

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING (DOCTRINE)



A. THE WORLD SCRIPTURE ENVISIONS FOR US AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

1. Some Examples:

Matthew 25:31-46 (*"What you did to the least ones, you did to me"*) and **26:1** (*"when Jesus had finished all these words..."*)

James 5:1-6 (*"Come, now, you rich, weep and wail over your impending miseries..."*)

1 Peter 2:10 (*"Once you were 'no people' but now you are God's people"*)

Joel 2:13 (*"Rend your hearts, not your garments...for your God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love."*)

Exodus 22:21-22 (*"...If you ever wrong [any widow or orphan] and the cry out to me, I will surely listen to their cry."*)

Isaiah 58:6-10 (*"Is this not, rather, the fast that I choose: releasing those bound unjustly...setting free the*

oppressed...sharing your bread with the hungry, bringing the afflicted and homeless into our house; clothing the naked...")

Micah 6:1-8 (*"You have been told ...what the Lord requires of you: only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God."*)

Luke 4:16-21 (*"He unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written, 'the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor..."*)

2. Theological Foundations

- **God:** If God is the God who 'hears the cry of the poor', who invites us into a communion of divine persons, whose Spirit calls us to make that communion more visible in the world, then a need to embody a solidarity that bridges class and other stratifications and leads to communities of compassion and justice becomes essential to Catholic social teaching.
- **Jesus Christ:** If Jesus is the incarnate Word whose life, death and resurrection are the pattern of deepest human living within which the divine life is fully experienced, then it should not be surprising that core to Catholic social teaching is a concern for those who are excluded, impoverished or on the margins of society.
- **Church:** If the historical mission and ministry of Jesus is entrusted to the Church and that Church is to be both a sign and instrument of the unity and salvation of humanity, then action on behalf of justice and witnessing to that justice within concrete social settings is a constitutive element of living as Church.
- **Creation:** If creation is a gift of God for all humanity, past, present and future, then care for the environment has a claim on us and all property and goods fall under the ethical

requirement of serving the common good and preserving it for future generations.

- **Christian Anthropology:** If every human person is truly made in the image of God, then the dignity of the human person is inalienable and intrinsic and a full or integral humanism includes respecting/protecting the capacity for transcendence and true social justice includes respecting/protecting the full gamut of basic human rights.

3. Summary

Wherever the reign of God is, there needs to be visible, concrete, socially significant manifestations of justice. Catholic Social Teaching (Doctrine) does not depend on one text or other of Scripture nor is it a systematic theological manual. Rather, it is grounded in the whole of Scripture and intimately tied to all aspects of theology, which reveals a God who wants to be in relationship with us, who covenants with us by inviting us into a community of faith and faithfulness in a way that obliges us to create a society of right relationships/justice visible to the world, and if we do, we become part of God's fullness of life/shalom/ the reign of God breaking into the world.

B. ORIGINS AND HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

Phase I: The Church Responds to the Modern Industrial World: Social Teaching Related to Local/National Economic Realities

Context: Rise of the "modern", quickly changing world of industrial capitalism and socialist alternatives, both of which challenge the more stable agrarian, hierarchical, organic model of the past

Focal points:

- 1) Protection of family stability through an emphasis on the common good (understood in a paternalistic manner)
- 2) The excesses of capitalism of the time countered by rights of workers to fair wages, acceptable working conditions, and free association
- 3) Concern about socialist movements countered by a reminder of “natural right” to private property, but with acceptance of limited state intervention

Some Key Documents:

1891 *Rerum novarum* (On the Condition of Labor, Leo XIII)

1931 *Quadragesimo anno* (On Reconstructing the Social Order, Pius XI)

1939 and following years, *Christmas Radio Messages* of Pius XII

Quotes from Rerum Novarum:

The following duties . . . concern rich men and employers:

Workers are not to be treated as slaves; justice demands that the dignity of human personality be respected in them, ... gainful occupations are not a mark of shame to man, but rather of respect, as they provide him with an honorable means of supporting life. It is shameful and inhuman, however, to use men as things for gain and to put no more value on them than what they are worth in muscle and energy. (#31)

Equity therefore commands that public authority show proper concern for the worker so that from what he contributes to the common good he may receive what will enable him, housed, clothed, and secure, to live his life without hardship. Whence, it follows that all those measures ought to be favored which seem in any way capable of benefiting the condition of workers. Such solicitude is so far from injuring anyone, that it is destined rather to benefit all, because it is of absolute interest to the State that

those citizens should not be miserable in every respect from whom such necessary goods proceed. (#51)

