

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING



A. THE WORLD SCRIPTURE ENVISIONS FOR US

1. Some Examples:

Joel 2:13 (*"Rend your hearts, not your garments...for your God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love."*)

Exodus 22:21-22 (*"...If you ever wrong [any widow or orphan] and the cry out to me, I will surely listen to their cry."*)

Isaiah 58:6-10 (*"Is this not, rather, the fast that I choose: releasing those bound unjustly...setting free the oppressed...sharing your bread with the hungry, bringing the afflicted and homeless into our house; clothing the naked..."*)

Micah 6:1-8 (*"Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord and you enduring foundations of the earth....You have been told, O mortal one what is good and what the Lord requires of you: only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God."*)

Matthew 25:31-46 (*"what you did to the least ones, you did to me"*)

Luke 4:16-21 (*“He unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written, ‘the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor...”*)

Luke 10:25-29 (*“A lawyer stood up to test Jesus: ‘Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ Jesus answered: ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart...soul...strength...mind, and your neighbor as yourself...And the lawyer answered, ‘But who is my neighbor?’”*)

James 5:1-6 (*“Come, now, you rich, weep and wail over your impending miseries...”*)

1 Peter 2:10 (*“Once you were ‘no people’ but now you are God’s people”*)

2. Summary

Wherever the reign of God is, there needs to be visible, concrete, socially significant manifestations of justice. Catholic Social Teaching does not depend on one text or other of Scripture to prove it has biblical foundations. Rather, it is grounded in the whole of Scripture and the revelation of a God who wants to be in relationship with us, who covenants with us by inviting us into a community of faith and faithfulness in a way that obliges us to create a society of right relationships/justice visible to the world. If we do, we become part of God’s fullness of life/shalom/ the reign of God breaking into the world. If we do not, then we create the brokenness we see in the world—within ourselves, families, communities, nations, environment—which are signs of sin and signals that such justice is lacking. To address such brokenness the Church offers a set of principles that has come to be called Catholic Social Teaching (Doctrine)

B. ORIGINS AND HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

Phase I: The Church Responds to the Modern Industrial World: Catholic Social Teaching Related to Local/National Economic Realities

Context:

Rise of “modern”, developing world, industrial capitalism and socialist alternatives as challenge to more stable agrarian, hierarchical, organic model of past

Focal points:

- 1) Protection of family stability through an emphasis on the common good (understood in a paternalistic manner)
- 2) The excesses of capitalism of the time countered by rights of workers to fair wages, acceptable working conditions, and free trade associations (unions)
- 3) Concern about socialist movements countered by a reminder of “natural right” to private property, but with acceptance of limited state intervention
- 4) The importance of respecting subsidiarity

Documents:

1891 *Rerum Novarum* (On the Condition of Labor, Leo XIII)

1931 *Quadragesimo Anno* (On Reconstructing the Social Order, Pius XI)

Quotes from Rerum Novarum:

The following duties . . . concern rich men and employers: Workers are not to be treated as slaves; justice demands that the dignity of human personality be respected in them, ... gainful occupations are not a mark of shame to man, but rather of respect, as they provide him with an honorable means of supporting life. It is shameful and

inhuman, however, to use men as things for gain and to put no more value on them than what they are worth in muscle and energy. (#31)

Equity therefore commands that public authority show proper concern for the worker so that from what he contributes to the common good he may receive what will enable him, housed, clothed, and secure, to live his life without hardship. Whence, it follows that all those measures ought to be favored which seem in any way capable of benefiting the condition of workers. Such solicitude is so far from injuring anyone, that it is destined rather to benefit all, because it is of absolute interest to the State that those citizens should not be miserable in every respect from whom such necessary goods proceed. (#51)

In protecting the rights of private individuals, however, special consideration must be given to the weak and the poor. For the nation, as it were, of the rich, is guarded by its own defenses and is in less need of governmental protection, whereas the suffering multitude, without the means to protect itself, relies especially on the protection of the State. Wherefore, since wage workers are numbered among the great mass of the needy, the State must include them under its special care and foresight. (#54)

Phase II: The Church Engaged with an Interdependent World: Catholic Social Teaching Expanding to Address International Political and Economic Realities

Context:

Experience of horror of two world wars, establishment of east-west political and economic blocs, arms race and Cold War, end of colonialism and addressing the needs of “underdeveloped” nations

Focal points:

