

A Century of Social Teaching

A Common Heritage, A Continuing Challenge



**A Pastoral Message
of the Catholic
Bishops of the United
States on the 100th
Anniversary of
*Rerum Novarum***



In order to provide a framework for the national commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the issuance of Pope Leo XIII's historic social encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, the Committees on International Policy and on Domestic Social Policy approved *A Century of Social Teaching: A Common Heritage, A Continuing Challenge* at their June 1990 meetings. Subsequently, the statement was approved by the USCC Administrative Board in September 1990, submitted to and approved by the full body of bishops on November 13, 1990, and is authorized for publication as a statement of the United States Catholic Conference by the undersigned.

Monsignor Robert N. Lynch
General Secretary
NCCB/USCC

November 29, 1990

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A basic moral test of a society is how its most vulnerable members are faring.

Our faith calls us to work for justice; to serve those in need; to pursue peace; and to defend the life, dignity, and rights of all our sisters and brothers. This is the call of Jesus, the challenge of the prophets, and the living tradition of our Church.

Across this country and around the world, the Church's social ministry is a story of growing vitality and strength, of remarkable compassion, courage, and creativity. It is the everyday reality of providing homeless and hungry people with decent shelter and needed help, of giving pregnant women and their unborn children lifegiving alternatives, of offering refugees welcome, and so much more. It is believers advocating in the public arena for human life wherever it is threatened, for the rights of workers and for economic justice, for peace and freedom around the world, and for "liberty and justice for all" here at home. It is empowering and helping poor and vulnerable people to realize their dignity in inner cities, in rural communities and in lands far away. It is the everyday commitment of countless people, parishes and programs, local networks and national structures—a tradition of caring service, effective advocacy, and creative action.

At the heart of this commitment is a set of principles, a body of thought, and a call to action known as Catholic social teaching. In 1991, we mark the 100th anniversary of the first great modern social encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, and celebrate a century of powerful social teaching. We recall the challenges of that new industrial age and the role of our own James Cardinal Gibbons, who encouraged Pope Leo XIII to issue this groundbreaking encyclical on work and workers. But this celebration is more than an anniversary of an important document; it is a call to share our Catholic social tradition more fully and to explore its continuing challenges for us today. This is a time for renewed reflection on our shared social tradition, a time to strengthen our common and individual commitment to work for real justice and true peace.

Social Mission and Social Teaching

The story of the Church's social mission is both old and new, both a tradition to be shared and a challenge to be fulfilled. The Church's social ministry is:

- *founded on the life and words of Jesus Christ*, who came "to bring glad tidings to the poor . . . liberty to captives . . . recovery of sight to the blind . . ." (Lk 4:18-19), and who identified himself in the powerful parable of the Last Judgement with the hungry, the homeless, the stranger, "the least of these" (cf. Mt 25:45);
- *inspired by the passion for justice of the Hebrew prophets* and the scriptural call to care for the weak and to "let justice surge like water" (Am 5:24);
- *shaped by the social teaching of our Church*, papal encyclicals, conciliar documents, and episcopal statements that, especially over the last century, have explored, expressed, and affirmed the social demands of our faith, insisting that work for justice and peace and care for the poor and vulnerable are the responsibility of every Christian; and
- *lived by the People of God*, who seek to build up the kingdom of God, to live our faith in the world and to apply the values of the Scriptures and the teaching of the Church in our own families and parishes, in our work and service and in local communities, the nation, and the world.

The social dimensions of our faith have taken on special urgency and clarity over this last century. Guided by Pope Leo XIII and his successors, by the Second Vatican Council, and by the bishops of the Church, Catholics have been challenged to understand more clearly and act more concretely on the social demands of the gospel. This tradition calls all members of the Church, rich and poor alike, to work to eliminate the occurrence and effects of poverty, to speak out against injustice, and to shape a more caring society and a more peaceful world.

