



CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHINGS AND SOCIAL WORK VALUES

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Introduction

In 1891, Pope Leo XIII wrote the Encyclical Letter on the Condition of the Working Classes titled: “Rerum Novarum” in response to the structural economic injustice in Europe at the time (Kevin Knight (2007) http://www.newadvent.org/library/docs_le13rn.htm). In the United States, 38 years later, there were attempts to draft a social work professional code of ethics (Elliot, 1931). However, it wasn’t until 1996 that the *National Social Workers’ Code of Ethics* complete with the Preamble which addresses the social work values was formally sanctioned (Reamer, 1998). According to Morales & Sheafor (2004) a value is a type of belief, centrally located in one’s total belief system, about how one ought, or ought not to behave, or about some end-state of existence worth or not worth attaining. Both Catholic Social Teachings and the Social Work Core Values have strikingly similarities with respect to their beliefs about humanity; although the first having biblical and scriptural references and the latter is more secular in nature. Regardless of their origin they both speak to a common good and are important principles for social workers. This paper addresses the seven key themes of the Catholic Social Teachings and the six Core Values of Social Work.

Seven Key Themes of the Catholic Social Teachings

In 1891, Pope Leo XIII launched a frontal attack on structural economic injustice with Rerum Novarum. The encyclical’s themes mandated the just wage, the distribution of land, and worker associations. Although the document criticized the exploitation of capitalism against the working class, Pope Leo XIII also spoke against socialism.

The first key theme is *Life and Dignity of the Human Person*. “The human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. “Catholic teaching calls people to work to avoid war. Nations must protect the right to life by finding increasingly effective ways to prevent conflicts

and resolve them by peaceful means. Catholics 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.

The second key theme is “***Family, Community, and Participation***”. The person is not only sacred but also social. How the communities organize their society—in economics and politics, in law and policy—directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community. Catholics 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.

The third key theme is “***Rights and Responsibilities***”. Every person has a fundamental right to life and a right to those things required for human decency. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities--to one another, to our families, and to the larger society. The goal should be to ensure the capacities necessary for human flourishing (Bane, 2003).

The fourth key theme is “***Options for the Poor and Vulnerable***”. A basic moral test is how the most vulnerable members are faring. Catholic 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 fifth key is “***The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers***”. The economy must serve people, not the other way around. Work is a form of continuing participation in God’s creation. The right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to the organization and joining of unions, to private property, and to economic initiative should include all persons.

The sixth key theme is “***Solidarity***”. We are one human family whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. At the core of the virtue of solidarity is the pursuit of justice and peace. Pope Paul VI taught that “if you want peace, work for justice.”

The seventh and last key theme of Catholic Social Teaching is “*Care for God’s Creation*”.

Care for the earth is not just an Earth Day slogan; it is a requirement of our faith.

Catholics are called to protect people and the planet, living our faith in relationship with all of God’s creation. This environmental challenge has fundamental moral and ethical dimensions that cannot be ignored (Massaro, 2000).

At the core of these values is a challenge to live a catholic faith. Catholic with a small “c” means universal. In that sense, it is not solely belonging to one faith but rather to humankind. Catholic Social Teachings are not a prescriptive way to live nor does it endorse specific policies or programs. However, Catholic Social Teachings force us to think about whether or not we are promoting a peaceful and just society. The core values of social work similarly are professional beliefs and ideals that guide our practice.

Core Values and Ethical Principles of Social Work

The following broad ethical principles are based on social work’s core values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. The mission of the social work profession is rooted in these set of core values. These core values, have been developed by social workers throughout the profession’s history, and are the foundation of social work’s unique purpose and perspective. Core values, and the principles that flow from them, are balanced within the context and complexity of the human experience (Brenden, 2007).

The first social work value is “*Service*”. Social workers elevate service to others above self-interests. Social workers draw on their knowledge, values, and skills to help people in need and to address social problems. Social workers are encouraged to volunteer some portion of their professional skills with no expectation of significant financial return (pro bono service).

The second social work value is “***Social Justice***”. Social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people. Social workers’ social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice. These activities seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people.

The third social work value is “***Dignity and Worth of the Person***”. Social workers treat each person in a caring and respectful fashion, mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers promote clients’ socially responsible self-determination. Social workers seek to enhance clients’ capacity and opportunity to change and to address their own needs. Social workers are cognizant of their dual responsibility to clients and to the broader society.

The fourth social work value is “***Importance of Human Relationships***“. Social workers understand that relationships between and among people are an important vehicle for change. Social workers seek to strengthen relationships among people in a purposeful effort to promote, restore, maintain, and enhance the well-being of individuals, families, social groups, organizations, and communities.

The fifth social work value is “***Integrity***“. Social workers act honestly and responsibly and promote ethical practices on the part of the organizations with which they are affiliated. By acting with integrity they model this value for the client. It also serves the interests of the larger community.

The sixth and last social work value is “*Competence*“. Social workers continually strive to increase their professional knowledge and skills and to apply them in practice. Social workers should aspire to contribute to the knowledge base of the profession (*NASW Code of Ethics*, 1996). These principles set forth ideals to which all social workers should aspire.

The first and most obvious comparison is Catholic Social Teaching’s first key theme of *Life and Dignity of the Human Person* and Social Work’s Value of *Dignity and Worth of the Person*. Inherent in both of these principles is that every human is worthy of respect and the opportunity to achieve their potential. As Catholics and social workers we should not judge people by their background, rather see their potential in all of their diversity.

The second comparison would be Catholic Social Teaching’s key theme of *Family, Community, and Participation* and Social Work’s Value of *Importance of Human Relationships*. Both of these principles not only recognize but honor human relationships as a necessary part of thriving and achieving a full life. Catholic Social Teachings and Social Work Values would agree that the support we receive from each other help us to grow and in turn take care of each other.

The third comparison would be Catholic Social Teaching’s key theme of *Options for the Poor and Vulnerable* and Social Work’s Value of *Social Justice*. Again both emphasize the capacity for human growth and development given access to resources. As noted in Bane (2003, p. 21), “that important capabilities for human flourishing is lack of income or opportunity to work and opportunities to participate fully in society”. We see this carried out in social work which calls for inclusion of all to achieve their potential and rights to information access to resources.

In conclusion, the parallels between these two sets of values lead to general conclusions about a just society. The documents of Catholic Social Teaching are not infallible or immutable (Bane, 2003) but do reflect the church's official teachings. The Social Work Values have three statements specifically addressed to professional values in work with and on behalf of clients. They also reflect social workers' rights and responsibilities "that every person has a fundamental right to life and a right to those things required for human decency" (Bane, 2003). Both the Catholic Social Teachings and the Social Work Values should serve as a guide to our daily practice and as a way to measure if our policies and programs meet these standards.

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