

“Live wisely, think deeply, and love generously.”

(Pope Francis)

On Catholic Social Teaching and Parish Engagement

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This document is a brainstorm on Catholic social teaching perhaps helpful to a parish as it thinks about programing, volunteer activities, and prayer life.

As works of charity and justice are essential elements of the mission of the Church in the world, so Catholic parishes see service/community engagement programs as essential elements in their mission.

There are many sources here to support and describe this. Two will suffice: Pope Benedict in his 2005 encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* wrote, “The Church's deepest nature is expressed in her three-fold responsibility: of proclaiming the word of God, celebrating the sacraments, and exercising the ministry of charity. These duties presuppose each other and are inseparable. For the Church, charity is not a kind of welfare activity which could equally well be left to others, but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being” (#25). The World Synod of Catholic Bishops wrote in 1971: “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.”

In *Deus Caritas Est*, Benedict notes that the Catholic response to the needs of others – it is not and can never be a one-way street. He writes:

My deep personal sharing in the needs and sufferings of others becomes a sharing of my very self with them. If my gift is not to prove a source of humiliation, I must give to others not only something that is my own, but my very self. I must be personally present in my gift.

This proper way of serving others leads to humility. This means that the person who serves the other ought not to consider himself or herself superior to the one who is served, however miserable the situation at the moment may be. Christ took the lowest place in the world—the Cross. Those who are in a position to help others will realize that in doing so they themselves receive help.

Catholic social thought is not simply about “them,” the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized. Nor it is simply about “me” and my responsibilities for the problem and to the poor. It is about us. It is love received and given, received and given – creating the conditions for reciprocal relationships.

Catholic social teaching can provide the theological/moral grounding for parish educational and service programs. It can be used to:

- Identify directions an institution might take in developing such programs,
- Interpret or prioritize community needs,
- Guide institutional, departmental, and personal reflection,
- Facilitate institutions for reflection on internal relationships, and

- Direct a parish's relationships to the broader social, political, and economic communities.

What is Catholic social teaching?

Catholic social teaching is part of the Catholic intellectual and moral tradition rooted in the Bible and developed through history. While there is a 2,000-year-old tradition of Catholics and Christians reflecting on participating in the political, economic, and social structures of the world, the term usually is understood to name a movement started at the end of the 19th century. In 1891, Pope Leo XIII issued a teaching document (formally called an “encyclical”) titled *Rerum Novarum*, which addressed the conditions of workers and the moral economic order in the industrialized world in his day. Among other things, Pope Leo defended the rights of workers to a living wage, to form associations, for appropriate working conditions, and to be able to own their own property. Since that time, popes, bishops, and councils of bishops have written encyclicals and other authoritative documents responding to the social issues of the day (such as international relations and trade, poverty and oppression, war, and ecological challenges). These documents, along with applications and reflections from practitioners and scholars, make up the broader Catholic social tradition.

As the main documents in the tradition are from popes and a bishops' council, they are part of Church teaching. For Catholics, however, the authority of the texts does not simply come from the teaching authority of popes and bishops, although that certainly is important. The popes and bishops make moral arguments and defend moral positions through a reasoning process. They ground their points on Scripture and the Catholic tradition. Yet they do more. They see themselves as being a voice for and to the human family. As such, they do not rest their persuasion on elements within its tradition alone. Indeed, the usual practice of all within the tradition is to address the teaching to “All people of good will.” The popes then position their thinking and positions as a form of public discourse, intelligible and accessible to people willing to listen. They ground their writing then on a sense of personhood -- persons in positive and healthy relationships. The spirit of the tradition then is that one does not have to hold Christian beliefs to understand and agree with their positions.

There is a lot of information in Catholic social teaching. The list of the most authoritative documents includes 17 long statements. In the 1980's, the American Catholic bishops, realizing this and knowing that the tradition was thus very hard to teach, decided to develop a comprehensive list of themes or principles that summarized the tradition. Others followed suit, including the Vatican's Council for Justice and Peace in 2004. The many lists developed by national councils of bishops and theologians usually have seven principles (as in seven sacraments, etc.) or ten (as in ten commandments). Most often (except for the Vatican's), the lists are presented without an order or sense of relationship between the principles.

What follows is a list of the main ideas of the tradition placed within an interpretive order. These ideas are to be seen as action guides, ideals we strive for, tools for critical reflection, sources of hope, and foundations for the moral life. As such, they fit into the “See, Judge, Act” model expressed in Catholic social teaching. They help us “See” and to name the reality around us with sense of objectivity and clarity. They help us “Judge,” to describe the reality and discern appropriate responses. They compel us to “Act” on an interpersonal, one-on-one sphere (sometimes called “charity”) and/or to do something on an institutional or systemic sphere (sometimes simply referred to as “justice”) and/or to commit ourselves to longer term responsibilities toward influencing policy and social change (sometimes referred to as “social justice”).

