

See, Judge, Act

Catholic Social Teaching and Service Learning

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Overview of the Catholic Social Tradition

The Catholic social tradition (CST), broadly understood, refers to the thoughts, actions, and teachings that have emerged as members of the Catholic Church have responded to social injustices throughout history. This chapter will briefly discuss Catholic social thought and action and then will explore in more detail the Catholic Church's modern-era social teaching, the teaching that this text invites readers to learn about and apply to social problems encountered in service-learning situations using the see-judge-act process. The chapter will introduce the major documents that comprise CST and explore the sources that inform it, its methodology, and the major principles it articulates.

Catholic Social Thought and Action

Christians have thought about and acted on the implications of the gospel message for their relationships since the beginnings of the church. This message includes a call to Christians to love both God and neighbor: "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37, 39). Christians have wrestled to understand what the love of neighbor means and what actions it demands. Catholic social thought, in its broadest sense, refers to the ongoing reflection on the social implications of Christian discipleship—being a follower of Jesus Christ. Catholic social thought emerges through the work of many people, including church leaders, theologians, ethicists, leaders of movements for social change, and the many other Catholics trying to live out their faith in the world.

are remembered not only for their ideas about social justice but also for their actions.

The Catholic social tradition has been shaped by well-known individuals but also by untold numbers of other people whose actions have helped to bring about justice. Many of these people—lay, ordained, and vowed religious—have worked in association with parishes and dioceses and with Catholic movements and organizations. Listed here is a small sampling of organizations whose work provides examples of Catholic social action:

The Society of Saint Vincent DePaul. Founded in 1833 when French law student Frederick Ozanam gathered a group of lay Catholics together to serve the needs of people living in poverty, this society has grown into an international association of over six-hundred-thousand men and women who promote charity and social justice by providing food, shelter, clothing, and care to people in need. Since its origin, the Society of Saint Vincent DePaul has emphasized the importance of person-to-person assistance. Web site: www.svdpsa.org/.

Pax Christi. This international organization dedicated to peacemaking originated in France through the initiative of lay Catholics who began gathering together to pray for peace. Pax Christi today offers resources for prayer and spirituality as well as education and advocacy related to peacemaking. It welcomes pacifists and just-war advocates while promoting the rights of conscientious objectors, nonviolent conflict resolution, and disarmament. Web site: www.paxchristi.org.

The Center of Concern. This center engages in analysis, education, and advocacy for the promotion of social justice. Located in Washington, DC, the center works to influence US policies, especially those impacting global justice. Though it is autonomous, ecumenical, and interreligious, the center began in 1971 through the collaboration of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) and is rooted in the Catholic social tradition. Web site: www.coc.org.

Network. Network is a nationally recognized Catholic lobbying group based in Washington, DC, and informed by Catholic social teaching. Network promotes just policies related to immigration, healthcare, the environment, and the economy. It was founded in 1972 following a meeting of US Catholic sisters and continues to

draw on the experiences of women religious involved in direct service and social justice work in the United States. Web site: www.networklobby.org.

The Ignatian Solidarity Network. This network promotes justice education and advocacy opportunities for people affiliated with Jesuit ministries. Their Ignatian Family Teach-In for Justice attracts over a thousand participants each year and provides an opportunity to learn, reflect, and advocate for justice on Capitol Hill. Web site: www.ignatiansolidarity.net.

Catholic Charities USA. This national association of local charities, which provides basic need assistance and advocacy for millions of Americans each year, is one of the largest nonprofit organizations in the country. Catholic Charities also works closely with local Catholic parishes and the US bishops to provide adoption services and programs to strengthen families. Web site: www.catholiccharitiesusa.org.

Catholic Relief Services (CRS). This organization was founded in 1943 by the USCCB and remains the official humanitarian relief organization of the Catholic Church in the United States. CRS provides international aid in the form of disaster relief, microfinance programs, peacebuilding initiatives, and assistance for communities struggling with food insecurity and HIV/AIDS. Web site: www.crs.org.

Catholic Climate Covenant. This initiative was launched by the US bishop-sponsored Catholic Coalition on Climate Change in 2009. The Catholic Climate Covenant encourages Catholic individuals and organizations to take the Saint Francis Pledge to pray and learn about the moral dimensions of climate change, to change their lifestyle to promote environmental responsibility, and to advocate for the care for creation. Web site: www.catholicclimatecovenant.org.

