

# CATHOLIC SOCIAL TRADITION

## TEACHING, THOUGHT AND PRACTICE\*

The Catholic social tradition is part of a much larger moral and intellectual tradition of the Church that has been formed by a profound dynamic between word and deed, thought and action, theory and practice. Its words, thoughts and theories have been informed by a larger faith tradition encompassing the Scriptures, the official teachings of the Church, reflections and ideas of theologians, philosophers, social scientists, and others. Its deeds, actions and practices have been lived out by the sacrifices and witnesses of religious communities and the laity.

As members of Catholic institutions, this tradition provides a vision about our work in terms of its meaning, how we organize it, what it does for the community and how we are affected by it. We are both receivers of and contributors to this tradition. As *receivers* of this tradition, we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us. We owe a debt of gratitude to those who have paved the way with their sacrifices and contributions. As *contributors* to this tradition, we need both to embrace these past contributions and to face with courage and creativity the new and unique challenges of today and tomorrow. As members in Catholic institutions we have a calling not only to understand the principles of human dignity, subsidiarity, solidarity, etc., but to live them in a way that these principles can come alive organizationally. Applied in this way, our tradition gives rise to a practical theology of institutions capable of informing the way we hold our organizations in trust.

To do this successfully, as members we need to familiarize ourselves with three important dimensions of the Catholic social tradition: *teaching, thought* and *practice*. It is the dynamic of these three dimensions that make the Catholic social tradition a rich and powerful reservoir for building strong communities of work in Catholic institutions.

**I. Catholic Social Teachings:** Through encyclicals, pastoral letters and conciliar and other official documents, the social teachings of the Catholic Church seek to provide an “*accurate formulation* of the results of a careful reflection on the complex realities of human existence . . . in the light of faith and the Church’s tradition” (*Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 41). “The church’s social teaching is itself a valid instrument of evangelization. As such, it proclaims God and his mystery of salvation in Christ to every human being, and for that very reason reveals man to himself” (*Centesimus annus*, 54). These teachings seek to clarify and deepen our commitment to the common good by rousing deliberation over both what we are called to do and how we are called to think. The social teachings draw upon the long and varied tradition of Catholicism as well as from “scientific studies promoted by members of the laity, from the work of Catholic movements and associations, and from the church’s practical achievements in the social field” (*Centesimus annus*, 4). While the social teachings of the Church serve as an “indispensable and ideal orientation” to the good informed by faith, they do not and cannot detail specific answers to every economic, organizational and political problem (*Centesimus annus*, 43; see appendix for list of documents).

**II. Catholic Social Thought:** The Church’s social teachings inform and are informed by the various disciplines of knowledge. Theologians, philosophers, economists, political scientists,

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management theorists, educators, sociologists and others have throughout the years developed a tradition of thought, which extends the Church's social teachings into the specifics of the economic, organizational and political worlds. This thought provides a vitality to Catholic social teaching by testing out its general orientation in the specifics and complexities of modern life. This is why Catholic education is so important to Catholic social thought. It is the place where, as Theodore Hesburgh pointed out, the Church does her thinking (see bibliography for a taste of the various issues Catholic social thinkers are engaging).

**III. Catholic Social Practice:** Catholic social teaching and thought will not develop without educators, administrators, staff, peace activists, politicians, businesspeople, farmers, unionists and the various organizations of such practitioners (Catholic Charities, Catholic Schools, Catholic Health Care, Catholic Worker, UNIAPAC, Legatus, Catholic Peace Fellowship, Thomas More Society, Catholic Relief Services, etc.). John Paul II has strongly pointed out that more than ever, "the Church is aware that her social message will gain credibility more immediately from the *witness of actions* than as a result of its internal logic and consistency." Catholic social teaching and thought as messengers of the Gospel cannot be considered mere theory, "but above all else a basis and a motivation for action" (*Centesimus annus*, 57).

**Conclusion: The Catholic Social Tradition**, then, is a comprehensive term that captures the dynamic between teaching, thought and practice. We need to remind ourselves that the Catholic social tradition did not begin in 1891, but brings us back to the Old Testament and draws upon everything in the life and thought of the church. The social tradition, therefore, is broader and older than the modern social teachings of the church. It provides an intellectual framework and legacy informed by practice and experience from which the more recent (1891-present) social teachings draw.

This dynamic among the teachings, thoughts and practices of the tradition points to another important dynamic in the Church: *the different but complementary roles of its members*. While the popes and bishops have been given an authority of their teaching office (*magisterium*), they nonetheless look to others, and in particular to theologians and the laity, to bring social questions and problems to the fore, examine the social teachings, build upon them, develop their significance, and at times readjust them in light of changing circumstances. The laity especially are called to implement the church's teaching and thought in the social structures in which they most immediately participate. The social teachings of the popes, bishops and councils suppose appropriation by a laity whose faith-filled and imperfect engagement in the concrete, day-to-day complexities of human existence alone can turn the Gospel values into renewing action.