A dominant theme here for Catholics is not to wait for the Church to tell them what to do in the face of justice questions. As Pope Paul VI said in his 1971 Apostolic Letter, *Octogesima adveniens*: “It is up to the Christian communities to analyze with objectivity the situation that is proper to their own

country, to shed on it the light of the Gospel's unalterable words and to draw principles of reflection, norms of judgment and directives for action from the social teaching of the Church."

Service/community engagement programs are more likely to attain their goals when people are knowledgeable about the context in which they are working (for example, when working at a shelter, to have a sense of the causes and the realities around housing insecurity within the community*) and have some structured time to reflect and to respond to their experience (formation takes place in the processing).

Two final introductory notes: Who is the patron saint of your parish? There may be a theme or an event in the life of that saint that may relate to Catholic social teaching. And as Catholic social teaching is meant to be wholistic and addresses the range of social issues, not all of it might be relevant to service or justice activities of a parish.

What are the main points of Catholic social teaching?

We can summarize Catholic social teaching saying it has two foundational convictions, four principles that help us work toward these convictions, and an integrating element.

Catholic social teaching has two foundational convictions.

We promote, protect, and encounter the dignity of persons.

All persons share a fundamental dignity. From this dignity flows the moral claims (human rights) to the freedoms, the fulfillment of basic needs, and the social conditions necessary for our development. Dignity is a universal moral principle, but it is expressed in people. We encounter the dignity of others in their wonderful uniqueness and difference. Recall the * used in a paragraph above. While data and background information are important as we begin community engagement, we know that we are working with people, who have names, identities and stories. We are not simply serving food. We are serving someone's father or sister, son or mother. And a key point here is that we experience our own dignity most fully in the giving and receiving that comes by participating in positive relationships.

Work for the common good.

In Catholic social teaching, the common good is the full network of social conditions which enable persons and groups to flourish and live genuinely human lives. As social beings, our flourishing is both the product of our agency and dependent on the character of the relationships we find ourselves within. Some relationships enable us to become who we are and help us grow into our best selves. Others can be negative and repressive. Working for the common good then refers to developing the conditions for the possibility for persons to develop. It concerns the just distribution of all sorts of public and social goods. It also assumes a certain confidence of persons and their ability dialogue and work together to create relationships worthy of persons. Working for the common good is a process. It challenges people to "see" a particular community as it is and as it could be; to "judge" a situation or social practice by the standards of truth, justice, and compassion; and, to "act" to support or change the processes to enhance the development of persons. In doing one type of action, we can come to understand the necessity of the spheres of social action (see above) and perhaps come to understand that an adequate response to a social justice issue requires action from various levels within a society (this would have implications for their social engagement after graduation).

Catholic social teaching has four principles that support human dignity and the common good.

We give a special concern for the poor, the powerless, and the marginalized.

The deep experience of human dignity is that we are moved to respond when we experience persons who are unable to act on their dignity or whose dignity has been crushed by others or situations -- people on the margins, the sick, the very young and very old, the poor, the migrant, the exploited and the oppressed. We have a calling to reach out to those people either through direct or indirect actions. This humanistic movement is deeply embedded in the Bible. Throughout Scripture, we see God's love for the poor; indeed, Jesus identifies himself with the poor. Thus, we are called to make a "preferential option for the poor." In charity we care for the immediate needs of the poor, giving them something that is our own. In justice we respond to the social practices that work against the inclusion of the marginalized into full participation in society, enabling them to have what is due them.

We work for peace and the development of peoples.

Conflict will always be a part of life, but violence does not have to be. We are to actively take part in actions and practices to make violence and indeed war less likely. These include understanding and addressing the causes of conflict, building relationships, and working, as a preventative measure, for the development of persons, nations, and groups. As Pope Francis said (flipping the language), it is important to "create processes of encounter, processes that build a people that can accept differences. Let us, arm our children with the weapons of dialogue! Let us teach them to fight the good fight of the culture of encounter!"

We recognize the dignity of work and the rights of workers (and the meaning of work in our lives).

Work is a key element of social life. It provides the material means for persons to develop, the opportunity for self-expression, the foundation for the support of families, and it contributes to the well-being of society. The moral and theological significance of work primarily resides in the worker and thus the worker has moral claims to appropriate working conditions and compensation. In charity and justice work, we meet people who work *and* need social services -- which offers points to consider, points about poverty and why people are poor, for reflection and further action.

