

“Whatever you do to the least of my brothers, you do unto me”

Living the Catholic Social Teachings: An Overview of Principles

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by

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Catholic Social Teaching, or Catholic social justice doctrine, has been called our Church’s “best kept secret.” It is a body of

...doctrine that the Church has developed, with the Holy Spirit’s guidance, to apply the gospel of Jesus Christ to our life together as members of one human family. It has three aspects:

1. It gives us principles for reflection.
2. It provides criteria for judgment.
3. It gives guidelines for action (CCC, 2423)²

In short, it is a set of principles and ideals that can be applied to society and societal situations and problems in general. Our relationship with our Savior calls us to respond to those in need, and to work towards addressing unjust situations. *“Discovering that they are loved by God, people come to understand their own transcendent dignity, they learn not to be satisfied with only themselves but to encounter their neighbor in a network of relationships that are ever more authentically human.”*³ Catholic Social Teaching is a means by which the Gospel is applied to structures in society, including the most basic societal structure (the individual family,) and the most complex (global international human affairs.)

It is also important to define at the onset of this overview what Catholic Social Teaching (CST from here forward) is not. In learning the principles of CST, many students try to align the doctrine with a particular political party. While it is true that the beauty of learning these principles is that they can be applied to events of the marketplace (in order to activate the three aspects listed above), the existence of the principles does not mean

¹ Matthew 25: 45

² Michael Pennock, *Learning and Living Justice, Catholic Social Teaching*, (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press), p. 12.

³ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Washington, D.C.: Libreria Editrice Vaticana), 4.

that the Catholic Church is taking sides in the “liberal/conservative” or “Democrat/Republican” spectrum. This is not the case. “*The Church is not to be confused with the political community and is not bound to any political system.*”⁴ There is much room for deciding how the principles are to be applied, and in fact I have monitored class discussions on hot button issues (immigration comes to mind) when both opposing views applied CST correctly! So be assured that the principles of CST do not neatly line up with one political agenda or the other, and it is a fallacy to attempt to generalize the principles into political ideologies. One is to apply the principles to social circumstances, and in particularly complex situations, careful analysis may render more than one outcome.

History of CST

The origins of CST can be traced back to Hebrew Scriptures, beginning with the Creation story, through the salvific event of the Exodus, and continuing as the Israelites were challenged to live justly in Covenant with God and one another. Social justice principles are seen in the laws regarding the sabbatical and jubilee years (every seven and fifty years where land was to lie fallow, debts were cancelled and people as well as goods were restored to their original owners.)

“This legislation is designed to ensure that the salvific event of the Exodus and fidelity to the Covenant represents not only the founding principle of Israel’s social, political and economic life, but also the principle for dealing with questions concerning economic poverty and social injustices.”⁵ (p. 13 compendium)

However, infidelity to the covenant with God also meant injustice in society. Sin and injustice showed the need for a Savior.

While the roots of CST can be traced to the Old Testament, it is the Gospel of Jesus itself that forms the basis for the doctrine. Jesus calls His disciples to “love God and neighbor, live the beatitudes, be open to all people, and be compassionate.”⁶ From the earliest days the Church has responded to the poor and vulnerable in society. As the Church grew and

⁴ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 50.

⁵ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 24.

⁶ Pennock, teachers edition, p. 53.

advanced, work for charity and justice became more structured as institutions for the needy (schools, hospitals, homes for the aged) developed as a response to the Gospel. However, it was not until the late 1800's that the Church, in a formal way, applied the message of Christ to society at large. Pope Leo XIII (1810-1903) responded to two forces of the day, unbridled capitalism and Marxism, by writing a seminal document in 1891: *The Condition of Labor (Rerum Novarum)*. Pope Leo XIII recognized that in both unrestrained capitalism and Marxism (the grandfather of modern communism) human dignity is threatened. *Rerum Novarum* addressed the role of the state to provide rights for workers; the right to work and unionize, the right to a just wage, and the right to own private property.

Later popes took the opportunity on the anniversaries of *Rerum Novarum* to write further on social issues of their own day. Michael Pennock summarizes the additional contributions to Catholic Social Teaching:

“...popes in their encyclicals and speeches, synods of bishops in their statements, regional and national conferences of bishops, and individual bishops in their pastoral letters have taught extensively on social justice themes. In addition, the Second Vatican Council had much to say about the dignity and rights of humans, especially in the important Pastoral Constitution, *The Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes.)* Rooted in the Bible and centuries of Christian living, these teachings help form the core of Catholic Social Teaching.”⁷

In 1998, the American bishops synthesized the material on social teaching in a document entitled *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions—Reflections of the U.S. Catholic Bishops*. Although there is not a “canon” of CST documents, the bishops looked at previous material and came up with seven themes, or principles that are consistently shown throughout the existing documents on Catholic Social Teaching.

