

What is Catholic Social Teaching and Incorporating the Teaching into the Life of the Parish

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What is Catholic Social Teaching?

Origins in the Old and New Testament

Catholic Social teaching is a body of teachings founded on Scripture and the ongoing reflection of the Church focused on how we as people of God ought to live together in loving community. The social teaching of the Church is rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures. Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah – all spoke about the duty of Israel to ensure justice for the poor, decried legal and economic practices that marginalized the orphan and widow, and warned against a spiritual worship detached from concern with justice. The prophets were adamant that God's true peace was impossible without social justice.

In the New Testament Jesus came to bring “good news to the poor... and liberty to captives.” In the Beatitudes Jesus blessed the poor and those who hunger and thirst for justice. In the stories of Lazarus and the Good Samaritan, and in the teachings about turning the other cheek and loving one's enemies, Jesus made clear that God's kingdom is one of justice, love, and forgiveness. [Matthew 25](#) captures the way we are to love our neighbor. In Mathew 25:40, Jesus declares that our salvation is found in care and concern for the least among us. In fact, Jesus identifies himself with the least of the community - as you care for the least of my brethren you care for me. In Scripture Jesus' words and actions demonstrate the early belief in the Hebrew Scriptures that every human being is made by God in God's image [Gen 1:26] and possesses the very breath of God that makes each person a living being – God's creation [Gen2:7]. It is this gift of life and creation by God in God's image that gives each and every human being their God granted dignity – a dignity and life that cannot be given or taken away by any human person.

Thus two main pillars of Catholic Social teaching are the dignity of every human being and the common good of all people. The U.S. Catholic Bishops in their document “Sharing Catholic Social Teaching, Challenges and Directions” write on human dignity,

“Catholic social teaching is based on and inseparable from our understanding of human life and human dignity. Every human being is created in the image of God and redeemed by Jesus Christ, and therefore is invaluable and worthy of respect as a member of the human family. Every person, from the moment of conception to natural death, has

inherent dignity and a right to life consistent with that dignity. Human dignity comes from God, not from any human quality or accomplishment.”¹

And on the common good,

“Catholic social teaching emerges from the truth of what God has revealed to us about himself. We believe in the triune God whose very nature is communal and social. God the Father sends his only Son Jesus Christ and shares the Holy Spirit as his gift of love. God reveals himself to us as one who is not alone, but rather as one who is relational, one who is Trinity. Therefore, we who are made in God's image share this communal, social nature. We are called to reach out and to build relationships of love and justice.”²

In the Acts of the Apostles, the early church exemplified what it means to care for the common good. Paul chastises the Corinthians for ignoring the poor in their Eucharistic feasts. James reminds us that "faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." ([James 2:17](#)) The text of Acts reports that the first Christians “had all things in common . . . distributing them to all, as any had need.” ([Acts 3:44-45](#)) In the following centuries, shepherds and theologians of the Church continued the teachings of Jesus in the tradition of the early church, from Origen, Augustine and Aquinas to Gregory XVI, Pius IX and Benedict XIV.

St. Thomas Aquinas

A second source of inspiration for Catholic Social Teaching comes from the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas. A prolific writer on the topic of Justice, St. Thomas stressed that justice toward the common good (all people) was required for Christians to live a moral and upright life. He believed that where legal justice exists in harmony with the truth of God as revealed by Jesus Christ, communities and nations are directed to the common good of all. As Disciples of Christ all Christians bear a responsibility to bring God's justice for the common good to society – to transform belief into living actions. In a state of true justice all may move toward their ultimate goal of happiness in eternal life with God.