These organizations highlight some of the issues to which Catholics have responded—poverty, violence, global inequalities, and environmental destruction—and some of the ways they have done so. The causes of social problems, such as poverty are often embedded in the political and economic structures of society, requiring not only immediate attention but also long-term solutions and widespread commitment. Organizations dedicated to social justice can facilitate such action. Bishops' conferences, dioceses, parishes, and Catholic institutions such as universities and hospitals also can facilitate action aimed at furthering justice. The many organizations dedicated

to putting Catholic social thought into action extend the reach of the Catholic Church beyond its membership and often present an opportunity to collaborate with Christians who are not Catholic, adherents of other religious and nonreligious groups, and individuals.

Catholic Social Teaching

In addition to thoughts and actions, the Catholic social tradition includes teachings. The term *Catholic social teaching* (CST) is commonly used to refer specifically to modern-era teachings issued officially by the Catholic Church, beginning with the social encyclical, *Rerum novarum* (*On the Condition of Labor*), promulgated by Pope Leo XIII in 1891. Many of the major writings that make up CST are papal encyclicals, which are substantial letters issued by a pope intended for wide circulation. Other major writings of CST are issued by groups of bishops, gathered in councils or synods, in conjunction with the pope. There is no official list of documents that make up Catholic social teaching, but there is broad consensus about the writings CST includes. The following list of major documents generally considered to comprise CST provides the Latin title and English title of each document along with its date, source, context, and major themes:

- *Rerum novarum* (*On the Condition of Labor*), 1891, Pope Leo XIII. Responding to industrialization and the emergence of capitalism in Europe, Leo XIII defends the right to just wages, fair working conditions, and the formation of workers' unions. Responding to socialism, the pope defends the right to private property and the importance of religion.
- *Quadragesimo anno* (*The Reconstruction of Social Order*), 1931, Pope Pius XI. Writing during the Great Depression and the rise of fascism in Europe, Pius XI argues for subsidiarity as guide for the government to protect the common good (in CST this means the flourishing of all) without overpowering local communities.
- *Mater et magistra* (*Christianity and Social Progress*), 1961, Pope John XXIII. Observing an increasingly interconnected world, John XXIII argues for solidarity between nations. He argues

specifically for the protection for traditional agricultural workers in the context of rapid economic changes.

- *Pacem in terris* (*Peace on Earth*), 1963, Pope John XXIII. In the context of the global arms race of the 1960s, John XXIII advocates for peace and disarmament. He claims that protecting human rights, which he observes to be embedded in human nature, is the foundation of peace.
- *Gaudium et spes* (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*), 1965, Second Vatican Council. The council declares that the church and world are linked in human history, and the gospel remains relevant in the modern age as it gives meaning to human existence. The text defends the dignity of the human person against discrimination and modern threats to human life.
- *Populorum progressio* (*The Development of Peoples*), 1967, Pope Paul VI. Recognizing the urgent problem of global inequalities in the aftermath of colonization, Paul VI argues for integral human development that promotes the economic, social, cultural, and spiritual flourishing of all.
- *Octogesima adveniens* (*A Call to Action*), 1971, Pope Paul VI. The pope challenges the world to recognize the roots of inequalities and promote political and economic justice on national and international levels. He invites the church around the world to participate in applying CST to local contexts.
- *Justice in the World*, 1971, Synod of Bishops. Observing structural injustices and revolutionary uprisings in Latin America, the synod promotes the preferential concern for the poor. The synod declares the work for justice to be an essential part of promoting the gospel.
- *Laborem exercens* (*On Human Work*), 1981, Pope John Paul II. Recognizing that both capitalism and communism can diminish worker's dignity, the pope advocates for workers' rights and presents a personalist (person-centered) understanding of work.
- *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (*On Social Concern*), 1987, Pope John Paul II. Observing the widening gap between rich and poor nations, the pope calls for international solidarity. He denounces global economic systems that oppress impoverished nations to benefit the wealthy.

- *Centesimus annus* (*On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum*), 1991, Pope John Paul II. Commemorating *Rerum novarum*, the pope critiques both socialist collectivism for undermining personal freedom and unrestrained capitalism for placing competition above the needs of the impoverished.
- *Caritas in veritate* (*Charity in Truth*) 2009, Pope Benedict XVI. Commemorating *Populorum progressio* (*The Development of Peoples*), Benedict XVI addresses challenges to development in the context of globalization. Specifically, he argues that solidarity and a spirit of gratuitousness are needed to promote economic and environmental justice.

