issues, since the lack or violation of these rights affects all members of society. The task of building a just and loving society requires special attention to these rights since they flow from our dignity as persons made in God's image. In his encyclical, *The Gospel of Life*, Pope John Paul II described assaults on human dignity in this way:

Whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, or willful self-destruction, whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where people are treated as mere instruments of gain rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others like them are infamies indeed. They poison human society, and they do

more harm to those who practise them than to those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are a supreme dishonour to the Creator. (#3)

Two issues in social justice are presented in this topic — poverty and respect for life. The section on poverty includes both absolute and relative poverty and introduces the students to the concept of microcredit, an economic innovation that offers some hope for the future in the developing world. The section on respect for life examines the issues of abortion and euthanasia. For more background information about euthanasia, you may want to consult “Going to the House of the Father” in Appendix D.

In grade 7, students learned the difference between mental health and mental illness and how to recognize signs that someone might be struggling with their mental health. Now, in theme 5, students will develop an understanding of how advocating for those who experience mental illness is upholding human dignity as reflected in Catholic Social Teaching. They will brainstorm and consider how to advocate for those affected by mental illness, understanding that all of us are made in the image and likeness of God.

Your response to the students as they first learn about social justice issues is very important. If they feel overwhelmed with facts and complexities, they are likely to retreat. On the other hand, they do need to become more aware of social issues and attitudes. The maturational differences among Grade 8 students make achieving this delicate balance even more challenging. Your enthusiasm and encouragement as they take their first steps toward Christian maturity and its responsibilities is essential.

**Caution:** The discussion of relative poverty may be distressing for any students who come from families with limited economic resources. The belief that poverty is a personal failing is deeply ingrained in our society. As the class discusses the facts and examines attitudes that surround the experience of poverty, your sensitivity will be essential.

The section on respect for life includes the issue of abortion. It is possible that abortion may have touched the lives of some students through relatives or family acquaintances. It is important to communicate a message of compassion for those who have resorted to abortion, even as you defend the fundamental right to life of the unborn child. Students of this age can be quick to judge and may need to be reminded that this is a matter we leave to God.

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## Important Words

- *absolute poverty, relative poverty, microcredit, abortion, euthanasia, human dignity*
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## Materials/Preparation

- This topic is lengthy, and you may want to divide it into two sessions, the first for the introduction and Poverty (pages 143 – 149) and the second session for Respect for Life (pages 150 – 155)
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## Program Resources

- Student Book, pages 143 – 155
  - Reflection Sheet #22 (Some Issues in Social Justice)
  - BLM#19 — Millennium Goals (related activities)
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## Curriculum Connections

This topic has a connection with Unit 4, Theme 1, “Does Death Destroy Everything?,” Unit 6, Theme 3, “Can suffering be meaningful?,” and Unit 7, Theme 3, “Do I live justly?” in *Stand by Me*, from the *We are Strong Together* catechetical program. The Response provides a connection to The Arts: Visual Arts curriculum guidelines.

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## *We Experience*

Ask the students to work in small groups and discuss the list of human rights on page 143. Some questions for them to consider are:

- Which right do you think is the most important human right? Why?
- Which right do you think is the hardest to understand?
- Are there any rights you think should be added to this list? What are they?

When the groups have completed their discussions, ask them to share their ideas with the class. The main points of their conclusions could be recorded on a chart or the chalkboard.

Read together the remainder of the introduction (page 143 – 144) and invite the students’ comments.

### Poverty

Read together page 144 and invite the students' comments. You might ask them:

- Would you have walked out of the classroom if you were Joe? Why?
- What's wrong with Frank's comments? (he is stating his opinions as if they were facts; he thinks that those who are poor are responsible for their situation)
- Why is it wrong to make comments like Frank's about a group of people — people who are poor, people of a particular race or religion, or people who are disabled in some way? (it's unjust; it offends and hurts members of these groups; it creates division among people, which is the opposite of creating solidarity)

Read together pages 145 (absolute poverty) and invite the students' comments. You might ask them:

- What does *absolute* mean? (total, complete)
- Do any of these facts about absolute poverty surprise you? Which ones? Why?
- How do these facts about absolute poverty make you feel?
- Are the basic human rights of people living in absolute poverty respected? (most of their rights are ignored; the well-being of people depends on access to food, clean water, basic sanitation, health care; children need education; adults need work to care for their families)

