

## Seven Principles of Catholic Social Teaching

by Christopher Kaczor, Ph.D.

Jesus rescued the adulteress from stoning, ate with tax collectors and prostitutes, spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well, and healed the sick and the sinner. He promised the most severe punishments for those who were indifferent to the plight of the poor:

"Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, a stranger and you gave me no welcome, naked and you gave me no clothing, ill and in prison, and you did not care for me." Then they will answer and say, "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison, and not minister to your needs?" He will answer them, "Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me." And these will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life. (Matt. 25:41-45)

Christians through the ages have sought to take the example and words of Jesus to heart and to live them in social settings very different from ancient Palestine. Catholic social teaching is an offspring of this effort.

Certain teachings of the Catholic Church are very clear and relatively easy to articulate. We believe in God. We believe in Jesus, truly God and truly a human being. We believe in seven sacraments and the infallibility of the pope. Catholic social teaching, on the other hand, is difficult to summarize so neatly. Catholics of good will disagree about the meaning of Catholic social teaching and especially about how to apply it in a given situation. Moreover, there is ongoing development of doctrine on social questions, as seen in the writings of various pontiffs, from Pope Leo XII's charter of Catholic social thought *Rerum Novarum*, through Blessed Pope John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris* and Pope John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus*, to the second part of Pope Benedict XVI's *Deus Caritas Est*. Catholic social teaching is complex, linked with changing social conditions and deepening understandings of both the work of God in history and ethical principles. Nevertheless, this complexity can be summarized imperfectly in terms of seven key principles of Catholic social teaching.

### I. Respect the Human Person

The foundation for Catholic social thought is the proper understanding and value of the human person. In the words of Pope John Paul II, the foundation of Catholic social teaching "is a correct view of the human person and of his unique value, inasmuch as 'man . . . is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself.' God has imprinted his own image and likeness on man (cf. Gen 1:26), conferring upon him an incomparable dignity" (*Centesimus Annus* 11). In a sense, all Catholic social teachings articulate the ethical implications of a proper understanding of the dignity of the person.

The concept of "human rights" has been adopted by popes to communicate that each and every human being, as a child of God, has certain immunities from harm by others and merits certain kinds of treatment. In particular, the Church has been forceful in defending the right to life of every single innocent human being from conception to natural death. Opposition to abortion and euthanasia forms the necessary foundation for respecting human dignity in other areas such as education, poverty, and immigration.

Based on this foundational right to life, human beings also enjoy other rights. In this, the Church joins with a chorus of other voices in proclaiming the dignity of the person and the fundamental rights of man. Nevertheless, this apparent consensus conceals very serious disagreements about the nature and scope of these rights. One of the most controversial of these areas in present culture is the understanding of the family.

## II. Promote the Family

The human person is not simply an individual but is also a member of a community. Failing to acknowledge the community aspect leads to a radical individualism. A full understanding of the person considers the social aspects of the individual. The first social consideration, in order and importance, is the family. It is the basic unit of society, and it predates and in a sense surpasses all other societies in a community. Catholic social teaching emphasizes the importance of the family, in particular the importance of fostering stable marriages where children are welcomed and educated.

The wider social network plays an important role in promoting the family. In particular, the Church has spoken of a "family wage" whereby one breadwinner can adequately support spouse and children. Social conditions either contribute to the stabilization or the destabilization of family structures. Social conditions that destabilize include mandatory and unreasonably long work hours, a toxic "social culture" that denigrates fidelity, legal dissolution of the definition of marriage between one man and one woman, and excessive taxation.

## III. Protect Property Rights

Catholic social teaching from Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (1891) through John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus* (1991) has defended the right to private property against the claim that the state should own all things. Even much earlier, St. Thomas Aquinas whose writings are of central importance in understanding the foundations of Catholic social teaching gave three reasons why private property is essential to human flourishing:

First because every man is more careful to procure what is for himself alone than that which is common to many or to all: since each one would shirk the labor and leave to another that which concerns the community, as happens where there is a great number of servants. Secondly, because human affairs are conducted in more orderly fashion if each man is charged with taking care of some particular thing himself, whereas there would be confusion if everyone had to look after any one thing indeterminately. Thirdly because a more peaceful state is ensured to man if each one is contented with his own. Hence it is to be observed that quarrels arise more frequently where there is no division of the things possessed. (*Summa Theologiae* II-II.66.2)

In addition to these reasons, private property also helps to secure human freedom. A person's ability to act freely is greatly hindered if he is not allowed to own anything. Indeed, without possessions of any kind, a person can be reduced to a kind of slavery in which labor is not rewarded and speaking against the exercise of state authority is taken at enormous risk.

