

# The Foundations of the Church's Social Doctrine

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The objective of the Church's social doctrine is not only intellectual or cognitive, but also eminently practical and personal. It should change our lives and help us assume our own responsibilities vis-à-vis the common good, especially as far as those most in need are concerned.

I intend to develop this brief presentation on the Church's social doctrine in four parts: its definition; its nature; its foundations; and several practical suggestions.

## 1. What is it?

Though we may have a general idea of what Catholic social doctrine is, it is often simpler to eliminate false notions but starting with what it is not.

The Church makes clear that her social teaching is not a "third way," some middle road between capitalism and socialism. It is not an economic or political agenda at all, and nor is it a "system." Although it does, for example, offer a critique of socialism and capitalism, it does not propose an alternative system. It is not a technical proposal for solving practical problems, but rather a moral doctrine, arising from the Christian concept of man and his vocation to love and to eternal life. It is in a category of its own.

Catholic social doctrine is not a utopia, in the sense of a social project impossible to achieve. It does not intend to describe an earthly paradise in which mankind can attain perfection.

In spite of all this, Catholic social teaching seriously confronts existing realities and structures, and challenges humankind to look for solutions to social, political and economic situations worthy of human dignity, thereby creating a healthy degree of tension between temporal realities as they stand and the Gospel's ideal.

Catholic social teaching is not a static, fixed doctrine, but a dynamic application of Christ's teaching to the changing realities and circumstances of human societies and cultures. Of course, the fundamental

principles do not change, because they are deeply rooted in human nature. But its applications and contingent judgments adapt to new historical circumstances according to times and places.

The Church's social doctrine belongs within the framework of theology and especially moral theology.

According to the magisterial wording, it is the accurate formulation of the results of careful meditation on the complex realities of humankind's existence, in society and in an international context, in the light of the faith and of the Church's living tradition.

It is an ensemble of the principles, criteria and guidelines for action, with the aim of interpreting social, cultural, economic and political realities, assessing their conformity with or diversity from the Gospel's teachings on the human person and his earthly and transcendent vocation.

## 2. The content of Catholic Social Teaching

The content of social doctrine is expressed on three levels:

-- **Principles and fundamental values.** Social doctrine acquires its basic principles from theology and philosophy, with help from the human and social sciences that complement it. These principles include the dignity of the human person, the common good, solidarity, participation, private property, and the universal destination of goods. Fundamental values include truth, freedom, justice, charity and peace.

-- **Criteria for judgment:** for economic systems, institutions, and organizations, also using empirical data. Examples: the Church's evaluation of communism, liberalism, liberation theology, racism, globalization, just wages, etc.

-- **Guidelines for action:** contingent opinions on historical events. This is not a logical and necessary deduction arising from principles, but also the result of the Church's pastoral experience and a Christian perception of reality; a preferential option for the poor,

dialogue, and respect for the legitimate autonomy of political, economic and social realities. Example: suggestions for the pardon of international debt, agricultural reform, creation of cooperatives, etc. (see "Gaudium et Spes," Nos. 67-70).

### 3. Foundations

The first foundation of Catholic social teaching is Jesus' commandment to love: Love God above all things and love your neighbor as you love yourself. This is the foundation for all Christian morals, and therefore of the Church's social doctrine that is part of morals. Jesus said that the dual commandment of love is not only the first and most important of all commandments, but also a summary or compendium of all God's laws and the message of the prophets.

The Church's social doctrine therefore provides an answer to the question: How should I love God and my neighbor within my political, economic and social context? Our love for God and neighbor does not simply consist in a weekly obligation to attend Mass and throwing a few coins in the basket at offertory time. It must permeate our entire life and conform our actions and our environment to the Gospel.

This is a very important principle for overcoming the tendency to see the economy or politics as something totally separate from morals, when in fact it is precisely there that a Christian makes his faith influence temporal matters.

The commandment to love therefore should represent the general foundation of the Church's social doctrine. There are, however, also specific foundations that can be summarized in four basic principles of the Church's entire social doctrine, four columns on which the whole building is supported. These principles are: the dignity of the human person, the common good, subsidiarity and solidarity.

-- **The dignity of the human person.** The first classical principle is that of the dignity of the human person, which provides the foundation for human rights. To think correctly about society, politics, economy and culture one must first understand properly who a human being is and what his real good is. Each person, created in the image and likeness of God, has an inalienable dignity and must therefore always be treated as an end and not only as a means.

When Jesus, using the image of the Good Shepherd,

spoke of the lost sheep, he taught us what God thinks about the value of the individual human person. The shepherd leaves the 99 in the wilderness to seek out the lost one. God does not think of human beings en masse, or in percentages, but as individuals. Each one is precious to him, irreplaceable.