Principles of CST

The first principle identified by the bishops is considered the most important:

Life and Dignity of the Human Person

Dignity of the human person is considered the foundational principle, from which all of the other principles flow. We have inherent dignity, worth and value because we are

⁷ Pennock, p. 40

made in the image and likeness of God, and are redeemed by Him. A basic truth to the CST's is that *"all people have dignity, and therefore cannot be treated as objects."*⁸ Dignity of humanity means that we have worth independent of our social standing, physical abilities or merit. When people are treated as objects, or without dignity, injustice occurs. Human dignity is the most basic theme of all the CST's, and foundational for having a moral society. Flowing from an understanding of human dignity, the sacredness of human life is included in this most important first principle. Life is considered man's first right, and it is upheld in Catholic Social Teaching against the most notable backdrop of threats to life itself: abortion and euthanasia. CST has addressed issues such as cloning, embryonic stem cell research, the use of the death penalty, and just war theory, which all emerge from this first principle. *"We believe that every person is precious, that people are more important than things, and that the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person."*⁹

The Call to Family, Community and Participation

Since we are made in the image and likeness of the Trinitarian God, we are social creatures by nature, and are meant to live in community with one another. As the "original cell of social life,"¹⁰ the family is the most basic unit of society. *"The family is the central social institution that must be supported and strengthened, not undermined..."*¹¹ Families form communities, and we are called to participate in the activities of the community. All of the many organizations in communities (sports teams, religious and political organizations, professional and social groups to name a few) meet goals that could not be achieved on an individual basis.

Related to this principle is the concept of subsidiarity, which deals with *"the responsibilities and limits of government, and the essential roles of voluntary*

⁸ Personalist principle, introduced by John Paul II, *Love and Responsibility*, 1960, 26.

⁹ *Themes from Catholic Social Teaching*, Publication No. 5-315, USCCB Publishing, Washington, D.C., 2005

¹⁰ CCC, 2207

¹¹ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions—Reflections of the U.S. Catholic Bishops* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1998) 4-5

organizations.”¹² Subsidiarity teaches that “*the lowest level of an organization should handle a function if it is capable of doing so without the higher level intruding.*”¹³ For example, if a city can govern itself, or if families or voluntary organizations can perform a task, it is wrong for a state or federal government to become involved in that process. Matters should always be settled at the most immediate, direct level. At the same time, the principle of subsidiarity allows the higher government to step in when justice is not occurring at the local level (Pennock gives the example of the federal government having to monitor civil rights laws in the 1960’s to assure that all citizens were getting an equal education.¹⁴) Subsidiarity emerged in CST as a response to various unjust political systems that usurped family and community rights to govern themselves.

Rights and Responsibilities

Commensurate with human dignity is the right to basic necessities. Pope John XXIII (*Peace on Earth*) listed some of the fundamental human rights: right to life and those things that support life such as food, shelter, clothing, medical care, and social services in the event that he is deprived of the means of subsistence through no fault of his own; moral and cultural rights including the right to follow the natural law and the right to a basic education; the right to worship God; and economic and political rights.

Rights must go hand in hand with duties and responsibilities. Each individual has a responsibility to one another, their families, and to the larger society. “*To claim one’s rights while ignoring one’s responsibilities diminishes the dignity of humans.*”¹⁵

Option for the Poor and Vulnerable

Jesus in the story of the Last Judgment (Mt. 25:31-46) reminds us that we are called to serve the “least of the brothers,” and we will be judged on how we respond to the needs of others.

This principle addresses both individuals and societies in general. Both individuals and governments are to understand that we are to be “administrators” of our possessions, not

¹² *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions—Reflections of the U.S. Catholic Bishops*, 6

¹³ Pennock, p. 15

¹⁴ Pennock, p. 58

¹⁵ Pennock, p. 21

owners. Thus giving what is required to the needy is to be done with humility, recognizing that the goods given to us have a universal destination.^{16 17}

A measure of the morality of a society is the treatment of the poor and vulnerable. This principle calls us to evaluate social and economic activity from the viewpoint of the poor and powerless.