In protecting the rights of private individuals, however, special consideration must be given to the weak and the poor. For the nation, as it were, of the rich, is guarded by its own defenses and is in less need of governmental protection, whereas the suffering multitude, without the means to protect itself, relies especially on the protection of the State. Wherefore, since wage workers are numbered among the great mass of the needy, the State must include them under its special care and foresight. (#54)

Phase II: The Church Looks at an Interdependent World: Social Teaching Addressing International Political and Economic Realities

Context: Experience of the horror of two world wars, establishment of east-west political and economic blocs, nuclear arms race and the Cold War, end of colonialism and need for “development of Third World” nations

Focal points:

- 1) Greater emphasis on the common good as key moral criterion, no longer understood paternalistically
- 2) Emphasis on the need for peace and international institutions to guarantee peaceful relations among countries
- 3) Expanded understanding of human rights beyond basic economic rights for workers to include social rights
- 4) Greater emphasis on the social debt/responsible use of private property as well as the right to it
- 6) Inviolable dignity (including freedom of conscience) and social nature of every person
- 7) Dialogic relationship of Church and world
- 8) Responsibility for nations to aid “developing” nations and recognition of stronger state intervention to achieve justice

9) Action on behalf of justice as constitutive dimension of the gospel

Some Key Documents:

1961 *Mater et Magistra* (Christianity and Social Progress, John XXIII)

1963 *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth. John XXIII)

1965 *Gaudium et Spes* (The Church in the Modern World, Vatican Council II)

1967 *Populorum Progressio* (On the Development of Peoples, Paul VI)

1971 *Octogesima Adveniens* (A Call to Action, Paul VI)

1971 *Iustitia in Mundo* (Justice in the World, Synod of Bishops)

1974 *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (On Evangelization, Paul VI)

Bishop Conference Documents such as the U.S. Bishops'

Pastorals 1983 *The Challenge of Peace* and 1986 *Economic*

Justice for All, CELAM's 1968 Medellin statements, etc. all fit in this phase as well

Quotes from Mater et Magistra:

It is necessary that public authorities have a correct understanding of the common good. This embraces the sum total of those conditions of social living, whereby people are enabled more fully and more readily to achieve their own perfection. (#65)

Wherefore, whatever the progress in technology and economic life, there can be neither justice nor peace in the world, so long as men fail to realize how great is their dignity; for they have been created by God and are His children. (#215)

Individual human beings are the foundation, the cause and the end of every social institution. That is necessarily so, for men are by nature social beings. This fact must be recognized, as also the fact that they are raised in the plan of Providence to an order of reality which is above nature. (#219)

Quotes from Guadium et Spes:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. (#1)

For excessive economic and social differences between the members of the one human family or population groups cause scandal, and militate against social justice, equity, the dignity of the human person, as well as social and international peace. (#29)

Economic development must ... not be left to the sole judgement of a few men or groups, possessing excessive economic power, or of the political community alone, or of certain powerful nations. It is proper, on the contrary, that at every level the largest number of people have an active share in directing that development. (#65)

Quote from Justitia in Mundo:

Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation. (#6)

Phase III: The Church in the Emerging Post-Modern, Post-Industrial World: Social Teaching Connected to Global Political, Economic, and Cultural Realities

Context: Breakdown of East-West bloc and failure of communist socialism as economic, political model; failure of developmental model for emerging nations and increased disparity between

rich/poor nations, emergence of a global perspectives and realities; long pontificate of John Paul II

Focal points:

- 1) Solidarity as both a core principle and a virtue
- 2) Recognition of creative energy and potential of capitalist economic model but condemnation of current western-style capitalism's greed, consumerism; priority of labor and human subject over capital
- 3) The need to protect humanity's openness to the transcendent: strong critique of secularism
- 4) Protection of traditional understanding of marriage and family and sharper divide between a "culture of life" / "civilization of love" and current secular emphases on issues of life
- 5) Greater emphasis on the global nature of economic, social (immigration, e.g.), and ecological realities and solutions
- 6) Preferential option for poor/those vulnerable and on the margins, including youth

Some Key Documents:

1979 *Redemptor Hominis* (The Redeemer of Humanity, John Paul II)

1981 *Laborem Exercens* (On Human Work, John Paul II)

1987 *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (The Social Concerns of the Church, John Paul II)

1991 *Centesimus Annus* (The 100th Anniversary Year, John Paul II)

1995 *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life, John Paul II)

2005 *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*
(Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace)

2005 *Deus Caritas Est* (God Is Love, Benedict XVI)

2009 *Caritas Veritate* (On Christian Love, Benedict XVI)

Quote from *Centesimus Annus* :

