

The Seven Main Principles of Catholic Social Teaching

Social Justice has a rich tradition, starting in the 1891's with the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, 'On Capital and Labor', in the Catholic Church. Christ's message of love and service also embodied a call for social change. "The central message is simple: Our faith is profoundly social. We cannot be truly 'Catholic' unless we hear and heed the Church's call to serve those in need and work for justice and peace" (Renewing the Vision, 38). Our young people need to be empowered to live lives of holiness with a social consciousness, rooted in a faith of Jesus Christ, the scriptures, and Catholic social teaching. These seven principles summarize the teachings of our Church and its very basic foundations of social justice.

Life and Dignity of the Human Person: The dignity of life is the base of Catholic social teaching and comes from the inherent gift that all humans were "made in the image and likeness of God." The respect and sanctity of all humans requires that human life be valued and protected from conception to natural death, based on who they are, not ever dependent on what they do. "We believe that every person is precious, that people are more important than things, and that the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person" (*Sharing Catholic Social Teaching*). Life is to be treated as precious and valid regardless of the circumstances surrounding the individual. Christ loved us first, and we are called to be that love to others, and share the message of dignifying life.

Call to Family, Community and Participation: Although some celebrate and encourage individualism, we humans are very much dependent on others, and are inherently social. "How we organize our society—in economics and politics, in law and policy—directly affect the human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community" (*Sharing Catholic Social Teaching*). Community is non-negotiable in our Catholic faith, as seen in the mystical body of Christ. The family is the central institution which Catholics must support and foster. Community is where humans can achieve more fully who they were created to be. This call to community is both a right and responsibility of all humans to look out for the common good of all those in society, especially the poor and most vulnerable.

Rights and Responsibilities: The term "rights" and "responsibilities" are used many times by the government and other organizations. When these words are used in the context of Catholic social teaching, they speak about human dignity and the preservation of strong communities through human rights. The right to life is possessed by all human beings, but also the right to basic human decency. These rights and responsibilities are to one another, to our families, and to the greater world. The phrase "love thy neighbor," in the realm of Catholic social teaching has global implications. There is a necessary balance of individual and social responsibility in our tradition.

Option for the Poor and Vulnerable: In his apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 'At the Beginning of the New Millennium', Pope John Paul II states that "there is a special presence of Christ in the poor, and this requires the church to make a preferential option for them." There is an obvious gap in our world's poverty and riches, with half the world living on less than a dollar each day. It is these individuals, though not often seen as brothers and sisters because of distance or separation, that we are to not only think about but actually put first in all of our decisions.

How are the poor and most vulnerable going to be affected by my actions, or way of life? “Catholic teaching proclaims that a basic moral test is how our most vulnerable members are faring.” (*Sharing Catholic Social Teaching*).

Dignity of Work and Rights of Workers: Work is more than a way in which human beings earn a living. It is the dignified participation in God’s creation. All work has dignity, and all workers must also have rights. The security and initiatives of the rights of workers are a large part of Catholic social teaching. “If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected—the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to organize and join unions, to private property, and to economic initiative” (*Sharing Catholic Social Teaching*). Work in terms of Catholic social teaching needs to be viewed as an important part of God’s purpose for the individual.

Solidarity: This is the fundamental belief that we are all children of God and therefore all connected by God as a part of His creation. Solidarity is rooted in the concerns and action we all must take toward the common good of our global world. This creates an inherent duty to take care of each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. Living in an interdependent world, regardless of our differences, we are globally responsible for a collective well-being that cannot be separated. This virtue is described by John Paul II as “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all” (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 38).

Care for God’s Creation: The idea of caring for God’s creation is one that is surrounded by environmental issues, not often associated with the Catholic faith, but is a part of our identity as Catholics. In the words of John Paul II, it is “genuine doctrine” (*Centesimus Annus*, no. 5). The policies and controversies that surround so much of our world’s environmental issues cause Catholics to look at what needs to be done. “We are called to protect people and the planet, living our faith in relationship with all of God’s creation. This environmental challenge has fundamental moral and ethical dimensions that cannot be ignored” (*Sharing Catholic Social Teaching*). Terms like “subsidiarity,” which involves limiting government and the roles of voluntary associations, are a part of the care of God’s creation. As Catholics, we have a responsibility to be involved citizens in policy and advocacy -- always working for needs of those most vulnerable, which often means caring for God’s creation and what affects it.

In his encyclical, *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis states “I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all... All of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements and talents.” (14)

Main Source:

[USCCB: Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions Reflections of the U.S. Catholic Bishops](#)