Catholic social teaching developed and will continue to develop in response to particular social issues, so over time the body of official teaching grows and new insights emerge. Central ideas, however, recur throughout the teachings, as the documents' authors aim to apply fundamental principles to particular historical situations. For example, the principle of human dignity that guided Leo XIII's response to industrialization in 1891 informed Benedict XVI's response to globalization over one hundred years later.

The remainder of the chapter will explore some of the sources that inform CST, the methodology the authors of CST employ, and major principles CST articulates.

Sources of Catholic Social Teaching

Catholic social teaching is rooted in principles drawn from the Old and New Testaments, the doctrines of the Catholic Church, and the work of theologians. Catholic social teaching, however, has never relied solely on Christian sources, drawing on philosophy and most recently, the social sciences. This section of the chapter will briefly highlight a few of the sources that inform CST—Scripture, theology, and a type of philosophical argumentation known as natural law.

Scripture

The Christian Scriptures, made up of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and the New Testament are normative sources of Catholic social teaching. This is because the Catholic Church views the

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965)

The Second Vatican Council, also called Vatican II, was an ecumenical council held from 1962 to 1965. When Pope John XXIII announced his plan to convene the Catholic bishops of the world for a council he used the term *aggiornamento*, an Italian word that means “updating,” to describe his hope that the council would renew the Catholic Church and make it more responsive to contemporary realities. The council issued sixteen documents on topics related to the life of the Church and its relationship to the world. Some of the most significant developments at Vatican II include changes in the liturgy (including allowing Mass to be celebrated in the spoken language of the local churches rather than in Latin), greater emphasis on the importance of religious liberty, the need for reconciliation with other Christians, the importance of dialogue with people of other religious traditions, and openness to the wisdom of scientific discovery and secular ideas. *Gaudium et spes* (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*), generally viewed as part of CST, was one of four major documents, called constitutions because they articulate central teachings or principles, issued by Vatican II.¹

Old and New Testaments as the Word of God. In *Dei verbum* (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*), the Second Vatican Council explains the Catholic view that sacred Scripture is the Word of God, and in sacred Scripture, God speaks through human authors in a “human fashion” (no. 12). Aligned with the two ideas—that Scripture is the Word of God and that the Word is expressed through humans—the Catholic Church rejects fundamentalist understandings of the Bible. In other words, Catholics maintain that the Scriptures are inspired by God and, taken as a whole and

1. The three other major documents are *Lumen gentium* (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*), *Dei verbum* (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*) and *Sacrosanctum concilium* (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*).

interpreted with the help of the Holy Spirit, reveal the truths of the Christian faith. At the same time, because the Scriptures are written by human authors in particular historical moments, the interpretation of Scripture must also consider the human factors expressed in the writings. Biblical scholars use several tools to arrive at a better understanding of these factors including archeology, cultural anthropology, and literary tools.

The authors of CST draw on the Scriptures for insight into fundamental principles including the meaning of social justice and the nature of the human person in relation to God. One example is John Paul II's use of the Bible to develop an understanding of human work in his encyclical, *Laborem exercens* (*On Human Work*):

When man, who had been created “in the image of God . . . male and female” (Gen 1:27) hears the words: “Be fruitful and *multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it*” (Gen 1:28) even though these words do not refer directly and explicitly to work, beyond any doubt they indirectly indicate it as an activity for man to carry out in the world. Indeed, they show its very deepest essence. Man is the image of God partly through the mandate received from his Creator to subdue, to dominate, the earth. In carrying out this mandate, man, every human being, reflects the very action of the Creator of the universe. (No. 4)

Pope John Paul II interprets the biblical story of creation to articulate the relationship between human nature and work. Referring to the mandate to subdue the earth, the pope suggests that work is one of the ways that humanity participates in the creative activity of God and therefore manifests God's image in the world. In the pope's reading, the biblical text is understood in light of the whole story of creation, which highlights the unique ability of humanity to reflect God's image. The pope draws on the Bible in this case to argue for the dignity of work.

Theology

Christian theology, grounded in Scripture, the Christian tradition, and the experiences of Christians, is also a source for Catholic

social teaching. The classic definition of theology offered by Saint Anselm (1033–1109) is “faith seeking understanding.” This definition reveals two important dimensions of theology. First, theology presupposes the experience of faith and seeks to understand the object of faith—God. Theology is not limited to reasoning about God. Second, theology tries to make sense of reality in light of belief in God. Professional theologians take up in a more systematic way what many people of faith do throughout their lives. When individuals reflect on a significant experience such as falling in love or suffering an injury or on an aspect of nature or themselves in light of Christian belief, they sometimes come to new understandings of their faith. This reflection is theologizing. The work of theology is never ending because human beings continue to reflect on experiences in light of Christian faith.

