

**“An authentic faith – which is never comfortable or completely personal – always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it.”**

*- Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium*

## **THEMES AND PRINCIPLES OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHINGS (CST)**

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## **SEE-JUDGE-ACT “FAITH PRAXIS” AND CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING**

- **SEE:** Be attentive/aware of the issues (“*signs of the times*”). This requires a lived experience where one describes the specific and broader realities of a particular issue or situation and identifies the problem.
- **JUDGE:** Understand what is happening and why it is happening. Such analysis and reflection incorporate *social/empirical/scientific* and *theological/philosophical* dimensions. One must analyze why a particular problem exists, how it may relate to other issues, etc. What are the causes (*i.e. historical, political, economic, etc.*)? Catholics also must reflect theologically: What do the lessons from Scripture and Catholic Social Thought teach us in our discernment?
- **ACT:** What should we do? This is the stage where we must decide as a community of faith how to respond in love.

## **OVERVIEW: CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHINGS (CST)**

Catholic Social Teaching is deeply rooted in the story of God’s relationship with us revealed throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament of Jesus Christ, and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in our shared church community. With the publication of *Rerum Novarum* (On the Condition of Labor) by Pope Leo XIII in 1891, Catholic Social Thought has become even more well-known as these teachings have been shared through papal, conciliar, and episcopal documents. These social teachings share our faith’s wisdom on living a good life and building a just society as our Catholic Tradition has engaged with important social, cultural, and political issues throughout history. Catholic Social Thought helps guide us as a faith community in our reflections and discernment, as we discover the ways God is teaching us what it means to be human. Its principles foster solidarity in our relationships with one another in our local and global communities, as we work together toward a society that promotes dignity and justice for everyone (particularly the poor and vulnerable).

There is quite a litany of books, articles, websites, and other resources dedicated to

Catholic Social Teachings. I created this “JPIC Themes and Principles of Catholic Social Teachings (CST)” guide to help our parishioners better understand these principles based on my experience teaching Catholic Social Thought to undergraduates and in other academic settings. Although no summary can encapsulate the richness found in a direct prayerful study of these primary sources of our faith tradition, many central themes have remained constant throughout our long history. The themes and principles of Catholic Social Teachings help us to live the Gospel call to discipleship in our everyday lives. The number may vary from 7-12+ depending on how each scholar/theologian chooses to nuance them (*perhaps to keep all of us academics employed*)! For simplicity, I have decided to consolidate these themes using the 7 categories/principles listed by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) in a short document they published called [“Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions” - Reflections of the U.S. Catholic Bishops.](#) This QR code will link you to their full discussion of Catholic Social Teaching.



Like my other JPIC web pages and guides, I have created this to be a *user-friendly* guide for our parishioners. Since it is not intended for public distribution, I intentionally removed extended footnotes for my direct citations and any other additional theological commentary. I kept any original explanations and personal theological contributions to a minimum, only making necessary transitions, adding minor changes to titles, or incorporating “related themes” to better reflect the breadth/depth of each principle, etc. I did my best to use the exact *word-for-word* descriptions for each theme found on many Catholic Social Teaching websites or publications. Many of these direct citations, for example, normally can be traced back to the USCCB document noted above or a select number of Catholic Social Teaching resources online. I hope you find this guide helpful.

If you have any questions, would like to learn more about Catholic Social Teachings, or get involved with any of our JPIC programs, please do not hesitate to contact me directly.

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## I. LIFE AND DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

The Catholic Church proclaims that **human life**, from the moment of conception through natural death, is **sacred**, has value, and should be protected. The inherent dignity and worth of the human person are the foundation of a moral vision for society. The basic **dignity** that each person possesses **comes from God, not earned** by achievements, **or bestowed by any authorities other than God**. It is not dependent on race, creed, color, economic class, political power, social status, culture, personal abilities, gender, sexual orientation, or any other dimensions by which people discriminate social groupings.

