

## Catholic Social Teachings of the Universal Church – Part 2

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

### Today - More on Catholic Social Principles

With this article we continue our exploration of the ten key Catholic Social Teaching themes. These collectively are the themes we will use as principles from which to judge our way forward on difficult public and moral issues of the day.

#### #4: Subsidiarity

This theme has clearly a \$10 name but its meaning is quite understandable. Subsidiarity starts with the premise that we need governmental entities to perform essential and positive roles – which help promote the common good for all citizens. Subsidiarity recognizes that we have local and national tasks suitable, respectively, for local and national governments, and that the tasks of government should be done at the lowest appropriate level which has the capability to achieve it. Thus, fire and police protection, local education, parks and recreation should be managed at the local governmental level. National governments, in contrast, are needed to create a climate where trade is fair, peace is promoted, the country is protected, citizen’s rights are secured, the economy is managed and the environment is cared for. And of course, the state governments have a role in between, for example, to assist with regional reduction of poverty and promotion of equitable higher education. (This principle is comparable to that of modern management - responsibilities in a firm should be managed at the lowest possible level of the organization.)

#### #5: Preferential Option for the Poor

This theme ultimately comes right out of the gospels which describe Jesus’ actions and dialogue, and says that we as a society need to be aware of and support the most vulnerable in our society – those without legal or economic means – those who are sick, elderly, with disabilities – those who are “poor” in a manifest way. In fact, we are not just to consider their needs among many others, but we are prioritize the restructuring of our society to eliminate the structural inequities which perpetuate poverty and other economic inequities present. This principle is in stark contrast to some of the common capitalist practices in today’s global societies which directly or indirectly deny people food, shelter, life sustaining jobs, access to health care, etc. which everyone needs to live a normal life. This principle says that rich people and nations have a moral obligation to share resources in order to help others who are less fortunate and beset with poverty and related issues.

#### #6: Dignity of Human Work, Rights of Workers

Some will have difficulty with this one, given the strong capitalist culture of our day. Each person has inherent dignity and has this dignity irrespective of his/her economic value. Work is a fundamental right, is good and is fundamentally a sacred activity in which we use our God-given gifts to earn a

living and participate in the on-going work of creation. Accordingly workers have rights to job opportunities, to safe working conditions, and to organizing themselves (eg, through unions, guilds) when they find themselves in companies which deny them rights. In return for a good day’s work, employees are entitled to living wages, not just a “minimum wage”, and the ability to function safely and productively as workers and citizens. Workers are also entitled to leisure time. Employers are to treat workers in keeping with their human dignity and to not put profits above this responsibility. Social and governmental policies need to be grounded in mutual and equitable rights between firms and workers.

#### #7: Rights, Responsibilities, Participation

This theme speaks to the social, political and cultural dimensions of our lives, and promotes the common good from another perspective. According to this principle, all people have a right and a responsibility to participate as fully as practical in these areas of their lives. There should be no social strata or rules which prevent our access to or ability to engage others socially and culturally. This applies to recreation, sports, Church activities, concerts, etc. This theme also recognizes the importance and responsibility of all citizens to participate in the political process. This not only includes voting, but also the capability to be heard and to have a “place at the table” of political discussion. It is a tragedy that our political process has deteriorated to an activity where only the rich and well connected may apply and where the politics of division is the coin of the realm. This is not how politics should operate and this Catholic Social theme says we have a right to participate in a more cooperative environment. But first in the US, we have to change the nature of the system, in part by leveraging these social action principles to seek the common good for all.

#### What We Have Learned So- Far

With this installment, we have explored several themes with a common thread around citizens’ full participation in society and with necessary help by government in provide support to all people in their care. We are challenged to give the highest priority to eliminating poverty and other structures which currently burden too many who are poor and vulnerable. We are challenged to participate politically in order to change the nature of the political process to once again work for the common good of all citizens.

#### For More Detail

As mentioned in the last article, see the US Bishop’s Faithful Citizenship document at [www.faithfulcitizenship.com](http://www.faithfulcitizenship.com).

Deacon Bob Wallace

Representative Sources:

1. *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, USCCB, Nov 14, 2007 – see [www.faithfulcitizenship.org](http://www.faithfulcitizenship.org) which is one of the U.S. Bishop’s several permanent web sites on social concerns, peace and justice issues.
2. *Catholic Social Teaching – Our Best Kept Secret* by Edward DeBerri, James Hug and others, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, 2004, Orbis (There may be later editions). This is an excellent overview of the many documents published by the Church in the last 120 years. This document was a project co-sponsored by the Center of Concern ([www.coc.org](http://www.coc.org))
3. *Principles, Prophecy, and a Pastoral Response – An Overview of Modern Catholic Social Teaching*, revised edition, 2001, U.S. Catholic Bishops
4. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Vatican, June 2004 (Available from the Vatican web site: [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va), just search on the English title.)
5. *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](http://www.vatican.va), just search on the Latin title.)
6. *A Nation for All*, by Chris Korzen and Alexia Kelley, Jossey-Bass / Wiley, 2008

Suggested Discussion Questions:

1. Describe briefly the classical positions of “progressive” versus “conservative” on the “proper” role of government in a democracy. (Try to avoid getting channeled into the often inconsistent positions of the two main political parties in the U.S.)
2. Discuss briefly what you consider to be the proper role of the government at the federal, state and local levels. Cite examples of what the government does or does not do properly, according to the principle of Subsidiarity (#4)
3. Look in the Gospels for examples of where Jesus explicitly expressed in word or actions the importance of helping the poor. (Hints: Matthew Ch 5; Luke Ch 4, 14, 16) (Preferential Option for the Poor, #5)
4. Can you cite any examples of the good work by people you know or local charities who take this principle seriously? (#5)
5. Describe two actions you would take on a local level, if you had the power and resources, to eliminate some of the structural causes of poverty. How might you and others work toward this direction?
6. The number of members of labor unions has declined in recent years due largely to structural changes in the economy and corporations. Can you cite any examples in your local community where workers have been exploited to a greater or lesser extent, perhaps in part because they are not unionized? (Human Work, Rights of Workers, #6)
7. In your community is there a positive or negative “stigma” associated with union membership? If negative, what could be done to turn that perception around?
8. Describe how you participate as fully as possible as a citizen in the local, state or national political processes? What is the “cost” of such participation and what are the “benefits” you derive from participation? (Rights, Responsibilities, Participation, #7)
9. Suggest how you might try to convince others to participate more fully. (#7)