

Catholic Social Teaching: A Basic Outline

I. Sources of Catholic Social Teaching

★ Natural law

St. Thomas Aquinas said that natural law was a rational creature's participation in eternal law. The social teachings are in part a reflection on the need of human beings who live in communities for a just social order.

★ Holy Bible

★ In the Old Testament texts, we see that God cares for the poor. Righteous governments defend the poor; evil governments oppress the poor. There is a considerable amount of Old Testament texts regarding the poor and our obligations to them. In the Old Testament, the accumulation of wealth was often associated with injustice and oppression. Single mothers with children and foreigners were people of special concern to the prophets. The Hebrew word *almana*, typically translated as the English word "widow" in the Old Testament, refers to any woman with children, but without a husband. *Yatom*, translated as "orphan," refers to any child without a father. Thus, the texts typically translated as "widows and orphans" actually refer to any single mother with children.

★ In the New Testament, the roots of our social teaching are found in the Person and ministry of Jesus, who models solidarity with the poor and marginalized, critiques the abuse of wealth, the New Testament text indicates two models for Christians regarding wealth – renunciation and stewardship. Jesus said that the poor were blessed and that the judgment at the End of Time would be based on how we treat the poor.

★ The Magisterium

★ Begins in the modern era with *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XIII. Continues in encyclicals by popes and letters by bishops and bishops' conferences, as well as the authoritative statements of the Second Vatican Council and the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

★ Living experience of the people of God

★ The lives of the saints, and the experience through the people of God throughout the ages, demonstrate the social teachings of the Church in action.

II. Foundations of the Social Teachings

★ Virtues

Virtue is the foundation of the Church's social teachings. The social teachings are always interpreted in light of these theological and cardinal virtues.

★ Theological Virtues – Faith, Hope, Love

★ Cardinal Virtues – Justice, Temperance, Prudence, Fortitude

III. Principles

These principles can be found throughout the social teachings of the church.

★ **The right to life and the dignity of the human person.**

This is the most fundamental social teaching, because life is the most fundamental right of all. Within the right to life is the right to dignity of the human person.

★ **Solidarity and participation.**

Solidarity is seeing others as family and close friends. The call of the Church is to worldwide solidarity. We should never leave anyone behind for the wolves to devour. Participation is the right and the duty to participate in one's own life.

★ **Subsidiarity (including the roles of government, civil society, and religion).**

No man or woman is an island. All of us live, move, and have our being within human communities. This is so fundamental that solitary punishment is one of the ultimate sanctions in prisons. Subsidiarity is a way of deciding who does what in our communal works. Everybody does not do the same tasks. Some things are appropriate for government at the national level, others for government at an intermediate level like a state or region, and still other tasks are best accomplished at the local level. There are activities that are appropriate for government and activities that should be left to private endeavor. The exact outlines of how subsidiarity is worked out are culturally and politically conditioned based on the prevailing circumstances and customs.

★ **Preferential option for the poor.**

While God loves everyone without exception, God has a special concern and love for the poor, and calls all Christians to that same preferential love. This is the exact opposite of what happens in most human societies, where we love and praise the wealthy and scorn the poor. You can see this playing out in American politics at all levels.

★ **Calls to conversion and holiness for the individual person and for society**

All social reform begins with the conversion of the individual, but the conversion of the individual is not where the work of the Gospel ends. It goes on to redeem the cultures in which we live, as we endeavor by God's grace to build the Reign of God right here and right now.

★ **Oppression of the poor**

The oppression of the poor by the rich is a fact of history and modern life. There are some who say that that does not happen in the United States but that is not true.

★ **Catechesis and evangelism**

The social teachings should be an integral component of the Church's catechetical and evangelical activities. The New Evangelism calls for the presentation of the Gospel in ways that are truly authentic. Attempts to ignore or marginalize the Church's social teachings damage the authenticity of the Christian proclamation in this secular world.

★ **Distributive justice**

Everyone has a right to sufficient goods of the earth to sustain their lives. It is not the purpose of the social teaching to define "how" this happens – that is up to the laity whose special competence it is to implement the social teachings of the Church in our secular and temporal lives. The Church simply tells us that this must happen.