The right to private property, however, is not unconditional. May a person take what is legally the property of another in order to secure survival? This question was posed in dramatic fashion in *Les Misérables*. Does Jean Valjean, who steals bread to feed his starving family, deserve to be punished? St. Thomas's answer is no. In cases when there is no other way to secure the basic necessities for human survival, taking them from those who have in abundance is not wrongful because these basic

necessities are rightfully theirs as human beings.

To be sure, Thomas speaks of cases of "need" — not cases of "want." At issue here are situations of famine or disaster, where people's lives are at risk for lack of basic necessities such as food, shelter, or clothing. These necessities do not include DVDs, CDs, or TVs, no matter how great the desire for them. Moreover, such reallocation must be a last resort. One may not take basic necessities if these necessities could be provided through one's own work or through the voluntary assistance of others, be it governmental agencies or private charities.

Catholic social teaching also notes that private property can become a kind of idol, leading people to assess the goal and meaning of human life simply in terms of dollars and cents. The right to private property also brings with it responsibilities, in particular the responsibility to care for and promote the common good.

#### IV. Work for the Common Good

Pope John XXIII defined the common good as "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily" (*Pacem in Terris* 55). This good is common because only together as a community, and not simply as isolated individuals, is it possible to enjoy, achieve, and spread this good. All people are obligated to work towards making the common good a greater and greater reality.

Sometimes the common good is misunderstood to mean simply the common desires or interests of the multitude. But the common good, as Pope John Paul II noted, "is not simply the sum total of particular interests; rather it involves an assessment and integration of those interests on the basis of a balanced hierarchy of values; ultimately, it demands a correct understanding of the dignity and the rights of the person" (*Centesimus Annus* 47). The common good, in other words, is not simply what people happen to want, but what would be authentically good for people, the social conditions that enable human flourishing.

Human flourishing is multifaceted because the human being as such has many dimensions. Human fulfillment includes a physical dimension of health and psychological well being. If a country does not have sufficient pure drinking water, nourishing food, and a relatively toxin-free environment, human beings will not be able to achieve their full potential. Moreover, human flourishing has an intellectual dimension that can be helped or hampered by educational opportunities or the lack thereof. Finally, each of us bears an ethical or moral dimension that will be frustrated without the avoidance of vice and the cultivation of virtue. The common good includes all these elements, the loss of any one of which can hinder our seeking of fulfillment.

However, the common good, as important as it is, is not the greatest good. The ultimate fulfillment of every human person can be found only in God, but the common good helps groups and individuals to reach this ultimate good. So, if social conditions are such that people are inhibited or deterred from being able to love God and neighbor, then the common good has not been realized.

Participation and solidarity are two other fundamental principles of Catholic social thought. Participation is defined by the recent *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* as when each

[C]itizen, either as an individual or in association with others, whether directly or through representation, contributes to the cultural, economic, political and social life of the civil community to

which he belongs. Participation is a duty to be fulfilled consciously by all, with responsibility and with a view to the common good. (189)

Solidarity, a frequent theme especially in the writings of Pope John Paul II, is more than a

[F]eeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good. That is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all. (Sollicitudo Rei Socialis 38)

#### V. Observe the Principle of Subsidiarity

Some Christian thinkers conceive of the state or government as being established simply to repress evil desires and evil people. In Catholic thought, the government also has a more positive role, namely to help secure common good. Pope John Paul II put the point as follows:

It is the task of the state to provide for the defense and preservation of common goods such as the natural and human environments, which cannot be safeguarded simply by market forces. Just as in the time of primitive capitalism the state had the duty of defending the basic rights of workers, so now, with the new capitalism, the state and all of society have the duty of defending those collective goods which, among others, constitute the essential framework for the legitimate pursuit of personal goals on the part of each individual. (Centesimus Annus 40)

The government has many necessary and indispensable functions to play, roles that cannot be accomplished by individuals acting alone or even by smaller groups in society.

