

Fundamental Principles of Catholic Social Teaching



“A statement often heard among Catholics involved in the Church’s social justice ministry is that Catholic social teaching is a well-kept secret. Since the late 19th century with Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical “Rerum Novarum” to the early 21st century of Pope Benedict XVI’s “Caritas in Veritate” the Church has spoken loudly and clearly about contemporary social issues. In the following pages the basic principles of Catholic social teaching with some reflection questions are offered to acquaint or reacquaint you with this precious part of the Church’s proclamation of the Gospel. By living and applying these principles of Catholic social teaching we discover what St. Irenaeus said: “the glory of God is the human person fully alive”.

Most Reverend John Pazak, C.Ss.R. Chairman, Social Affairs Commission,
Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario

“This presentation on the Church’s social teaching is clearly done and a great service to all of us. The principles of human dignity, the common good, solidarity and subsidiarity, as well as the virtues of social charity and social justice are fundamental elements of our social teaching, as the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church states clearly. We need to make every effort to have these communicated as integral parts of our Catholic faith and as fundamental to living a Christian life.”

-Rev. Michael Ryan, Retired Professor of Catholic Social Teaching, St. Peter’s Seminary, London

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“This presentation makes a significant contribution to the current well substantiated literature and resources in the complex and challenging area of Catholic social teaching. It will be a wonderful resource for Catholic educators: principals, chaplains, curriculum coordinators and religious education teachers.”

-Sr. Joan Cronin, g.s.i.c., Director, Institute for Catholic Education, Toronto



Principles of Catholic Social Teaching

Modern Catholic Social Teaching began with Pope Leo XIII in 1891, when he issued his Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum* (On Capital and Labour) on the condition of the working classes. Catholic Social Teaching applies the Gospel to bring about social justice and social love.

"To teach and spread her social doctrine belongs to the Church's evangelizing mission and is an essential part of the Christian Message, since this doctrine points out the direct consequences of that message in the life of society, and situates daily work and struggles for justice in the context of bearing witness to Christ our Saviour. This not a marginal activity, or one that is tacked on to the Church's mission, rather it is at the very heart of the Church's ministry" (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church no.67). Pope Benedict continues on the path of Catholic Social Teaching with his encyclical *Love in Truth for Integral Human Development*.

Every Catholic is called to know the Church's Social Teaching (CST) but at first sight the array of principles in CST may be confusing with its multitude of principles and applications. We need to teach the coherence and unity of all these principles and how they fit together in a systematic way. "The principles of the Church's social doctrine must be appreciated in their unity, interrelatedness and articulation. Examining each of these principles individually must not lead to using them only in part, which would be the case if they were to be invoked in a disjointed and unconnected way with respect to each of the others." (Compendium no. 162)

Pope Benedict XVI,
in *Caritas in Veritate*
(Charity in Truth),
stated:

"Charity is at the heart of the Church's social doctrine. Every responsibility and every commitment spelt out by that doctrine is derived from charity. It is the principle not only of relationships between family members and friends but also of social, economic and political relationships" "Everything has its origin in God's love, everything is shaped by it, everything is directed towards it." (Ency. 2) "Love is an extraordinary force which leads people to opt for generous and courageous engagement in the fields of justice and peace." (Ency. 1)

The following pages are based on the pattern followed in the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, the Church's official directory which gives a coherent assembly and summary of the Church's social doctrine. (1).

There are four fundamental principles of the Church's Social Teaching: the dignity of the human person, the common good, subsidiarity and solidarity. They go together with the virtues of social justice and social love, which put these principles into practice (Comp. no. 160, 201, 207, 208). From these basic principles flow the other principles of the Church's Social Teaching, such as human rights (first of all, the right to life), universal sharing in the goods of the earth, private property, the preferential option for the poor, participation in government and society; and the application of these principles to the family, government and political life, human work, economic life, the environment, governance of the international community and the promotion of peace. CST tells us how to love our neighbour in all our social relationships, in all the groups and structures of society. Matthew 25: "I was hungry and you gave me to eat ..." applies to all the groups of society as well as individuals.

