

# Catholic Social Teaching

The Church has always had social teaching and the most fundamental source is the Bible. There was also the tradition of the Church Fathers in such areas, for example, as ownership of property, the just war, and the charging of interest. In its modern form, Catholic Social Teaching (CST) first emerged at the end of the nineteenth century as a response to the injustices of the Industrial Revolution and the threat of Communism. While recognising that social teaching is a lived tradition and not just a written one, this paper is concerned with the considerable development that has taken place over the last one hundred years.

## What is Catholic Social Teaching?

- Authoritative Church teaching on social, political and economic issues
- Informed by Gospel values and lived experience of Christian reflection
- Analysing that experience from different historical, political and social contexts
- Providing principles for reflection, criteria for judgement and guidelines for action
- Thus enabling us in our struggle to live our faith in justice and peace

CST is NOT an ideology or third way, nor does it provide a practical programme or model.

The Church's social doctrine is not a 'third way' between liberal capitalism and Marxist collectivism ... rather it constitutes a category of its own. Nor is it an ideology, but rather the accurate formulation of the results of careful reflection on the complex realities of human existence, in society and in the international order, in the light of faith and the Church's tradition. Its main aim is to interpret these realities, determining their conformity with or divergence from Gospel teaching; its aim is thus to guide Christian behaviour. It therefore belongs to the field, not of ideology, but of moral theology. [*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, John Paul II, 1987, n41]

The Church has no models to present, models that are real and effective can only arise within the framework of different historical situations, through the efforts of all those who responsibly confront concrete problems in their social, political and cultural aspects, as these interact with each other. For such a task the Church offers her social teaching as an indispensable and ideal orientation towards the common good. [*Centesimus Annus*, John Paul II, 1991, n. 43]

## Principles of Catholic Social Teaching

- **The dignity of the human person:** the focal point of CST is the human person, made in the image of God, and so having fundamental freedom and dignity, the basis for human Rights. Recognising this image in our neighbour, the teaching rejects any policy or system that reduces people to economic units or passive dependence.
- **The Common Good:** people exist as part of society. Every individual has a duty to share in promoting the welfare of the community and a right to benefit from that welfare. This applies at every level: local, national, and international. Public authorities exist to mainly promote the common good and to ensure that no section of the population is excluded.
- **Solidarity:** as members of the one human family, we have mutual obligations to promote the rights and development of peoples across communities and nations. Solidarity is the fundamental bond of unity with our fellow human beings and the resulting interdependence. All are responsible for all; and in particular the rich have responsibilities towards the poor. National and international structures must reflect this.
- **Subsidiarity:** all power and decision-making in society should be at the most local level compatible with the common good. Subsidiarity will mean power passing downwards, but it could also mean passing appropriate powers upwards. The balance between the vertical (subsidiarity) and the horizontal (solidarity) is achieved through reference to the common good.

## Putting CST into practice

Although applying abstract principles is difficult, Pope John XXIII outlined a well-tried procedure in *Mater et Magistra* (1961).

- a. Examine the concrete situation (SEE)
- b. Evaluate it with respect to the principles (JUDGE)
- c. Decide what should be done in the circumstances (ACT)

## A Developing Teaching

CST is not a fixed body of teaching. Grounded on the principles identified above and Gospel values, it has focussed on major themes that have evolved in response to the challenges of the day. Many of the changes date from around the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) though some are taking a long time to be integrated into the life of the Church.

a) Changes in attitude:

- **Political involvement** – responding to the privatisation of religion and the political apathy this engendered, Vatican II gave fresh emphasis to the Church's shared responsibility for secular as well as sacred history. *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971) sees politics as aimed at the transformation of society. In this sense political involvement is a must. Christians and the Church itself must be prepared to take a prophetic stand in bearing witness to the peace and justice of the Kingdom.
- **Commitment to the World** – the Council presents the world in positive terms, created and redeemed by God. We share in the Creator's plan, working for its realisation in history. So CST has developed a more global vision affecting every level of society and both rich and poor nations. It has also taken a peace-making role more seriously.
- **Preaching the Gospel** – "action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world are a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel." (*Justice in the World*, 1971, n 6) This means that when this dimension is lacking in its preaching, the Church is failing to preach the Gospel.
- **Preferential option for the poor** – implicit in earlier CST, but now explicit from an insight from Latin America, this has been taken up with new urgency and far-reaching consequences for pastoral action.

b) Changes in methodology:

- **Reading the 'signs of the times'** – "the church has the duty of scrutinising the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1965). God speaks in and through human history, i.e. the Church learns from the world where God's Spirit is at work. The world is part of God's continuing creation for whose transformation we take responsibility.
  - **Empowering the local Community** – "it is up to Christian Communities to analyse the situation proper to their own country, to shed on it the light of the Gospel, and to draw principles of reflection, norms of judgement and directives for action from CST." (*Octogesima Adveniens*, 1971)
  - **Greater use of scripture** – CST has moved away from a deduced, rather narrow adherence to natural law ethics towards a more objective approach based on human experience, with scripture as the new touchstone. This is particularly evident in the encyclicals of John Paul II. The resulting change has brought a new radicalism that sees the obligations of the rich towards the poor as part of the co-responsibility for creation and a share in God's covenant with the poor.
  - **Primacy of Love** – instead of CST being primarily based upon reason, more recent documents have been increasingly shaped by the primacy of love, understood as including the biblical themes of justice, mercy and option for the poor. Reason is not discarded but put in its proper place.
  - **Action oriented planning** – the starting point of pastoral and social reflection is people, with all "the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties" (*Gaudium et Spes*). In their struggle for justice and peace, the outcome of the process is action. The emphasis is on right doing (orthopraxis) and not just right thinking (orthodoxy). Earlier CST often led to social idealism, isolating reason from the whole pastoral cycle process.
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