Can it perhaps be said that, after the failure of Communism, capitalism is the victorious social system, and that capitalism

should be the goal of the countries now making efforts to rebuild their economy and society? ... The answer is obviously complex. If by "capitalism" is meant an economic system which recognizes the fundamental and positive role of business, the market, private property and the resulting responsibility for the means of production, as well as free human creativity in the economic sector, then the answer is certainly in the affirmative, ... But if by "capitalism" is meant a system in which freedom in the economic sector is not circumscribed within a strong juridical framework which places it at the service of human freedom in its totality and sees it as a particular aspect of that freedom, the core of which is ethical and religious, then the reply is certainly negative. (Official text, #42)

Quote from Caritas Veritate:

Another important consideration is the common good. To love someone is to desire that person's good and to take effective steps to secure it. Besides the good of the individual, there is a good that is linked to living in society: the common good. It is the good of "all of us", made up of individuals, families and intermediate groups who together constitute society. It is a good that is sought not for its own sake, but for the people who belong to the social community and who can only really and effectively pursue their good within it. To desire the common good and strive towards it is a requirement of justice and charity. To take a stand for the common good is on the one hand to be solicitous for, and on the other hand to avail oneself of, that complex of institutions that give structure to the life of society, juridically, civilly, politically and culturally, making it the pólis, or "city". The more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbors, the more effectively we love them. (#7)

Phase Four: The Church in a World of Global Crisis and Uncertain Future

Context: Recognition of devastating human effects due to climate change, huge economic inequalities, ongoing violence and increased wars and military actions, use of artificial intelligence in all aspects of life, fraying of existing international structures

Focal points:

- 1) Greater emphasis on ecology and care for all creation as essential to social justice of individuals and groups
- 2) Increased critique of excesses of global capitalism
- 3) Solidarity with those displaced by social upheaval and climate change
- 4) Evangelical joy in solidarity with the poor
- 5) Focus on relationships, especially those who are different from us
- 6) The significance and potential danger of the rise in development and use of artificial intelligence
- 7) Greater emphasis on subsidiarity / synodality within the Church's own structures

Some Key Documents:

2013 *Evangelii Gaudium* (Joy of the Gospel, Francis)
2015 *Laudato Si'* (Care for Our Common Home, Francis)
2020 *Fratelli Tutti* (On Social Friendship, Francis)
2026 *Magnifica Humanitas* (On Safeguarding Humanity in the Time of Artificial Intelligence, Leo XIV)

Quotes from *Laudato Si'*:

The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation. In fact, the deterioration of the environment and of society affects the most vulnerable people on the planet... The impact of present imbalances is also seen in the premature death of many of the poor. (#48)

A change in lifestyle could bring healthy pressure to bear on those who wield political, economic and social power. This is what consumer movements accomplish by boycotting certain products. They prove successful in changing the way businesses operate, forcing them to consider their environmental footprint and their patterns of production... This shows us the great need for a sense of social responsibility on the part of consumers. "Purchasing is always a moral – and not simply economic – act." Today, in a word, "the issue of environmental degradation challenges us to examine our lifestyle". (#206)

Quotes from Fratelli Tutti:

One effective way to weaken historical consciousness, critical thinking, the struggle for justice and the processes of integration is to empty great words of their meaning or to manipulate them. Nowadays, what do certain words like democracy, freedom, justice or unity really mean? They have been bent and shaped to serve as tools for domination, as meaningless tags that can be used to justify any action. (#14)

Certain populist political regimes, as well as certain liberal economic approaches, maintain that an influx of migrants is to be prevented at all costs. Arguments are also made for the propriety of limiting aid to poor countries, so that they can hit rock bottom and find themselves forced to take austerity measures. One fails to realize that behind such statements, abstract and hard to support, great numbers of lives are at stake. Many migrants have fled from war, persecution and natural catastrophes. Others, rightly, "are seeking opportunities for themselves and their families. They dream of a better future and they want to create the conditions for achieving it". (#37)

Quotes from Magnifica Humanitas:

The idea of "social justice" helps us recognize that injustices do not arise solely from the wrong choices of individuals, but also

from structures, mechanisms and economic and cultural systems that produce inequality almost automatically.... In this perspective, justice is not merely about the fairer distribution of resources or the correction of current injustices, but also assumes a restorative dimension. It aims to mend broken bonds and reintegrate those who have been excluded, taking into account the wounds caused by injustices, such as wars, colonialism, racial or gender discrimination, violence against entire peoples and exploitation. This may include restoring dignity and a voice to those who have been ignored, fostering processes of healing for collective memory, opposing discriminatory laws and practices, and providing concrete support to those who still bear the consequences of wrongs suffered in the past. (#79)

