

# How Catholic Social Teaching Can Help Us Respond to Issues

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**Catholic Social Teaching sums up the teachings of the Church on issues of justice between groups in society. It seeks to bring the light of the Gospel to bear on the social justice issues that arise in the complex network of relationships in which we live.**

## What is it?

Catholic Social Teaching promotes a vision of a just society that is grounded in biblical revelation, the teachings of the leaders of the early church, and in the wisdom gathered from experience by the Christian community as it has tried to respond to social justice issues through history.

A formal body of international Catholic social justice teachings for the modern era has developed since the nineteenth century.

## Four Sources

Catholic Social Teaching is part of the discipline of applied moral theology and draws on all four major sources of insight used in Catholic ethics: Scripture; reason; tradition; and experience.

Tradition, which is often passed on through formal teaching documents, has played such a strong role in Catholic life that sometimes people think of Catholic Social Teaching as just a series of Papal documents.

## Three Elements

The social teachings are made up of three distinct elements: principles for reflection; criteria for judgment; and guidelines for action. Each has a different level of authority.

The key principles for reflection are sometimes called perennial principles because they apply across every time and place. They are highly authoritative, but also rather abstract and general. International Church documents identify just four of these principles: human dignity; the common good; subsidiarity; and solidarity.

The guidelines for action can vary for different times and places. Uniform guidelines for action aren't feasible because societies differ greatly, and they are always changing, creating new situations with different problems and possibilities. Guidelines for action always depend on practical judgments made with the information available at the time. There is

often scope for legitimate differences of opinion among believers on social justice issues.

The criteria or norms for judgment can be thought of as connecting or mediating between the highly authoritative but necessarily general and abstract principles for reflection, and the need for action guidelines in concrete social situations. They are less authoritative than the principles for reflection but more so than the guidelines for action.

## Four Key Principles

Principles for reflection are one of the elements of Catholic Social Teaching. The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, in its *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, and the Congregation for Catholic Education in its *Guidelines for the Study and Teaching of Catholic Social Doctrine in the Formation of Priests*, both identify just four principles of Catholic Social Teaching that are valid always and everywhere. They are:

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- Human dignity,
- The common good,
- Subsidiarity, and
- Solidarity.

These four are not the only principles of Catholic Social Teaching, but they are the most important. They are sometimes called permanent or perennial principles, and they sum up the core of Catholic Social Teaching. These four key principles are dynamically interrelated and a range of other principles and criteria can be derived from them. This is why you will find that various writers may present different lists of principles, or major lessons, of Catholic Social Teaching.

Let us examine each of these principles in turn.

## Human Dignity

The principle of the dignity of the human person reminds us that every human being is made in the image and likeness of God and has an inalienable and transcendent human dignity which gives rise to human rights. It is the bedrock of all Catholic social ethics.

It follows that people are always more important than things. People must never be treated as a means or an instrument to be used for the benefit of another.

Every human person is equal in dignity and rights. Every human community, every race and culture is equal in dignity and rights. The human family is one because we are all children of the one God. This aspect of human dignity is sometimes referred to as the principle of the unity of the human family.

The *Catechism* explains it this way:

“Created in the image and likeness of the one God and equally endowed with rational souls, all persons have the same nature and the same origin. Redeemed by the sacrifice of Christ, all are called to participate in the same divine beatitude: all therefore enjoy an equal dignity.”

*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n 1934

### **The Common Good**

The principle of the common good reminds us that we are all really responsible for each other – we are our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers - and must work for social conditions which ensure that every person and every group in society is able to meet their needs and realize their potential.

It follows that every group in society must take into account the rights and aspirations of other groups, and the well being of the whole human family.

Related to this is the principle of the universal destination of goods - God intended the goods of creation for the use of all, and so everyone has a right to access the goods of creation to meet their needs.

Writing in 1965, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council already understood the relevance of this principle not only to small communities or nations, but the whole international community:

“Every day human interdependence grows more tightly drawn and spreads by degrees over the whole world. 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. Every social group must take account of the needs and legitimate aspirations of other groups, and even of the entire human family.”

Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n 26

### **Subsidiarity**

The principle of subsidiarity concerns how participation and decision making should be

organized. Responsibility should be kept as close as possible to the grassroots. The people or groups most directly affected by a decision or policy should have a key decision making role in it.

