



Catholic Social Teaching

A foundation document of the CES by Dr Michael Costigan

Adjunct Professor Dr Michael Costigan gives a brief history of the significant body of Catholic Social Teaching, scripturally based and encapsulated in Papal Encyclicals of the last two centuries.

Catholic Social Teaching (or Doctrine) [CST] is a collection of principles or values related to life in society. It is enshrined in a rich series of papal, conciliar and other Magisterial documents, complemented by the reflections of numerous clerical, religious and lay commentators. Those principles are scripturally and theologically based and have found expression through the ages in the teachings and actions of many of Jesus Christ's followers both within and outside the Roman Catholic tradition. While, in general, the social teachings are not unique to Roman Catholicism, the Popes and other Church leaders have developed them more systematically than other Churches in the period since 1891, when Pope Leo XIII issued his Encyclical Letter, *Rerum Novarum*.

SOME FEATURES OF CST

Among the teachings more conspicuous features are:

- that it has evolved and grown as the Church leadership has responded to the enormous social, economic, political, scientific and technological changes taking place everywhere since the 19th Century
- that the responsibility for translating the principles into action, applying them to all kinds of situations and circumstances, rests above all with the laity
- that some diversity in the kinds of responses by activists to particular socioeconomic-political events is acceptable that the content and importance of the teaching, which is integral to the faith, is regrettably less well known to or accepted by many believers than they should be.

MAIN GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF CST

Various attempts have been made to summarise the main guiding principles of this teaching. One helpful ten-point summary appeared in the Australian Catholic Bishops' famous pastoral statement, *Common Wealth for the Common Good* (Collins Dove, 1992, pp. 17-28). With a few slight modifications, the ten principles are the following.

1. The dignity of the human person

This is Catholic Social Teaching's bedrock principle. From it flows that teaching's emphasis on the inalienable value of human life, on human rights, on the equality of all persons and on the right and duty of all members of the community to participate in society.

2. Freedom

This is seen as a basic human right, reflecting the liberating mission of Jesus Christ and requiring his followers to be "lovers of true freedom" (the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Liberty, *Dignitatis Humanae*, n. 8).

3. The common good

Freedom is limited by the fact that we are necessarily members of society, who must contribute to the good of all, the “common good”, described by Vatican II as “the sum of those conditions which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfilment” (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 26).

4. Private property and God’s gift of the Earth to all humanity

While the right to private property is defended by the Church, it has limits and restrictions, sometimes described as a “social mortgage”. The earth’s goods are meant to benefit everyone - they have a “universal destination”.

5. Labour and capital

The teaching affirms the dignity of work, the rights of workers to suitable recompense and conditions, the legitimacy of trade unions and the right to strike in appropriate circumstances. The primacy of labour over capital is affirmed.

6. Solidarity and family

As a consequence of their social nature, human beings have responsibilities to others, beginning with their own families and extending to their communities, their nation and indeed the whole human family. The importance of the family as an institution is central to Catholic Social Teaching. At the same time, the commandment to “love thy neighbour” also has global implications.

7. The preferential option for the poor and vulnerable

This is not in conflict with the principle of equality. Aimed at restoring genuine equality, it is based on the teaching and example of Jesus himself. It has been repeatedly proclaimed in papal teaching as well as in the writings of others.

8. Stewardship and sustainability

We are managers of God’s creation, a role that implies duties towards future generations.

9. The environment and the subservient place of economics

An increasingly significant implication of our stewardship of the earth is that we should care for the environment. Pope John Paul II spoke of the need for “ecological conversion”. Economic interests are sometimes given precedence over the health of the environment. The economy must meet the basic needs of people, since it exists for human beings, not the reverse.

10. The signs of the times and the principle of subsidiarity

In addition to setting down principles, the Popes speak of the need to observe what is happening in the world - the “Signs of the Times”. Responding to major trends and developments, believers should pay heed to what the social teaching has to offer, including the principle of subsidiarity. This principle resists excessive centralism, over-active government intervention and all kinds of oppression and authoritarianism.

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