As children of God created in God’s image, human persons have a preeminent place in creation. The voice of God can be discerned using **reason and faith**. We are obligated to follow this voice

of God which is heard through the **development of our conscience**. **Reason and free will** are an expression of the Divine Image. The human person is a **body-soul unity** called to use the gift of free will responsibly, **promoting the good and avoiding evil**. I am truly myself, reflecting the Divine Image, when I am living and contributing to the community. People are more important than (*i.e. take precedence over*) structures or things. People must never be treated as a means or an instrument to be used for the benefit of another. Systems are meant to serve people, not the other way around. **The measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person**. This principle calls us to ask: **“What is happening to people?”**

## II. CALL TO FAMILY, COMMUNITY, AND PARTICIPATION

*Related Theme(s): Subsidiarity*

As Catholics, we profess a belief in a Triune God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - as a relationship of complete love among the three divine persons in one God. In God’s image, we are called to embody this self-giving love in our relationships. The person is not only **sacred** but fundamentally **social**. Through service and **dialogue**, we respond to our vocation and develop our potential. We are meant to work together to improve ourselves, each other, and society. In our relationship with and to others in community alone can we realize the fulfillment of our human dignity.

**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 human person is the *subject and end* of all social institutions. By its nature, *every* social activity should serve the members of the body. It should never destroy and/or absorb them. The church teaches that people have a **right and responsibility/duty** to **participate in society** through both **social and political institutions**. The Gospel calls us to work together for the common good and well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable. Our human dignity gives rise to the equal dignity and rights of all persons and cultures (*i.e. unity of the human family as children of the one God*). **Marriage and the family** are the central social institutions that must be supported and strengthened, not undermined.

### SUBSIDIARITY

In Catholic Social Thought, the principle of subsidiarity is about how participation and decision-making should be organized. According to the principle of subsidiarity, “a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to coordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good” (CCC 1883). The term subsidiarity originates from this aspect of help offered by larger to smaller groups (*i.e. Latin “subsidium” for help or assistance*). Essentially, **subsidiarity speaks to the need to respect the capacity and capabilities of people and communities, allowing decisions to be made at the lowest local level possible**. The people or groups most directly affected by a decision or policy should have a key decision-making role in it (*i.e. everyone should have the right, responsibility, and opportunity to participate in and contribute to decision processes that closely affect them*). More encompassing groups should only get involved to support smaller, local groups when they need help, often to promote and build up the common good by

coordinating their activities with other groups. Upholding the principle of subsidiarity is necessary for promoting human dignity and protecting human rights.

To protect basic justice, governments should undertake only those initiatives which exceed the capacities of private groups or individuals acting independently (*i.e. governments should not replace or destroy smaller communities or personal initiative*). Each person should perform for oneself what he/she is capable of doing. It is wrong to take from a person and give to the community what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry. Although good government intervention (*urging, restraining, and regulating economic activity as necessary*) truly helps other social groups contribute to the common good, only when basic needs cannot adequately be met at the lower level does it become necessary and imperative that higher levels or the government intervene. Therefore, the principle of subsidiary also sets limits on state intervention (*Compendium of Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church, 186*). Subsidiarity asks us to consider “**Who is making the decisions?**” and “**Can everyone participate?**”

### III. SOLIDARITY AND THE COMMON GOOD

*(Often Listed Separately)*

*Related Theme(s): Justice/Promoting Peace and The Role of Private Property/The Universal Destination of Goods*

God is community and makes community. Humans are social by nature and depend on one another. Human beings cannot survive without others and can only grow and achieve our potential in relationships with *others*. We are all neighbors, interdependent and interconnected. We all belong to one human family whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. Hence, loving our neighbor always includes local and global dimensions. We seek to stand in unity with each other, particularly those who are powerless or disadvantaged, and recognize each person’s rights regardless of our differences. We are our brothers and sisters’ keepers, wherever they may be (*Gen. 4:9*). True development occurs when we journey together, taking care of each other, and responding to each other’s needs.