Questions

- ✧ *Why is Catholic Social Teaching an essential part of our Faith?*
- ✧ *Why do the virtues of social justice and social love go along with the Principles of Catholic Social Teaching?*
- ✧ *Why do most Catholics have little interest in Catholic Social Teaching?*

(1) The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church may be ordered from CCCB Publications: from its website, www.cccbpublications.ca; by calling 1-800-769-1147; or by email at publi@ccb.ca. The complete document may also be viewed on the website of the Holy See at www.vatican.va.



Number 1: Human Dignity

"God created us in his own image...male and female he created us." (Genesis 1:27)

Our God-given dignity as human persons with human rights comes from having been created by God and being capable of knowing, loving and glorifying God, unlike all other earthly creatures.

We are all children of the one God. We are brothers and sisters to each other. Our respect for each person's human dignity is the basic principle of Catholic Social Teaching. Our human rights flow from our dignity as human persons. The right to life from conception to natural death is the basic human right, the condition for the exercise of all other human rights, such as the rights of the child to live in a united family and a moral environment, the right to food, clean water, clothing and shelter, as well as health care, education and truth, the right to work, the right to marry and have a family, free speech, the right to participate in society and government, and religious freedom.

To a person's rights there correspond duties: the duty in oneself to become what God calls us to be, and the duty in others to acknowledge and respect these rights and of helping persons achieve the free and full exercise of their rights if they are deprived of them.

The Vatican Council stated:

"Whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where people are treated as mere tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons: all these things and others of their like are infamies indeed." (Vatican Council: Gaudium et Spes (Joy and Hope) #27)

Questions

∞ How do you respect other persons' dignity, in your family, at work, in groups you are in?

∞ How do you resist the influence of stereotypes to look down on certain people, e.g. poor people, people of other race or colour, native people, immigrants?

∞ How can you support efforts to overcome the abuse of human rights, such as abortion, workers paid less than a living wage, denied their other rights as workers, people unable to get affordable housing? Can you develop or grow in your human dignity and character, build on the dignity given to you by God?



REFLECTIONS

Pope Benedict XVI, in *Caritas in Veritate*, stated:

The dignity of the individual requires that we prioritize the goal of steady employment...being out of work or dependent on public or private assistance undermines the person and his family and social relationships, causing great psychological and spiritual suffering." #32, 25

"Only if we are aware of our calling, as individuals and as a community, to be part of God's family as his sons and daughters, will we be able to generate a new vision and muster new energy in the service a truly integral humanism." #78



Number 2:

The Common Good

"To each person is given the gifts of the Spirit for the common good" (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:7)

The common good means achieving the conditions that make it possible for all to come to their full potential as persons and to become all that God intends them to be. From the principle of the common good flow the following: Right to the goods of the earth for all; Right to private property and its social function; Preferential option for the poor and their needs; Care for the environment; and Promotion of peace.

Care for the environment and religious freedom are of increasing concern for the common good.

"Care for the environment represents a challenge for all of humanity. It is a matter of a common and universal duty, that of respecting a common good." (Comp. Soc. Doct. 466)

The Vatican Council stated:

"It is imperative that no one would indulge in a merely individualistic morality. The best way to fulfill one's obligations of justice and love is to contribute to the common good according to one's means and the needs of others, and also to promote and help public and private organizations devoted to bettering the conditions of life."

Vatican Council: Gaudium et Spes
(Joy and Hope) 30

REFLECTIONS

Pope Benedict XVI,
in Caritas in
Veritate, stated:

"Besides the good of the individual, there is a good that is linked to living in society: The common good. It is the good of all of us, made up of individuals, families and intermediate groups who together constitute society..."

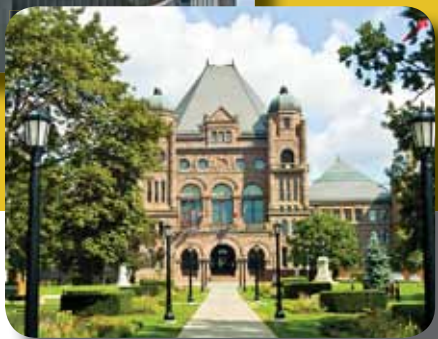
To desire the common good and strive towards it is a requirement of justice and charity (love). The more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbours, the more effectively we love them. ... This is the institutional or political path of charity, no less excellent and effective than the kind of charity which encounters the neighbour directly." #7

Question

☞ How are you helping others to come to their full potential as persons, in all the groups that you are in, beginning with your family, - by making things as good as possible in the group?