- 1) More dialogical relationship between Church and world
- 2) Greater emphasis on the common good as key moral criterion, no longer understood paternalistically
- 3) Social justice as constitutive dimension of the gospel
- 4) More focus on the complementary side of subsidiarity and the responsibility of and need for intervention at times
- 5) Emphasis on the need for stopping the arms race and institutions to guarantee peaceful relations among countries
- 6) Expanded understanding of human rights beyond basic economic rights for workers to include social rights
- 7) Greater emphasis on the social debt/responsible use of private property
- 8) More emphasis on both the Inviolable dignity and social nature of every person
- 9) Responsibility for nations to aid “developing” nations and recognition of stronger state intervention to achieve justice

Documents:

1961 *Mater et Magistra* (Christianity and Social Progress, John XXIII)

1963 *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth, John XXIII)

1965 *Gaudium et Spes* (The Church in the Modern World, Vatican Council II)

1967 *Populorum Progressio* (On the Development of Peoples, Paul VI)

1971 *Octogesima Adveniens* (A Call to Action, Paul VI)

1971 *Justitia in Mundo* (Justice in the World, Synod of Bishops)

Bishop Conference Documents such as the U.S. Bishops’

Pastorals 1983 *The Challenge of Peace* and 1986 *Economic Justice for All*, CELAM’s 1968 Medellin statements, etc.

Quotes from Mater et Magistra:

It is necessary that public authorities have a correct understanding of the common good. This embraces the sum total of those conditions of social living, whereby people are enabled more fully and more readily to achieve their own perfection. (#65)

Wherefore, whatever the progress in technology and economic life, there can be neither justice nor peace in the world, so long as men fail to realize how great is their dignity; for they have been created by God and are His children. (#215)

Individual human beings are the foundation, the cause and the end of every social institution. That is necessarily so, for men are by nature social beings. This fact must be recognized, as also the fact that they are raised in the plan of Providence to an order of reality which is above nature. (#219)

Quotes from Gaudium et Spes:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. (#1)

For excessive economic and social differences between the members of the one human family or population groups cause scandal, and militate against social justice, equity, the dignity of the human person, as well as social and international peace. (#29)

Economic development must ... not be left to the sole judgement of a few men or groups, possessing excessive economic power, or of the political community alone, or of certain powerful nations. It is proper, on the contrary, that at every level the largest number of people have an active share in directing that development. (#65)

Quote from Justitia in Mundo:

Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation. (#6)

Phase III: The Church in the Emerging Post-Modern, Post-Industrial World: Catholic Social Teaching Adjusting to Global Nature of All Social, Political, Economic, and Cultural Realities

Context:

Breakdown of East-West bloc and failure of communist socialism as economic, political model; failure of developmental model for emerging nations and increased disparity between rich/ poor nations, emergence of a global perspectives and realities; long pontificate of John Paul II

Focal points:

- 1) Solidarity as core principle and virtue in addressing socio-economic, cultural and political issues
- 2) Recognition of energy and potential of capitalist economic model but condemnation of current western-style capitalism's greed, consumerism; priority of labor and human subject over capital
- 3) The need to protect humanity's openness to the transcendent: strong critique of secularism
- 4) Protection of traditional understanding of marriage and family
- 5) Emphasis on culture of life and the protection of life from conception to natural death

- 6) Greater emphasis on the global nature of economic, social realities and solutions
- 7) Preferential option for poor and marginal fully embraced

Documents:

- 1979 *Redemptor Hominis* (The Redeemer of Humanity, John Paul II)
1981 *Laborem Exercens* (On Human Work, John Paul II)
1987 *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (The Social Concerns of the Church, John Paul II)
1991 *Centesimus Annus* (The 100th Anniversary Year, John Paul II)
1995 *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life, John Paul II)
2005 *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace)
2005 *Deus Caritas Est* (God Is Love, Benedict XVI)
2009 *Caritas Veritate* (On Christian Love, Benedict XVI)

Quote from Centesimus Annus :

Can it perhaps be said that, after the failure of Communism, capitalism is the victorious social system, and that capitalism should be the goal of the countries now making efforts to rebuild their economy and society? ... The answer is obviously complex. If by "capitalism" is meant an economic system which recognizes the fundamental and positive role of business, the market, private property and the resulting responsibility for the means of production, as well as free human creativity in the economic sector, then the answer is certainly in the affirmative, ... But if by "capitalism" is meant a system in which freedom in the economic sector is not circumscribed within a strong juridical framework which places it at the service of human freedom in its totality and sees it as a particular aspect of that freedom, the core of which is ethical and religious, then the reply is certainly negative. (Official text, #42)

Quote from Caritas Veritate:

Another important consideration is the common good. 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. It is a good that is sought not for its own sake, but for the people who belong to the social community and who can only really and effectively pursue their good within it. 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 on the one hand to be solicitous for, and on the other hand to avail oneself of, that complex of institutions that give structure to the life of society, juridically, civilly, politically and culturally, making it the pólis, or "city". The more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbors, the more effectively we love them. (#7)