As such we have mutual obligations to promote the rights and development of all people across communities, nations, and the world, irrespective of national boundaries. In particular, the rich nations have responsibilities toward the poor nations, and people with wealth and resources are linked in the divine economy with those who lack them. Those who remain untouched or unchanged by the suffering of their brothers and sisters around the world are suffering from serious spiritual underdevelopment. It follows that our salvation is bound up with each other. They need solidarity for their own salvation. The principle of **solidarity** encourages us to remove the obstacles that separate us so we can promote our common humanity. Solidarity is not just a vague feeling of empathy or compassion. It is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good by continuing to build a community that empowers people to attain their full human potential. St. Paul tells us that when we are united to Christ, we remove any and everything that divides us: “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (*Gal. 3:27-28*). The structures of the international order must reflect true biblical justice. Solidarity calls us to share spiritual and material goods, including a just distribution of all earth goods. As one human family, we realize

our dignity, rights, and responsibilities, in relationships with others by working for justice and building the body of Christ.

The **common good** is the total of all those conditions of social living – economic, political, sociological, and cultural – which make it possible for women and men readily and fully to achieve the fullness of their humanity through God’s grace. The principle of the common good reminds us that we are all responsible for each other. We must advocate and work for social conditions and a just society in which all people, particularly the vulnerable and marginalized, are able to meet their needs, realize their potential, and flourish.

In Catholic social thought, the common good is not simply the sum of individual goods. It is not, as in utilitarian ethics, the sum of the good of the greatest number of people. That approach presumes that some people will, realistically, be left out or excluded from the benefits of social advance – and accept that fact. In contrast, Catholic social thought emphasizes and insists upon the participation of each and every person in the common good. It challenges contemporary cultures’ heightened individualism in its teaching that every group in society must consider the rights and aspirations of other groups, and the well-being of the whole human family. Personal rights are always experienced within the context of the promotion of the common good. When we are thinking about the common good, we must ask ourselves questions like: **“Is every group able to share in the benefits of society?”** and **“Are some groups excluded?”**

In Catholic Social Thought, other themes, like the role of **private property** and the **universal destination of goods** or our responsibility to work for **justice** and promote **peace** can either be discussed separately or under broader principles like solidarity and the common good. Like all the themes and principles of Catholic Social Teaching, they remain intimately related.

### **PRIVATE PROPERTY/UNIVERSAL DESTINATION OF GOODS**

The **goods** of the world are everyone's and these gifts **are to be shared rather than possessed**. Each of us has a responsibility to contribute to the common good. While there are benefits to private ownership, **private property does not constitute an absolute and unconditional right**. Since we live in community, private property and amassing of wealth have limits. Keeping for one's exclusive use what is not needed can never be morally justified: **“No one is allowed to amass excessive wealth when others lack the basic necessities of life”** (*Catechism 2426-36, Populorum Progressio 23, etc.*).

### **JUSTICE AND PEACE**

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. Pope Paul VI taught that **“if you want peace, work for justice.”** Peace is the fruit of justice and is dependent upon “right order” among humans and among nations. Hence, Catholic social thought has called for direct actions such as an end to the arms race and widespread trafficking in arms, along with an effective international authority since progressive disarmament is essential to future security and to promote and ensure the conditions of peace.

## IV. RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Rights and responsibilities come from our inherent human dignity **granted by God**. ALL human persons enjoy **inalienable rights**. These rights belong to the person because of his or her being a person; they are **not granted by society or the government**. Nor are they earned by achievement, wealth, or any other measure of human production. These rights are **realized in community**. They are essential for the promotion of justice, human development, and solidarity. They are to be respected and **protected** by all the institutions of society and by all members of society.

The Catholic tradition teaches that human dignity can be protected and a healthy community can be achieved only when there is a **reciprocal relationship between rights and responsibilities**. Therefore, **all human rights have corresponding duties and responsibilities - to one another, to our families, and to the larger society - to honor and protect the rights of all others and to build the kind of society that protects and nourishes the rights of all**.