Yet states and governments often exceed their legitimate role and infringe upon individuals and groups in society so as to dominate rather than to serve them. To combat this tendency, Catholic social thought emphasizes the principle of subsidiarity. Non-Catholics also have discovered this principle. Abraham Lincoln wrote: "The legitimate object of government is to do for a community of people whatever they need to have done, but cannot do at all or cannot so well do, for themselves — in their separate and individual capacities." Government should be as small as possible, but as big as necessary to accomplish whatever needs to be accomplished that cannot be accomplished in any other way. National defense, interstate cooperation, and treaties with other nations are obvious examples of matters properly undertaken by the federal government. Administration of the criminal justice system is another example of a matter that properly pertains to government.

On the other hand, the government should not intervene to attempt to alleviate all problems. A welfare or "nanny" state, offering cradle-to-grave security and attempting to provide for all human needs, expands the state beyond its proper scope and violates the principle of subsidiarity. Pope John Paul II explained:

Malfunctions and defects in the social assistance state [or welfare state] are the result of an inadequate understanding of the tasks proper to the state. Here again the principle of subsidiarity must be respected: A community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to coordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good. (Centesimus Annus 48)

This overreaching by the state leads to situations that are both inefficient and detrimental to human welfare:

By intervening directly and depriving society of its responsibility, the social assistance state leads to a loss of human energies and an inordinate increase of public agencies, which are dominated more by bureaucratic ways of thinking than by concern for serving their clients, and which are accompanied by an enormous increase in spending. In fact, it would appear that needs are best understood and satisfied by people who are closest to them and who act as neighbors to those in need. (Centesimus Annus 48)

When should the state intervene and when should governmental authority refrain? Such questions are difficult to answer outside of the concrete situation, for they depend upon prudential judgments about particular situations. People of good will, including Catholics who are attempting to put into action Catholic social teaching, may legitimately disagree about whether a given piece of legislation or governmental intervention is warranted to alleviate a social problem. Many social questions, such as, "Should this welfare benefit be offered to people in this particular situation?" do not admit of an answer that would be binding upon all Catholics. Nevertheless, all Catholics are obliged to work to find solutions to contemporary social problems in light of the Gospel and their best practical wisdom.

## VI. Respect Work and the Worker

According to Genesis, God not only creates man but puts him to work naming the animals and caring for the garden. Obviously, this task was not given to Adam because God was too tired to finish the job. Rather, human work participates in and reflects God's creative and providential care of the universe. Even before the fall, man is created to till and keep the Garden of Eden, to imitate God's work in creation through human work. After the fall, work becomes at times a toilsome task, but work remains part of man's vocation from God. Any honest work can be sanctified, offered to God, and made holy through the intentions of the worker and the excellence of the work done.

Furthermore, workers are not mere drones, means to the production of capital for owners, but must be respected and accorded the opportunity to form unions to secure collectively a just compensation. In Catholic thought, the right of association is a natural right of the human being, which therefore precedes his incorporation into political society. Indeed, the formation of unions "cannot . . . be prohibited by the state" because, as Pope John Paul II notes, "the state is bound to protect natural rights, not to destroy them; and if it forbids its citizens to form associations, it contradicts the very principle of its own existence" (Centesimus Annus 7). The Church was instrumental in helping workers form unions to combat the excesses of industrialization.

