

Do it. Justice

Lumen Christi Catholic Community

Catholic Social Teaching

“And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy...” (Micah 6:8)

Catholic Social Teaching is a central and essential element of our faith. The Church identifies key principles of Catholic Social Teaching that stand today as a guide for what our response should be to the needs of those in our midst – whether locally or worldwide.

1. Catholic Social Teaching

—from *Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions*; U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops

Catholic social teaching is a central and essential element of our faith. Its roots are in the Hebrew prophets. It is a teaching founded on the life and words of Jesus Christ. 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. Our commitment to the Catholic social mission must be rooted in and strengthened by our spiritual lives. In our relationship with God we experience the conversion of heart that is necessary to truly love one another as God has loved us.

However, the Bishops continue, *“far too many Catholics are not familiar with the basic content of Catholic social teaching. More fundamentally, many Catholics do not adequately understand that the social teaching of the Church is an essential part of Catholic faith. This poses a serious challenge for all Catholics, since it weakens our capacity to be a Church that is true to the demands of the Gospel. We need to do more to share the social mission and message of our Church.”*

As Catholics, we are called by God to work for justice and the common good. While the common good embraces all, those who are weak, vulnerable, and most in need deserve preferential concern. **A basic moral test for our society is how we treat the most vulnerable in our midst.** Scripture reminds us that we will be judged by our response to the “least among us” (Mt 25:31-46).

The Church identifies ten key principles of Catholic Social Teaching that stand today as a guide for what our response should be to the needs of those in our midst – whether locally or worldwide.

2. Key Principles of Catholic Social Teaching

As Catholics, we are called by God to work for justice and the common good. While the common good embraces all, those who are weak, vulnerable, and most in need deserve preferential concern. A basic moral test for our society is how we treat the most vulnerable in our midst.

Our responsibilities, as Catholics, are embodied in these **Key Principles of Catholic Social Teaching**:

Human Dignity – Belief in the inherent dignity of the human person is the foundation of all Catholic social teaching. Human life is sacred. The person, made in the image of God, is the clearest reflection of God among us. We are required to honor and give priority to the human person.

Community and the Common Good – In a culture driven by excessive individualism, our tradition proclaims that that the person is not only sacred but also social. Human dignity can only be realized and protected in the context of relationships with the wider society.

How society is organized – economically, politically, legally – directly affects human dignity and the capacity for individuals to grow in community. The obligation to “love our neighbor” includes both an individual and a broader social commitment. Everyone has a responsibility to contribute to the good of the whole community – to the common good.

Rights and Responsibilities – Human dignity can be protected and a healthy community can be achieved only if human rights are protected and responsibilities met. A person has a fundamental right to life and those things required for human decency – sufficient food, shelter, clothing, employment, health care, and education.

Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities – to one another, to our families, and to the larger society

Option for the Poor and Vulnerable – A basic moral test of society is how it treats its most vulnerable members. The poor have the most urgent moral claim on the conscience of the nation.

The option for the poor is a perspective that examines personal decisions, policies of private and public institutions, and economic relationships in terms of their effects on the poor – those who lack the minimum necessities of nutrition, housing, education, and health care. Those who are marginalized and whose rights are denied have privileged claims if society is to provide justice for all.

The obligation to evaluate social and economic activity from the viewpoint of the poor and the powerless arises from the radical command to love one's neighbor as one's self.

The option for the poor is an essential part of society's effort to achieve the common good. A healthy community can be achieved only if its members give special attention to those with special needs, to those who are poor and on the margins of society.

Participation – All people have a right to participate in the economic, political, and cultural life of society. It is a fundamental demand of justice and a requirement for human dignity that all people be assured a minimum level of participation in the community.

It is wrong for a person or a group to be excluded unfairly or to be unable to participate in society. In the words of the U.S. bishops, "The ultimate injustice is for a person or group to be treated actively or abandoned passively as if they were non-members of the human race. To treat people this way is effectively to say that they simply do not count as human beings."

Dignity of Work/Rights of Workers – The economy must serve people, not the other way around. Workers have the right to productive work, to fair wages, and safe working conditions. They also have a fundamental right to organize and join unions.

People have a right to economic initiative and private property, but these rights have limits. No one is allowed to amass excessive wealth when others lack the basic necessities of life.

Stewardship of Creation – Our respect for the Creator is revealed by our stewardship of creation. The goods of the earth are gifts from God, intended for the good of all. We are not the ultimate owners of these goods, but the temporary stewards. We are entrusted with the responsibility of caring for these gifts and preserving them for future generations.

Global Solidarity – Catholic social teaching proclaims that we are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. Solidarity means that "loving our neighbor" has global dimensions in an interdependent world.

Constructive Role for Government – Because we are social beings, the state is natural to the person. Therefore, the state has a positive moral function as an instrument to promote human dignity, protect human rights, and build the common good. One of the key functions of government is to assist citizens in their responsibility to others in society. Citizens need the help of government in fulfilling these responsibilities and promoting the common good.

According to the principle of **subsidiarity**, the functions of government should be performed at the lowest level possible, and if not performed adequately, then a higher level of government should intervene to provide help.

Promotion of Peace – There is a close relationship in Catholic teaching between peace and justice. Peace is the fruit of justice and is dependent upon right order among human beings. Peace is not just the absence of war. It involves mutual respect and confidence between peoples and nations. It involves collaboration and binding agreements.

3. Scriptural Background

"The foundation and root of justice originate in God's love as revealed in scripture..."

God's love provides the Biblical foundation for justice. Within the context of God's love, justice is understood as "righteousness": being in a state of "right-relationship" with another. Biblical justice, therefore, is concerned with the "right relation" of human beings to God, to each other, and to the earth.

The Catholic Catechism teaches that following Adam and Eve's fall from God's favor or 'grace,' humanity lost its "original holiness and justice" and that consequently "Harmony with creation is broken: visible creation has become alien and hostile to man" (400). The resulting desire for human autonomy leads to alienation and breakdown in community between man and woman, humanity and nature, and humanity and God.

God's covenant with Israel is God's attempt to call humanity back to its original holiness and justice through a communal commitment toward a faithful concern and care for those on the margins – particularly those most impacted by humanity's fall from God's favor – the widow, the orphan, the alien, and the "poor among us." For Israel, justice is both symbolized and measured by fidelity to the covenant. Therefore, justice, originating in response to God's love/ covenant, is the hallmark of Israel's faith.

Jesus came proclaiming the reign and Kingdom of God realized only through the quality of love and justice lived out in the context of community: "You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, and with all your mind ... and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets" (Matt 22:37-40). Jesus is God's love incarnate and God's justice enacted in the flesh as the "new and everlasting covenant".

Therefore, justice, originating in response to God's love incarnate, is the hallmark of Christian faith and discipleship.