

Overview of Catholic Social Teaching



Catholic Social Teaching is a collection of teachings that are designed to reflect the Church's social mission in response to the challenges of the day. The teachings are rooted in biblical values and reflections on Christian tradition. This tradition calls all members of the Church, rich and poor alike, to work to eliminate the occurrence and effect of poverty, to speak out against injustice, and to shape a more caring society and a more peaceful world.

The work for social justice is first and foremost a work of faith, a profoundly religious task. It is Jesus who calls us to this mission, not any political or ideological agenda. We as Catholics are called to bring the healing hand of Christ to those in need, the courageous voice of the prophet to those in power, and the gospel message of love, justice and peace to a suffering world.

Major Themes: The following seven themes highlight some of the key principles that are addressed in Catholic Social Teaching documents. These seven themes are summarized in the document Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions, reflections of the U.S. Bishops published in 1998. (The quotations given below are from this document.)

Life and Dignity of the Human Person

Made in the image and likeness of God, all persons are sacred. Belief in the sanctity of human life and inherent dignity of each person is the foundation of all of our social teachings. Today this value is threatened by abortion, assisted suicide, euthanasia, the death penalty, and the many ways in which people are treated with disregard for their human dignity.

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

The human person is social as well as sacred. Our Catholic tradition teaches that human beings grow and achieve fulfillment in community. The family is the central social institution. Family life needs to be supported by other institutions and governments. Excessive individualism, competition, and greed mitigate against community and the common good.

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.

Rights and Responsibilities

People have a fundamental right to life and to those things necessary for human decency, such as food, shelter, health care, education and employment. People have a right to participate in decisions that affect their lives. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities to respect the rights of others and to work for the common good. When people lack the basic necessities to live a life of dignity, their fundamental rights are being denied.

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.

Option for the Poor and Vulnerable

Catholic teaching proclaims that the moral test of a society is how it treats its most vulnerable members. This calls us to look at public policy decisions in terms of how they affect the poor. In our present society a minority of 20% of the people control more than 80% of the world's resources, leaving few resources to be shared by the majority of the people.

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

People have a right to humane working conditions, productive work and fair wages. The economy exists to serve the people, not the other way around. Many corporations have lost sight of the rights of workers and look only at the profit margin. From 1988 to 1998, the salaries of corporate executives grew by 15% while those of the bottom level workers grew by only 1%, not enough to even meet the rise in cost of living.

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.

Solidarity

We are all one human family, and we are responsible for the well-being of each other. This responsibility reaches across national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. Indifference to the pain and suffering of others has no place in our interdependent society. We are all responsible for all.

Learning to practice the virtue of solidarity means that 'loving our neighbor' has global dimensions in an interdependent world

Care for God's Creation

All of creation is a gift from God and should be respected as such. We show our respect by the way we care for the earth as stewards of all that has been entrusted to us. We need to examine how our excessive consumerism and poor environmental practices are exploiting the earth and take measures to correct our destructive patterns.

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.

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