

Ten Building Blocks Of Catholic Social Teaching

by William J. Byron (edited)



Principles, once internalized, lead to something. They prompt activity, impel motion, direct choices. Unfortunately, many Catholics do not adequately understand that the social teaching of the Church is an essential part of Catholic faith. Listed here are ten principles that guide Catholic social teaching. The first eight of these principles were culled from the relatively brief "Reflections of the U.S. Catholic Bishops," as the second subtitle of *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching* describes this published product of the (U.S.) National Conference of Catholic Bishops. The two last principles are culled from additional texts.

I. The Principle of Human Dignity.

Every human being is created in the image of God and redeemed by Jesus Christ, and therefore is invaluable and worthy of respect as a member of the human family.

This is the bedrock principle of Catholic social teaching. Every person - regardless of race, sex, age, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, employment or economic status, health, intelligence, achievement or any other differentiating characteristic - is worthy of respect. It is not what you do or what you have that gives you a claim on respect; it is simply *being* human that establishes your dignity. Given that dignity, the human person is, in the Catholic view, never a means, always an end.

The body of Catholic social teaching opens with the human person, but it does not close there. The principle of human dignity gives the human person a claim on membership in a community, the human family.

2. The Principle of Respect for Human Life.

Every person, from the moment of conception to natural death, has inherent dignity and a right to life consistent with that dignity.

Human life at every stage of development and decline is precious and therefore worthy of protection and respect. It is always wrong directly to attack innocent human life. The Catholic tradition sees the sacredness of human life as part of any moral vision for a just

and good society.

3. The Principle of Association.

The person is not only sacred but also social. How we organize our society - in economics and politics, in law and policy - directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community.

The centerpiece of society is the family; family stability must always be protected and never undermined. By association with others - in families and in other social institutions that foster growth, protect dignity and promote the common good - human persons achieve their fulfillment.

4. The Principle of Participation.

People have a right and a duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable.

Without participation, the benefits available to an individual through any social institution cannot be realized. The human person has a right not to be shut out from participating in those institutions that are necessary for human fulfillment.

This principle applies in a special way to conditions associated with work. Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God's creation. If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected - the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to organize and join unions, to private property, and to economic initiative.

5. The Principle of Preferential Protection for the Poor and Vulnerable.

In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, Catholic teaching recalls the story of the last judgment (Mt. 25:31-46) and instructs us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first.

Why is this so? Because the common good - the good of society as a whole - requires it. The opposite of rich and powerful is poor and powerless. If the good of all, the common good, is to prevail, preferential protection must move toward those affected adversely by the absence of power and the presence of privation. Otherwise the balance needed to keep society in one piece will be broken to the detriment of the whole.

6. The Principle of Solidarity.

Catholic social teaching proclaims that we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they live. We are one human family Learning to practice the virtue of solidarity means learning that 'loving our neighbor' has global dimensions in an interdependent world.

The principle of solidarity functions as a moral category that leads to choices that will promote and protect the common good.

7. The Principle of Stewardship.

The Catholic tradition insists that we show our respect for the Creator by our stewardship of creation.

The steward is a manager, not an owner. In an era of rising consciousness about our physical environment, our tradition is calling us to a sense of moral responsibility for the protection of the environment - croplands, grasslands, woodlands, air, water, minerals and other natural deposits. Stewardship responsibilities also look toward our use of our personal talents, our attention to personal health and our use of personal property.

8. The Principle of Subsidiarity.

This principle deals chiefly with the responsibilities and limits of government, and the essential roles of voluntary associations.

The principle of subsidiarity puts a proper limit on government by insisting that no higher level of organization should perform any function that can be handled efficiently and effectively at a lower level of organization by human persons who, individually or in groups, are closer to the problems and closer to the ground. Oppressive governments are always in violation of the principle of subsidiarity; overactive governments frequently violate this principle.

9. The Principle of Human Equality.

Equality of all persons comes from their essential dignity. While differences in talents are a part of God's plan, social and cultural discrimination in fundamental rights are not compatible with God's design.

Treating equals equally is one way of defining justice, also understood classically as rendering to each person his or her due. Underlying the notion of equality is the simple principle of fairness; one of the earliest ethical stirrings felt in the developing human person is a sense of what is "fair" and what is not.

10. The Principle of the Common Good.

The common good is understood as the social conditions that allow people to reach their full human potential and to realize their human dignity.

The social conditions presupposed by Catholic teaching presuppose respect for the person, the social wellbeing and development of the group and the maintenance by public authority of peace and security. Today, in an age of global interdependence, the principle of the common good points to the need for international structures that can promote the just development of the human family across regional and national lines.

What constitutes the common good is always going to be a matter for debate. The absence of any concern for or sensitivity to the common good is a sure sign of a society in need of help. As a sense of community is eroded, concern for the common good declines. A proper communitarian concern is the antidote to unbridled individualism, which, like

unrestrained selfishness in personal relations, can destroy balance, harmony and peace within and among groups, neighborhoods, regions and nations.

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