In his encyclical letter *Centesimus Annus*, Pope John Paul II underscored the centrality of this principle: "It is necessary to keep in mind that the main thread, and in a certain sense the guiding principle ... of the Church's social doctrine, is a correct view of the human person and of his unique value, inasmuch as "man ... is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself." God has imprinted his own image and likeness on man (see Genesis 1:26), conferring upon him an incomparable dignity (see "*Centesimus Annus*," No. 11).

Hence the Church does not think first in terms of nations, political parties, tribes or ethnic groups, but rather of the individual person. The Church, like Christ, defends the dignity of each individual. She understands the importance of the state and of society in terms of service to people and to families, rather than the other way around. The state in particular has the duty to protect the rights of persons, rights that are not bestowed by the state but by the Creator.

-- **The common good.** The second classical principle of the Church's social doctrine is the principle of the common good. The Second Vatican Council defines it as "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily." ("*Gaudium et Spes*," 26; see GS, 74; and *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1906).

Man, created in the image of God who is Trinitarian communion of persons, achieves his perfection not in isolation from others, but within communities and through the gift of self which makes communion possible. The selfishness that urges us to search for our own good to the detriment of others is overcome by a commitment to the common good.

The "common good" is not exclusively mine or yours, and nor is it the sum of the good of individuals, but rather creates a new subject-we-in which each discovers his own good in communion with others. Therefore the common good does not belong to an abstract entity like the state, but to persons as individuals called to communion.

Man is fundamentally (and not only circumstantially) social, relational and interpersonal. Our common good is also necessary for my own fulfillment, meaning for my own personal good. Each person grows and reaches fulfillment within society and through society. Hence, the common good is distinct from but not in opposition to each individual's particular good. Very often, your good and my good meet in our common good.

The common good does instead oppose utilitarianism, the idea of the greatest possible happiness (pleasure) for the highest possible number of people, which inevitably leads to the minority being subordinated to the majority. Therefore the excellence and inviolability of the individual human person excludes the possibility of subordinating the good of one to that of others, thereby converting the first into a means for the happiness of others.

-- **Subsidiarity.** The third classical principle of social doctrine is the principle of subsidiarity. It was first expressed under that name by Pope Pius XI in his 1931 encyclical letter "Quadragesimo Anno." This principle teaches us that society's decisions must be left at the lowest possible level, therefore at the level closest to those affected by the decision. This principle was formulated when the world was threatened by totalitarian systems with their doctrines based on the individual's subordination to the collectivity. It invites us to search for solutions to social problems in the private sector before asking the state to interfere.

Even prior to Pius' encyclical, Pope Leo XIII himself insisted "on necessary limits to the state's intervention and on its instrumental character, inasmuch as the individual, the family and society are prior to the state, and inasmuch as the state exists in order to protect their rights and not stifle them" ("Centesimus Annus," 11).

-- **Solidarity.** The fourth founding principle of the Church's social doctrine was only recently formulated by John Paul II in his encyclical letter "Sollicitudo Rei Socialis" (1987). This principle is called the principle of solidarity. Faced with globalization, the growing interdependence of people and populations, we must bear in mind that the human family is one. Solidarity invites us to increase our sensitivity for others, especially those who suffer.

But the Holy Father adds that solidarity is not simply

a feeling, but a real "virtue" which enables us to assume our responsibilities for one another. The Holy Father wrote that solidarity "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" (SRS, 38).

#### 4. Practical advice

I would lastly like to sketch five practical suggestions regarding the application of Catholic social teaching, especially for us priests:

-- Read and have good, precise knowledge of the Church's social teachings, to be able to expound them with assurance and clarity, and make sure that what we teach in the name of the Church is effectively what the Church teaches, and not our own personal opinions.

-- Humility, so as not to have to jump from general principles to definitive concrete judgments, especially when expressed in a categorical and absolute manner. We should not go beyond the limitations of our own knowledge and specific competence.

-- Realism in assessing the human condition, acknowledging sin but leaving room for the action of God's grace. In the midst of our commitment to human development, never lose sight that man's vocation is above all to be a saint and enjoy God for eternity.

-- Avoid the temptation of using the Church's social doctrine as a weapon for judging "others" (entrepreneurs, politicians, multinational companies, etc.). We should instead concentrate first on our own lives and our personal, social, economic and political responsibilities.

-- Know how to closely cooperate with lay people, forming them and sending them out as evangelizers of the world. They are the true experts in their fields of competence and have the specific vocation of transforming temporal realities according to the Gospel.

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