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This article highlights key themes of Catholic social teaching that ground LGBTQ+ ministry that attempts to express and embody these values by promoting welcoming and understanding communities.

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LGBT Ministry and Catholic Social Teaching

Controversy often surrounds LGBT issues. Soon after Pope Benedict announced his resignation, comments about his record appeared, along with concerns and hopes for the new pope. The 2013 Supreme Court decisions on the Defense of Marriage Act and California's Proposition 8 raised new concern and tensions in the Church. Even in ordinary times, people involved in LGBT ministries face numerous difficulties, including misunderstanding and discouragement. Whatever the challenges or times, key themes of Catholic Social Teaching offer support, encouragement, and direction for those involved in LGBT ministry.

In their pastoral message *Always Our Children*, the U.S. Catholic bishops state: "The teachings of the Church make it clear that the fundamental human rights of homosexual persons must be defended and that all of us must strive to eliminate any forms of injustice, oppression, or violence against them." Later they add that "all homosexual persons have a right to be welcomed into the community, to hear the word of God, and to receive pastoral care."

Various groups—diocesan, parish, and others like the Marianist Social Justice Collaborative—attempt to embody and express these convictions by promoting welcoming and understanding communities. This article highlights key themes of Catholic Social Teaching that ground LGBT ministry: human dignity, common good, and justice. It also resurrects a framework for integrating these themes: the consistent ethic of life.

Human Dignity

The heart of the social teachings is the value of the human being. Everyone is created in God's image (see Genesis 1:27); therefore, everyone is sacred and social. One's value is rooted in who a person is, not in what one accomplishes. Human dignity is always present in every person; it is not bestowed on us by family or government. Human dignity and rights are viewed in a personalist perspective, not an individualist one. The person is the center of attention, but is always understood as a social being, implying interdependence and mutual obligation and duty.

Human dignity is the foundation of all the Catholic social teachings, expressed in papal encyclicals, the documents of Vatican II, and in statements of bishops' conferences. A thorough understanding of human dignity is developed in two of these, John XXIII's *Peace on Earth (Pacem in Terris)* and Vatican II's *The Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*.

Pope John develops his vision of world peace from a philosophical perspective of natural law. This vision, presented in ever-widening concentric circles, begins with human nature and dignity at its very core. "Peace on earth, which people of every era have most eagerly yearned for, can be firmly established only if the order laid down by God be dutifully observed" (#1). John focuses first on human rights as a means to protect and nourish human dignity. Then he expands from the person to society, discussing the role of public authorities, international relations, and finally a worldwide public authority to promote the universal common good.

One advantage of this natural law approach is its capacity to address more easily people of other religions or with no religion. Indeed, *Peace on Earth* shares many insights and convictions with the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

The Second Vatican Council called for much more attention to and use of Scripture in developing insights into contemporary moral issues. Its own document, *The Church in the Modern World*, expresses this conviction. The long first part develops an understanding of humanity in light of revelation. Human beings are sacred and social (#12), endowed with conscience, one's "most secret core and sanctuary" where one is "alone with God" (#16), and blessed with a communitarian nature and called to develop solidarity with all (#23-32).

Respecting, protecting, and nurturing human dignity is the very center of LGBT ministry. The opening lines of *The Church in the Modern World* accurately capture the spirit of this ministry: "The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts" (#1).

The grief and anguish experienced by many LGBT persons have been well documented in the United States and around the world. These experiences include both subtle and blatant forms of disenfranchisement and violence. LGBT ministry's efforts to respond by challenging prejudice and fear and by fostering dialogue and understanding (for example, the Collaborative's "A Place at the Marianist Table") clearly embody Vatican II's pastoral concerns as well as those expressed in *Always Our Children*: "Nothing in the Bible or in Catholic teaching can be used to justify prejudicial or discriminatory attitudes and behaviors."

Common Good

A second key theme for LGBT ministry from the social teachings is the common good. Both John XXIII and Vatican II describe the common good as all the conditions of social living that enable people to achieve authentic human development (see *Peace on Earth* #58). Such basic necessities as food, clothing, and shelter are, of course, included, but also the right to education, medical care, and participation in public affairs, and also the right to worship God freely.

Pope John also emphasized that 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.

As interdependence and globalization increased recent popes have stressed the universal common good even more. Key encyclicals such as *The Development of Peoples* (*Populorum Progressio*) by Paul VI, *On Social Concern* (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*) by John Paul II, and *Charity in Truth* (*Caritas in Veritate*) by Benedict XVI have all emphasized this point as the gaps between rich and poor continue to increase.