Phase Four(?): The Church and Catholic Social Teaching in a World of Global Crises

Context:

Recognition of devastating human effects due to climate change, huge economic inequalities, ongoing violence leading to greatly expanded immigration and refugee situations; pastoral need to address less than perfect situations/people with God's mercy

Focal points:

- 1) Greater emphasis on ecology, climate, the environment and care for all creation as essential to social justice of individuals and groups
- 2) World-wide social upheaval caused by an economic upheavals (increasingly disconnected from providing for the basics of

- life, dominance of social media and information technology, rise of AI, greater wealth gaps between haves and have nots), political crises with increasing concentrations of political power in various ideological blocs, climate change affecting rural, poorer nations, all leading to mass migrations/refugees
- 3) Increased critique of excesses of global capitalism
 - 4) Solidarity with those displaced by social upheaval and climate change
 - 5) Focus on relationships, especially those who are different from us and evangelical joy in solidarity with those who are in need
 - 6) Greater emphasis on subsidiarity / synodality within the Church's own structures

Documents:

2013 *Evangelii Gaudium* (Joy of the Gospel, Francis)

2015 *Laudato Si'* (Care for Our Common Home, Francis)

2018 *Gaudete et Exsultate* (On the Call to Holiness, Francis)

2020 *Querida Amazonia* (Beloved Amazon, Francis)

2020 *Fratelli Tutti* (On Social Friendship, Francis)

Quotes from Laudato Si':

The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation. In fact, the deterioration of the environment and of society affects the most vulnerable people on the planet... The impact of present imbalances is also seen in the premature death of many of the poor.
(#48)

A change in lifestyle could bring healthy pressure to bear on those who wield political, economic and social power. This is what consumer movements accomplish by boycotting certain products. They prove successful in changing the way businesses operate,

forcing them to consider their environmental footprint and their patterns of production... This shows us the great need for a sense of social responsibility on the part of consumers. "Purchasing is always a moral – and not simply economic – act." Today, in a word, "the issue of environmental degradation challenges us to examine our lifestyle". (#206)

Quote from Gaudete et Exsultate :

The other harmful ideological error is found in those who find suspect the social engagement of others, seeing it as superficial, worldly, secular, materialist, communist or populist. Or they relativize it, as if there are other more important matters, or the only thing that counts is one particular ethical issue or cause that they themselves defend. Our defense of the innocent unborn, for example, needs to be clear, firm and passionate, for at stake is the dignity of a human life, which is always sacred and demands love for each person, regardless of his or her stage of development. Equally sacred, however, are the lives of the poor, those already born, the destitute, the abandoned and the underprivileged, the vulnerable infirm and elderly exposed to covert euthanasia, the victims of human trafficking, new forms of slavery, and every form of rejection. We cannot uphold an ideal of holiness that would ignore injustice in a world where some revel, spend with abandon and live only for the latest consumer goods, even as others look on from afar, living their entire lives in abject poverty. (#101)

Quotes from Fratelli Tutti:

One effective way to weaken historical consciousness, critical thinking, the struggle for justice and the processes of integration is to empty great words of their meaning or to manipulate them. Nowadays, what do certain words like democracy, freedom, justice or unity really mean? They have been bent and shaped to serve as tools for domination, as meaningless tags that can be used to justify any action. (#14)

Certain populist political regimes, as well as certain liberal economic approaches, maintain that an influx of migrants is to be prevented at all costs. Arguments are also made for the propriety of limiting aid to poor countries, so that they can hit rock bottom and find themselves forced to take austerity measures. One fails to realize that behind such statements, abstract and hard to support, great numbers of lives are at stake. Many migrants have fled from war, persecution and natural catastrophes. Others, rightly, “are seeking opportunities for themselves and their families. They dream of a better future and they want to create the conditions for achieving it”. (#37)

C. THE TWO FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES

Dignity of Every Human Being

- Human Dignity is **Intrinsic**
- Human Dignity is **Inalienable**
- Human Dignity is **Inviolable**

The Common Good

- The sum total of those conditions of social living, whereby every person can fulfill their basic needs and maintain their fundamental dignity
- Not “the greatest good for the greatest number”
- Not the majority-imposed good
- Not just economic well-being but social, political, cultural, familial, spiritual well-being

D. THREE KEY AUXILIARY PRINCIPLES

The Universal Claim on All Goods Leading to a Preferential Option for the Poor (Marginal)

- Private ownership as a conditional right

- All goods subordinate to God’s purposes
- A way to test whether the common good is being served—the most in need among us have access to sufficient goods to maintain their human dignity

