

## KEY THEMES OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

The [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops](#) has identified seven key themes of Catholic Social Teaching which are:

### **Life and dignity of the human person**

The foundational principle of all Catholic Social Teaching is the sanctity of human life and the inherent dignity of the human person. Human life must be valued infinitely above material possessions. [Pope John Paul II](#) wrote and spoke extensively on the topic of the inviolability of human life in his watershed encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*, (Latin for "The Gospel of Life").

Acts considered attacks and affronts to human life include [abortion](#), [euthanasia](#), and every other deliberate taking of life, and must always be opposed. In the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (Latin for "Joy and Hope"), it is written that "from the moment of its conception life must be guarded with the greatest care ."

War and the death penalty must almost always be opposed, the former being guided by the principles of just war doctrine and recourse to the latter is not excluded "if this is the only practicable way to defend the lives of human beings effectively against the aggressor." It is argued that the defense of lives includes the provision of deterrence and the establishment of justice. Both war and the death penalty must always be a last resort. In addition, each human, being made in the image and likeness of God, has an inherent dignity that must always be respected. Every human person "is called to a fullness of life which far exceeds the dimensions of his earthly existence, because it consists in sharing the very life of God." Racism and other forms of discrimination must then always be opposed.

### **Call to family, community, and participation**

Immediately after forming Adam the "LORD God said: "It is not good for the man to be alone." The Church teaches that man is now not only a sacred but also a social animal and that families are the first and most basic units of a society. Together families form communities, communities a state and together all across the world each human is part of the human family. How these communities organize themselves politically, economically and socially is thus of the highest importance. Each institution must be judged by how much it enhances, or is a detriment to, the life and dignity of human persons.

Catholic Social Teaching opposes collectivist approaches such as Communism but at the same time it also rejects unrestricted laissez-faire policies and the notion that a free market automatically produces justice. The state has a positive moral role to play as no society will achieve a just and equitable distribution of resources with a totally free market. All people have a right to participate in the economic, political, and cultural life of society and under the principle of subsidiarity state functions should be carried out at the lowest level that is practical.

### **Rights and responsibilities**

Every person has a fundamental right to life and to the necessities of life. In addition, every human has the right to what is required to live a full and decent life, things such as employment, health care, and education.

The Church supports private property and teaches that "every man has by nature the right to possess property as his own." The right to private property is not absolute, however, and is limited by the concept of the social mortgage. It is theoretically moral and just for its members to destroy property used in an evil way by others, or for the state to redistribute wealth from those who have unjustly hoarded it.

### **Preferential Option for the poor and vulnerable**

Jesus taught that on the Day of Judgment God will ask what each of us did to help the poor and needy: "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me." This is reflected in the Church's canon law, which states, "[The Christian faithful] are also obliged to promote social justice and, mindful of the precept of the Lord, to assist the poor from their own resources."

Through our words, prayers and deeds we must show solidarity with, and compassion for, the poor. When instituting public policy we must always keep the "preferential option for the poor" at the forefront of our minds. The moral test of any society is "how it treats its most vulnerable members. The poor have the most urgent moral claim on the conscience of the nation. We are called to look at public policy decisions in terms of how they affect the poor."

### **Dignity of work and the rights of workers**

Society must pursue economic justice and the economy must serve people, not the other way around. Workers have a right to work, to earn a living wage, and to form trade unions to protect their interests. All workers have a right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, and to safe working conditions.

Workers must "fully and faithfully" perform the work they have agreed to do and employers must not "look upon their work people as their bondsmen, but... respect in every man his dignity as a person ennobled by Christian character."

### **Solidarity**

"Solidarity is undoubtedly a Christian virtue. It seeks to go beyond itself to total gratuity, forgiveness, and reconciliation. It leads to a new vision of the unity of humankind, a reflection of God's triune intimate life...." It is a unity that binds members of a group together.

All the peoples of the world belong to one human family. We must be our brother's keeper, though we may be separated by distance, language or culture. Jesus teaches that we must each love our neighbors as ourselves and in the parable of the Good Samaritan we see that our compassion should extend to all people.

Solidarity at the international level primarily concerns the Global South. For example, the Church has habitually insisted that loans be forgiven on many occasions, particularly during Jubilee years. Charity to individuals or groups must be accompanied by transforming unjust structures.

**Care for God's creation**

Stewardship of creation: The world's goods are available for humanity to use only under a "social mortgage" which carries with it the responsibility to protect the environment. The "goods of the earth" are gifts from God, and they are intended by God for the benefit of everyone. Man was given dominion over all creation, but in return must be a good steward of the gifts God has given him. We cannot use and abuse the natural resources God has given us with a destructive consumer mentality.