## VII. Pursue Peace and Care for the Poor

Peace means more than just an absence of violent conflict. Peace is the "tranquility of order" in Augustine's phrase. War between nations may be necessary at times — but solely in order to restore peace. The Catholic Church from at least the time of Augustine has endorsed "just war theory." Pacifism rejects outright waging war as morally evil for a variety of reasons, some secular (violence breeds violence) and some religious (Jesus acted non-violently). Realism, in the context of the ethics of war, contends that war has no rules whatsoever, aside perhaps from survival of the fittest. Just war theory is a mean between pacifism and realism, a mean that has been explicitly adopted and appealed to by most contemporary governments. As articulated by the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the criteria for a just war include that:

[T]he damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or community of nations must be lasting, grave and certain; all other means of putting an end to it must have been shown to be impractical or ineffective; there must be serious prospects of success; the use of arms must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated. The power of modern means of destruction weighs very heavily in evaluating this condition. These are the traditional elements enumerated in what is called the "just war" doctrine. The evaluation of these conditions for moral legitimacy belongs to the prudential judgment of those who have responsibility for the common good. (CCC 2309)

Recent discussions have addressed the question of whether a "preemptive" war, a war launched in order to prevent attack, could be justified according to traditional just war teaching. Other discussions question, given contemporary technology, whether a just war is possible.

These questions notwithstanding, the fact remains that peace involves a just ordering of society. This just order of society also includes solicitude for the poor. Not only the direct or indirect effects of individual actions, but also wise social policies are necessary for a just ordering of society, social policies that must take into account the likely effect on the poor.

As noted, Catholic social teaching does not address exactly how this should be done in every society. It may be that aggressive social action through the intervention of governmental policy is necessary. It may be that private and voluntary initiatives of religious groups (such as St. Vincent de Paul) and secular groups (such as the United Way) should take place. It may be that businesses should be compelled by law or voluntarily adopt policies that aid the poor. It may be that families and private persons should undertake the responsibility. Most likely a combination of governmental, social and religious, and individual initiatives are needed. What exactly will help the poor (and society in general) will not always be clear in every situation, but every Catholic has an obligation to think seriously and act purposely to aid those suffering around them and around the world.

These seven principles — respect for the human person, promotion of the family, the individual's right to own property, the common good, subsidiarity, the dignity of work and workers, and pursuit of peace and care for the poor — summarize some of the essentials of Catholic social teaching from Leo XIII through Benedict XVI. However, at the heart of Catholic social teaching is something both simple and noble: an effort to make the actions and words of Jesus real again today to transform and uplift social life for all people in light of the Gospel.

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## Rich in Poverty

Then there was the man we picked up from the drain, half eaten by worms and, after we had brought him to the home, he only said, "I have lived like an animal in the street, but I am going to die as an angel, loved and cared for." Then, after we had removed all the worms from his body, all he said, with a big smile, was: "Sister, I am going home to God" — and he died. It was so wonderful to see the greatness of that man who could speak like that without blaming anybody, without comparing anything. Like an angel — this is the greatness of people who are spiritually rich even when they are materially poor.

We are not social workers. We may be doing social work in the eyes of some people, but we must be contemplatives in the heart of the world. For we must bring that presence of God into your family, for the family that prays together, stays together. There is so much hatred, so much misery, and we with our

prayer, with our sacrifice, are beginning at home. Love begins at home, and it is not how much we do, but how much love we put into what we do . . . I want you to find the poor here, right in your own home first. And begin love there. Be that good news to your own people first. And find out about your next-door neighbors. Do you know who they are? — Bl. Mother Theresa

#### For Further Reading

Citizens of the Heavenly City: A Catechism of Catholic Social Teaching (Catholic Answers)  
Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (available online from [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va))  
Introduction to Catholic Social Teaching by Fr. Rodger Charles, S.J. (Ignatius)

#### What You Do for Them You Do for Him

How can I help but think of these things every time I sit down . . . and look around at the tables filled with the unutterably poor who are going through their long continuing crucifixion. It is most surely an exercise of faith for us to see Christ in each other. But it is through such exercise that we grow and the joy of our vocation assures us we are on the right path . . . There are wars and rumors of war, poverty and plague, hunger and pain. Still, the sap is rising, again there is the resurrection of spring, God's continuing promise to us that he is with us always, with his comfort and joy, if we will only ask.

The mystery of the poor is this: That they are Jesus, and what you do for them you do for him. It is the only way we have of knowing and believing in our love. The mystery of poverty is that by sharing in it, making ourselves poor in giving to others, we increase our knowledge of and belief in love. — Dorothy Day

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