Finally, while we stand on the shoulders of a great tradition, it is not a perfect tradition, just as we are not a perfect people. The Catholic social tradition is a developing tradition that is always in need of renewal. But it is a tradition, and in particular, it is a living tradition, and what we do today will affect future generations. Catholic institutions are an important part of the Catholic social tradition, since they are both actors and thinkers in bringing forth God's kingdom. Our actions in the facilities we work in will not only affect those within the walls of those facilities, but will reverberate throughout the Church.

# CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

## THE MAJOR DOCUMENTS

<http://www.osjspm.org/cst/doclist.htm>  
<http://www.mcgill.pvt.k12.al.us/jerryd/cm/cst.htm>

### I. Leo XIII (1878-1903)

A. *Rerum novarum* (On the Condition of Labor) 1891: Often considered the first great social encyclical, *Rerum novarum* reacted to the detrimental effects of the Industrial Revolution, in particular, to the inhumane conditions of the worker and the growing option of socialism. In the encyclical, Leo XIII argued that with sub-living wages, poor working conditions and inadequate housing standards, the workers were the oppressed and exploited of Western society, upon which the rich had “laid a yoke almost of slavery.” For Leo XIII, the root cause of the workers’ plight was the owners’ treatment of labor as a commodity—just another factor of production determined by the laws of the free market. He perceived this treatment as a fundamental violation of the workers’ dignity. By treating workers as an extension of capital (that is, no different from the rest of creation), owners violate workers’ human nature.

### II. Pius XI (1922-1939)

A. *Quadragesimo anno* (On Reconstructing the Social Order) 1931: As Leo XIII responded to the abuses of the industrial revolution, Pius XI responded to its apparent demise in the Great Depression. Similar to Leo, Pius was still very concerned about the conditions of the worker; however, Pius went further to challenge the structures of the capitalist economic order. He proposed structures of economic self-government “modeled on the medieval guilds to overcome the chaotic injustice of capitalism and the regimented injustice of socialism.” One such structure was what he called vocational groups, which would bring workers, unions, managers, industry councils and the state to cooperate so as to create a socially just economy.

### III. Pius XII (1939-1958)

A. “Fiftieth Anniversary of *Rerum novarum*” 1941: Pius XII communicated most of his social teachings through addresses to specific audiences, which ranged from beekeepers to bankers. Speaking within the historical context of post World War II reconstruction, Pius XII addressed subjects such as unions, wages, codetermination, work as vocation and profession, unemployment, technology and so forth. One of Pius XII’s gravest concerns was the depersonalization of the people as a result of technological growth. To read some of his talks on social matters concerning work see <http://www.stthomas.edu/cathstudies/cst/mgmt/publications/PiusXII.html>

### IV. John XXIII (1959-1963)

A. *Mater et magistra* (Mother and Teacher) 1961: John XXIII responded to the increasing complex and interdependent nature of social relations and social institutions. In the 1950s and 60s, this was brought about by progress in technology, the increasing role of government, and the furthering education of the worker. He responded to these historical circumstances by expanding the concept of human dignity into a wage principle of “justice and equity” and a production process principle of “participation.”

B. *Pacem in terris* (Peace on Earth) 1963: Often considered the “rights” encyclical, John XXIII examines the problems of war, the arms race, state authority, political refugees and international relationships.

## **V. Vatican II (1962-1965)**

A. *Dignitatis humanae* (On Religious Liberty) 1965: Considered to be strongly influenced by the American Jesuit theologian John C. Murray, the “Council intends to develop the teaching of recent popes on the inviolable rights of the human person and on the constitutional order of society.”

B. *Gaudium et spes* (Church in the Modern World) 1965: This was the only document at Vatican II that was addressed to the whole world and not just the Church. It took 3 years of dialogue and debate to produce the document. It is probably the most comprehensive document the Church has in the social realm. If one wanted to get a good idea of what the Church taught on the social issues this would be a good place to start.

## **VI. Paul VI (1963-1978)**

A. *Populorum progressio* (On the Development of Peoples) 1967: Focused on the inequalities existing in developing countries. The encyclical “offers assistance in grasping all the dimensions of an integral human development and of a development in solidarity of humanity.”

B. *Octogesima adveniens* (Apostolic Letter on the 80th Anniversary of *Rerum novarum*) 1971: This document, like *Populorum progressio*, is more international in scope. Paul spent much of his time on the macro dimensions of economics.

