

Catholic Social Teaching

Basic Themes

❖ **Life and Dignity of the Human Person**

Human life is sacred because each person is made in the image and likeness of God. Every person must be respected. 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. Every person "must be respected with a reverence that is religious. When we deal with each other, we should do so with the sense of awe that arises in the presence of something holy and sacred" (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986). When we look into the eyes of the human person, we see there the greatest manifestation of the grandeur of God, the clearest reflection of the presence of God among us. We are asked never to forget this most basic principle: people are more important than things. Every person, regardless of age, sex, race, gender, religion, or economic status, has the special dignity that comes from being a child of God. Every person is a reflection of the sacred and is worthy of respect.

❖ **Call to Community and Participation**

The human person is both sacred and social. The dignity of the person makes sense only in the context of the person's relationships to others in the community. Human dignity can only be realized and protected in the context of relationships with the wider society. Always cognizant of being in community, we must work towards the common good. This principle has profound implications not only for individual attitudes and behavior, but also for the institutions and structures of society. How we organize society -- economically, politically, legally -- directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community.

❖ **Rights and Responsibilities**

With inherent dignity, people have fundamental rights and corresponding responsibilities to respect others' rights and work for the common good. First among these are the rights to life, food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, and basic education. These are indispensable to the protection of human dignity. In order to ensure these necessities, all persons have a right to earn a living. Corresponding to the basic rights enjoyed by all people are fundamental duties and responsibilities -- to one another, to families, and to the larger society. For example, people have a right to adequate employment, but they also have a duty to work and a responsibility to provide adequate income for their families. Additionally, society as a whole also has a responsibility to organize its economic structures so that the right to employment is protected for all.

❖ **Option for the Poor and Vulnerable**

The theme of special care and love for the poor is one that is central to the biblical notion of justice. The Hebrew Scriptures emphasized that God expects those who are faithful to pay special attention to the "widows, orphans, and strangers." Indeed, the treatment of the poor and vulnerable is one of the bottom-line tests of the Hebrews' faith in God. In the New Testament, Jesus showed a marked preference for persons who were in need, especially the sick, the poor, and the marginalized. As His disciples, we are expected to do the same. In light of the social nature of the person, Catholics believe that human dignity can only be fully realized in community. A healthy community, in turn, 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. The "option for the poor" is an essential part of society's effort to achieve the common good.

❖ **The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers**

"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." (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1998). This means that the economy exists to serve people, not the other way around. People are more important than things, and labor is more important than capital. 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.

❖ **Global Solidarity**

"We are members of a universal Church that transcends national boundaries and calls us to live in solidarity and justice with the peoples of the world. We are also citizens of a powerful democracy with enormous influence beyond our borders. As Catholics and Americans we are uniquely called to global solidarity" (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1997). John Paul II called solidarity a virtue. It is the virtue, he says, by which we demonstrate "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good ... because we are all really responsible for all" (Pope John Paul II, 1988).

❖ **Care for God's Creation**

The goods of the earth are gifts from God. We humans are not the ultimate owners of these goods, but rather, the temporary stewards. We are entrusted with the responsibility of caring for these gifts and preserving them for future generations. As the Second Vatican Council stated, "God destined the earth and all it contains for all people and nations so that all created things would be shared fairly by all humankind under the guidance of justice tempered by charity." Or, according to the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (1991), "As faithful stewards, fullness of life comes from living responsibly within God's creation."

❖ **Promotion of Peace**

Peace can only come about when we learn to treat each other as brothers and sisters and recognize our shared vocation as children of God. “Peace is not merely the absence of war; nor can it be reduced solely to the maintenance of a balance of power between enemies; nor is it brought about by dictatorship. Instead, it is rightly and appropriately called an enterprise of justice” (Vatican II). The God-given peace that our creator desires for us, and to which we are called, is built on justice, where everything and everyone in the created order is in right relationship with each other and can reach their God-given potential. Peace is the fruit of justice. According to St. John Paul II (1972), “If you want peace, work for justice.”