

# Catholic Social Teaching: Principles for the Service and Justice Dimensions of Social Work Practice and Education

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*This introduction provides an overview of Catholic social teaching, including a brief description, a perspective on some of the major social issues that prompted Papal encyclicals (letters from the Pope) related to service, justice, and society, and a brief description of those Catholic teachings. It describes the principles of human dignity, common good, solidarity, subsidiarity, and the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable, and relates those principles to social work practice and education. Finally, it introduces each of the articles in the special issue on Catholic Social Teaching and Social Justice.*

**F**OR MORE THAN TWO THOUSAND YEARS, FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST HAVE recognized the sacred dignity of all and put their love of God and love of neighbor into action by caring for the poor and needy, Christians and non-Christians. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Christian love of neighbor played a central role in the development of social work, including the settlement house movement (Christian socialists, Jane Addams), the Salvation Army, the YMCA and YWCA, and Catholic ministries within parishes and beyond (Leiby, 1978). By 1900, more than 800 Catholic institutions existed to address the social services needs of vulnerable people, particularly Catholic immigrants (Hehir, 2010).

The societal changes resulting from industrialization, combined with the rapid increase of immigration in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, created chal-

lenges and questions about how to help others effectively and efficiently while preserving their human dignity. Influenced by the “scientific charity” methods and service coordination efforts developed by the Charity Organization Societies, Catholic leaders created the National Conference of Catholic Charities in 1910 (currently Catholic Charities) to coordinate Catholic social services and to bring a level of professionalization to social work practices. (Conrad & Joseph, 2010).

Catholic social services were also influenced by and in turn influenced the social work profession’s efforts to establish professional training schools. As Mary Richmond and Jane Addams were helping to form the first schools of social work at Columbia University and the University of Chicago, respectively, Catholic Charities leaders also recognized the importance of professional training for social workers. Catholic schools of social work began to emerge starting in 1914 with the Loyola University in Chicago, followed by Fordham University in 1916 and the National Catholic School of Social Service (Catholic University of America) in 1921.

In addition to working toward coordination, professionalization, and training in social work, the Catholic Church and the social work profession have collaborated to shape public policies to protect children, to secure living wages for workers, and to address many of the structural causes of poverty and human suffering. The theological tradition underlying the U.S. Catholic response to need is commonly referred to as Catholic Social Teaching (CST). This volume is an attempt to introduce readers to this aspect of the Catholic faith and its relevance to the social work profession.

### **What Is Catholic Social Teaching?**

Catholic Social Teaching reflects the Hebrew prophets’ call to “do justice, love goodness, and walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). It is based on the life of Jesus, who identified with the poor and marginalized and who lived a life of service and justice, guided by and renewed through prayer. Catholic Social Teaching is promulgated through documents issued by the Pope and Church councils and synods that address social concerns. Its purpose is to contribute “principles for reflection, criteria for judgment and guidelines for action” (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004, #11) when addressing contemporary social questions. Catholic social teaching is a set of doctrines that have become more fully expressed over time, and have been described in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004). The following documents are considered to have had major influence on Catholic Social Teaching. The brief summaries are paraphrased from teaching activities on Catholic Social Teaching through the U.S. Council Of Catholic Bishops (USCCB, 2010):

- ***Rerum Novarum*** (Of New Things) 1891, Pope Leo XIII. Considered the “groundbreaking social encyclical,” addressing dehumanizing labor conditions, rights to just wages, unions, the individuals’ right to hold private property and distributive justice so that workers can adequately support families and special consideration for the poor.
- ***Quadragesimo Anno*** (After Forty Years) 1931, Pope Pius XI. Written to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, the encyclical reaffirms concern for workers, workers’ rights, just wages, condemns increasing disparities, and introduces the idea of subsidiarity along with critiques of communism, unrestrained capitalism and classism.
- ***Mater et Magistra*** (Mother and Teacher) 1961, Pope John XXIII. Reflects on communication advances, increases in workers’ rights, the decline of colonialism, global interdependence, the arms race, the growing inequalities between countries and the responsibility of stronger governments to help weaker ones, the common good, and the plight of small farmers and rural areas. It recognizes the power of science and technology to both improve the human condition and to limit human freedoms.
- ***Pacem in Terris*** (Peace on Earth) 1963, Pope John XXIII. Issued only two months before the pope’s death, this encyclical is the first ever to be directed to “all men of good will,” instead of only the world’s Catholics. He asks that a “moral order” prevail between people, between persons and states, between states, and in the world. Again emphasizing human rights, and in response to the Cold War, the encyclical calls for an end to the arms race and encourages the East and West to enter into a dialogue to address important social and economic questions that threaten world peace.
- ***Populorum Progressio*** (On the Development of Peoples) 1967, Pope Paul VI. This encyclical examines world economic structures, including the market system, which leads to inequality. Pope Paul VI addresses economic domination and exploitation of poor countries, military spending, rights of workers to unionize, and development that requires “a true commitment to solidarity...and genuinely human values.”
- ***Laborem Exercens*** (On Human Work) 1981, Pope John Paul II. Issued in honor of the 90th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, this encyclical expands on the dignity of labor, presenting work as fundamental to human existence and a sharing in the activity of the Creator. Pope John Paul II reminds readers that the worker should be valued more than profit, and therefore workers’ rights to organize and receive just wages should be protected.
- ***Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*** (On Social Concern) 1987, Pope John Paul II. This encyclical honored *Populorum Progressio* on its 20th

anniversary, citing current East/West and additional North/South divisions, with the gap between the rich and poor widening. The Pope emphasized the importance of caring for the environment, of “being” over “having,” explaining that the desire for profit and thirst for power help create the evil of poverty and threaten life, calling once again for solidarity.

