

UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIAL DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH

September 12, 2021

From the USCCB [website](#)...

The Church's social teaching is a rich treasure of wisdom about building a just society and living lives of holiness amidst the challenges of modern society. Modern Catholic social teaching has been articulated through a tradition of [papal, conciliar, and episcopal documents](#). The depth and richness of this tradition can be understood best through a direct reading of these documents. In these brief reflections, we highlight several of the key themes that are at the heart of our Catholic social tradition.

Life and Dignity of the Human Person

The Catholic Church proclaims that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. This belief is the foundation of all the principles of our social teaching. In our society, human life is under direct attack from [abortion](#) and [euthanasia](#). The value of human life is being threatened by [cloning](#), [embryonic stem cell research](#), and the use of the [death penalty](#). The intentional targeting of civilians in [war](#) or terrorist attacks is always wrong. Catholic teaching also calls on us 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](#). We 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.

Call to Family, Community, and Participation

The person is not only sacred but also social. [How we organize our society](#) -- in economics and politics, in law and policy -- directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community. [Marriage and the family](#) are the central social institutions that must be supported and strengthened, not undermined. We 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.

Rights and Responsibilities

The Catholic tradition teaches that human dignity can be protected and a healthy community can be achieved only if human rights are protected and responsibilities are met. Therefore, 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.

Option for the Poor and Vulnerable

A basic moral test is how our most vulnerable members are faring. In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, our 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 Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers

The [economy must serve people](#), not the other way around. Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God's creation. If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected--the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to the organization and joining of unions, to private property, and to economic initiative.

Solidarity

We are [one human family](#) whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. We are our brothers and sisters keepers, wherever they may be. Loving our neighbor has [global dimensions](#) in a shrinking world. 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.¹ The Gospel calls us to be peacemakers. Our love for all our sisters and brothers demands that we promote peace in a world surrounded by violence and conflict.

Care for God's Creation

We show our respect for the Creator by our [stewardship of creation](#). Care for the earth is not just an Earth Day slogan, it is a requirement of our faith. We 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.

[Publication No. 5-315](#)

USCCB Communications

Washington, D.C.

ISBN 1-57455-315-1

1 Paul VI, [For the Celebration of the Day Of Peace](#) (Rome: January 1, 1972).

Text is drawn from *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1998) and [Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility](#) (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2003).

Also from the [USCCB](#)...

Papal and Vatican Documents

- [Rerum Novarum](#) (On the Condition of Labor) – Pope Leo XIII, 1891
- [Quadragesimo Anno](#) (After Forty Years) – Pope Pius XI, 1931
- [Mater et Magistra](#) (Christianity and Social Progress) – St. John XXIII, 1961
- [Pacem in Terris](#) (Peace on Earth) – St. John XXIII, 1963
- [Gaudium et Spes](#) (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World) – Second Vatican Council, 1965
- [Dignitatis Humanae](#) (Declaration on Religious Freedom) – Second Vatican Council, 1965
- [Populorum Progressio](#) (On the Development of Peoples) – Blessed Paul VI, 1967
- [Octogesima Adveniens](#) (A Call to Action) – Blessed Pope Paul VI, 1971

- [Evangelii Nuntiandi](#) (Evangelization in the Modern World) – Blessed Paul VI, 1975
- [Laborem Exercens](#) (On Human Work) – St. John Paul II, 1981
- [Sollicitudo Rei Socialis](#) (On Social Concern) – St. John Paul II, 1987
- [The Church and Racism: Towards a more fraternal society](#) – Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 1989
- [Centesimus Annus](#) (The Hundredth Year) – St. John Paul II, 1991
- [Veritatis splendor](#) (The Splendor of Truth) – St. John Paul II, 1993
- [Evangelium Vitae](#) (The Gospel of Life) – St. John Paul II, 1995
- [Dignitas Personae](#) (The Dignity of a Person) – Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1998
- [Ecclesia in America](#) (The Church in America) – St. John Paul II, 1999
- [Fides et Ratio](#) (Faith and Reason) – St. John Paul II, 1998
- [Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life](#) - Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2002
- [Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church](#) – Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004
- [Deus Caritas Est](#) (God Is Love) – Pope Benedict XVI, 2005
- [Sacramentum Caritatis](#) (The Eucharist as the Source and Summit of the Church's Life and Mission) – Pope Benedict XVI, 2007 (especially paragraphs 47, 49, 82-84, and 88-92)
- [Caritas in Veritate](#) (Charity in Truth) – Pope Benedict XVI, 2009
- [Evangelii Gaudium](#) (The Joy of the Gospel) – Pope Francis, 2013
- [Laudato Si'](#) (On Care for Our Common Home) – Pope Francis, 2015
- [Fratelli Tutti](#) (On Fraternity and Social Friendship) – Pope Francis, 2020

From the *Compendium*...