Number 3: Subsidiarity



For as in one body we have many parts, and all the parts do not have the same function, so too, we though many, are one body in Christ and individually parts of one another."

(Romans 12: 4-5)

"Nor is the body to be identified with one of its many parts. ..Now you together are Christ's body; but each of you is a different part of it." (1 Cor. 12: 14, 27)

The principle of subsidiarity means that every group or body in society must have the freedom and the means to do what it can best do for itself without its activity being taken over by a higher body or level of government. In other words: "Don't take over what others can do for themselves".

To the principle of subsidiarity corresponds the principle of participation in society and government whereby the citizen, either as an individual or in association with others,(e.g. a labour union), takes part in the cultural, economic, political and social life of the civil community. It is absolutely necessary to encourage participation of the most disadvantaged. Participation in community life is one of the major guarantees of the proper functioning of the democratic system.

Subsidiarity promotes the establishment and flourishing of intermediate groups and organizations between government and the individual, so necessary to a vital society. Society should be based on the interrelationship of subordinate and coordinate groups all working for the common good.

Just as the parts of the human body each fulfill their proper function while being united with the rest of the body and contributing to the common good of the whole body, so also there is needed intermediate bodies and organizations in society which function in the same manner within the whole of society as subsidiary organs.

REFLECTIONS

Pope Pius XI stated:

"Every social activity ought to furnish help to the members of the social body and never destroy or absorb them. Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own Initiative and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser organizations can do."

Pius XI:
Quadragesimo Anno (Encyclical Letter on the Restoration of the Social Order) # 79

"Subsidiarity is first and foremost a form of assistance to the human person via the autonomy of intermediate bodies. Such assistance is offered when individuals or groups are unable to accomplish something on their own and it is always designed to achieve their emancipation, because it fosters freedom and participation through assumption of responsibility."

Benedict XVI: Caritas in Veritate (Charity in Truth) # 57

Questions

- ≈ *Do you see situations where individuals or groups are taking over what other individuals or groups can do for themselves? What needs to happen in these situations?*
- ≈ *What are the benefits to a group in resolving disagreements themselves without turning to a higher authority?*



Number 4: Solidarity

*“God has arranged the body...so that each part may be equally concerned for all the others. If one part is hurt, all parts are hurt with it”
(1 Corinthians 12: 24-26)*

Pope John Paul II stated: “God has created us to live in solidarity. This means to live in union with one another, supporting one another, committed to the common good, the good of all and each individual, because we are all responsible for all.” (John Paul II: Sollicitudo rei Socialis (Concern of the Church for the Social Order) 38.4)

We are all our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers. We are one family. This leads to choices that promote and protect the good of all.

There is an intimate bond between solidarity and the common good, between solidarity and the universal sharing of goods, between solidarity and peace in the world. Pope John Paul’s description of solidarity tells us what a family, parish, school or any organization should be like: the members supportive of one another, concerned for the needs and good of all. They will have a feeling of belonging together.

DIVINE LOVE AND SOLIDARITY SHOULD PERMEATE ALL OUR ACTIVITY AS CATHOLICS.

Question

➤ How are you living in solidarity with your family, parish, school, place of work, labour union, business people, community, levels of government?



REFLECTIONS

Pope Benedict XVI,
in Caritas in
Veritate,
stated:

“Economic activity cannot prescind from gratuitousness, which fosters solidarity and responsibility for justice and the common good. Solidarity is first and foremost a sense of responsibility on the part of everyone with regard to everyone.” (gratuitousness is giving without expecting a return)

Benedict XVI: Caritas in Veritate #38



The Virtues of Social Justice and Social Love

The way to act, the virtues to practice, in working for social change

REFLECTIONS

Pope Pius XI declared in *Quadragesimo Anno* (Encyclical on Reconstruction of the Social Order) 88:

“The right ordering of economic life cannot be left to a free competition of forces. It must be governed by the directing principles of social justice and social charity (social love). The institutions of all social life ought to be penetrated with this justice, establishing a legal and social order which gives form and shape to all economic life. Social love ought to be the soul of this order.