We are called to respect others and to seek the common good. Human rights must be guaranteed if human dignity is going to be promoted and protected. Every person has a fundamental right to life and a right to those things required for human decency, including the basic necessities that provide quality of life (*i.e. food, shelter, health care, education, employment, etc.*). This is fundamental to the welfare of each person and thus to the health of the community. This principle teaches us that we are responsible for each other, to both serve and be served through the communities and institutions of the world in which we live.

## V. PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR AND VULNERABLE

**How do we treat those members of our society that are most vulnerable – people who are poor, weak, marginalized, the sick?** Jesus invites us to follow his example – to stand on the side of the poor. When we serve those who are affected by poverty, those who are marginalized, those who are lost, we serve Jesus. In this service, we truly become who we are called to be. **The Gospel calls Christians to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first**, giving **priority attention** to the rights of those who are economically and socially disadvantaged and, as a result, suffer oppression and powerlessness. We are called to have a love that *prefers* those who are oppressed by poverty. Although poverty has many forms (*material, religious/spiritual, social, cultural*), this principle calls us to **look first** to those whose dignity is most often ignored, overlooked, at risk, or disdained.

In Catholic Social Teaching, social action has *two feet* – **charity (direct service)** and **social (systematic) justice**. St. Pope John XXIII teaches us that not only can justice never be replaced by charity, **“justice comes before charity.”** Christians are called to oppose all forms of structural injustice. The demands of justice must be enjoyed by all. Those with the greatest need require the greatest response. Possessions and the goods of the earth belong and are meant to serve all people. Based upon the principle of the sacred dignity of each and every person, **a basic moral test is to examine how our most vulnerable members are faring in our society. Poverty and marginalization not only hurt its victims but also the whole community.** 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](#).

## VI. DIGNITY OF WORK AND THE RIGHTS OF WORKERS

*Related Theme(s): Economic Justice*

Created in God's image, we reflect this image in human work. Work is the way that humans share in the activity of God and express their sacred dignity as human persons. Work can and must serve a person's humanity and dignity. Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a **form of continuing participation and involvement in God's creation**. Work is necessary for earthly progress and the development of God's Reign on the earth (*On Human Work*). Work can have a redemptive and sanctifying quality when we unite the hardships of work with Jesus.

The Catholic Church promotes a "people first" **economic justice** model which promotes a healthy theology of work. God calls us to work and to rest. Since economic decisions, activity, and growth are meant to provide for the needs of all, they need to be shaped by moral and social justice principles. The [economy must serve people](#), not the other way around. Through work, we exercise our gifts and fulfill our potential. When work is done by a person, it has value. The Church teaches that if the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected--including the right to productive work, fair wages sufficient to support a family, health care, leisure, a decent work environment, the ability to organize and join unions, pension and accident insurance, private property, and to economic initiative. Organizations and all leaders are responsible to society for the economic and ecological effects of their operations.

## VII. CARE FOR GOD'S CREATION

Care for God's Creation is a foundational teaching of our Catholic faith. God created all things, including the Earth and all life, with love, beauty, purpose, and order. We show our respect for the Creator through our [care for God's creation](#). All creation reflects God's infinite goodness and wisdom. All things, in a unique way, possess their own particular goodness and perfection. No creature is self-sufficient. **All of creation is interconnected and interdependent**. We are part of and dependent on the environment.

We are **called to protect people** and the **planet**, living our faith in relationship with all of God's creation. Care for the earth, or what Pope Francis has recently referred to as **integral ecology**, recognizes the importance of the moral, ethical, and countless other intimate connections between humans and our environment. Through human work and activity, we are co-creators in the continuing development of the earth. People are to respect and share the resources of the earth since we are all part of the **community of creation**. The goods of the earth are created for all. We are called to ensure the fair distribution of these goods. **We must seek to maintain the health of the Earth** for future generations by avoiding wastefulness, overconsumption, and by working to cultivate the Earth's resources. In gratitude and respect for the goodness of God and God's plan, we must carefully interact with all creation so as not to bring harm to others or to the environment.