AN INTEGRAL AND SOLIDARY HUMANISM

a. At the dawn of the Third Millennium

1. *The Church moves further into the Third Millennium of the Christian era as a pilgrim people, guided by Christ, the “great Shepherd” (Heb 13:20). He is the “Holy Door” (cf. Jn 10:9) through which we passed during the Great Jubilee of the year 2000[1]. Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life (cf. Jn 14:6): contemplating the Lord's face, we confirm our faith and our hope in him, the one Saviour and goal of history.*

The Church continues to speak to all people and all nations, for it is only in the name of Christ that salvation is given to men and women. Salvation, which the Lord Jesus obtained “at a price” (1 Cor 6:20; cf. 1 Pet 1:18-19), is achieved in the new life that awaits the righteous after death, but it also permeates this world in the realities of the economy and labour, of technology and communications, of society and politics, of the international community and the relations among cultures and peoples. “Jesus came to bring integral salvation, one which embraces the whole person and all mankind, and opens up the wondrous prospect of divine filiation”[2].

2. *At the dawn of this Third Millennium, the Church does not tire of proclaiming the Gospel that brings salvation and genuine freedom also to temporal realities. She is mindful of the solemn*

exhortation given by Saint Paul to his disciple Timothy: "Preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths. As for you, always be steady, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfil your ministry" (2 Tim 4:2-5).

3. *To the people of our time, her travelling companions, the Church also offers her social doctrine.* In fact, when the Church "fulfils her mission of proclaiming the Gospel, she bears witness to man, in the name of Christ, to his dignity and his vocation to the communion of persons. She teaches him the demands of justice and peace in conformity with divine wisdom"[3]. *This doctrine has its own profound unity, which flows from Faith in a whole and complete salvation, from Hope in a fullness of justice, and from Love which makes all mankind truly brothers and sisters in Christ: it is the expression of God's love for the world, which he so loved "that he gave his only Son" (Jn 3:16). The new law of love embraces the entire human family and knows no limits, since the proclamation of the salvation wrought by Christ extends "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).*

4. *Discovering that they are loved by God, people come to understand their own transcendent dignity, they learn not to be satisfied with only themselves but to encounter their neighbour in a network of relationships that are ever more authentically human.* Men and women who are made "new" by the love of God are able to change the rules and the quality of relationships, transforming even social structures. They are people capable of bringing peace where there is conflict, of building and nurturing fraternal relationships where there is hatred, of seeking justice where there prevails the exploitation of man by man. Only love is capable of radically transforming the relationships that men maintain among themselves. This is the perspective that allows every person of good will to perceive the broad horizons of justice and human development in truth and goodness.

5. Love faces a vast field of work and the Church is eager to make her contribution with her social doctrine, which concerns the whole person and is addressed to all people. So many needy brothers and sisters are waiting for help, so many who are oppressed are waiting for justice, so many who are unemployed are waiting for a job, so many peoples are waiting for respect. "How can it be that even today there are still people dying of hunger? Condemned to illiteracy? Lacking the most basic medical care? Without a roof over their head? The scenario of poverty can extend indefinitely, if in addition to its traditional forms we think of its newer patterns. These latter often affect financially affluent sectors and groups which are nevertheless threatened by despair at the lack of meaning in their lives, by drug addiction, by fear of abandonment in old age or sickness, by marginalization or social discrimination ... And how can we remain indifferent to the prospect of an ecological crisis which is making vast areas of our planet uninhabitable and hostile to humanity? Or by the problems of peace, so often threatened by the spectre of catastrophic wars? Or by contempt for the fundamental human rights of so many people, especially children?"[4].

6. *Christian love leads to denunciation, proposals and a commitment to cultural and social projects; it prompts positive activity that inspires all who sincerely have the good of man at heart*

to make their contribution. Humanity is coming to understand ever more clearly that it is linked by one sole destiny that requires joint acceptance of responsibility, a responsibility inspired by an integral and shared humanism. It sees that this mutual destiny is often conditioned and even imposed by technological and economic factors, and it senses the need for a greater moral awareness that will guide its common journey. Marvelling at the many innovations of technology, the men and women of our day strongly desire that progress be directed towards the true good of the humanity, both of today and tomorrow.

b. The significance of this document

7. The Christian knows that in the social doctrine of the Church can be found the principles for reflection, the criteria for judgment and the directives for action which are the starting point for the promotion of an integral and solidary humanism. Making this doctrine known constitutes, therefore, a genuine pastoral priority, so that men and women will be enlightened by it and will be thus enabled to interpret today's reality and seek appropriate paths of action: "The teaching and spreading of her social doctrine are part of the Church's evangelizing mission" [5].

