

Basic Themes of Catholic Social Teaching



The Church's social vision has developed and grown over time, responding to changing circumstances and emerging problems – including developments in human work, new economic questions, war and peace in a nuclear age, and poverty and development in a shrinking world. While the subjects have changed, some basic principles and themes have emerged within this tradition:

A. The Life and Dignity of the Human Person

In the Catholic social vision, the human person is central, the clearest reflection of God among us. Each person possesses a basic dignity which comes from God, not from any human quality or accomplishment, not from race or gender, age or economic status. The test of every institution or policy is whether it enhances or threatens human life and human dignity. We believe people are more important than things.

B. The Rights and Responsibilities of the Human Person

Flowing from our God-given dignity each person has basic rights and responsibilities. These include the right to freedom of conscience and religious liberty, to raise a family, to immigrate, to live free from unfair discrimination and to have a share of earthly goods sufficient for oneself and one's family. People have a fundamental right to life and to those things which make life truly human – food, clothing, housing, health care, education, security, social services and employment. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities – to one another, to our families and the larger society, to respect the rights of others and to work for the common good.

C. The Call to Family, Community and Participation

The human person is not only sacred, but social. We realize our dignity and rights in relationship with others, in community. No community is more central than the family; it needs to be supported, not undermined. It is the basic cell of society and the state has an obligation to support the family. The family has major contributions to make in addressing questions of social justice. It is where we learn and act on our values. What happens in the family is at the basis of a truly human social life. We also have the right and responsibility to participate in and contribute to the broader communities in society. The state and other institutions of political and economic life, with both their limitations and obligations, are instruments to protect the life, dignity and rights of the person, promote the well-being of our families and communities, and pursue the common good. Catholic social teaching does offer clear guidance on the role of government. When basic human needs are not being met by private initiative, then people must work through their government at appropriate levels to meet those needs. A central test of political, legal and economic institutions is what they do *to* people, what they do *for* people and how people *participate* in them.

D. The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers

Work is more than a way to make a living, it is an expression of our dignity and a form of continuing participation in God's creation. People have the right to decent and productive work, to decent and fair wages, to private property and economic initiative. Workers have the strong support of the Church in forming and joining unions and worker associations of their choosing in the exercise of their dignity and rights. In Catholic teaching, the economy exists to serve people, not the other way around.

E. The Option for the Poor and Vulnerable

Poor and vulnerable people have a special place in Catholic social teaching. A basic moral test of a society is how its most vulnerable members are faring. This is not a new insight; it is the lesson of the Parable of the Last Judgment (Matthew 25). Our tradition calls us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first. As Christians, we are called to respond to the needs of all our sisters and brothers, but those with the greatest needs require the greatest response. We must seek creative ways to expand the emphasis of our nation's founders on

individual rights and freedom by extending democratic ideals to economic life and thus insure that the basic requirements for life with dignity are accessible to all.

F. Solidarity

We are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic and ideological differences. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers. In a linked and limited world, our responsibilities to one another cross national and other boundaries. Violent conflict and the denial of dignity and the rights to people anywhere on the globe diminish each of us. This emerging theme of solidarity, so strongly articulated by Pope John Paul II, expresses the core of the Church's concern for world peace, global development, environment, and international human rights. It is the contemporary expression of the traditional Catholic image of the "Mystical Body." "Loving our neighbor" has global dimensions in an interdependent world.

A Century of Catholic Social Teaching: A Common Heritage, A Continuing Challenge (National Conference of Catholic Bishops)