

***An American Conscience:***  
***The Reinhold Niebuhr Story***  
A film by Martin Doblmeier

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The following Study Guide can facilitate the use of the documentary film [\*An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story\*](#) as part of the religious studies/theology curriculum in Catholic high schools.

Reinhold Niebuhr was one of the major public theologians of the 20th Century whose writings on human nature, the uses and abuses of power, the role of democracy, sin and Christian Realism had impact on presidents, the Civil Rights Movement, the Cold War and other key chapters in America's recent history. Many believe his ideas and writings still have importance today.

**View the entire 55-minute film or portions of it leading up to the classroom discussions. The following themes and questions are designed to engage students in areas relevant to Catholic studies.**

1. In his address to the United States Congress Pope Francis highlighted the work of Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr. Thomas Merton and Abraham Lincoln. Each is considered an important American religious figure. Would you consider Reinhold Niebuhr an important figure? Why or why not?

Possible exercise: *Imagine you are a speechwriter for Pope Francis. Read his speech to Congress and then consider incorporating a paragraph from Niebuhr into that text.*

2. Martin Doblmeier has titled the film *An American Conscience*. What does that title mean for you? What is the role of someone who is identified as the "conscience" for a people or nation?

3. Catholic Social Teaching challenges everyone to strive for service and justice for the underprivileged and needy in our midst. How do you compare/contrast Reinhold Niebuhr with Catholic Social Teaching?

4. Dorothy Day worked in direct service to the hungry and needy. At the time, many branded her a socialist. Reinhold Niebuhr's focus was on institutional justice and change through broad awareness and policy impact. Is one approach more important than the other or can both have value?

Possible exercise: *Read Luke 10:38-42 and reflect on the importance of keeping social justice work centered on Christ, rather than politics.*

5. One of Reinhold Niebuhr's classic works is *Moral Man and Immoral Society* where he argues that as individuals we are capable of rising above self-interest, but groups - whether churches, organizations, gangs or even nations, rarely - if ever - rise above self-interest. Do you agree? Why is that?

*Individual men may be moral in the sense that they are able to consider interests other than their own ...capable on occasion of preferring the advantage of others to their own...But all these achievements are more difficult - if not impossible - for human societies and social groups.*  
(MMIS)

6. There are religious communities - Franciscans, Jesuits, the Amish, etc. that vow to support each other in achieving a level of interest and care for others that is beyond what an individual might accomplish alone. Is that in contrast to what Niebuhr is suggesting?

7. Much of Niebuhr's thinking is framed around his understanding of human nature. He writes about "original sin" as a common denominator for all humankind. What is the Catholic teaching on human nature and transforming grace? Would Niebuhr agree with that, or prefer a more Calvinist notion of depravity of human nature or something in between?

8. After seeing the horrors of World War I, Niebuhr vowed pacifism. But later in life - with the rise of Nazism in Europe he abandoned pacifism saying justice was served by the use of force or even violence in resisting Nazism. Do you see his shift as a sign of weakness or courage? How does it align (or not) with the example of Jesus and Catholic teaching?

9. Historian Healan Gaston talks in the film that Reinhold Niebuhr's preoccupation was "power." How do you think about power? What gives a person or a group power? Is it too often a force for evil or can it also be used for good?

10. Niebuhr is considered the leading public theologian of his day. Who would you consider "public theologians" in our country today?