It is in this light that the publication of a document providing the fundamental elements of the social doctrine of the Church, showing the relationship between this doctrine and the new evangelization [6], appeared to be so useful. The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, which has drawn up the present document and is fully responsible for its content, prepared the text in a broad-based consultation with its own Members and Consulters, with different Dicasteries of the Roman Curia, with the Bishops' Conferences of various countries, with individual Bishops and with experts on the issues addressed.

8. This document intends to present in a complete and systematic manner, even if by means of an overview, the Church's social teaching, which is the fruit of careful Magisterial reflection and an expression of the Church's constant commitment in fidelity to the grace of salvation wrought in Christ and in loving concern for humanity's destiny. Herein the most relevant theological, philosophical, moral, cultural and pastoral considerations of this teaching are systematically presented as they relate to social questions. In this way, witness is borne to the fruitfulness of the encounter between the Gospel and the problems that mankind encounters on its journey through history. In studying this Compendium, it is good to keep in mind that the citations of Magisterial texts are taken from documents of differing authority. Alongside council documents and encyclicals there are also papal addresses and documents drafted by offices of the Holy See. As one knows, but it seems to bear repeating, the reader should be aware that different levels of teaching authority are involved. The document limits itself to putting forth the fundamental elements of the Church's social doctrine, leaving to Episcopal Conferences the task of making the appropriate applications as required by the different local situations [7].

9. *This document offers a complete overview of the fundamental framework of the doctrinal corpus of Catholic social teaching. This overview allows us to address appropriately the social issues of our day, which must be considered as a whole, since they are characterized by an ever greater interconnectedness, influencing one another mutually and becoming increasingly a matter of concern for the entire human family. The*

exposition of the Church's social doctrine is meant to suggest a systematic approach for finding solutions to problems, so that discernment, judgment and decisions will correspond to reality, and so that solidarity and hope will have a greater impact on the complexities of current situations. These principles, in fact, are interrelated and shed light on one another mutually, insofar as they are an expression of Christian anthropology[8], fruits of the revelation of God's love for the human person. *However, it must not be forgotten that the passing of time and the changing of social circumstances will require a constant updating of the reflections on the various issues raised here, in order to interpret the new signs of the times.*

10. *The document is presented as an instrument for the moral and pastoral discernment of the complex events that mark our time; as a guide to inspire, at the individual and collective levels, attitudes and choices that will permit all people to look to the future with greater trust and hope; as an aid for the faithful concerning the Church's teaching in the area of social morality.*

From this there can spring new strategies suited to the demands of our time and in keeping with human needs and resources. But above all there can arise the motivation to rediscover the vocation proper to the different charisms within the Church that are destined to the evangelization of the social order, because “*all the members of the Church are sharers in this secular dimension*”[9]. In short, the text is proposed as an incentive for dialogue with all who sincerely desire the good of mankind.

11. *This document is intended first of all for Bishops, who will determine the most suitable methods for making it known and for interpreting it correctly. It is in fact part of the Bishops' “munus docendi” to teach that “worldly things and human institutions are ordered, according to the plan of God the Creator, towards people's salvation, and that they can therefore make no small contribution to the building up of the Body of Christ” [10]. Priests, men and women religious, and, in general, those responsible for formation will find herein a guide for their teaching and a tool for their pastoral service. The lay faithful, who seek the Kingdom of God “by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will”[11], will find in it enlightenment for their own specific mission. Christian communities will be able to look to this document for assistance in analyzing situations objectively, in clarifying them in the light of the unchanging words of the Gospel, in drawing principles for reflection, criteria for judgment and guidelines for action[12].*

12. *This document is proposed also to the brethren of other Churches and Ecclesial Communities, to the followers of other religions, as well as to all people of good will who are committed to serving the common good: may they receive it as the fruit of a universal human experience marked by countless signs of the presence of God's Spirit. It is a treasury of things old and new (cf. Mt 13:52), which the Church wishes to share, in thanksgiving to God, from whom comes “every good endowment and ever perfect gift” (Jas 1:17). It is a sign of hope in the fact that religions and cultures today show openness to dialogue and sense the urgent need to join forces in promoting justice, fraternity, peace and the growth of the human person.*

The Catholic Church joins her own commitment to that made in the social field by other Churches and Ecclesial Communities, whether at the level of doctrinal reflection or at the practical level. Together with them, the Catholic Church is convinced that from the

common heritage of social teachings preserved by the living tradition of the people of God there will come motivations and orientations for an ever closer cooperation in the promotion of justice and peace[13].