## **VII. 1971 Synod of Bishops: Justice in the World**

A. *Iustitia in mundo* (Justice in the World) Synod of Bishops (1971): “The representative bishops, gathered in synod, acknowledge that it is not their job to elaborate a profound analysis of the situation of the world (a. 3). The starting point of their treatment of justice and injustice was the tremendous paradox they saw in the world: powerful forces were working to bring about a unified world society at the same time that forces of division and antagonism seemed to be increasing in strength (a. 7-9).” “While the Church is bound to give witness to justice, she recognizes that everyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes. Hence we must undertake an examination of the modes of acting and of the possessions and lifestyle found within the Church itself.”

## **VIII. John Paul II (1978-2005)**

A. *Laborem exercens* (On Human Work) 1981 -- Certainly the most systematic exposition on the nature of work by any pope. For John Paul II, to understand work one must have a sound anthropology which originates from Genesis, namely, the person is the Image of God, who is called to subdue and till the earth. This doctrine of creation from Genesis provides the meaning of work, namely, that in work people remain true agents and that both the means of production and the fruit of labor are at the service of those who work (the person has a transcendent value). Because people are made in the image of God, every aspect of work is subject to their dignity.

B. *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (On Social Concern) 1987: Celebrates the 20th anniversary of *Populorum progressio* by revisiting the question of development. He argued that one major reason for lack of development in many countries was the Eastern (former Soviet Union) and Western (US) blocs’ manipulation of such countries.

C. *Centesimus annus* (The Hundredth Year) 1991: Whereas *Laborem exercens* is systematic, *Centesimus annus* is historical. In the area of work, John Paul II explains the increasing importance of information regarding skills and technology and entrepreneurial virtues in the production process. His evaluation of the market economy is positive overall; however, he is concerned over the increasing phenomenon of consumerism, which he believes is a partial cause to the various social problems, in particular environmental degradation.

D. *Evangelium vitae* (On the Gospel of Life) 1995: Because the heart of the social teachings is human dignity, any act that violates life disrupts the social order. Quoting *Guadium et spes*, John

Paul II lists the many forms of assault to human dignity. “Whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia or willful self-destruction; whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; 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 men 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. They poison human society, but they do more harm to those who practice them than those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are a supreme dishonor to the Creator.” He proposes instead a “culture of life.”

## **IX. Benedict XVI**

A. *Deus caritas est* (God is Love) 2005: The first part of the encyclical presents a theological-philosophical reflection on "love" in its various dimensions - "eros," "philia," and "agape" - highlighting certain vital aspects of God's love for man and the inherent links that such love has with human love. The second part concerns the concrete implementation of the commandment to love others. Catholic social teaching is a body of doctrine that purifies and illuminates reason, offering its own contribution to the formation of consciences so that the true requirements of justice may be perceived, recognized and put into effect.

## **X. U.S. Catholic Bishops Statements**

A. *The Challenge of Peace* (1983): The Bishops examine the role of nuclear and conventional weaponry as part of U.S. defense policy.

B. *Program of Social Reconstruction* 1979 and *Economic Justice for All* 1986: The bishops of the U.S. attempted to apply the papal and conciliar teaching to the specific situation in the U.S. They also attempted to develop the tradition. Issues such as unemployment, poverty, plant closings, worker ownership and participation are examined in both documents. When the bishops wrote their recent pastoral letters, controversy ensued as to the role of the bishops in the public discourse on these social issues.

## **XI. The Catechism:**

**2420** “The Church makes a moral judgment about economic and social matters, ‘when the fundamental rights of the person or the salvation of souls requires it.’ In the moral order she bears a mission distinct from that of political authorities: the Church is concerned with the temporal aspects of the common good because they are ordered to the sovereign Good, our ultimate end. She strives to inspire right attitudes with respect to earthly goods and in socio-economic relationships.”

**2421** “The social doctrine of the Church developed in the nineteenth century when the Gospel encountered modern industrial society with its new structures for the production of consumer goods, its new concept of society, the state and authority, and its new forms of labor and ownership. The development of the doctrine of the Church on economic and social matters attests the permanent value of the Church’s teaching at the same time as it attests the true meaning of her Tradition, always living and active.”

**XII. Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church** provides a summary of the church’s social teachings in an accessible manner.

# CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT

## GETTING SPECIFIC ON PARTICULAR ISSUES

### A WORKING BIBLIOGRAPHY

#### **General Resources**

##### **Websites**

<http://www.shc.edu/theolibrary/cst.htm> (all CST documents and much more)

<http://www.cin.org/jp2doc.html> (John Paul II's encyclicals)

<http://www.cin.org/vatiidoc.html> (Vatican II Documents)

<http://www.nccbuscc.org/sdwp/national/workind.htm> ("Fair and Just Workplace: Principles and Practices for Catholic Health Care")

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**Family:**

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# CATHOLIC SOCIAL PRACTICE

## A CLOUD OF WITNESSES

**Church Sponsored Institutions:** Catholic Charities, Catholic Health Care, Catholic Education, Catholic Relief Services, Catholic Near East Welfare Association, Caritas, Parish programs, etc. Many of these were sponsored by religious orders and dioceses whose sacrifices and determination brought a great deal of humanity to a suffering world.

