

## A Beginner's Action Plan – Applying Catholic Social Principles (Part 1 of 3)

- From this series, I now understand the basics of Catholic Social Teachings
- What are some general steps to apply them in my life and in broader society?
- This article (Part 1) applies to both broad public actions and to personal actions

### Recent Bulletin Articles

Articles in this series have so far briefly discussed Catholic Social Teachings and suggested a collective need to apply them more aggressively to contemporary policy debates, and as opportunities arise in our personal lives. We have also said that a position you take on an issue depends a lot on how you frame the question we are debating and trying to bring to closure and action. We have said that an attitude of mutual respect and seeking common ground should bring better results for all. Now let's take a few additional practical steps. (associated article Parts 2 and 3 will appear soon.)

### Take Time to Understand Today's Major Issues

Few of us have the time and energy to really jump in and become authoritative in the causes and potential solutions for our key social challenges, such as, poverty, homelessness, loss of jobs, access to health care, racism and many others. We also may feel we have no leverage to effect change – whether in local, state or national discussions.

But, why not start with what you have an interest in and passion around? Often we feel most sharply about societal situations which our family or friends have encountered and have had great difficult coping with. Or we may start by aligning ourselves with a favorite Church group, local organization or political candidate and adopt their cause. The important point is to get started with good information sources including major daily newspapers, weekly news magazines, and the web sites of major news organizations known to express a variety of balanced views. Complement the secular sources by reading reliable Catholic sources such as your local Catholic newspaper, national Catholic magazines, the U.S. Bishops web site, and web sites of major religious orders. As you dig, I suggest you avoid newspapers, magazines and web sites which are obviously promoting far right or far left positions, whether they claim to be “Catholic” or not. Also, avoid sources which have an “all or nothing” attitude, unwillingness to dialog or strong partisan ideologies, whether they claim to be “Catholic” or not.

### Filter Each Issue Using Catholic Social Principles

This is not as complicated as it may appear at first. Learn the basic moral and social principles as described earlier in this bulletin article series or from other Catholic sources. Keep a copy handy for easy reference. As you consider each issue, try to frame the issue / situation as occurring to persons just like you – to persons who are created in the image and likeness of God and who should be treated with fundamental dignity and rights – just like you deserve. Put yourself in the shoes of those who are impacted by today's dehumanizing situations – poverty, unemployment / underemployment, sickness, those disenfranchised, victims of discrimination or

abuse. Imagine yourself being impacted and often trapped by these kinds of situations through no fault of your own.

Reflect on Jesus in the Gospels who confronted similar situations. Observe His actions and his avoidance of criticism of those in need. Never did He criticize the ordinary people He helped as being ignorant, lazy, making poor choices or otherwise not worthy of assistance, empathy and love.

### Form an Opinion Based on These Principles

Ask yourself, “What kind of actions do Catholic Social Principles lead me to? Is there a precedent here in the Gospels or in today's secular society? What actions can work?”

Ask yourself, “Where should help come from? Myself? My family or friends? From a Church or other local organization? From my local, state or federal government? What do Catholic Social Teachings say about the help needed and where should help come from?”

Given some sense of a solution, then ask yourself, “Am I being called to be a part of the solution? Can I contribute something personally or with a few others like me, or is the size and scope of the problem too big?” Our approach and tactics will vary depending upon the nature of the problem and what we can do. Nevertheless, resolve each day to take a step to help address one problem with a personal response.

### Pray Throughout This Process

Connecting to God – Father, Son and Spirit – is essential to navigating the rough waters in today's culture of strong individualism and trickle down assistance. Realize you are thinking counter-culturally and will be acting in the same way as did Jesus and His followers. You will meet resistance, criticism and misunderstanding. You will be attacked personally along with others who hold similar views. Realizing that we are walking the same path taken by Jesus really helps on this challenging journey!

### Make Your Opinion Heard by Those Who Need It

Many solutions start with a personal invitation to reflect upon and help change existing attitudes and perspectives.

Who needs to hear? Most likely, those at your school, your work place, in your neighborhood, those who ride the bus or train with you. And don't forget your elected representatives at all levels of government!

What do they need to hear? That there are better ways to frame issues. That our existing partisan attitudes are often unhealthy and counterproductive. That there are reasonable solutions if we adopt a different approach – one with love, empathy, and personal efforts to help!

Deacon Bob Wallace February 2009

(For related materials, see [www.paxjoliet.org/bulletin](http://www.paxjoliet.org/bulletin))

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 / is 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. *A Nation for All*, by Chris Korzen and Alexia Kelley, Jossey-Bass / Wiley, 2008
6. Social Teachings - see <http://www.catholicsinalliance.org/catholic-social-teaching>
7. Social teachings magazine – see <http://salt.claretianpubs.org/>
8. Social teachings summary - see <http://salt.claretianpubs.org/cstline/tline.html>
9. Books – see <http://www.catholicsinalliance.org/resources/books>

Suggested Discussion Questions:

1. What public news sources do you use for gathering information about today's key public policy issues? (newspapers, magazines, web sites)
  - a. Which ones do you seek out and read?
  - b. Which news sources have you found to be biased, highly ideological / partisan or otherwise unreliable?
2. What Church or public sources do you utilize for explanations of Catholic Social Teachings? (eg, Catholic newspapers, magazines, web sites, books)
3. What persons in your parish can you ask for assistance regarding understanding and applying Catholic Social Teachings? (pastoral staff, lay persons or clergy)
4. Describe any recent experiences you have had in trying to share your views on major policy issues, in part through applying Catholic Social principles. What has worked or not worked? What are you going to do differently the next time?
5. Describe your spiritual journey around Catholic Social Teachings up to this point? Do you find this topic difficult? Time consuming? Straightforward? Confusing? Challenging? How does prayer for discernment help?