The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers

Our work helps us provide for our needs and those of our families. Additionally, it is through work that we participate with God in creation and develop ourselves as human beings. Work also enables people to contribute to the well-being of the larger community. This principle recognizes the dignity and worth of work, and seeks to uphold that dignity by safeguarding workers' rights. Issues that have been addressed in the CST's regarding work include: safe working conditions and hours, just wages to support families, a call to end exploitation of labor, union rights and the role of governments and business owners. *"Respecting these rights promotes an economy that protects human life, defends human rights, and advances the well-being of all."*¹⁸

Solidarity

This principle recognizes that we are part of a global family, and we are all on the common path as pilgrims on the earth. The bond of global interdependence between people has increased with advances in technology, yet *"there persists in every part of the world stark inequalities between developed and developing countries...the acceleration on interdependence between persons and people's needs to be accompanied by equally intense efforts on the ethical-social plane, in order to avoid the dangerous consequences of perpetrating injustice on a global scale."*¹⁹ In short, this principle calls us to place ourselves in the other's shoes, and to count all people as our brothers and sisters in Christ.

¹⁶ St. Gregory the Great, *Regula Pastoralis*, 3, 21: PL 77, 87

¹⁷ The concept of the universal destination of goods is referred to in *Guadium et Spes*: "God destined the earth and all it contains for all men and all peoples so that all created things would be shared fairly by all mankind under the guidance of justice tempered with charity." Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 69: AAS 58 (1966), 1090.

¹⁸ *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions—Reflections of the U.S. Catholic Bishops*, p. 5

¹⁹ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 192.

This means more than a vague feeling of pity or discomfort at the plight of others in distress; it bids us to work for the common good. *“The common good includes the social conditions that permit people to reach their full human potential and to realize their human dignity.”*²⁰ Solidarity, then, requires us to approach global situations with concern for the development of individuals involved. “Conditions which allow people to reach their full human potential” exclude war zones; so this principle calls us to work not only for economic development for the poor, and an end to injustice, but also for peace. *“Our love for all our sisters and brothers demands that we promote peace in a world surrounded by violence and conflict.”*²¹

Care for God’s Creation

*“Nature shares in God’s goodness, and contemplation of its beauty and richness raises our hearts and minds to God.”*²² We are called to be faithful stewards of the earth, and this requires that we protect both people and nature. Some of the moral and ethical implications of this principle include the following challenges: preserving natural environments, working to make human environments compatible with local ecology, finding solutions to environmental threats such as air and water pollution, and considering the effects of instant gratification and consumerism on the environment. The American bishops’ pastoral letter, *Renewing the Earth*, discusses rationale and principles for good stewardship of the earth. One of the points is the observation that abuse of the environment often hurts the poor who depend on the earth for their subsistence. This principle addresses not only stewardship for the goods of the earth, but concern again for the least of our brothers and sisters.

²⁰ Pennock, p. 15.

²¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Themes for Catholic Social Teaching, USCCB Summary Document* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB Publishing)

²² United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Renewing the Earth, An Invitation to Reflection and Action on Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching* (Washington D.C.: USCCB Publishing, 1991),

A Journey of Fourteen Inches

A co-worker has explained the goal of teaching Catholic Social Teaching thusly:

“If you can get the student to take the information and make the journey from the head to the heart (14 inches,) you have succeeded.”²³ After teaching the material for a year I was asked to chaperone students on a mission trip to Honduras. It was there that his words came back to me, when I was working with the local people side by side to accomplish a task and living as they lived, simply and without my customary creature comforts. I understood with my heart what solidarity meant, the dignity of an honest day’s work, and the disparity between the rich and the poor. Moreover, the dignity of the people that we served was made apparent to me. Those that had what Americans would consider “nothing” and may even be considered by some to be “nobodies,” were rich in curiosity, friendliness, laughter, the ability to appreciate the most simple things, resourcefulness, and gracious generosity.

In order to internalize the principles of Catholic Social Teaching it may be necessary to step out of one’s comfort zone. These teachings are challenging, yet *“working for justice is an essential dimension of Christian living. It is not optional...”*²⁴

We are to love as Jesus loved. Our Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, is leading us to serve Christ not only in our interpersonal relationships with families and friends and groups to which we belong, but also in our communities and in our concern with people even on a global level. We are to consider “the least of our brothers” as Christ himself, recognizing in our brothers and sisters the dignity that is both God given and a reflection of His glory.

²³ Dn. Bill Fobes

²⁴ Pennock, p. 41.