

Brief Introduction to Catholic Social Teaching

What is Catholic Social Teaching?

Catholic Social Teaching (also known as Catholic Social Doctrine) sums up the teachings of the Church on social justice issues. It promotes a vision of a just society that is grounded in the Bible and in the wisdom gathered from experience by the Christian community as it has responded to social justice issues through history.

Three Elements

The social teachings are made up of three different elements: principles for reflection; criteria for judgement; and guidelines for action.

The principles for reflection apply across many different times and places, but the guidelines for action can change for different societies or times. Uniform guidelines for action wouldn't work because societies are so different from one another, and they are always changing over time creating new situations with different problems and possibilities. The criteria for judgement may be thought of as 'middle axioms' mediating between the highly authoritative but necessarily general and abstract principles for reflection, and the details of the concrete social reality. They are less authoritative than the principles for reflection but more so than the guidelines for action. Guidelines for action are always dependant on contingent judgements and the information available through human knowledge. There is frequently scope for legitimate differences of opinion among believers on a range of social justice issues.

Methodology: See, Judge & Act

Since Vatican II the methodology that has been promoted asks us to read the 'signs of the times' using the 'see', 'judge', 'act' method that Cardijn made popular in workers' and students' movements. It asks us to work inductively, looking first at the social justice issues as they exist in our communities, before assessing what is happening, and what is at stake. Finally we need to discern what action to undertake in response.

Key Themes in CST

Many texts on CST move chronologically through the key documents of the social magisterium examining their content. By tracing ideas and themes through these documents we can see how this rich body of thought has developed through time. To provide a brief introduction to some of the most important principles of the social magisterium let us look at six of the key themes evident in these documents. Every commentator has their own list of key principles and documents, and there is no official 'canon' of principles or documents. In practice, the most important principles and documents to draw on will be those that most directly speak to the situation in question.

Human Dignity & the Unity of the Human Family

Human dignity is the starting point and central concern of Catholic thinking about human rights. Each person is created in the image and likeness of God and so has an inalienable, transcendent God-given dignity. It follows that each member of the human family is equal in dignity and has equal rights because we are all children of the one God. We are sisters and brothers to each other.

We understand God to be a trinity of persons and so we see the image of God reflected not only in individuals, but also in communities. Together in community we bear the image of our God whose very nature is communal.

The Catholic tradition is opposed to anything that is opposed to life itself, or that violates the integrity of the human person, and anything that insults human dignity. Human rights are the things due to us simply because we are human beings, they are the claims made by human dignity.

From this principle we can derive the following criteria to help judge a social situation: “does this situation respect and promote human dignity?”, And, “what is happening to people, and to their human dignity?”

Solidarity

The principle of solidarity means basically that we are all really responsible for each other. It is not about a vague sort of compassion or shallow distress at others' misfortune, but involves a determination to commit oneself to working for change so that everyone will be able to reach their potential. It is about respect for and the promotion of the dignity and rights of our sisters and brothers.

The Common Good

The doctrine of the common good also emphasises that we are connected with other people.

The common good is understood as the collection of social conditions that make it possible for each social group and all of their individual members to achieve their potential. It means that each social group must take account of the rights and aspirations of other groups, and of the well-being of the whole human family. The rights and duties of individuals and groups must be harmonised under the common good.

Questions that flow from these principles when judging a social situation might include: “are the benefits enjoyed by some groups attained only at the cost of other groups?”, And, “what are the consequences of this policy for those living in poor countries?”.

Universal Destination Of Goods

The universal destination of goods refers to the fact that God intended the goods of creation for the use of all. Everyone has the right to access the goods of creation to meet their needs. People and nations have no right to squander resources when others are in need.

The key question here is: “does everyone have access to a large enough share of resources to meet their needs?”

Participation

Because of their intelligence and free will, people have both a right and a duty to participate in those decisions that most directly affect them. They are actively to shape their own destiny rather than simply accept the decisions of others.

This right to participate belongs not only to individuals but also to groups and communities.

One way to reflect on participation is to ask: who wins? Who loses? Who decides?

Subsidiarity

The principle of subsidiarity places responsibility as close as possible to the grassroots. The people or groups most directly affected by a decision or policy should have a key decision-making role. They should only be interfered with in order to support them in cases of need, and to help coordinate their activities with the activities of the rest of society with a view to the common good.