Read together the feature on microcredit (page 146) and invite the students' response. Explore the meaning of credit with them:

- What is credit? (it's a loan, which creates a debt that eventually has to be paid back)
- What is a credit card? (a plastic card that people can use to buy goods or services without cash now, and they agree to pay for these goods or services at a later date)
- What's a credit rating? (it's an evaluation of a person's ability to pay their debts, based on their resources and past history)
- If you wanted to borrow money from a bank, what would you have to prove? (your ability to pay the money back)
- What is microcredit? (very small loans to set up small businesses)
- What is unique about the idea of microcredit? (it allows people to be self-sufficient and look after their families; it gives people living in absolute poverty an opportunity to improve their lives; the loans are a sign of trust in the ability of people to improve their lives when given a chance)

Read together page 147 and invite the students' response. Explore the meaning of relative poverty with them:

- What does *relative* mean? (in comparison)
- What is the difference between absolute poverty and relative poverty? (absolute poverty takes away many of people's basic rights; relative poverty makes life difficult and stressful)
- How do changes in programs and policies come about in a democratic country? (pressure from citizens; electing a political party that is committed to doing more for people living in poverty)

Read together pages 148 – 149 and invite the students' response.

- Who do you think is more likely to go to university, Frank or Joe?
- Do Frank and Joe have equal opportunities? Why? Why not?
- Do you think everyone has the determination and strength to overcome disadvantages? Why?
- What might help a person to overcome the disadvantages of poverty? (a loving and supportive family; the special interest and encouragement of a teacher or other supportive adult; the example of people who overcame the obstacles created by poverty)

Invite the students to explore the needs of their community, for example, low-income families with limited access to resources in the community; lack of recreational facilities in some areas; or unemployment. What activities can they get involved in to help others in their community?

- Is it difficult for people living in a particular society to look at the values of that society? Why? (You might point out that we are so much a part of our society, it can be hard to look at its values in a critical way.)
- What happens if we get caught up in the desire for more and more possessions and money? (we discover that no matter how much we have, we want more; we find ourselves more and more dissatisfied; we lose sight of what's really important)
- What temptations are there in our society to get caught up in having the latest things? (advertising messages telling us we need these things; pressure from other people; feeling as if we're not really accepted and popular without certain things)
- Do you think it's hard to have a simple lifestyle in our society? Why?

### **Respect for Life (Abortion)**

Read together the introduction to Respect for Life and the introduction to the issue of abortion (150 – 151) and invite the students' response. You might ask them:

- What does *vulnerable* mean? (defenceless, unprotected)

- What other groups of people in our society do you think are vulnerable? (young children; people with disabilities; people with serious health problems)
- What is an abortion? (a deliberately caused termination of a pregnancy)

Ask the students to work in small groups and discuss the three arguments put forward in favour of abortion and the responses to these arguments (pages 151 – 152). When they have finished their discussions, ask them to share their comments and any questions they have.

Invite the students to explore the attitudes in our society (page 152) that contribute to more abortions. You might ask them:

- How can we change attitudes in our society that result in more abortions? (by encouraging both males and females to accept responsibility for their actions; by making sure that pregnant women have the support they need — financial, housing, and medical help; by encouraging young people to respect the gift of sexuality and resist the pressures to be sexually active outside of marriage)
- What kind of difficulties do you think a young teen-age mother might experience? (financial worries; limited opportunities to complete her education; feeling tied down with too much responsibility for her age; feeling isolated and lonely)

Read together the conclusion of the discussion of abortion (page 153) and invite the students' response.