Modern Catholic Social Teaching

In modern Catholic social thought these foundations have developed into a comprehensive body of doctrine about modern social issues. Pope Leo in *Rerum Novarum* addressed the condition of labor following the Industrial Revolution; Pope Pius XI in [The Reconstruction of the Social Order](#) (*Quadragesimo Anno*) spoke of the effects of the Great Depression and condemned Communism; Pope John XXIII in [Peace on Earth](#) (*Pacem in Terris*) took up the issues of human rights and the cold war; in [The Church in the Modern World](#) (*Gaudium et Spes*), Vatican II spoke about the institution of marriage and the role of the Christian in secular society; the World Synod of Bishops in 1971 in *Justice in the World* decried the concentration of wealth and corporate power; Pope Paul VI in [Evangelization in the Modern World](#) addressed third world development and the need for Christian participation in politics as no one had ever done before; and Pope John Paul II, perhaps the most prolific pope on issues of social justice, wrote the encyclicals [On Human Work](#) (*Laborem Exercens*), [The Social Concerns of the Church](#) (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*), [One Hundred Years](#) (*Centisimus Annus*), and [The Gospel of Life](#) (*Evangelium Vitae*).

¹ “Sharing Catholic Social Teaching, Challenges and Directions, Reflections of the U.S. Catholic Bishops”, United States Catholic Conference, Inc., (Washington, D.C.: 2000), 1.

² Ibid.

Charity, Empowerment, and Advocacy

Charity/Direct Service

Just as Jesus, who came "to bring glad tidings to the poor . . . liberty to captives . . . recovery of sight to the blind"(Lk 4:18-19), and who identified himself with "the least of these," the hungry and the stranger (Mt 25:45), we too are called to serve the poor, the suffering, the homeless, and the alienated in our communities, our nation and the world. Often our church communities reach out to the least of these through monthly financial tithing, giving to the food pantry, collecting and distributing clothing and supplies, a Christmas Giving tree, Easter baskets, St. Ben's meal program, Rice Bowls, various health ministries and other forms of direct service. Charity is extremely important because it meets the immediate needs of those who without help would go hungry, lose their home, not have the proper tools for education, or even be left alone and forgotten. Often charity is performed through the act of giving money, food or items to the poor. Many members of the parish can be involved, but generally only a few are really in touch face to face with those who they serve. In charity we give people fish and bread to eat.

Empowerment

Empowerment happens when we take action to help people help themselves. An example of empowerment is a program like ACTS - Allied Churches Teaching Self-Empowerment. The program helps to restore people's sense of dignity by placing them in a situation where they can purchase their own house, take responsibility for that house and hopefully build personal equity versus continuing to experience loss of income through rental expense. Other forms of empowerment are teaching job skills, reading skills, writing, or a second language. In empowerment, we teach people how to fish and bake bread.

Advocacy

In advocacy, we are called to act within the constructs of our communities to seek out the root causes of why people are poor, suffering, homeless, sick or alienated. Often issues of injustice, either intentional or unintentional, exist within societies that cause poverty, homelessness, or the inability for people to receive adequate healthcare. Advocacy focuses on seeking out the underlying causes of suffering and works to change the social structures that cause that suffering. While charity meets the immediate needs of individuals, advocacy works to permanently change the underlying issues that cause individuals to be in need. As Catholics we are "called to use [our] talents, the resources of [our] faith, and the opportunities of this democracy to shape a society more respectful of the life, dignity, and rights of the human person."³ The attached story "Who Will Save the Babies?" provides a good contrast for understanding the roles of charity (works of mercy) and advocacy (works of social action). Advocacy often requires legislative action that changes the legal structures of society. In advocacy we clean up the water so everyone has fish to catch and eat, and we break down any unjust barriers that prohibit equal access to the land for all people to grow wheat and make bread to eat.

Justice Education

There is a book put out by the Center of Concern called "Catholic Social Teaching, Our Best Kept Secret." The first printing of the book was in 1985. The book is now in its fourth revision and oddly enough still few Catholics, as the title implies, know about the social teaching of the Catholic Church. The first step in bringing parishioners to a fuller understanding of their Catholic faith and the need to carry out their faith within the context of their community is through formation. In *Communities of Salt and Light*, the Catholic Bishops state,

³ "Communities of Salt and Light: Parish Resource Manual," USCC Department of Social Development and Word Peace, (Washington, D.C.:1994), 24.