“Let all strive according to the talent, powers, and position of each to contribute something to the Christian reconstruction of human society.” (147)

“It is of the very essence of social justice to demand from each individual all that is necessary for the common good.”

Divini Redemptoris (Encyclical on Atheistic Communism) 51

“I was hungry, and you gave me to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me to drink.” (Matt 25)

“By this love you have for one another, everyone will know that you are my disciples.” (John 13:35)

Can we change unjust systems and practices? As individuals we can't do very much. To bring about changes, to establish just systems and practices, we have to work with others and build up a force that can go against the prevailing current. We have to practice the virtues of social justice and social love.

The virtue of social justice obliges each of us to work with others to change unjust systems and practices and create structures which work for the common good, the good of each and all. We are obliged to practice social justice all the time in all our groups: family, parish, school, workplace, labour union, business, community and government. Individuals can practice the virtue of social justice as individuals, by working for the common good, but they can be more effective by working with others, in an organizational way. (Compendium Soc. Doct. 193,201,325,332,369,564. Cat. Cath. Ch. 1928)

The virtue of social love obliges us to work with others to make attitudes and practices express respect, mutual care and love in groups and among groups for the common good. (Compendium Soc. Doct. 207-208, 580-583)

Social love has to guide all our activities for justice to be effective in bringing people together in harmony.

Social justice and social love aim to overcome the underlying causes, the unjust structures at the root of social ills. (Comp. Soc. Doct. 207, 208; Cat. C. Ch. 1939-41).

Questions

How are you practicing the virtues of social justice and social love in your family and in all of the groups you are in?



Social Justice and Social Love in the Documents of the Church

POPE BENEDICT'S ENCYCLICAL: CARITAS IN VERITATE (CHARITY IN TRUTH)

“To love someone is to desire that person’s good and to take effective steps to secure it. Besides the good of the individual, there is a good that is linked to living in society: the common good. It is the good of “all of us”, made up of individuals, families and intermediate groups who together constitute society. To desire the common good and strive towards it is a requirement of justice and charity. To take a stand for the common good is to be solicitous for that complex of institutions that give structure to the life of society, juridically, civilly, politically and culturally. ” (Ency. 7)

“Men and women are called to make themselves instruments of grace so as to pour forth God’s charity and weave networks of charity.” (Ency. 5)

COMPENDIUM OF THE SOCIAL DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH

“No legislation, no system of rules or negotiation will ever succeed in persuading men and peoples to live in unity, brotherhood and peace: no line of reasoning will ever be able to surpass the appeal of love. Love is a force capable of inspiring new ways of approaching the problems of today’s world, of profoundly renewing structures, social organizations, legal systems from within.” (Comp. 207)

“It is an indispensable act of love (social love) to strive to organize and structure society so that one’s neighbour will not find himself in poverty.” (Comp. 208)

VISION OF THE CHURCH AND OF PARISHES IMBUED WITH SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SOCIAL LOVE

If we put the fundamental principles of Catholic Social Teaching together in relation to one another, with one principle leading into the next, all of them being put into practice by the Church, this is the picture of the Church we would have: Our focus would be on the dignity of the human person created in the image of God whose human rights flow from that personhood. All of us would be seeking the common good, the good of each and every individual person. We would ensure that every group had the freedom to do what it could best do for itself but with the support of higher bodies. We would be living in solidarity, in union with one another and supporting one another. We would be working together in our groups and with other groups to ensure that the systems and structures of society contribute to the common good, so that no one is deprived of what is needed to achieve his potential as a human person. We would be living together in mutual respect with mutual care of one another, all our relationships diffused with the love of Christ, fulfilling our vocation to love our brothers and sisters, as God created human society to be. We would be a sign and instrument of the coming Kingdom of God.



*“With her social doctrine the Church proclaims God and his mystery of salvation in Christ to every human being.”
(Compendium of Social Doctrine 67)*