The Principle of Subsidiarity to Create Meaningful Participation

- Subsidiarity means respecting the creativity and legitimate responsibility of “intermediate” associations, groups, expressions of socio-economic-political-cultural life which spontaneously arise
- Balanced against the responsibility for larger, higher level institutions to intervene, if necessary for dignity and the common good
- Goal is to give people a meaningful participation in and responsibility for the social, economic, political, and cultural life of communities

The Principle of Solidarity to Overcome Divisions

- Especially highlighted by Pope John Paul II
- Pope Francis: “Unity prevails over conflict” (*Gaudium Evangelium*, #226 ff.)
- The danger of ideological divisions
- Both a moral principle and a virtue

E. THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

God:

Because God is the God who’ hears the cry of the poor’, who invites us into a communion of divine persons, whose Spirit calls us to make that communion more visible in the world, all moral decisions are more than just an individual decision and have social repercussions, which require us to embody a solidarity that breaks apart class differences and leads to communities of compassion and justice.

Jesus Christ:

Because Jesus is the incarnate Word whose life, death and resurrection are the pattern of deepest human living within which God is experienced, we are called to that same pattern in our own personal and communal lives, including embracing a preferential option for the those who are poor or on the margins, which requires a willingness to sacrifice so that all might have access to the basic goods necessary for life.

The Human Person:

Because every human person is truly made in the image of God, the dignity of the human person is inalienable and intrinsic and a full or integral humanism includes respecting/protecting life from its first moment to its natural end, safeguarding every human being's capacity for transcendence, and providing access to all the basic rights and goods necessary for each person to flourish.

Church:

Because the historical mission and ministry of Jesus is entrusted to the Church and the Church is to be both a sign and instrument of the unity and salvation of humanity, action on behalf of justice and witnessing to that justice within concrete social settings is a constitutive element of the gospel and therefore of a Church that is the Church of Jesus Christ.

Creation:

Because creation is a gift of God for all humanity, past, present and future, care for the environment has a claim on us and all property and goods fall under the ethical requirement of serving the common good and the universal destination of all goods not just for today but for future generations as well.

Eschatology:

Because all initiatives are under an 'eschatological proviso,' and the kingdom of God is both breaking in now and yet not to be equated fully with any particular existing social and political structure, Catholic social teaching needs to embody a certain humility,

openness to the legitimate wisdom and autonomy of others, and a concern for a subsidiarity which protects that autonomy and the full participation of all in the search for justice.

F. INTEGRATING CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING: INTO A JUSTICE-CENTERED LIFE AND SPIRITUALITY

Quote from Laudato Si':

“At the same time [Patriarch] Bartholomew has drawn attention to the ethical and spiritual roots of environmental problems, which require that we look for solutions not only in technology but in a change of humanity; otherwise we would be dealing with mere symptoms. He asks us to replace consumption with sacrifice, greed with generosity, wastefulness with a spirit of sharing, an asceticism which ‘entails learning to give, not simply give up. It is a way of loving, of gradually moving away from what I want to what God’s world needs. It is liberation from fear, greed, and compulsion.’ As Christians, we are called ‘to accept the world as a sacrament of communion, as a way of sharing with God and our neighbors on a global scale. It is our humble conviction that the divine and human meet in the slightest detail in the seamless garment of God’s creation, in the last speck of dust on God’s planet.” (#9)

Examination of Conscience

- *How do we engender a sense of wonder and awe for creation that enables us to see ourselves as part of the interconnected unfolding of the universe and its life?*
- *Do we approach each interaction, reminding ourselves of the dignity of the person(s) in front of us—even are enemies—determined to respect that dignity by words and actions? Do we treat others as an end in itself or merely as a means to an end?*

- *Do we treat others as an end in itself or merely as a means to an end?*
- *Can we see our responsibility for others as a joyful obligation within which our deepest freedom can be lived?*
- *Can we develop the habit of thinking through choices from the perspective of the common good, not simply the individual good or most immediate greater good?*
- *Can we learn to think in terms of the common good from the perspective of the most vulnerable, those who are poor or on the margins of life and see our sharing of our personal goods (those that go beyond what we truly need) not as a matter of charity but of justice?*
- *How can we shape our decisions in a way that enhances participatory structures and opportunities?*
- *How can we respect the finitude of the created world, simplify our lives, and practice a renewed and appropriate asceticism?*

G. FURTHER DISCUSSION

- 1. The interplay among justice, peace, and charity**
- 2. Absolute obligations within absolute norms and prudential judgments**
- 3. Social-political implications vs. partisan party politics**
- 4. Other Discussion Issues?**

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