

United States Catholic Catechism for Adults

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Reflections of the Catholic Bishops of the US on the Church's Social Teaching: Major Themes

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 a 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 wish to 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. Our belief in the sanctity of human life and the inherent dignity of the human person is the foundation of all the principles of our social teaching. In our society, human life is under direct attack from abortion and assisted suicide. The value of human life is being threatened by increasing use of the death penalty. 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. The family is the central social institution 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 organize and join unions, to private property, and to economic initiative.

Solidarity

We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they live. We are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. Learning to practice the virtue of solidarity means learning that "loving our neighbor" has global dimensions in an interdependent world.

Care for the Environment

We show our respect for the Creator by our stewardship of creation. Care for the earth 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. This summary should only be a starting point for those interested in Catholic social teaching. A full understanding can only be achieved by reading the papal, conciliar, and episcopal documents that make up this rich tradition. (USCCB, *Excerpts from Catholic Social Teaching* [card] [Washington, DC: USCCB, 1999])

Franciscan Prayer – Ilia Delio OSF

Francis wanted his followers to live in poverty by confidently making known their needs to one another. In his *Earlier Rule* he wrote: "Let each one confidently make known his need to the other, for if a mother loves and cares for her son according to the flesh, how much more diligently must someone love and care for his brother according to the Spirit."¹⁴ Poverty, for Francis, was the key to love. Although poverty played a central role in his way of life, it is interesting that he almost never explains it in his writings. Francis was not really interested in the poverty of material possessions; rather he was concerned for the type of poverty that would lead to interdependence and the love of the brothers for one another. Thus he advocated that his followers live *sine proprio*—not without things but without possessing things, for when we possess things we may think that we do not need other people or have a responsibility of love toward them. Francis had profound insight into the human person and he placed poverty in the context of human relationships. Three areas where he speaks of living *sine proprio* are: 1) our inner selves and what we possess for ourselves; 2) our relationships with others and what we possess in relation to others; and 3) our relationship to God and what we possess in relation to God.¹⁵ In all three areas Francis asked of his followers to "hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves, so that he who gives himself totally to you may receive you totally."¹⁶

To live as poor persons, for Francis, is to love one another as family, as a mother loves and cares for her son. The poor person is the brother or sister who lives in dependence on others, following the poor Christ. Poverty is being able to say, "I need you," that is, "I am incomplete without you." When Jesus asked Peter, "Peter, do you love me?" he was not looking for an exchange of goods but a commitment of fidelity. When Peter exclaimed, "you know I love you!" Jesus said "when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone will fasten the belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go" (John 21:17–18). Poverty is being able to have someone else put a belt around me and lead me to places I may never have thought of or may have preferred not to go. It is to be open and free to follow where God is leading, not only in my own life but in my brothers and sisters in whom God dwells.

Only relationships of poverty and humility, in Francis' view, can undo the injustices of the self-centered person. Only when we are dependent on another can we renounce autonomy and accept the gift of the other in whom God lives. Existential poverty, the poverty of being created, underlies structures of justice because it forms structures of interdependency by which all share in the common good. But to really live poverty we must ask, how much am I willing to let go? How much can I trust my neighbors, my brothers and sisters? Can I accept God's goodness in the neighbor who is different from me? Poverty, therefore, relates to our humanity; material poverty is only sacramental of the deeper poverty of being human. Poverty is to help make us human, and to be a human person is to be dependent on another; it is to be an instrument of otherness by which the other shines through in one's life. There is no sense in giving away all of my material possessions if this act does not lead me to a poverty of being interdependent, to accepting goodness from another, and to accepting the other as the goodness of God. Only care for another, in Francis' view, truly humanizes life.

God is Love (Deus Caritas Est) – Benedict XVI

28. In order to define more accurately the relationship between the necessary commitment to justice and the ministry of charity, two fundamental situations need to be considered:

a) The just ordering of society and the State is a central responsibility of politics. As Augustine once said, a State which is not governed according to justice would be just a bunch of thieves: "Remota itaque iustitia quid sunt regna nisi magna latrocinia?".^[18] Fundamental to Christianity is the distinction between what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God (cf. Mt 22:21), in other words, the distinction between Church and State, or, as the Second Vatican Council puts it, the autonomy of the temporal sphere.^[19] The State may not impose religion, yet it must guarantee religious freedom and harmony between the followers of different religions. For her part, the Church, as the social expression of Christian faith, has a proper independence and is structured on the basis of her faith as a community which the State must recognize. The two spheres are distinct, yet always interrelated.

Justice is both the aim and the intrinsic criterion of all politics. Politics is more than a mere mechanism for defining the rules of public life: its origin and its goal are found in justice, which by its very nature has to do with ethics. The State must inevitably face the question of how justice can be achieved here and now. But this presupposes an even more radical question: what is justice? The problem is one of practical reason; but if reason is to be exercised properly, it must undergo constant purification, since it can never be completely free of the danger of a certain ethical blindness caused by the dazzling effect of power and special interests.

Here politics and faith meet. Faith by its specific nature is an encounter with the living God—an encounter opening up new horizons extending beyond the sphere of reason. But it is also a purifying force for reason itself. From God's standpoint, faith liberates reason from its blind spots and therefore helps it to be ever more fully itself. Faith enables reason to do its work more effectively and to see its proper object more clearly. This is where Catholic social doctrine has its place: it has no intention of giving the Church power over the State. Even less is it an attempt to impose on those who do not share the faith ways of thinking and modes of conduct proper to faith. Its aim is simply to help purify reason and to contribute, here and now, to the acknowledgment and attainment of what is just.

The Church's social teaching argues on the basis of reason and natural law, namely, on the basis of what is in accord with the nature of every human being. It recognizes that it is not the Church's responsibility to make this teaching prevail in political life. Rather, the Church wishes to help form consciences in political life and to stimulate greater insight into the authentic requirements of justice as well as greater readiness to act accordingly, even when this might involve conflict with situations of personal interest. Building a just social and civil order, wherein each person receives what is his or her due, is an essential task which every generation must take up anew. As a political task, this cannot be the Church's immediate responsibility. Yet, since it is also a most important human responsibility, the Church is duty-bound to offer, through the purification of reason and through ethical formation, her own specific contribution towards understanding the requirements of justice and achieving them politically.

The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument and she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper. A just society must be the achievement of politics, not of the Church. Yet the promotion of justice through efforts to bring about openness of mind and will to the demands of the common good is something which concerns the Church deeply.

Scripture Reflection

1 Thessalonians 5:12-24

¹²We ask you, brothers, to respect those who are laboring among you and who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you, ¹³and to show esteem for them with special love on account of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. ¹⁴We urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, cheer the fainthearted, support the weak, be patient with all. ¹⁵See that no one returns evil for evil; rather, always seek what is good [both] for each other and for all. ¹⁶Rejoice always. ¹⁷Pray without ceasing. ¹⁸In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus. ¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰Do not despise prophetic utterances. ²¹Test everything; retain what is good. ²²Refrain from every kind of evil.

Concluding Prayer. ²³May the God of peace himself make you perfectly holy and may you entirely, spirit, soul, and body, be preserved blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴The one who calls you is faithful, and he will also accomplish it.