“The focus of this statement is the urgent task to incorporate Catholic social teaching more fully and explicitly into Catholic educational programs. This must be undertaken in the context of efforts to share the faith in its entirety and to encourage Catholics to experience the gospel call to conversion in all its dimensions. Recognizing the importance of this broader goal of Catholic education and formation, we call for a renewed commitment to integrate Catholic social teaching into the mainstream of all Catholic educational institutions and programs. We are confident that this goal can be advanced, because we know firsthand of the dedication, talent, and deep faith of those involved in the work of education, catechesis, and faith formation. . . We thank and commend all those who carry out the holy work of educating others to understand and to act on the truths of our faith.”

“However, despite these significant and ongoing efforts, our social heritage is unknown by many Catholics. Sadly, our social doctrine is not shared or taught in a consistent and comprehensive way in too many of our schools, seminaries, religious education programs, colleges, and universities. We need to build on the good work already underway to ensure that every Catholic understands how the Gospel and church teaching call us to choose life, to serve the least among us, to hunger and thirst for justice, and to be peacemakers.”⁴

Often we think of formation within the context of a classroom, but classroom or discussion circle formation only reaches a small number of people at a single time. JustFaith [30 weeks], FaithJustice [12 weeks], and Engage! [3 hour introduction and discussion] are examples of discussion group and discussion group plus field experience formation. This type of formation is extremely important and effective and that is why ministries like mission trips are so effective and life changing, because they include Scripture, discussion, and first hand experience.

In reality though classroom only formation fails to meet the needs of the wider parish as the entire parish community rarely gathers in a classroom or discussion circle setting. The first point of gathering for the parish community is in prayer and worship at Eucharist. Thus, formation must begin where the community gathers – at the Eucharist through Scripture, reflection, petition and guest speakers. From that point, social justice ministry can at the same time begin to expand to other aspects of parish life like the Christian Formation curriculum, adult formation opportunities, and especially social justice outreach ministry that brings us face to face and side by side with those in need.

At a 2007 Catholics for Peace and Justice conference on “Justice, Advocacy, and the Social Teaching of the Church” Father Kenneth Mich [Pastor at Good Shepherd Parish], Eileen Ciezki [Director of Human Concerns at Gesu], Kari Hanson and Tom Hunt [Chairperson and member of SS. Peter and Paul Human Concerns in Milwaukee] addressed the topic “Transforming Hearts: Incorporating Justice into the Life of the Parish.”

They shared the goals of their ministry and how their parish has engaged in approaching issues of justice, what has worked well for them and what challenges they have faced. The following thoughts on formation came from the panel members:

- Develop a mission statement through parish council that can be incorporated into the life of the parish
- Liturgy is the center of parish life thus if the church has a mission for justice that mission should be a part of the coming together of the parish. Ideas presented were skits, readings, songs, prayer, preaching, or speakers before, during, or after liturgy

⁴ “Sharing Catholic Social Teaching, Challenges and Directions, Reflections of the U.S. Catholic Bishops”, United States Catholic Conference, Inc., (Washington, D.C.: 2000), 1.

- A social justice mission for your parish can be based on the Jesuit mission, Ignatian spirituality, your parish patron saint or another spiritual tradition such as Benedictine, Franciscan, or Dominican
- Create awareness of the social teachings of the church through readings or a “justice corner” in the bulletin
- Create an off shoot of your human concerns group that focuses on and educates the parish on issues of justice and social teaching
- Start a “Just Faith” discussion group in your parish
- Create opportunities for learning and discussion on social issues. Discussion is about listening to what each person has to say as opposed to telling people how to vote. Don’t be afraid to let everyone express their opinion.
- Create an ongoing relationship with a parish or organization/ministry from another country
- Provide direct service opportunities for adults that give personal first hand awareness and association with people affected by poverty and injustice. Include prayer and discussion about the possible root causes of the situation.
- Provide opportunities for people to hear about all sides of a current issue along with opportunity for discussion and questions - pick topics that are timely and of concern.
- Don’t be afraid to think “outside the box” or outside the walls of your parish. Invite the community to speaker events and book and film discussions. Consider holding these events at a community location outside of your parish. Collaborate with other organizations and churches. Invite people from around the area, not just your own parish.