More encompassing groups should only intervene to support smaller, more local groups in case of need, and where this is necessary in order to coordinate their activities with the activities of other groups in order to promote the common good. It is from this aspect of help offered by larger to smaller groups that the term subsidiarity (from the Latin *subsidium* for help or assistance) comes.

This is perhaps the most widely misunderstood of the four key principles. The Pontifical Council for Justice & Peace explains it in this way:

“On the basis of this principle, all societies of a superior order must adopt attitudes of help (‘subsidium’) – therefore of support, promotion, development – with respect to lower-order societies. In this way, intermediate social entities can properly perform the functions that fall to them without being required to hand them over unjustly to other social entities of a higher level, by which they would end up being absorbed and substituted, in the end seeing themselves denied their dignity and essential place.”

Pontifical Council for Justice & Peace  
*Compendium of the Social Doctrine  
of the Church*, n 186

### **Solidarity**

Human beings are social by nature. We cannot survive without others and can only grow and achieve our potential in relationship with others. We are made in the likeness of a Trinitarian God – a community of persons in perfect relationship.

God is community and makes community. It follows that our salvation is bound up with that of each other.

Solidarity can also be understood as a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good.

Pope John Paul II frequently stressed the virtue of solidarity:

“Solidarity helps us to see the ‘other’ - whether a person, people, or nation - not just as some kind of instrument, with a work capacity and physical strength to be exploited at low cost and then discarded when no longer useful, but as our neighbour, a helper (cf Gn 2:18-20),

to be a sharer, on a par with ourselves, in the banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God.”

John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, n 39

### **Universal & Particular**

Catholic Social Teaching operates at both the international and at the local level. The insights of local Bishops responding to particular issues in their own place help to inform the development of the international teachings, while the international teachings guide the Bishops in teaching on justice issues in their particular places.

### **For Discussion**

- How do you make decisions on matters of justice in society? Do Scripture, Church teaching, reason and experience play a role?
- Do you think that these principles hold true in all societies, times and places? Why / why not?
- Share an experience in which one or more of these principles was engaged. How did it feel when these principles were respected? And when they were not?

## **How Does it Help Us to Respond to Issues?**

### **Inspiration**

Catholic Social Teaching provides inspiration for our efforts. It is one of the reasons why we do what we do.

It calls us to promote a more just society, reminding us of the essential place that work to promote the justice of God's Reign in our world holds in the mission of the Church, and in the mission of each Christian.

Catholic Social Teaching proposes principles for reflection which help us to name and explain the key values that guide us. It grounds the vision, mission and goals of Catholic organizations and social justice groups.

### **Approach**

Catholic Social Teaching guides our approach to the promotion of social justice. It influences how we do what we do.

Catholic Social Teaching proposes criteria for judgment which promote certain patterns of behaviour that contribute to establishing the ethos

and culture of a Catholic group or organization.

It suggests an incarnational path, seeking and finding God in people, places and events, and an inductive methodology which starts from experience rather than theory.

If we are guided by Catholic Social Teaching, our ways of acting will be respectful of the principle of subsidiarity. We will adopt a wholistic view of the human person in community, and our ways of going about things will express solidarity. The ultimate measure of our work will be the extent to which it respects, protects and promotes human dignity.

Catholic Social Teaching underpins the strategies, policies and practices of Catholic organizations and groups.

### **Substance**

Catholic Social Teaching influences the substance of our work. It guides the choice of what we do.

The principles of human dignity, the common good and solidarity will guide us in deciding which issues and situations require our response. They are touchstones in the development of our positions, and they guide us in prioritizing, or ranking, the relative importance of different issues and tasks.

The principle of subsidiarity will guide decisions about the concerns and tasks which are appropriate to particular organizations or groups. It helps us to discern whether a particular task or issue would be best undertaken by our group, or by smaller, more local group, or perhaps by a larger more overarching group that can coordinate efforts more effectively.

Catholic Social Teaching guides the priorities of Catholic organizations and groups, as well as the substance of the positions that they adopt on issues.

### **For Discussion**

- Who or what inspires your work for a more just society? How do your vision, mission and goals reflect this?
- How would you describe your approach to promoting social justice? What strategies do you favour? Why?
- What criteria do you use to decide what to take on? How do you set priorities?

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