c. At the service of the full truth about man

13. *This document is an act of service on the part of the Church to the women and men of our time, to whom she offers the legacy of her social doctrine, according to that style of dialogue by which God himself, in his only-begotten Son made man, “addresses men as his friends (cf. Ex 33:11; Jn 15:14-15) and moves among them (cf. Bar 3:38)” [14]. Drawing inspiration from the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, this document too places “man considered whole and entire, with body and soul, heart and conscience, mind and will” [15] as the key to its whole exposition. In this perspective, the Church is “inspired by no earthly ambition and seeks but one solitary goal: to carry forward the work of Christ himself under the lead of the befriending Spirit. For Christ entered this world to bear witness to the truth, to save and not to sit in judgment, to serve and not to be served” [16].*

14. *By means of the present document, the Church intends to offer a contribution of truth to the question of man's place in nature and in human society, a question faced by civilizations and cultures in which expressions of human wisdom are found. Rooted in a past that is often thousands of years old and manifesting themselves in forms of religion, philosophy and poetic genius of every time and of every people, these civilizations and cultures offer their own interpretation of the universe and of human society, and seek an understanding of existence and of the mystery that surrounds it. Who am I? Why is there pain, evil, death, despite all the progress that has been made? What is the value of so many accomplishments if the cost has been unbearable? What will there be after this life? These are the basic questions that characterize the course of human life[17]. In this regard, we can recall the admonition “*Know yourself*”, carved on the temple portal at Delphi, which testifies to the basic truth that man, called to be set apart from the rest of creation, is *man* precisely because in his essence he is oriented to *knowing himself*.*

15. *The direction that human existence, society and history will take depends largely on the answers given to the questions of man's place in nature and society; the purpose of the present document is to make a contribution to these answers. The deepest meaning of human existence, in fact, is revealed in the free quest for that truth capable of giving direction and fullness to life. The aforementioned questions incessantly draw human intelligence and the human will to this quest. They are the highest expression of human nature, since they require a response that measures the depth of an individual's commitment to his own existence. Moreover, it is dealt here with *questions that are essentially religious*: “When the ‘why of things’ is investigated integrally with the search for the ultimate and exhaustive answer, then human reason reaches its apex and opens itself to religiousness. ... religiousness represents the loftiest expression of the human person, because it is the culmination of his rational nature. It springs from man's profound aspiration for truth and is at the basis of the free and personal search he makes for the divine” [18].*

16. *The fundamental questions accompanying the human journey from the very beginning take on even greater significance in our own day, because of the enormity of the challenges, the novelty of the situations and the importance of the decisions facing modern generations.*

The first of the great challenges facing humanity today is that of *the truth itself of the being who is man*. The boundary and relation between nature, technology and morality are issues that decisively summon personal and collective responsibility with regard to the attitudes to adopt concerning what human beings are, what they are able to accomplish and what they should be. A second challenge is found in *the understanding and management of pluralism and differences* at every level: in ways of thinking, moral choices, culture, religious affiliation, philosophy of human and social development. The third challenge is *globalization*, the significance of which is much wider and more profound than simple economic globalization, since history has witnessed the opening of a new era that concerns humanity's destiny.

17. *The disciples of Jesus Christ feel that they are involved with these questions; they too carry them within their hearts and wish to commit themselves, together with all men and women, to the quest for the truth and the meaning of life lived both as individual persons and as a society. They contribute to this quest by their generous witness to the free and extraordinary gift that humanity has received: God has spoken his Word to men and women throughout history; indeed he himself has entered history in order to enter into dialogue with humanity and to reveal to mankind his plan of salvation, justice and brotherhood. In Jesus Christ, his Son made man, God has freed us from sin and has shown us the path we are to walk and the goal towards which we are to strive.*

d. In the sign of solidarity, respect and love

18. *The Church journeys along the roads of history together with all of humanity. She lives in the world, and although not of the world (cf. Jn 17:14-16) she is called to serve the world according to her innermost vocation. This attitude, found also in the present document, is based on the deep conviction that just as it is important for the world to recognize the Church as a reality of history and a leaven in history, so too is it important for the Church to recognize what she has received from history and from the development of the human race[19]. The Second Vatican Council gave an eloquent demonstration of solidarity, respect and affection for the whole human family by engaging in dialogue with it about many problems, "bringing the light kindled from the Gospel and putting at the disposal of the human race the saving resources which the Church has received from her Founder under the promptings of the Holy Spirit. It is man himself who must be saved; it is human society which must be renewed"[20].*

19. *The Church, the sign in history of God's love for mankind and of the vocation of the whole human race to unity as children of the one Father[21], intends with this document on her social doctrine to propose to all men and women a humanism that is up to the standards of God's plan of love in history, an integral and solidary humanism capable of creating a new social, economic and political order, founded on the dignity and freedom of every human person, to be brought about in peace, justice and solidarity. This humanism can become a reality if individual men and women and their communities are able to cultivate moral and social virtues in themselves and spread them in society. "Then, under the necessary help of divine grace, there will arise a generation of new men, the moulders of a new humanity"[22].*