One example of theology informing Catholic social teaching can be found in the way that Vatican II’s *Gaudium et spes* (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*) defines the human person:

The root reason for human dignity lies in man’s call to communion with God. From the very circumstance of his origin man is already invited to converse with God. For man would not exist were he not created by God’s love and constantly preserved by it; and he cannot live fully according to truth unless he freely acknowledges that love and devotes himself to His Creator. (No. 19)

A theological understanding of the human person is different from nontheological understandings because theology tries to make sense of human existence in light of faith in God. In *Gaudium et spes*, the origin, purpose, and meaning of the human person is understood in relationship to God. These theological assumptions inform how the Catholic Church understands human dignity, resulting in different perspectives on human dignity than might be found in other approaches.

Natural Law Philosophy

Traditionally, philosophy has been an important source for Catholic thought, particularly a form of philosophical argumentation

known as *natural law*. A natural law argument begins with the assumption that through the use of reason, the human mind is capable of discerning God's will in creation. Following this assumption is the claim that people's actions should conform to the order of creation as observed in the natural world and common human experience. For example, the natural inclination to preserve one's life can be used to develop a moral mandate against suicide. The advantage of a natural law argument is that it transcends religious and cultural differences. For instance, the Catholic Church uses natural law argumentation to claim the universal significance of certain teachings such as the insistence on universal human rights. The following excerpt from Pope John XXIII's encyclical on peace, *Pacem in terris* (*Peace on Earth*), provides another example of natural law informing Catholic social teaching:

All created being reflects the infinite wisdom of God. It reflects it all the more clearly, the higher it stands in the scale of perfection. But the mischief is often caused by erroneous opinions. Many people think that the laws which govern man's relations with the State are the same as those which regulate the blind, elemental forces of the universe. But it is not so; the laws which govern men are quite different. The Father of the universe has inscribed them in man's nature, and that is where we must look for them; there and nowhere else. (Nos. 5–6)

The pope expresses the idea that God has ordered human nature, and this order should govern human relationships. From this perspective, peace will be achieved by transcending differences of opinion and following the laws of human nature.

One of the limitations of natural law is that it can fail to take into account historical and cultural differences that shape understandings of human nature. With the shift to a more historically conscious approach to theology and ethics in the second half of the twentieth century, Catholic thinkers have relied less on natural law. Many insights of natural law, however, particularly the claim that there are universal aspects of human nature, continue to inform Catholic social teaching.

Methodology of Catholic Social Teaching

In *Gaudium et spes* (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*), the Second Vatican Council identified the significance of history in shaping social life and described the Catholic Church's task as reading or "scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel" (no. 4). The signs of the times² are significant events, developments, struggles, and opportunities that characterize an era. The methodology of reading the signs of the times requires an ongoing process of understanding the world and discerning how to think and act in response to what is happening. Reading the signs of the times—a process with a close affinity to the see-judge-act process because both involve social analysis, ethical reflection, and informed action—is a helpful way to think about the methodology that has spurred the development of CST.

Recognizing the diverse social situations that exist in the world, in *Octogesima adveniens* (*A Call to Action*), Pope Paul VI instructs local churches to carry out a process of reading the signs of the times, or of seeing, judging, and acting, within their own contexts.

In the face of such widely varying situations it is difficult for us to utter a unified message and to put forward a solution which has universal validity. Such is not our ambition, nor is it our mission. . . . It is up to the Christian communities to analyze with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country, to shed on it the light of the Gospel's unalterable words and to draw principles of reflection, norms of judgment, and directives for action from the social teaching of the Church. (No. 4)

2. The phrase, reading the signs of the times, has biblical roots, appearing in the Gospel of Matthew (16:1–3): "The Pharisees and Sadducees came and, to test him, asked him to show them a sign from heaven. He said to them in reply, 'In the evening you say, 'Tomorrow will be fair, for the sky is red'; and, in the morning, 'Today will be stormy, for the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to judge the appearance of the sky, but you cannot judge the signs of the times.'" The passage depicts Jesus responding to religious leaders who are skeptical about his teaching authority. In his reply, Jesus challenges them to open their eyes to what is going on around them. He points out that they can read weather patterns in the signs of nature, but they do not recognize signs of God at work in the world—healing the sick, forgiving sinners, comforting those who are suffering.

