

What is Catholic Social Teaching?

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"I come to Mass on Sunday to pray, to be spiritually uplifted, to come closer to Jesus in Communion, and receive the grace I need for the coming week. I don't need political sermons. I'm here for religion, not politics." – Anonymous Parishioner

While many Catholics would welcome an application of the Gospel to the pressing political issues of our time, others feel the Church is abandoning its primary purpose when it allows "politics in the pulpit," even if you dress it up as Catholic Social Teaching. Many feel that the Bishops should stick to spiritual concerns and leave politics to the politicians. The dichotomy between faith and justice remains.

Simply put, though, Catholic social teaching helps us understand, and put into practice, the two great commandments Jesus proclaimed: love God totally, and love our neighbors as ourselves (Luke 10:25 – 27).

In the words of Jeremiah, God made it clear that we cannot know God unless we embrace the cause of the poor. Comparing the current king of Israel with the king's father, Jeremiah tells the new king:

"Did not your father eat and drink and do justice, and righteousness? Then it was well. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is this not to know me? says the Lord." (Jeremiah 22: 15 – 16).

Knowing God means promoting justice for the poor. Even more directly, Jesus tells us, "... just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." (Matthew 25: 45). John seals the deal when he writes, "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen." (1 John 4: 20)

Jesus gave us many examples of what it means to love our neighbor through personal encounters; what the Church calls the Corporal Works of Mercy. He also made it clear that "neighbor" means all persons.

But Jesus did not give us much direction on how to address the societal causes of hunger, poverty, war, and other issues of injustice. Nor did he offer much help for guiding public policy on these national and global issues in the modern world. This is the realm of social justice, and Catholic social teaching.

Unfortunately, Catholic social teaching continues to be called the Church's "best kept secret," perhaps because it is not as easy to understand, to preach, and to practice as are the Corporal Works of Mercy.

Consider the story of "The Children in the River." One day, a group of picnickers noticed several children floating down the river. They jumped in to rescue them and noticed even more children floating by. They called others to help, and before long there was a string of people involved in the rescue operation.

As more and more children appeared in the river, people began organizing temporary shelter along the bank. Medical people were called in. Milk and other foods were gathered. Eventually a team of social workers began to arrange foster care for the rescued children.

Finally one person walked upstream along the shore. As children continued to float down the river, others shouted at the person to stay and help. The person turned and answered: "I'm going upstream to try to stop whoever or whatever is throwing the children into the river."

If you were picnicking nearby and saw what was happening, what would be your response?

- Jump into the river and help pull children out?
- Go for more help? What kind of help?
- Join the person going upstream?

It is estimated that some 40,000 children die each day—one every two seconds—from hunger or hunger-related diseases. Many deaths could be prevented by a series of simple immunizations, costing less than \$10 per child.

The great landmark in Catholic social teaching in our own time was the 1971 World Synod of Bishops' document *Justice in the World*. It elevated the status of Catholic social teaching to one of the "constitutive dimensions" of Christian life, along with Scripture and the sacraments.

"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, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation." (*Justice in the World*, "Introduction")

Implied here is a four-fold challenge.

Action. Our response involves more than just awareness and understanding; more than just preaching and teaching.

Justice. We are called to challenge every oppressive situation in society.

Gospel. If the sermon does not include an application to justice in the world, then the Gospel isn't being preached. If parish life does not include a justice and peace component, if our Christian lives don't include some advocacy for justice, then the Gospel is not being lived.

Redemption. Jesus and the Creator beg us and challenge us to help transform the world and redeem the human race.

What an incredible and challenging call! Catholic social teaching helps us understand the implications and application of the central proclamation: love your neighbor as yourself.