

Xavier University

Exhibit

Faculty Scholarship

Theology

2018

125 Years of Catholic Social Teaching: Guidance for Troubled World

Kenneth R. Overberg S.J.
overberg@xavier.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://www.exhibit.xavier.edu/theology_faculty



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

In the midst of genocide, terrorism, war, refugees, pandemic, globalization, economic crises, and other threatening events Catholic social teaching's emphasis and guidance remain relevant, real, and challenging.

This Book Chapter/Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Theology at Exhibit. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Exhibit. For more information, please contact exhibit@xavier.edu.

125 Years of Catholic Social Teaching: Guidance for a Troubled World

As we celebrated the 125th anniversary of the landmark encyclical, *The Condition of Labor (Rerum Novarum)*, both old and new social, political, and economic events continued to rock our world: genocide, terrorism, AIDS, preemptive war, refugees, globalization, worldwide economic crises.

In the midst of these threats to hope and to life itself, we have discovered the continuing wisdom and urgency of Catholic social teaching. Its emphasis and guidance remain relevant, real, and challenging.

The collection of documents called the social teachings began in 1891 with Pope Leo XIII's *The Condition of Labor*. For more than 125 years, the statements of the popes, Vatican II, and conferences of bishops have addressed critical national and international issues such as human rights, labor problems, economic depression and development, political participation, war and peace.

In recent years, Pope Benedict XVI in his first encyclical, *God Is Love (Deus Caritas Est)*, affirmed the wisdom of the social teachings while discussing the relationship between justice and charity. He states that "the promotion of justice through efforts to bring about openness of mind and will to the demands of the common good is something which concerns the church deeply" (28a).

In a later encyclical, *Charity in Truth (Caritas in Veritate)*, Pope Benedict addresses issues of social ethics, especially the financial crisis and related topics. He states his basic conviction this way: "The greatest service to development, then, is a Christian humanism that enkindles charity and takes its lead from truth, accepting

both as a lasting gift from God” (78). The pope offers many applications, such as, “projects for integral human development cannot ignore coming generations, but need to be marked by solidarity and *inter-generational justice*, while taking into account a variety of contexts: ecological, juridical, economic, political and cultural” (48).

Most recently Pope Francis challenged the world about the environmental crisis in his *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home*. This encyclical calls for an ecological conversion, indeed, for a profound change in lifestyle.

To help us all follow Pope Paul VI’s words that these social questions “must in the years to come take first place among the preoccupations of Christians” (*A Call to Action*, 7), this chapter will explore five major themes of the Church’s social teaching and offer some action steps for today.

1. Affirming Human Dignity

At the heart of Catholic social teaching is an emphasis on the value of the human being. We are created in God’s image, and our value is rooted fundamentally in who we are and not in what we do.

Situations that undermine or limit human dignity cry out for change; those that truly promote such dignity need to be fostered. The theme of human dignity is discussed in detail in two documents: (1) Pope John XXIII’s *Peace on Earth* presents the more philosophical view and (2) Vatican II’s *The Church in the Modern World* sets forth the more scriptural view.

Pope John XXIII develops at length his conviction that human nature provides the key both for individual rights and duties and for the international cooperation

necessary for peace. The Church in the Modern World incorporates much of Pope John's thought but emphasizes how the Bible shows the meaning of human dignity: in Jesus Christ, sin is overcome and each person's full dignity and destiny are revealed.

Action Steps

What does this emphasis on human dignity mean for us? At least three things:

1. *See human dignity as a starting point for moral decision making.* Our growing appreciation of what truly enriches human dignity—and what truly injures it—provides a solid basis for our morality.

2. *Believe in your own worth.* The social teachings remind us that we, too, are precious and unique.

3. *Treat others with great respect.* Too easily, we get trapped in thinking of others according to some stereotype, especially those who are different from us. We need to skip the racist joke and the sexist comment.

2. Valuing Work

Labor—or better, the *laborer*—has been a central theme of the social teachings. In 1891, Pope Leo XIII wrote *The Condition of Labor* in response to the massive problems caused by the Industrial Revolution: exploitation of the worker, terrible working conditions, unjust wages. In order to defend people from such abuse, Leo stresses the basic right of human beings to work, to receive a just wage, to form unions, to possess private property.

Concern for the worker is expressed throughout the social teachings and is developed in detail in a contemporary way in Pope John Paul II's *On Human Work*. In

this very reflective statement, the pope again affirms the rights of workers and unions.

Consistent with other social teachings, *On Human Work* criticizes Marxism with its emphasis on state ownership and its rejection of private property; it also criticizes capitalism for its neglect of the common good and for its focus on productivity and profit rather than people.

Action Steps

The social teachings prompt the following suggestions:

1. *Take a fresh look at your work.* Most of us work, but do we really find our work creative and fulfilling, or does it more often become numbing drudgery?