The process Paul VI describes is useful for individuals and communities seeking to understand and respond to social situations, but it also describes the type of reflection that those who have authored the Church's official teachings have engaged in.

Principles of Catholic Social Teaching

Catholic social teaching develops a number of recurring themes, which are often referred to as principles. Though no definitive listing of these principles exists, Catholic Church leaders and scholars have developed various listings helpful to those seeking to understand and apply CST.³ The lists can provide a framework for organizing CST's central ideas, and therefore can facilitate both learning about CST and its application in particular situations.

The organization of the chapter topics in the remainder of this text reflects the list of seven major themes the USCCB articulated in 1997:⁴

The Dignity of the Human Person. The foundation for all of the Church's social teaching and ethical reflection is its theological understanding of the human person: the human person is created in the image and likeness of God. The belief that each person bears the image of God—regardless of characteristics such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, physical attributes, intelligence, behavior, or nationality—grounds Catholic social teaching's affirmation of the dignity of every individual. Furthermore, the conviction that every person bears the image of God regardless of his or her actions grounds the Church's defense of the immeasurable worth of each individual, despite their worse actions and beyond their greatest achievements.

3. For example, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace lists four major principles (human dignity, solidarity, subsidiarity, and the common good) in *The Compendium for the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004). Social ethicist, Thomas Massaro names nine key themes of Catholic social teaching (the dignity of the human person and human rights; solidarity, common good and participation; family life; subsidiarity and the proper role of government; property ownership: rights and responsibilities; the dignity of work, rights of workers, and support for labor unions; colonialism and economic development; peace and disarmament; and option for the poor and vulnerable) in his book *Living Justice: Catholic Social Teaching in Action* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011).

4. See USCCB, *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1997).

Call to Family, Community, and Participation. Catholic social teaching recognizes that people participate in various communities, including families, neighborhoods, and nations. Because the family provides the primary experience of community for most people, the Catholic Church emphasizes the importance of supporting families.

The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers. The Catholic social tradition affirms the dignity of work and the rights of workers, including the right to a living wage and the right to form labor unions. CST has consistently challenged economic systems that exploit people for their labor or place the value of profit over the value of the human person.

Option for the Poor and Vulnerable. The option for those who are poor and vulnerable calls for putting the needs of certain people first. Social injustices such as poverty that hinder human development create the conditions in which people are prevented from participating in society. The common good, defined in this context by the flourishing of all, cannot be achieved when individuals are marginalized. Empowering everyone to participate strengthens the common good.

Solidarity. Upholding the dignity of all individuals and empowering them to participate fully in community requires solidarity; a recognition that all people are interconnected and a commitment to work for the good of all people. Solidarity affirms the social nature of the human person and the interdependence of creation. As an ethical stance, solidarity goes beyond the observation that people are interconnected to the conviction that people are responsible for one another.

Care for Creation. This theme emphasizes human beings responsibility toward the whole of creation—human and nonhuman. CST advocates for environmental justice, recognizing that marginalized people (through situations such as poverty or racism) are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation.

Rights and Responsibilities. The Catholic Church teaches that human rights flow from human dignity, making them universal and intrinsic. The Church also teaches that the human person is social by nature and meant to live in relationship with others. Therefore, the Church emphasizes responsibilities alongside rights.

Applications of Catholic Social Teaching in the United States

The major writings of CST described earlier in the chapter are universal in scope, which means the pope or bishops who issued them intended to speak to the entire church and in some cases the world. The leaders of local churches are responsible for applying the universal teachings to situations that arise in local settings. The USCCB has carried out this responsibility by addressing numerous social, economic, and political issues particular to the United States. This list of selected writings illustrates the range diversity of topics the USCCB addressed in recent decades through official statements:

- *Brothers and Sisters to Us, Pastoral Letter on Racism*, 1979
- *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response*, 1983
- *Economic Justice for All*, 1986
- Labor Day Statements, published annually since 1986
- *Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action on Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching*, 1991
- *The Harvest of Justice Is Sown in Peace*, 1993
- *Called to Global Solidarity*, 1997
- *A Fair and Just Workplace: Principles and Practices*, 1999
- *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, published before each presidential election since 1999
- *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good*, 2001
- *A Place at the Table*, 2002
- *"For I Was Hungry and You Gave Me Food:" Catholic Reflections on Food, Farmers, and Farmworkers*, 2003
- *Strangers No Longer: Together on a Journey of Hope, A Pastoral Letter Concerning Migration from the Catholic Bishops of Mexico and the United States*, 2003