In this day and age, social justice must also grapple with the environment shaped by digital technologies. The spread of global networks, platforms and artificial intelligence systems is changing the way we obtain information, communicate and access services. Justice demands that we prevent the emergence of new forms of exclusion and deprivation of freedoms: individuals and peoples hindered or denied access to basic technologies, communities exposed to invasive surveillance and social groups penalized by opaque algorithms that perpetuate prejudice and discrimination. In the digital age, a just social order guarantees everyone equal access to opportunities, protects the youngest and weakest members of society, combats hate and misinformation and subjects the use of data and technology to public oversight, so that the guiding principle is not solely profit but the dignity of every person and the common good of all people. (#80)

A litmus test for social justice today is the treatment of migrants, refugees and those forced to move due to poverty, violence, climate change and environmental disasters. The way a society treats them reveals whether its sense of justice is driven by fear or by the spirit of fraternity. (#81)

C. DOCTRINAL PRINCIPLES OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

1. Foundational Principle: The Dignity of Every Human Being

“Every human person possesses an infinite dignity, inalienably grounded in his or her very being, which prevails in and beyond every circumstance, state, or situation the person may ever encounter.” (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration *Dignitas Infinita*, April 2, 2024 #7)

- Human Dignity is **Intrinsic**
- Human Dignity is **Inalienable**
- Human Dignity is **Inviolable**

2. The Principle of the Common Good

“As a result, the common good, that is, the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment, today takes on an increasingly universal complexion and consequently involves rights and duties with respect to the whole human race.” (Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, #26)

- The *“social expression of the dignity recognized in every human person”* (Pope Leo XIV, *Magnifica Humanitas*, #59)
- Not *“the greatest good for the greatest number”*
- Not the majority-imposed good
- The least/most vulnerable has adequate access to the goods necessary to live a dignified human life

3. Four Auxiliary Principles for Achieving the Common Good

3.1. The Principle of Solidarity: Overcoming Divisions

“As a principle, it expresses the objective order of relationships among individuals, groups and peoples, pointing to an awareness of interdependence whereby the good of each person depends on the good of others.” (Magnifica Humanitas, #75)

- Human person is intrinsically social and interdependent
- Commitment to communion over division

3.2. The Principle of the Universal Destination of Goods and the Preferential Option for the Poor/Those Excluded

“God gave the earth to the whole human race for the sustenance of all its members, without excluding or favoring anyone. That is the foundation of the universal destination of the earth’s goods.” (Compendium, #171)

- Does not forbid private ownership but there is a “social debt” on all goods that can supersede such ownership
- Leads to a preferential option for the poor/vulnerable/youth

3.3. The Principle of Subsidiarity: Creating Meaningful and Authentic Participation

“The Social Doctrine of the Church refers to subsidiarity as the principle according to which the role of individuals, families, local communities and intermediary organizations should not be supplanted by higher-level authorities. Moreover, higher-level institutions must recognize, protect and promote the freedom and creativity of lower-level entities, coordinating their contributions so that they can cooperate effectively for the common good.” (Magnifica Humanitas, #68; cf. Compendium #187)

- Respecting as far as possible the ability of individuals, families, intermediary groups and organizations to act on their own initiative
- Recognizing when and where higher levels of intervention (such as the State) are necessary for the common good

3.4. The Principle of Social Justice: Addressing the Structural Dimension to Sin and Injustice

“The idea of “social justice” helps us recognize that injustices do not arise solely from the wrong choices of individuals, but also from structures, mechanisms and economic and cultural systems that produce inequality almost automatically.” (Magnifica Humanitas, #79)

- Reality of sinful social structures and their effect
- Includes distributive justice but goes beyond that to “restorative justice”

D. INTEGRATING CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING: TOWARD A JUSTICE-CENTERED SPIRITUALITY

1. Always act within the understanding that we become most fully who we are within the relationship of the Triune God

- Inexhaustible and incomprehensible gift
- Dynamic of gift given, received, and responded to
- Greater communion as measure of success

2. Intentionally model respect for the dignity of every human person in every setting

- Resist reducing the “other” to the “same”
- Freedom as saying “Yes” to the responsibility/obligation a situation places on us (heteronomous not autonomous freedom)

3. Think through choices from the perspective of the common good and not just individual or local good

- Our individual-centered, consumer culture
- Human person never merely a means to an end
- Respecting human rights but also reciprocal duties

4. Promoting participatory attitudes, lifestyles, and structures rather than mere efficiency

- “Full, conscious, and active participation”
- Challenge to the Church’s own way of life: Synodality

5. Practice preferential solidarity toward the poor, the marginal, the young and vulnerable

6. Respect finitude by embracing a renewed and appropriate asceticism

- Resist false understanding of progress
- Reject consumer model for Church and spirituality
- Develop ecological awareness and action and adopt where possible a simpler lifestyle
- Practice nonviolence of word and action toward others

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