

Discerning a Call to Civil Disobedience

Prayer and personal discernment: Our mission is to serve Jesus. Yet, civil disobedience is not to be taken lightly. Consider the seriousness of the issue, the urgency of the suffering caused by the unjust law, the commitment to nonviolence in your campaign, the timing of the campaign, the personal and social habits this will cultivate, and other relevant impacts. Consult with others and attend training for the action to understand the implications. Share an affirmative decision with persons you are in relationship with that may be impacted by your decision.

Questions to Ask Yourself:

- Is there immediate harm that needs to stop?
- Am I aware of the risks and how they will affect me and my community?
- Does it fit within campaign strategy?
- How will it forward the campaign?
- Is there a political opportunity?
- Have dialogue methods had inadequate impact, such that social conditions need to change in order to enable more constructive dialogue?
- Will this help form potential leaders for the broader movement, not merely the campaign?
- Will it make me, or others, more courageous, compassionate, etc?

“One has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws.”

- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.



Sister Antona Ebo and other faith leaders who marched from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. 1965.

Civil disobedience is not disrespect for the law, because unjust laws are not simply bad laws, but don't deserve to be identified as law. Defending human rights in peaceful ways outside such so-called "law" is ultimately a form of defense of and respect for the law. It is an individual decision, but one that should be discerned with others. Please consult your support network about risks involved.

This resource was created by the D.C. Catholic coalition of national organizations.

For more information:
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A Call to Conscience: Catholic Teaching & Civil Disobedience



A guide to energize and organize Catholic leaders to challenge unjust structures of authority.

THE CATHOLIC FOUNDATION FOR CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Catechism of the Catholic Church

A human law has the character of law to the extent that it accords with right reason, and thus derives from the eternal law. Insofar as it falls short of right reason it is said to be an unjust law, and thus has not so much the nature of law as of a kind of violence. (#1902)

If rulers were to enact unjust laws or take measures contrary to the moral order, such arrangements would not be binding in conscience. (#1903)

The citizen is obliged in conscience not to follow the directives of civil authorities when they are contrary to the demands of the moral order, to the fundamental rights of persons or the teachings of the Gospel. (#2242)

The U.S. Catholic Bishops

“When a government enacts an unjust law, unjust because it violates the human dignity of the citizens or exceeds its authority, the citizens have a duty to disobey that law, for in a sense, it is no law, not having its foundation in the sources of law—divine or natural.” (Committee on Religious Liberty, 2015)

“For it (nonviolence) consists of a commitment to resist manifest injustice and public evil with means other than (violent) force. These include dialogue, negotiations, protests, strikes, boycotts, civil disobedience and civilian resistance.” (Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace, 1993)

Scriptures and the Early Church

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego’s refuse to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar on the grounds that a higher moral law was at stake (Daniel 3). They decide that it is far more important to obey God’s law than one imposed by an earthly ruler.

Jesus’ response to the Woman Caught in Adultery (John 8:1-11)- Rather than obey this law to kill her, he calls those around him to recognize their shared participation in sin.

Jesus in the Temple (MT: 21:12-13, John 2:13-17)[1]- Jesus challenges the laws of selling items in the Temple.

Catholic Social Teaching

St. Augustine: “An unjust law is no law at all.” (*On Free Choice Of The Will*, Book 1, § 5)

Pope John XXIII: “laws and decrees passed in contravention of the moral order, and hence of the divine will, can have no binding force in conscience, since “it is right to obey God rather than [humans].” (Peace on Earth, 1963, 51)

Pope Francis: “the future of humanity does not lie solely in the hands of great leaders, the great powers and the elites. It is fundamentally in the hands of peoples and in their ability to organize. It is in their hands, which can guide with humility and conviction this process of change.” (World Meeting of Popular Movements, 2015)

What is Civil Disobedience?

Civil Disobedience is a form of divine obedience. It involves public and nonviolent acts of resistance to structures of authority. It is an act faithful to conscience which is consistent with justice but contrary to law, and performed to bring about change in an unjust law or policy. It is a means of noncooperation which removes the consent of the governed and thereby releases forces for positive social change.



Catholics in the Senate, 2017



Faith leaders in the Senate, 2017

The Catholic Call

When traditional strategies have inadequate impact, it is wise to complement our efforts with actions that better illuminate the urgency of immoral policies and laws. This could involve taking risks together to build trust and momentum in the movement, better energize others to take creative and courageous action, and disrupt the unjust system in some way. Our faith calls us to be wise, bold, and courageous.