A Mission Statement

Embarking on a path of social justice ministry requires a conscious decision and action on the part of Human Concerns and the parish. A mission statement helps to bring focus to the efforts of the group especially in a ministry area that is endless in opportunity. Focus on particular efforts or a particular vision as opposed to all possibilities is key to an effective ministry. The mission can be focused around where we live, the gifts of the people who make up this community, about outreach to others who are not fortunate enough to live here, about global issues, a sister parish here or in another country, issues that are of great concern to our membership, a patron saint, etc.

Second, a mission statement is important to gaining the support of parish council and the congregation at large. People can support an objective, goal or mission they can see and understand and parish formation can begin by focusing formation on the context of the mission.

A model for social justice ministry should develop out of the parish community based on the parish’s unique social mission and pastoral context. A parish is situated in a particular community, has its own particular history and is blessed with the gifts and experience of the people who make up their community of faith. Thus, each organization and its mission should be unique to its community, experience and vision.

Catholic Social Teaching: Major Themes

The following is copied from “Sharing Catholic Social Teaching, Challenges and Directions, Reflections of the U.S. Catholic Bishops”

The Church's social teaching is a rich treasure of wisdom about building a just society and living lives of holiness amidst the challenges of modern society. It offers moral principles and coherent values that are badly needed in our time. In this time of widespread violence and diminished

respect for human life and dignity in our country and around the world, the Gospel of life and the biblical call to justice need to be proclaimed and shared with new clarity, urgency, and energy. Modern Catholic social teaching has been articulated through a tradition of papal, conciliar, and episcopal documents that explore and express the social demands of our faith. The depth and richness of this tradition can be understood best through a direct reading of these documents... [links to these documents can be found at www.catholicsforpeaceandjustice.org/CST]. In these brief reflections, we wish to highlight several of the key themes that are at the heart of our Catholic social tradition. We hope they will serve as a starting point for those interested in exploring the Catholic social tradition more fully.

Life and Dignity of the Human Person

In a world warped by materialism and declining respect for human life, the Catholic Church proclaims that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. Our belief in the sanctity of human life and the inherent dignity of the human person is the foundation of all the principles of our social teaching. In our society, human life is under direct attack from abortion and assisted suicide. The value of human life is being threatened by increasing use of the death penalty. The dignity of life is undermined when the creation of human life is reduced to the manufacture of a product, as in human cloning or proposals for genetic engineering to create "perfect" human beings. 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.

Call to Family, Community, and Participation

In a global culture driven by excessive individualism, our tradition proclaims that the person is not only sacred but also social. How we organize our society—in economics and politics, in law and policy—directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community. The family is the central social institution that must be supported and strengthened, not undermined. While our society often exalts individualism, the Catholic tradition teaches that human beings grow and achieve fulfillment in community. We believe people have a right and a duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable. Our Church teaches that the role of government and other institutions is to protect human life and human dignity and promote the common good.

Rights and Responsibilities

In a world where some speak mostly of "rights" and others mostly of "responsibilities," the Catholic tradition teaches that human dignity can be protected and a healthy community can be achieved only if human rights are protected and responsibilities are met. Therefore, every person has a fundamental right to life and a right to those things required for human decency. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities—to one another, to our families, and to the larger society. While public debate in our nation is often divided between those who focus on personal responsibility and those who focus on social responsibilities, our tradition insists that both are necessary.

Option for the Poor and Vulnerable

In a world characterized by growing prosperity for some and pervasive poverty for others, Catholic teaching proclaims that a basic moral test is how our most vulnerable members are faring. In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, our tradition recalls the story of the Last Judgment (Mt 25:31-46) and instructs us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first.

The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers

In a marketplace where too often the quarterly bottom line takes precedence over the rights of

workers, we believe that the economy must serve people, not the other way around. Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God's creation. If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected—the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to organize and join unions, to private property, and to economic initiative. Respecting these rights promotes an economy that protects human life, defends human rights, and advances the well-being of all.

Solidarity

Our culture is tempted to turn inward, becoming indifferent and sometimes isolationist in the face of international responsibilities. Catholic social teaching proclaims that we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they live. We are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. Learning to practice the virtue of solidarity means learning that "loving our neighbor" has global dimensions in an interdependent world. This virtue is described by John Paul II as "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all" (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 38).