2. *Be attentive to questions of justice at your workplace.* In the U.S., working conditions and the power of unions have changed drastically in the many years since *The Condition of Labor*. Our view of the relationship between workers and owners probably depends much more on our profession and economic bracket than on the social teachings.

3. *Recognize both values and limits in capitalism.* Pope John Paul II stresses both in his encyclical *Centesimus Annus* commemorating the 100th anniversary of *The Condition of Labor*. While some commentators try to interpret his words as a complete affirmation of capitalism, John Paul actually offers a powerful critique of capitalism, with its domination of things over people and the worsening problems of marginalization, consumerism, and exploitation.

3. Developing the Common Good

Closely related to concern for workers and international economics is the third major theme: the common good. Recognizing the increasing interdependence among all the peoples on earth, Pope John XXIII explains in *Peace on Earth* that the universal common good “embraces the sum total of those conditions of social living whereby people are enabled to achieve their own integral perfection more fully and more easily” (58).

Such basic necessities as food, clothing, and shelter are, of course, included, but also the right to education, the right to take an active part in public affairs, the right to worship God freely.

Pope John argues that in today’s world the common good of one nation cannot be separated from the common good of the whole human family. Countries must seek the good of all and not just their own self-interest.

Later popes continue to develop this theme of international development and liberation. Pope John Paul II’s *On Social Concern* commemorates the twentieth anniversary of Paul VI’s *The Development of Peoples*. Pope John Paul judges that the reality of the developing nations has become worse in the intervening twenty years and so calls for genuine collaboration among peoples as a necessary part of our response.

Although earlier popes had addressed concerns about the environment, Pope Francis is the first to devote an entire encyclical to the topic. Issues include pollution, water, climate change, and global inequality. A perfect example of the common good: the very existence of “our common home.”

Action Steps

Especially at this point, we may be tempted to ask, “What can I do? I’m only one individual.” Worldwide political, economic, and environmental issues are immense and overwhelming. The social teachings, however, stand as a challenge to us, reminding us that it is our world and, in some sense, our responsibility.

1. *Develop a global outlook.* In our families, for example, we can discuss and pray over issues like famines or global warming or the pain of whole nations torn by strife. We could also express our global concerns in the way we vote and by writing those who represent us in Congress.

2. *Find ways to promote the common good.* For instance, we North Americans might raise our awareness of how a consumer-oriented lifestyle affects other nations: How does the gobbling up of shrinking supplies of oil and lumber by some nations, for example, deplete the resources and harm the environment of others? This might lead us to personal efforts to conserve the earth’s resources: by recycling, perhaps, or simplifying our lifestyles.

4. Creating Justice

Justice—right relationships along with the structural recognition of human dignity and rights and responsibilities—is a major theme throughout the social teachings.

In 1971, a worldwide synod of bishops met to follow Vatican II’s direction to “read the signs of the times.” The synod’s statement, *Justice in the World*, finds massive divisions in the world between rich and poor, which result in millions of people living marginal lives, being illiterate, ill-fed, and poorly housed. The bishops state that the gospel demands justice for these people as an essential expression of

Christian love. Our relationship with God is closely related to our relationship with other persons.

In a celebrated passage of this statement, the bishops declare: “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the gospel” (6).

In *A Call to Action*, Pope Paul VI addresses other justice concerns including urbanization, discrimination, the role of women, the environment. Concerning women, for example, Paul asserts that “developments in legislation should...be directed to...recognizing her independence as a person, and her equal rights to participate in cultural, economic, social and political life” (13).

He addresses the environment too: “Humanity is suddenly becoming aware that by an ill-considered exploitation of nature humans risk destroying it and becoming in turn the victim of this degradation” (21).

Action Steps

Here are some ways we can help create a more just society:

1. *Get involved in political issues.* When we see how some government and business leaders make decisions that oppress people and deny human dignity (think of corporate scandals in the U.S. and sweatshops everywhere), we cannot, as Christians, simply remain silent about these profoundly human, ethical, religious issues. We see the importance of voting responsibly and speaking out on such matters. The people we elect are the ones determining policy on a wide range of crucial justice issues, whether it is a matter of trade agreements, funds to fight AIDS and malaria, or the debts of poor countries.

2. *Start now in your home and community.* There are plenty of justice questions to tackle in our own backyards. Do we abandon the elderly in nursing homes? Do we scornfully look down on persons suffering mental illness? Are we prejudiced against persons of a different sexual orientation or race or religion? How are our attitudes embodied in our votes on bond issues and school policies or in decisions about volunteering? We don't have to look far to find people and places in need of justice.

5. Building Peace

In a century marked by world wars, the use of atomic bombs and the build-up of arms, the social teachings frequently turned to the topic of war and peace. As we have already seen, Pope John XXIII's *Peace on Earth* emphasizes human dignity, rights, and duties as the only possible foundation for true peace.