### **Respect for Life (Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide)**

Read together the introduction to the issue of euthanasia and assisted suicide (page 153) and invite the students' response. You might ask them:

- How many of you have heard of euthanasia? What have you heard?
- What does it mean to kill someone “by action or omission?” (something the person does or something the person deliberately does not do, for example, withhold necessary medication)
- What is assisted suicide? (the act of helping someone end his or her life)

Read together the first part of page 154 and ask the students to work in small groups to discuss the three arguments put forward in favour of euthanasia and the responses to these arguments (pages 154). When they have finished their discussions, ask them to share their comments and any questions they have. You might ask them:

- If euthanasia were legal, would it be a threat to some groups of people? (some people might argue that very frail elderly persons or persons with serious disabilities require too much medical and personal care,

which is expensive; the value of human life would be diminished and those who are vulnerable might be seen as unnecessary burdens)

- Why do many people fear the idea of having to depend on others? (we might think that our dignity is diminished when we can't look after ourselves; we value our independence; we worry that we will become a burden on others)
- What virtue that we discussed earlier would help us to be gracious about accepting care from other people without resenting our loss of independence? (humility)

Read together page 155 and invite the students' response. Ask them to recall what they learned about the death of Michael's Aunt Elly and the support she received from her family and in the hospice. (Explain that hospice care is the same thing as palliative care.)


- Why do we need palliative care services? (there is not enough available for everyone who needs this kind of care; palliative care doctors and nurses are specialists in responding to medical needs of people who are dying; the emotional and spiritual needs of those who are dying and of their families are best met by a supportive and understanding approach)

### **Respect for Mental Health**

Discuss with the students:

- Mental health is often misunderstood and when people hear someone mention "mental health", they may automatically think "mental illness". Negative feelings or judgements about mental illness can be the result of not understanding or of being afraid. We all have mental health. How might societal views on mental health and mental illness perpetuate stigma and even cause harm?
- Through Catholic Social Teaching, we learn that solidarity and care for people who are poor and vulnerable call us to help anyone who struggles with mental health problems. There are many things that we can do individually or as part of a group to address stigma and help change it. For example, the way we treat people and uphold the dignity of others through how we talk about mental health and mental illness and also the groups and organizations in the community that we can be a part of that help create awareness about mental health. Can you think of some ways that you could take action to reduce stigma associated with mental health?

- What could we do to reduce stigma and raise awareness about mental illness and mental health here at school? How do we help others understand that this is part of our call as Catholics to uphold the dignity of human persons?



Invite the students to summarize the main ideas from the discussion. Record these ideas on a chart. If some important points did not emerge in discussion, encourage the students to expand on their ideas. The main ideas from this topic are

- The basic needs of all people are called rights. It is an offence against the whole human family when the rights of some people are ignored or denied.
- Absolute poverty threatens the survival and well-being of more than 20% of the world's people. Relative poverty does not threaten people's survival but creates hardship, stress, and disadvantages.
- Respect for all human persons at all stages of life is a fundamental commitment for Christians. To end a developing human life or the life of a person who is dying is a serious offence against the dignity and value of all people.

When the chart is complete, read it with the students and invite their comments. Is there anything that should be added? Removed?

Give the students copies of Reflection Sheet #22 (Some Issues in Social Justice). Ask them to keep the Reflection Sheet in their Family Life notebook and to complete the questions in the next few days. (For more information about the Reflection Sheets, please see Introduction to the *Fully Alive* program, page 27.)



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## *We Respond*

Ask the students to work in small groups or pairs, choose a social justice issue they have discussed (human rights, absolute poverty, relative poverty, respect for life, fighting the stigma of mental illness), and create posters that include visual images (drawing, painting, sculpting, printmaking, photographs) and short messages that provide the intended audience with information about the issue and the need to work for change.

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## *We Explore (related activities)*

- **Microcredit** — Ask the students to use online resources to research stories about people who have benefitted from small loans. These stories, with photographs of the people, could be gathered together in a class book about microcredit and the difference it can make in people's lives.
- **Millennium Goals** — Give the students copies of Millennium Goals (BLM #19) and review the goals with them, explaining terms or concepts that are new. Ask them to work in small groups, with each group choosing one of the goals and researching what Canada is doing to help achieve these goals. There are many websites that provide information about the goals and the progress (or lack of progress) that has been made since 2000. When the students have completed their research, they can share their information with the class.
- **Social Justice and the Canadian Catholic Church** — Read together the feature on page 145 of the student book and invite the students to find out more about what our Church is doing to create social justice in the world. They could work in pairs or small groups and choose a topic that particularly interests them. For example, students can gather information about social justice projects in the parishes of their diocese; describe some of the projects of Development and Peace; learn more about the Canadian Bishops' concerns for refugees or migrant workers; find out more about Catholic social services agencies. When they complete their research, invite them to share their information with the class.