

Principles of Catholic Social Teaching

Now that we understand what Catholic social teaching (CST) is and where it came from, we can explain why the Church considers it so important. Many wonder: “Why should we look to the Catholic Church as we deliberate present-day ethical challenges? What does it have to offer?” The answer is that CST offers a series of moral principles developed directly from Scripture and the teachings of the early Church fathers that provide a foundation for making moral decisions in the public realm. Stated differently, the principles of CST offer a moral guide for how to live the Christian faith in the world. It is important to clarify, however, that these principles are not laws or commandments that dictate exactly what one should or should not do in a particular situation. Instead the principles offer a framework for moral decision-making regarding how to live as individuals within society, and how to formulate public policy. Let us explore these principles in more detail.¹

Human Dignity

The first principle of CST is human dignity. The Catholic Church teaches that because all people are created in the image and likeness of God, and because God became human through the person of Jesus Christ, each individual maintains an inherent dignity and an infinite worth. Human dignity upholds the sacredness of human life at all stages, from conception until the moment of natural death. Although the media tends to focus on those Church teachings that involve the beginning of life (abortion) and end of life (euthanasia), we must remember that the Church upholds the principle that human life is sacred at all moments. . . . Practically speaking, human dignity means that all people must be afforded basic human rights and must always be treated with respect. It means that the human person must be viewed as an integrated whole—body, mind, and soul—and each individual must be afforded the opportunity to develop these aspects to his or her fullest ability. Finally, human dignity means that others must not be viewed as objects. One cannot exploit others, treat them as a means to one’s own end, or ignore the consequences of one’s actions on them. When faced with a decision that will affect others, one must always ask, “Do my decisions respect others as persons in themselves?”

Community

The next two principles are closely interrelated. The principle of community teaches that we humans are one family and that we need one another. Physically, we are interdependent as far as meeting our basic material needs, and socially we develop and fulfill ourselves only in relationship with one another. Thus the principle underscores the fact that we are not the isolated individualists that our culture tells us we are. The principle of community has a theological basis as well. Jesus taught his followers to love God with their whole heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love their neighbors as themselves (see Mark 12:30–31). God offers the perfect model of this teaching through the Trinity. Christians profess belief in God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; the “community” that exists within God models how Christians are called to live in communion with one another.²



Common Good

The principle of community leads directly to the principle of the common good. This principle teaches that because all people live, work, and fulfill themselves in community with one another, they must look not only to fulfill their individual good but to build a society that benefits all people. The Second Vatican Council defines the *common good* as “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their fulfillment.”³ Stated differently, the common good is a social order where all individuals have the opportunity to meet their basic needs, interact with others, and ultimately fulfill themselves as human persons. More recently, Pope Benedict XVI echoed this teaching when he stated the following:

[The common good] is the good of “all of us,” made up of individuals, families and intermediate groups who together constitute society. It is a good that is sought not for its own sake, but for the people who belong to the social community and who can only really and effectively pursue their good within it.⁴

It is important to note that the common good is not, as some have charged, another term for *socialism*. The principle simply means that society has the moral obligation to provide the conditions through which its members can develop themselves to their fullest potential. By developing themselves to their fullest potential, individuals contribute to the overall good of society. Consequently, CST maintains that the common good is not opposed to the individual good. The two are, in fact, complementary.

Participation

Building directly off the principles of community and the common good are the principles of participation and subsidiarity. The principle of participation states that at all levels of society people have the right to participate in the decision-making process concerning issues that affect them directly. An excellent example of this is the Revolutionary War slogan, “No taxation without representation,” which points to the injustice of forcing people to obey laws they had no voice in enacting. Participation is vitally important because it is the community’s primary means of self-determination. By participating in political and other processes, the community decides for itself who will govern, how it will provide necessary services, and how its resources will be allocated. Self-determination is most often exercised through voting.

Subsidiarity

The principle of subsidiarity states that as much as possible, public policy decisions should be made on the local level. The basis of this principle is that the people who have the best knowledge of what needs to be done in a particular location are those who actually live there. For example, in order to address the issue of rising crime rates in Cincinnati, the policy makers should be people who actually reside in Cincinnati. National or international bodies should not interfere with a local situation if the local community can handle it on its own. Higher authorities can step in if the local community cannot adequately address the situation, but these higher authorities cannot change or nullify the decisions of a local community without a compelling reason.⁵



Preferential Option for the Poor

The sixth principle of CST is preferential option for the poor. The rationale for this principle is that as Jesus championed the cause of the poor (both materially and spiritually), so also his followers are called to do the same. The Second Vatican Council made this point clear in the opening line of its *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1965):

