

Defining Major Themes of Catholic Social Teachings

Adapted from *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions* (USCCB)

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. It offers moral principles and coherent values that are badly needed in our time. In this time of widespread violence and diminished respect for human life and dignity in our country and around the world, the Gospel of Life and the biblical call to justice need to be proclaimed and shared with new clarity, urgency, and energy. Modern Catholic social teaching has been articulated through a tradition of papal, conciliar, and episcopal documents that explore and express the social demands of our faith. The depth and richness of this tradition can be understood best through a direct reading of these documents. These brief reflections highlight several of the key themes that are at the heart of 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. Belief in the sanctity of human life and the inherent dignity of the human person is the foundation of all the principles of Catholic social teaching. 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. The dignity of life is undermined when the creation of human life is reduced to the manufacture of a product, as in human cloning or proposals for genetic engineering to create "perfect" human beings. Catholics 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

In a global culture driven by excessive individualism, Catholic tradition proclaims that the person is not only sacred but also social. How society is organized—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. While society often exalts individualism, Catholic tradition teaches that human beings grow and achieve fulfillment in community. Catholics 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. The Church teaches that the role of government and other institutions is to protect human life and human dignity and promote the common good.

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. While public debate is often divided between those who focus on personal responsibility and those who focus on social responsibilities, Catholic tradition insists that both are necessary.

Option for the Poor and Vulnerable

In a world characterized by growing prosperity for some and pervasive poverty for others, Catholic teaching proclaims that a basic moral test is how the most vulnerable members are faring. In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, Catholic tradition recalls the story of the Last Judgment (*Mt 25:31-46*) and instructs that the needs of the poor and vulnerable first.

The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers

Catholics believe that 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. Respecting these rights promotes an economy that protects human life, defends human rights, and advances the well-being of all.

Solidarity

Society is often tempted to turn inward, becoming indifferent and sometimes isolationist in the face of international responsibilities. Catholic social teaching proclaims that we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they live. There is one human family, regardless of 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. This virtue is described by John Paul II as "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all" (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 38).

Care for God's Creation

On a planet conflicted over environmental issues, the Catholic tradition insists that respect is shown for the Creator through stewardship of creation. Care for the earth is not just an Earth Day slogan, it is a requirement of Catholic faith. Catholics 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.

The Educational Challenge

Catholic schools, religious education, adult education, and faith formation programs are vitally important for sharing the substance and values of Catholic social teaching. Just as the social teaching of the Church is integral to Catholic faith, the social justice dimensions of teaching are integral to Catholic education and catechesis. They are an essential part of Catholic identity and formation.

In offering these reflections, we want to encourage a fuller integration of the Church's social tradition into the mainstream of Catholic education and catechesis. We seek to encourage a more integral sharing of the substance of Catholic social teaching in Catholic education and catechesis at every level. The commitment to human life and dignity, to human rights and solidarity, is a calling all Catholic educators must share with their students. It is not a vocation for a few religion teachers, but a challenge for every Catholic educator and catechist.

The Church has the God-given mission and the unique capacity to call people to live with integrity, compassion, responsibility, and concern for others. Seminaries, colleges, schools, and catechetical programs are called to share not just abstract principles but a moral framework for everyday action. The Church's social teaching offers a guide for choices as parents, workers, consumers, and citizens. Therefore, we emphasize that the values of the Church's social teaching must not be treated as tangential or optional. They must be a core part of teaching and formation. Without our social teaching, schools, catechetical programs, and other formation programs would be offering an incomplete presentation of our Catholic tradition. This would fall short of our mission and would be a serious loss for those in our educational and catechetical programs.

Directions for the Future

We strongly support new initiatives to integrate the social teachings of the Church more fully into educational and catechetical programs and institutions. Many catechists and Catholic teachers do this every day by weaving these ideas into curricula and classrooms. They introduce their students to issues of social justice. They encourage service to those in need and reflect on the lessons learned in that service. Yet in too many schools and classrooms, these principles are often vaguely presented; the values are unclear; the lessons are unlearned.

We strongly urge Catholic educators and administrators to create additional resources and programs that will address the lack of familiarity with Catholic social teaching among many faculty and students. We encourage diocesan and local educators to promote curriculum development in the area of Catholic social thought and would like to see a model developed for faculty interested in this arena.

Full statement can be found at <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/sharing-catholic-social-teaching-challenges-and-directions.cfm>