It is important to note that these teachings of the Church stress that "integral human development" (true human flourishing of the whole person) includes not only economic needs, but also cultural, social, political, and religious needs. In this context, Pope Paul calls for "increased esteem for the dignity of others" (#21; see also #14-20). Pope Benedict stresses that development is a calling from God, requiring a free and responsible answer, demanding respect for the truth, and having love of God and neighbor as its center (#17-19).

LGBT ministry evidently contributes to building up the common good with its various actions to promote esteem for the dignity of others and to challenge economic, social, political, and religious structures that undermine human flourishing (what many call sinful social structures—see, for example, John Paul II’s *The Gospel of Life*, #12). Offering hospitality, providing tools to eliminate homophobia, encouraging positive attitudes and inclusivity: all these surely occur in some local situation but also help strengthen the wider common good.

Justice

The third key theme, closely related to the common good, is justice. Justice can be understood as fidelity to the demands of a relationship (a biblical focus) along with structural recognition of human dignity and rights and responsibilities. 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, that 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 gospel” (#6). *Justice in the World* also emphasizes a preferential option for the poor and marginalized (see, for example, #10 and #20).

Building on the insight that the common good includes much more than economics, those involved in LGBT ministry can recognize that there are many more marginalized people than just economically poor ones, that there are many forms of injustices, including those impacting LGBT persons. Prayerfully reading *Justice in the World* with appropriate applications to LGBT issues in mind may well inform and inspire those involved in LGBT ministry. Similarly, pondering “Biblical Perspectives on Justice” by John R. Donahue, S.J., in *The Faith That Does Justice* (edited by John C. Haughey) may deepen the biblical roots of one’s passion for justice.

Another passage from Vatican II's *The Church in the Modern World* summarizes well both the challenge and gift of LGBT ministry in respecting human dignity, protecting the common good, and nurturing justice. "Nowadays when things change so rapidly and thought patterns differ so widely, the church needs to step up this exchange by calling upon the help of people who are living in the world, who are expert in its organizations and its forms of training, and who understand its mentality, in the case of believers and non believers alike. With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the whole people of God, particularly of its pastors and theologians, to listen to and distinguish the many voices of our times and to interpret them in the light of God's word, in order that the revealed truth may be more deeply penetrated, better understood, and more suitably presented" (#44).

Consistent Ethic of Life

A sound framework for holding together these three themes (and others) from Catholic social teachings is the consistent ethic of life. This moral vision offers not only direction for action but also energy and hope. Developed and promoted by the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin in the 1980s and 1990s, the consistent ethic of life became a centerpiece of the teachings of the U.S. bishops. More recently, this focus has not been emphasized. Resurrecting it now would offer support for LGBT ministries along with many other aspects of life in the church.

The consistent ethic of life is a comprehensive ethical system that links together many different issues by focusing attention on the basic value of life. It challenges left and right, liberal and conservative, calling for consistency and ruling out contradictory moral positions about the unique value of human life. It would be contradictory, for example to be against abortion but for capital punishment or to work against poverty but support euthanasia. The consistent ethic of life recognizes that powerful forces in our culture significantly shape our convictions and spirituality. These forces often lead to the contradictions that separate us from a consistent ethic of life. Politics, media, money, and class—and not our faith—may well be the real sources of some of our values. The consistent ethic of life points to the possibility that an individual's moral stance may, in part, be rooted in prejudices or unexamined assumptions.

Questioning all views that contradict the message and meaning of Jesus, the consistent ethic of life calls for actions involving institutions and structures of society. In his address, “The Consistent Ethic of Life after *Webster*,” Cardinal Bernardin encourages us to be “both prophetic and public, a countersign to much of the culture, but also a light and leaven for all of it.” Later he adds: “We should be convinced we have much to learn from the world and much to teach it.... A confident Church will speak its mind, seek as a community to live its convictions, but leave space for others to speak to us, help us to grow from their perspective, and to collaborate with them.”

Cardinal Bernardin’s words and vision offer support and guidance for LGBT ministries. Confronting discrimination and fostering dialogue and respect contribute not only to justice and human dignity but also to creating a culture of life. While these ministries may take on different tasks, from the personal to the structural, their work can be seen as part of a larger whole—respect for life. Also learning from other perspectives in society and connecting with other respect-life groups will promote greater awareness and cooperation among all the participants. What might emerge from a respect-life gathering of people with a variety of interests, for example, immigration, abortion, LGBT issues, economics, war and peace! Possible contradictions in living the consistent ethic of life (as described above) could be acknowledged and challenged. New partnerships, for example, between those promoting nonviolence and those addressing LGBT issues, will likely create new energies and better embody the gospel of life.

Based on our ancient Scriptures and attentive to contemporary experiences, the consistent ethic of life provides an ethical framework for confronting the many moral dilemmas of LGBT ministry. It helps us all to promote the full flourishing of life!