- As far as the church is concerned, the social message of the Gospel must not be considered a theory, but above all else a basis and a motivation for action. Inspired by this message, some of the first Christians distributed their goods to the poor, bearing witness to the fact that, despite different social origins, it was possible for people to live together in peace and harmony. Through the power of the Gospel, down the centuries monks tilled the land, men and women religious founded hospitals and shelters for the poor, confraternities as well as individual men and women of all states of life devoted themselves to the needy and to those on the margins of society, convinced as they were that Christ's words "as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40) were not intended to remain a pious wish, but were meant to become a concrete life commitment (*Centesimus annus*, 57).
- As the years went by and the Church spread further afield, the exercise of charity became established as one of her essential activities, along with the administration of the sacraments and the proclamation of the word: love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind, is as essential to her as the ministry of the sacraments and preaching of the Gospel. The Church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the Sacraments and the Word (*Deus caritas est*, 22).

**Ecclesial Movements:** the Church has spawned hundreds of different movements that seek to live the gospel in the day-to-day affairs of people. Some of these movements are Focolare, Sant'Egidio, The Neocatechumenal Way, Communion and Liberation, Charismatic Renewal, Christ the Redeemer Community, L'Arche, Catholic Worker, National Center for the Laity, Catholic Peace Movement (Pax Christi), Solidarity, etc. See the Pontifical Council for the Laity's for an impressive list of movements within the church that display Catholic social practice [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/laity/documents/rc\\_pc\\_laity\\_doc\\_20051114\\_associazioni\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/laity/documents/rc_pc_laity_doc_20051114_associazioni_en.html)

- "Notable among the characteristics of missionary commitment found in ecclesial movements and new communities is the indisputable ability to awaken the apostolic enthusiasm and missionary courage of the laity. They know how to draw out the spiritual potential of the laity by helping them smash the barriers of timidity, fear, and false complexes of inferiority which today's secular culture creates in the hearts of so many Christians. Many of their members have experienced a deep inner transformation, at times to their own surprise; in fact, many never would have imagined themselves preaching the Gospel in this way or participating so actively in the Church's mission" (Archbishop Rylko, president of the Pontifical Council for the Laity).

**Politics and Law:** Thomas More Society, Robert Schuman (beatification process underway, first President of the European Parliamentary Assembly, considered "Father of Europe," member of the French Resistance in WW II), Konrad Adenauer (first chancellor of West Germany), Igino Giordani, Alcide De Gasperi, Sargent Shriver, Bobby Kennedy, Robert Casey (former governor of Pennsylvania), etc.

**Labor and Business:** UNIAPAC, World Movement of Christian Workers, Executives for Economic Justice, Legatus, Woodstock Business Conference, and the thousands of businesses inspired by the Catholic social teaching and thought such as the companies from the Focolare's Economy of Communion, Mondragon, etc. Ernesto Shaw, an Argentine businessperson, whose cause for beatification is under consideration. See Ouimet's practices.

**Peace:** Catholic Worker, Catholic Peace Fellowship, Sant'Egidio, etc. Dorothy Day whose cause for beatification is under consideration was a major figure for peace in the U.S. Other figures are Ben Salmon, Franz Jägerstätter, Gordon Zahn, etc.

**Laity:** In his document on the laity, *Christifideles laici*, John Paul writes that “[t]he vocation to holiness must be recognized and lived by the lay faithful, not as an undeniable and demanding obligation, but as a shining example of the infinite love of the Father that has regenerated them in His own life of holiness. Such a vocation, then, ought to be called an essential and inseparable element of the new life of Baptism, and therefore an element which determines their dignity. At the same time the vocation to holiness is intimately connected to mission and to the responsibility entrusted to the lay faithful in the Church and in the world. In fact, the same holiness which is derived simply from their participation in the Church's holiness represents their first and fundamental contribution to the building of the Church herself, who is the "communion of saints." The eyes of faith behold a wonderful scene: that of a countless number of lay people, both women and men, busy at work in their daily life and activity, oftentimes far from view and quite unacclaimed by the world, unknown to the world's great personages but nonetheless looked upon in love by the Father, untiring laborers who work in the Lord's vineyard. (17).

- Today more than ever, the church is aware that her social message will gain credibility more immediately from the witness of actions than as a result of its internal logic and consistency (*Centesimus annus*, 57). . . . This teaching is seen in the efforts of individuals, families, people involved in cultural and social life, as well as politicians and statesmen to give it a concrete form and application in history (*Centesimus annus*, 59).