Science tells us that creation is unfinished. The universe is expanding and changing. Indeed humans can see their work as building and uplifting creation. We are, in a sense co-creators, and sometimes we are not...

We care for creation.

Creation is the order of God's love and a place for us to encounter God. The earth is the common home of persons, meant for the use of all people and the rest of God's creatures. Our flourishing, the hope of future generations, and the integrity of the earth are bound to our concern for and responsible stewardship of God's interconnected creation.

The elements of a Catholic spirituality that includes an ecological aspect affirm most popular responses of sustainability, simplicity, and the 4 "Re's" reduce, reuse, recycle. And link this to the rights and well-being of both future generations and the poor among us today. It sees creation as an act of God's love, not simply for our use but sees creation as an expression of God. It thus also knows that creation, nature, the world is a place to "find" God or better put, to experience God. Jesus went to the desert, up a mountain, and sat by a lake to pray.

There is an integrating element of the tradition.

We are to love and live in solidarity.

God is love. Persons are created through love to love and to be loved. Love of neighbor is the primary social responsibility of Christians and is at the heart of Catholic social teaching. With solidarity we see other persons and nations, whether next to us or across the globe, as neighbors loved by God. It compels us to do justice and to transcend justice with compassion and mercy. While no program can

guarantee such a result, a goal of community engagement, through the encounter with dignity, is experience the journey of solidarity. Fr. Greg Boyle of Homeboy Industries constantly says, “You do not go to the margins to make a difference, you go to the margins to be made different.” Pope Benedict said, “My deep personal sharing in the needs and sufferings of others becomes a sharing of my very self with them...I must give to others not only something that is my own, but my very self. I must be personally present in my gift...This means that the person who serves the other ought not to consider himself or herself superior to the one who is served...Those who are in a position to help others will realize that in doing so they themselves receive help.” Community engagement programs meet a need in the community. Reflections can be directed in such a way as to have people understand themselves and their own moral compass more deeply.

Other themes in Catholic social teaching: subsidiarity and social sin.

A key element of dignity is agency, the ability to freely and knowingly act and direct one's life without undue interference from others and social practices. The tradition has a preference, when appropriate, for social, economic, and political decisions to be made at a local or basic level. Parents should make the basic decisions about the well-being of their children, not the state. Businesses should make decisions on employees in-house. Local communities should make the basic decisions about their well-being not the larger governing body. Yet the larger bodies have significant responsibilities here when there is abuse or neglect or wrongdoing in the lower group. There are times when the state ought to remove a child from a home and demand better working conditions and higher wages for employees. Also, simply put, smaller groups simply do not have the resources to direct larger or significant issues. Some responsibilities then, say defense, are best delegated to the national government. This idea is called “subsidiarity”, and it is to direct an appropriate moral balance of agency.

Second, we do not always use our agency appropriately. The Catholic tradition describes at least some of these instances as “sin.” Yet it does not limit its understanding of sin simply to interpersonal relationships. It also holds a concept of “social” or “structural sin.” That is (in the words of Pope John Paul II), “the sinful collective behavior of social groups, or nations. Social sin is the result of the accumulation and concentration of many personal sins. It is a case of the personal sins of those people who cause, support, or exploit evil; are in a position to avoid, eliminate or limit social evils but fail to do so out of laziness, fear, indifference, silence, or secret complicity; take refuge in the supposed impossibility of changing the world; produce false religious reasoning so as to avoid the sacrifice required.”

AND some take-aways from Catholic social teaching.

It is normative AND is necessarily lived out in contextual (the reality of a situation), proportional (needs and appropriate responses are determined in place), and dialogical (meeting, talking, recognizing the authority and moral voice to those need) ways.

Persons are individuals. The tradition values human freedom, agency, and responsibility AND we are social being. We are dependent upon others (interdependent might be the better word) for our growth and development for what they do to us and what we do to them. Catholic social teaching is about rights with duties.

It highlights then action to heal and build relationships, communities, and the world AND contemplation -- inner dispositions and character traits of personhood. Catholic social teaching is about being and doing.

It is concerned with the just distribution of material goods AND the positive development of spiritual goods. Catholic social teaching promotes integral development of whole persons.

It does not limit the spheres of social concern. We are to respond to the needs of those closest to us, families and communities AND there are no boundaries on the definition of neighbor. Catholic social teaching not only sees humanity, it sees the human family.