

Catholic Social Teachings of the Universal Church – Part 1

- The First of Several Installments on the Fundamentals
- Principles to Guide Us in Dealing With Today's Difficult Problems
- Grounded in Church Tradition, Scripture and Natural Philosophy

Where These Principles Come From

The first article in this series described the motivation for trying to better understand and articulate Catholic Social Teachings – a desire to break the deadlock, reach common ground and make real progress in dealing with many trying public issues of our day. This article begins a several part series on the key themes drawn from many Papal Encyclicals and other authoritative Church writings going back to 1891 (Pope Leo XXIII) and continuing to the present day (Pope Benedict XVI). These key themes have been expanded and reinforced over this time period by Popes, national Bishop Conferences and Catholic theologians world-wide.

Merging Teachings into Ten Key Themes

Studying each of the source documents by themselves would be time consuming and so I present for you a synopsis of key teachings. Authors who have written about this material have come up with various groupings of the essential themes, using from 7 to 15 (or more) groupings. For our purposes, I have chosen to elaborate using 10 key themes as the best means through which to communicate the essence of the message.

#1: Dignity of the Human Person

This principle is the starting point for almost any discussion of social morality and public policy. This theme describes two related principles:

- Humans are made in the image and likeness of God
- Humans have intrinsic and sacred dignity

You may notice that these points are ultimately based on Scripture, especially Genesis and the teachings of Jesus regarding the Second Great Commandment. Putting this together, the Church says that society needs to be ordered in such a way that all people (all human life) are respected all through society. That is, we are to promote the life and dignity of each person – at any age, in any circumstance, in the face of any obstacle.

#2: The Common Good

This theme says that we are to work together to build healthy and caring societies for both personal and public benefit. We (and our governmental representatives) are called to explore the issues of the day – healthcare, poverty, access to jobs and health care, taxation, etc. – realizing that in a pluralistic society there will be differences in the objectives and means to achieve them. We are called to discuss and compromise in order that differing ideologies not block the achievement of any real progress in these areas. In fact, the source documents

say that the reason that government / political authority exists is to achieve a common good for all citizens. This is in stark contrast to the extreme individualism and selfish capitalism that we often witness on a daily basis.

#3: Solidarity

The principle of solidarity says that we are to consider ourselves part of a global community – a global family of interdependent humans – who share the same desire for liberty and an opportunity to develop themselves and provide for their families. This theme says that human institutions (governments and other structures) are to promote the creation of just laws, equitable trade, human rights, worker's rights, etc. based on the premise that we are members of the same human family and as such are called to be there for each other. That is, our institutions are to be there in part to protect the poor and the exploited who have as many needs and rights as the rest of us and who need a voice and real caring.

What We Have Learned So Far

We have explored briefly three specific themes and principles which we may have already known intuitively but which we may need help in articulating and applying. The challenge for us is to critically listen to the issues of the day and use Catholic social principles as the lens through which we interpret the real issues, their moral implications and potential solutions. For example, as we watch the progress of political campaigns, we need to study the issues raised and determine whether the positions of politicians are consistent or inconsistent with the principles defined. (We will explore some of the specific issues in a future article, but for now we need to complete our overall exploration of the ten key principles.)

For More Detail

The most readily available source for the Catholic social themes is the November 2007 revision of the Faithful Citizenship document of the U.S. Bishops (USCCB). In paragraphs 40-62 they describe seven key principles, but the entirety of the material is the same as is presented here and in upcoming articles. You can easily visit their web site: www.faithfulcitizenship.com.

(There are many other references which I will put together in the near future so you can read for yourself the words of the many Catholic leaders who have contributed to this outstanding tradition.)

Deacon Bob Wallace November 2008

Representative Sources:

- *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, USCCB, Nov 14, 2007 – see www.faithfulcitizenship.org which is one of the U.S. Bishop’s several permanent web sites on social concerns, peace and justice issues.
- *Catholic Social Teaching – Our Best Kept Secret* by Edward DeBerri, James Hug and others, 4th Edition, 2004, Orbis (There may be later editions). This is an excellent overview of the many documents published by the Church in the last 150 years. This document was a project co-sponsored by the Center of Concern (www.coc.org)
- *Principles, Prophesy, and a Pastoral Response – An Overview of Modern Catholic Social Teaching*”, revised edition, 2001, U.S. Catholic Bishops
- *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Vatican, June 2004 (Available from the Vatican web site: www.vatican.va, just search on the English title.)
- *Gaudium et Spes* (literally “Joy and Hope”), commonly known as “The Constitution on the Church in the Modern World”, Second Vatican Council, December 8, 1965 (Available from the Vatican web site: www.vatican.va, just search on the Latin title.)
- *A Nation for All*, by Chris Korzen and Alexia Kelley, Jossey-Bass / Wiley, 2008

Suggested Discussion Questions:

1. Describe in your own words how the principle of the Dignity of Human Persons (#1) underlies the Catholic position on any of today’s well known social issues (you choose the specific issue to cite)
2. Find one (or several) Old Testament passages in Genesis which describe the dignity of humans (Hint – look in Chapters 1 and 2)
3. Similarly, find one (or several) New Testament passages which describe the dignity of humans in:
 - Matthew (hint: Ch 22, 25),
 - 1 Corinthians (Ch 8)
 - Acts (Ch 10)
 - Romans (Ch 2)
 - Galatians (Ch 2)
 - Ephesians Ch 6)
4. Describe in your own words what you believe the Church means by the Common Good (#2). Do you think exceptions apply here, or is this a teaching intended for “universal” application?
5. Can you cite any recent examples of how people in the news (politicians, business people, educators, etc.) either support or do not support this Common Ground principle?
6. Have you (or someone you know) traveled within the U.S. or to a foreign country and witnessed extremely poor social conditions? Describe what you saw and experienced.
7. How could or should we as the U.S., or other nations of the world, do to address the poor and suffering wherever they might be? (Solidarity, #3)