Vatican II's *Church in the Modern World* links the preparation for war with the problems of development: "The arms race is one of the greatest curses on the human race and the harm it inflicts upon the poor is more than can be endured" (81).

Pope John Paul II states: "Peace is not just the absence of war. It involves mutual respect and confidence between peoples and nations. It involves collaboration and binding agreements. Like a cathedral, peace must be constructed patiently and with unshakable faith" (Homily at Coventry Cathedral, quoted in the U.S. bishops' pastoral letter *The Challenge of Peace*, 200).

As the twenty-first century began with terrorism and preemptive war, Pope John Paul more and more limited the application of just-war theory and emphasized

the necessity of creating peace. In his address to the Diplomatic Corps in 2003, he states: “War is not always inevitable. It is always a defeat for humanity.” Solutions in the Middle East “will never be imposed by recourse to terrorism or armed conflict, as if military victories could be the solution.”

Action Steps

How can we help?

1. *Be a peacemaker in your community.* The bishops conclude their long pastoral letter by urging Christians to accept the cost of discipleship, to be faithful to gospel values. Concretely, this may mean helping to resolve conflicts at work or home or teaching children a message of peace when we see violence on TV.

2. *See the link between war and other human violations.* *The Challenge of Peace* shows connections between preparation for war and all the other issues treated in this article: “When we accept violence, war itself can be taken for granted. Violence has many faces: oppression of the poor, deprivation of basic human rights, economic exploitation, sexual exploitation and pornography, neglect or abuse of the aged and the helpless, and innumerable other acts of inhumanity. Abortion in particular blunts a sense of the sacredness of human life” (285).

Challenge and Hope

Our rich heritage of Catholic social teachings challenges us to use our gifts and imagination in upholding the dignity of people and tackling the social problems of our day as active citizens.

The Church, moreover, proclaims its profound trust that a loving God walks with us. As the U.S. bishops’ *Economic Justice for All* puts it: “We cannot be

frightened by the magnitude and complexity of these problems. We must not be discouraged.... [A]s believers in the redemptive love of God and as those who have experienced God's forgiving mercy, we know that God's providence is not and will not be lacking to us" (364).

Appendix: Some Key Social Teachings

1891 Leo XIII, **The Condition of Labor** (*Rerum Novarum*): addresses the pressing problems of industrialization and the oppression of workers.

1931 Pius XI, **The Reconstruction of the Social Order** (*Quadragesimo Anno*): responds to the impact of the economic depression: affirms just wages and unions; condemns unequal distribution of wealth; opposes both unrestricted capitalism and Marxism.

1961 John XXIII, **Christianity and Social Progress** (*Mater et Magistra*): turns to global interdependence and the vast differences between rich and poor nations.

1963 John XXIII, **Peace on Earth** (*Pacem in Terris*): presents a detailed analysis of human dignity and rights; affirms democracy and the rights of press, speech, and religion.

1965 Vatican II, **Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World** (*Gaudium et Spes*): emphasizes the scriptural views of the human person; addresses critical issues of marriage, culture, economics, politics, war and peace.

1967 Paul VI, **The Development of Peoples** (*Populorum Progressio*): explores the deeper meaning of development—cultural, social, religious needs, along with

economic ones; urges fair trade relations and other forms of international cooperation.

1971 Paul VI, **A Call to Action** (*Octogesima Adveniens*): focuses on political power and justice.

1971 Synod of Bishops, **Justice in the World**: stresses the preferential option for the poor and the reform of society so that all persons are able to participate actively in the economic, political, and cultural life of their society.

1981 John Paul II, **On Human Work** (*Laborem Exercens*): emphasizes the primacy of people over things; develops a spirituality of work.

1987 John Paul II, **On Social Concern** (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*): discusses the massive economic gap between North and South (in terms of global hemispheres); urges redirection of resources from producing arms to alleviating misery of impoverished peoples.

1991 John Paul II, **On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum** (*Centesimus Annus*): indicates how key themes of Leo XIII's encyclical remain valid for today's world; affirms and critiques capitalism, as shown in John Sniegocki's Horizons article, "The Social Ethics of Pope John Paul II."

1995 John Paul II, **The Gospel of Life** (*Evangelium Vitae*): defends life from womb to tomb, discussing abortion, euthanasia, self-defense, the death penalty, and the relationship between civil and moral law.

2009 Benedict XVI, **Charity in Truth** (*Caritas in Veritate*): marks the fortieth anniversary of Paul VI's *The Development of Peoples*; addresses the global financial crisis and discusses positive and negative aspects of globalization.

2015 Francis, **Praise Be to You** (*Laudato Si*): addresses the ecological crisis facing “our common home.” Issues include pollution, water, climate change, and global inequality.

(This article is taken from *Disciples: Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times*, published in 2018 by Lectio Publishing, LLC; available at <https://www.lectiopublishing.com>.)