Care for God's Creation

On a planet conflicted over environmental issues, the Catholic tradition insists that we show our respect for the Creator by our stewardship of creation. Care for the earth is not just an Earth Day slogan, it is a requirement of our faith. We are called to protect people and the planet, living our faith in relationship with all of God's creation. This environmental challenge has fundamental moral and ethical dimensions that cannot be ignored.

This teaching is a complex and nuanced tradition with many other important elements. Principles like "subsidiarity" and the "common good" outline the advantages and limitations of markets, the responsibilities and limits of government, and the essential roles of voluntary associations. These and other key principles are outlined in greater detail in the Catechism and in the attached Report of the Content Subgroup (see pp. xx-xx). These principles build on the foundation of Catholic social teaching: the dignity of human life. This central Catholic principle requires that we measure every policy, every institution, and every action by whether it protects human life and enhances human dignity, especially for the poor and vulnerable.

These moral values and others outlined in various papal and episcopal documents are part of a systematic moral framework and a precious intellectual heritage that we call Catholic social teaching. The Scriptures say, "Without a vision the people perish" (Prv 29:18). As Catholics, we have an inspiring vision in our social teaching. In a world that hungers for a sense of meaning and moral direction, this teaching offers ethical criteria for action. In a society of rapid change and often confused moral values, this teaching offers consistent moral guidance for the future. For Catholics, this social teaching is a central part of our identity. In the words of John Paul II, it is "genuine doctrine" (*Centesimus Annus*, no. 5).

There will be legitimate differences and debate over how these challenging moral principles are applied in concrete situations. Differing prudential judgments on specifics cannot be allowed, however, to obscure the need for every Catholic to know and apply these principles in family, economic, and community life.

Who will save the babies? [Author Unknown]

Once upon a time there was a small village on the edge of a river. The people there were good and the life in the village was good. One day a villager noticed a baby floating down the river. The villager quickly jumped into the river and swam out to save the baby from drowning.

The next day this same villager was walking along the river bank and noticed two babies in the river. He called for help, and both babies were rescued from the swift waters. And the following day four babies were seen caught in the turbulent current. And then eight, then more, and still more.

The villagers organized themselves quickly, setting up watch towers and training teams of swimmers who could resist the swift waters and rescue babies. Rescue squads were soon working 24 hours a day. And each day the number of babies floating down the river increased.

The villagers organized themselves efficiently. The rescue squads were now snatching many children each day. Groups were trained to give mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Others prepared formula and provided clothing for the chilled babies. Many people were involved in making clothing and knitting blankets. Still others provided foster homes and placement.

While not all the babies... could be saved, the villagers felt they were doing well to save as many as they could each day. Indeed, their priest blessed them in their good work. And life in the village continued on that basis.

One day, however, someone raised the question, "But where are all these babies coming from? Who is throwing them into the river? Why? Let's organize a team to go upstream and see who's doing it." The seeming logic of the elders countered: "And if we go upstream who will operate the rescue operations? We need every concerned person here.

"But don't you see," cried the one lone voice, "if we find out who is throwing them in, we can stop the problem and no babies will drown. By going upstream we can eliminate the cause of the problem."

"It is too risky," [decided the elders].

And so the numbers of babies in the river increase daily. Those saved increase, but those who drown increase even more. (Inter-Religious Task Force for Social Analysis, "Must We Choose Sides?" Pp. 114-115)

1. Works of mercy- exemplified by Mother Teresa
2. Social action- exemplified by Bishop Desmond Tutu, our bishops in their pastorals, Martin Luther King, Jr., Archbishop Oscar Romero

Works of Mercy

1. Are concerned with the present symptoms of injustice.
2. Focus on individual needs
3. Look for immediate solutions
4. Provide direct service: with temporary results
5. Involves having sharing with have-nots
6. Requires no change in social structure
7. Calms things down

Works of Social Action

1. Are concerned with the underlying causes of injustice.
2. Focus on changing social structures
3. Look for long-term solutions
4. Provide indirect help that is aimed at permanent change
5. Involves having and have-nots working together
6. Requires working toward changes in the social structures
7. Stirs things up