- ★ **Property, the social mortgage, and the universal destination of all goods,**
In the beginning, God created the heavens and the Earth and gave the Earth as a gift to our first parents with the command to care for Creation. Our first parents sinned, which brought about the Fall. Because of the Fall, we have the institution of private property which is a just method of organizing the social order. However, the existence of private property does not abrogate or nullify the original gift of the Earth to all humanity. This is known as the “universal destination of all goods” and it means that all property carries a social mortgage with it. All people are bound by moral law to help the poor with a portion of their goods and property.
- ★ **Human rights and responsibilities**
All human beings have rights and responsibilities that are rooted in our being as humans. Governments should protect human rights, not violate them.
- ★ **Care of Creation**
In the beginning, our first parents were commanded to care for the Earth as a stewardship. We have all inherited this responsibility. Thus, Christians should endeavor to properly care for the planet. We can do this by living as lightly as is possible and practical upon the land, by avoiding waste and pollution as much as possible, and by supporting initiatives, both civil and political, that protect the biological ecology from damage and destruction. This is an explicit teaching of the modern popes.
- ★ **Structures of sin and structures of beauty.**
Pope John Paul II wrote extensively about the problems caused in the world by structures of sin. These are systems, rules, laws, governments, situations, cultures, social pressures that make it easy for us to sin. All structures of sin have their origin in the concrete actions of human beings. We could say that large numbers of people committing many sins over long periods of time create structures of sin that enable evil. Conversely, there are structures of beauty, wisdom, and goodness that make it easier for us to do good. These structures of goodness are created by large numbers of people doing good over long periods of time. We should all endeavor to weaken structures of sin by not cooperating with them, and we should endeavor to strengthen structures of beauty, wisdom, and goodness by doing goodness, beauty, and wisdom at every opportunity.

IV. Documents

The social teachings have been presented over the years in encyclicals and other documents by popes, bishops, and councils. Within the social teaching you find basic universal principles enunciated that are true at all times and every where. But you also find culturally conditioned applications of the social teachings to specific situations. The former are important because they give us the tools we need to solve political, economic, and social problems in our own places and times. The latter are important as examples of what has happened before.

- ★ Rerum Novarum, Leo XIII, 1891
- ★ Quadragesimo Anno, Pius XI, 1931 (On the 40th anniversary of Rerum Novarum)
- ★ Mater et Magistra, John XXIII (Christianity and Social Progress)
- ★ Pacem et Terra, John XXIII, 1963 (Peace on Earth)
- ★ Gaudium et Spes, 2nd Vatican Council, 1965
- ★ Populorum Progressio, Paul VI, 1967, “On the development of peoples”
- ★ Octogesima Adveniens, Paul VI, 1971
- ★ Justicia in Mundo, Synod of Bishops, 1971

- ★ Evangelii Nuntiandi, Paul VI, 1975, Evangelization in the modern world
- ★ Laborem Exercens, John Paul II, 1981, On Human Work
- ★ Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, John Paul II, 1987, On Social Concern
- ★ Centesimus Annus, John Paul II, 1991, 100th anniversary of Rerum Novarum
- ★ Economic Justice for All, US Bishops, 1986
- ★ A Catholic Framework for Economic Life, US Bishops, 1996
- ★ Deus Caritas Est, Benedict XVI, 2006, God is Love
- ★ Sacramentum Caritatis, Benedict XVI, 2007, Sacrament of Charity
- ★ Caritas in Veritate, Benedict XVI, 2009, Charity in Truth

V. **Actions**

The Church's social teachings are not abstractions designed for academic debate, they should be living realities by which Christians seek to build a just social order that respects life and human dignity for all, from the moment of conception to the time of natural death. Two traditional formulations of social action are commonly found among Catholics.

★ **Corporal Works of Mercy –**

- ★ Feed the hungry,
- ★ Give drink to the thirsty,
- ★ Clothe the naked,
- ★ Shelter the homeless,
- ★ Visit the sick,
- ★ Bury the dead,
- ★ Visit those in prison.

★ **Spiritual Works of Mercy –**

- ★ Instruct the ignorant,
- ★ Counsel the doubtful.
- ★ Admonish sinners,
- ★ Bear wrongs patiently,
- ★ Forgive offences willingly,
- ★ Comfort the afflicted,
- ★ Pray for the living and the dead.

★ **Works of Justice and Peace**

Formulated by the Oscar Romero Catholic Worker House as an expression of the practical application of the Church's social teachings in the modern world.

- ★ Live simply and justly in solidarity with the poor and marginalized and be a good neighbor. Make no war on them, rather, be one with them in spirit, truth, and love.
- ★ Hear the truth when it is spoken to you. Discern the signs of the times and speak truth – to power, to the people, and to the Church.
- ★ Make injustice visible -- witness, remember, teach, proclaim, tell. Light candles, do not curse the darkness.

- ★ Protect the poor and powerless-- listen, learn, educate, organize, empower participation, and respect life from the moment of conception to the time of natural death.
- ★ Work for reconciliation with truth, evangelism, catechesis, orthopraxis.
- ★ Celebrate life, goodness, beauty, virtue, responsibility, and joy. Practice peace, non-violence, servant leadership, harmony, community, voluntary cooperation, and the proper stewardship of God's creation. Pray without ceasing.
- ★ Ensure fair distribution, subsidiarity, economic opportunity, justice, and food security for everyone everywhere.

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