- ***Centesimus Annus*** (The Hundredth Year) 1991, Pope John Paul II. This encyclical was issued on the 100th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, in which Leo XIII had issued warnings about socialism before it had developed into a movement. Pope John Paul II reflected on the limited economic system that threatened human rights, private property, and economic freedom, leading to the fall of communism. It reflected on the advantages and limitations of the market.
- ***Evangelium Vitae*** (The Gospel of Life) 1995, Pope John Paul II. An affirmation of the value and dignity of each human life and the need to protect it, this encyclical dealt with new threats to life, including abortion, the death penalty, and experimentation on human embryos. Pope John Paul II emphasizes human interconnectedness vs. individualism, the importance of “being” over “having,” and the recognition that we are all one family.
- ***Deus Caritas Est*** (God is Love) 2005, Pope Benedict XVI. Pope Benedict’s first encyclical describes human ability to love as rooted in the love of God for mankind, with the call to love our neighbor flowing from God’s love, manifest in Christ who gives Himself freely for the salvation of humankind. The result is that charity is essential in the Church and a manifestation of Trinitarian love.
- ***Caritas In Veritate*** (Charity in Truth) 2009, Pope Benedict XVI. This encyclical describes love (charity) as the “extraordinary force” that leads people to faith-inspired engagement in the world. The encyclical identifies justice as the “primary way of charity” and the obligation for love, truth, justice, and solidarity to inform economic life, including trade, globalization, personal business transactions, immigration and assistance to poor countries.

### **Catholic Social Teaching Principles**

Over the years, there have been various formulations of the core principles of CST. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops organizes them into 7 principles (USCCB, 2005); Massaro (2000), reviewed in this volume, identifies 9 principles; and the Office of Social Justice of the St. Paul/Minneapolis Archdiocese identifies 10 ([www.osjspm.org/cst](http://www.osjspm.org/cst)). This special issue highlights the complex and multilayered dimensions of CST. Readers will encounter these various ways of organizing CST principles, as well as authors who address specific principles in detail.

Catholic Social Teaching begins with the interlocking principles **dignity of the human person** and the **common good**. The sacred dignity of the human person is rooted in the belief that all people are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) and therefore have inherent dignity and worth. “The whole of the Church’s social doctrine...develops from the principle that affirms the inviolable dignity of the human person” (Pontifical Council, #107). Because of their social nature, people fully realize their inherent dignity and find meaning in their lives in relationship with others. Therefore, CST’s core commitment to promoting human dignity requires a commitment to fostering the common good. The common good is the “sum of all social conditions which allow people, either as a group or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily” (Pontifical Council, #164). Therefore, associations and institutions in all spheres of human life (e.g., family, community, economic, political, spiritual) must be directed toward enabling human beings to flourish. CST introduces additional themes of participation, dignity of work and rights of workers, call to family, call to community, and stewardship of God’s creation as irreducible components inherent to both dignity of the human person and the common good.

The principle of **solidarity** recognizes that we have a mutual responsibility for one another. Building upon the dignity of the human person, solidarity is “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good” (Pontifical Council, #193), recognizing that our flourishing is bound to the flourishing of our brothers and sisters across the globe. CST recognizes solidarity as both a social principle and a moral virtue. Solidarity “is found in a commitment to the good of one’s neighbor with the readiness, in the Gospel sense, to ‘lose oneself for the sake of the other instead of exploiting him...or oppressing him for one’s own advantage’” (#196).

The principle of **subsidiarity** is a broad principle related to the proper organization of social structures required for people to flourish both individually and in community. It includes a vision for the ordering, functioning, and governance of society, whereby individuals, families, and civil society have the autonomy to fulfill the functions they can fulfill without government interference. However, CST makes clear that government interventions may be necessary when there is “a serious social imbalance or injustice where only the [government] intervention...can create conditions of equality, justice, and peace” (Pontifical Council, #188). CST holds the position that the proper function of government is to ensure the common good.

Finally, CST holds a **special or preferential concern for people who are poor and vulnerable**. Jesus Christ identified with the least among us. He began His public ministry proclaiming “good news to the poor, liberty to the captives, and setting the oppressed free” (Luke 4:18). Pope John Paul II stated that the measure of a just society is how well it treats its most vulnerable members. So, people who are poor deserve our first consideration when reflecting on the social conditions of society, assessing them

according to a set of principles, and acting for justice to promote human dignity and the common good.

Catholic Social Teaching provides a lens to view the world as we “scrutinize the signs of the times and interpret them in light of the gospel” (Second Vatican Council, 1965, #4). In applying the principles of CST to contemporary social conditions, we are called to first examine these conditions in light of the principles of human dignity, the common good, solidarity, and subsidiarity for all people, with particular attention to people who are poor and vulnerable. Our examination of social conditions according to these principles should lead us to assess, for example, whether, current policies (housing, child welfare, immigration) uphold the dignity and worth of individuals, particularly people who are poor and vulnerable. That assessment should lead us to action for justice. Hence, CST is often referred to as the Catholic principles for social justice.

Catholic Social Teaching grounds and guides the action for justice of Catholics and Catholic institutions across the world. Readers will recognize the complementarity between CST principles and social work values. Social workers of faith will likely recognize these principles in their own faith traditions, and may appreciate the depth CST could bring to social work practice, not only for Christians but also for all “people of good will.” In this themed issue, authors apply CST to a variety of social work contexts.

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