The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well.⁶

This insight developed into a fuller recognition of the Church's vocation to stand with the poor, as well as its duty to evaluate economic, political, and social activity from the perspective of society's most vulnerable. The U.S. bishops underscored this insight twenty years later in *Economic Justice for All* by claiming that the poor "have the single most urgent economic claim on a nation." They further argued that economic policy decisions must be judged on what they do "for the poor, to the poor, and what they enable the poor to do for themselves." For the bishops, the "fundamental moral criterion" of any economic policy is that it be done "at the service of all people, especially the poor."⁷

Stewardship

The seventh CST principle is stewardship. As we saw with the early Church fathers, the Catholic Church has traditionally upheld the right of individuals to own property. Reasons for this include that private property serves as a means to meet basic needs (food, clothing, shelter, etc.) and that people are more diligent with their own property than with property commonly held. However, the Church also teaches that one must view property as a means to self-fulfillment, not as an end in itself. That is, one must not allow the pursuit of material wealth to become the primary driving force of one's life. Money is important, but only to the extent that it provides the means to live a genuinely fulfilling life. People are not to orient their lives toward "gaining more."

This understanding of private property gives rise to the principle of stewardship. Many people equate stewardship with caretaking, but it means much more than that. Caretaking means watching over something for another during the other's absence. Stewardship is much more involved because it means accepting full responsibility for that which is in your care. If a situation arises where an important decision has to be made, the steward has full responsibility to act and, in turn, will be held accountable for the decision that he or she makes. This understanding of stewardship has profound implications for how one lives. As Christianity views the earth and everything in it as gifts from God, it maintains that one has a moral obligation to use these gifts responsibly. One way to do this is by donating property for the benefit of others during times of great need. We saw an excellent example of this in the hours following the 9-11 attacks as store owners in lower Manhattan gave away food and drink to those who needed them. Seeing others in need, all Christians are called to do the same.

Stewardship also has important environmental implications. Genesis, chapter 1, asserts that God has given humanity dominion over the earth. God has made people stewards of the created order and has given them the privilege of using the world's resources to improve human life. However, along with this privilege comes responsibility. The Church teaches that people are called to recognize the created order as a good in itself and then act accordingly. This means that they must use resources prudently



by cutting waste and overconsumption and that they must not harm the environment unnecessarily through pollution or other means.

Solidarity

Finally, the principles of human dignity, community, common good, participation, subsidiarity, option for the poor, and stewardship all culminate in the principle of solidarity. What exactly is solidarity? In the aftermath of a natural disaster, we see on television images of people who are suffering, and our immediate response is one of compassion. As implied by its etymology, *com-passion* entails a response of “feeling with” the other and a spontaneous desire to let the other know that he or she is not alone. Now certainly solidarity involves compassion, but it is much more than that. Solidarity involves the conscious decision to form community with the one for whom we have compassion, the one who is suffering. Solidarity takes place when we recognize another’s need and then commit ourselves to action with the intent of either making some positive change in the suffering person’s life, or assuring that this person’s situation will improve in the long run. Solidarity also involves a sense of mutuality, a two-way relationship with both sides giving and receiving. Those who offer assistance begin to realize that their giving actually fosters their own growth. Those who receive assistance discover that their plight can serve to open people’s eyes to the suffering of so many others around the world.⁸

The crucial point to keep in mind is that solidarity means being in relationship with others. It does not mean feeling sorry for the other or acting charitably out of a sense of pity. Solidarity entails the recognition that we are one human family. It means that we are responsible for the well-being of others and we cannot turn our backs on one another or become isolationists in the face of global difficulties. The late Pope Saint John Paul II expressed these exact points in his own definition of solidarity:

[Solidarity] then is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, *it is 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.⁹

Endnotes

1. These principles, as well as a comprehensive explanation of the Church’s social teachings, can be found in the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004).
2. See Benedict XVI, *Charity in Truth* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2009), numbers 53–54.
3. Vatican II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, in *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, ed. David O’Brien and Thomas Shannon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), number 26.1.
4. Benedict XVI, *Charity in Truth*, number 7.
5. Pope Benedict XVI discusses the importance of subsidiarity with the global economic order in *Charity in Truth*, number 57.
6. Vatican II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, number 1.
7. USCCB, *Economic Justice for All: Tenth Anniversary Edition* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1997), numbers 24, 86, 88.
8. Marie Giblin, “What Catholics Should Know about Solidarity,” *Catholic Update* (June 2007): 1–4.
9. Saint John Paul II, *On Social Concern*, in *Catholic Social Thought*, number 38.

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