Together we seek to meet this challenge. Much, however, remains to be done if social doctrine is to become a truly vital and integral part of Catholic life and if we are to meet its challenges in our own lives and social structures. For too many, Catholic social teaching is still an unknown resource. It is sometimes misunderstood as a peripheral aspect rather than as an integral and constitutive element of our faith. The challenge of the 1971 Synod to make working for justice a constitutive dimension of responding to the gospel should be emphasized in our society, where many see religion as something personal and private. This is tragic since the Catholic social vision offers words of hope, a set of principles and directions for action to a world longing for greater freedom, justice, and peace.

Catholic social teaching is a powerful and liberating message in a world of stark contradictions: a world of inspiring new freedom and lingering oppression, of peaceful change and violent conflict, of remarkable economic progress for some and tragic misery and poverty for many others. Our teaching is a call to conscience, compassion, and creative action in a world confronting the terrible tragedy of widespread abortion, the haunting reality of hunger and homelessness, and the evil of continuing prejudice and poverty. Our teaching lifts up the moral and human dimensions of major public issues, examining "the signs of the times" through the values of the Scriptures, the teaching of the Church, and the experience of the People of God.



Work is more than a way to make a living, it is an expression of our dignity and a form of continuing participation in God's creation.

Basic Themes

Our Catholic social teaching is more than a set of documents. It is a living tradition of thought and action. The Church's social vision has developed and grown over time, responding to changing circumstances and emerging problems—including developments in human work, new economic questions, war and peace in a nuclear age, and poverty and development in a shrinking world. While the subjects have changed, some basic principles and themes have emerged within this tradition.

A. The Life and Dignity of the Human Person

In the Catholic social vision, the human person is central, the clearest reflection of God among us. Each person possesses a basic dignity that comes from God, not from any human quality or accomplishment, not from race or gender, age or economic status. The test of every institution or policy is whether it enhances or threatens human life and human dignity. We believe people are more important than things.



The human person is not only sacred, but social. We realize our dignity and rights in relationship with others, in community. No community is more central than the family....

B. The Rights and Responsibilities of the Human Person

Flowing from our God-given dignity, each person has basic rights and responsibilities. These include the rights to freedom of conscience and religious liberty, to raise a family, to immigrate, to live free from unfair discrimination, and to have a share of earthly goods sufficient for oneself and one's family. People have a fundamental right to life and to those things that make life truly human: food, clothing, housing, health care, education, security, social services, and employment. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities—to one another, to our families, and to the larger society, to respect the rights of others and to work for the common good.

C. The Call to Family, Community, and Participation

The human person is not only sacred, but social. We realize our dignity and rights in relationship with others, in community. No community is more central than the family; it needs to be supported, not undermined. It is the basic cell of society, and the state has an obligation to support the family. The family has major contributions to make in addressing questions of social justice. It is where we learn and act on our values. What happens in the family is at the basis of a truly human social life. We also have the right and responsibility to participate in and contribute to the broader communities in society. The state and other institutions of political and economic life, with both their limitations and obligations, are instruments to protect the life, dignity, and rights of the person; promote the well-being of our families and communities; and pursue the common good. Catholic social teaching does offer clear guidance on the role of government. When basic human needs are not being met by private initiative, then people must work through their government, at appropriate levels, to meet those needs. A central test of political, legal, and economic institutions is what they do *to* people, what they do *for* people, and how people *participate* in them.

D. The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers

Work is more than a way to make a living; it is an expression of our dignity and a form of continuing participation in God's creation. People have the right to decent and productive work, to decent and fair wages, to private property and economic initiative. Workers have the strong support of the Church in forming and joining union and worker associations of their choosing in the exercise of their dignity and rights. These values are at the heart of *Rerum Novarum* and other encyclicals on economic justice. In Catholic teaching, the economy exists to serve people, not the other way around.



Violent conflict and the denial of dignity and rights to people anywhere on the globe diminish each of us.

E. The Option for the Poor and Vulnerable

Poor and vulnerable people have a special place in Catholic social teaching. A basic moral test of a society is how its most vulnerable members are faring. This is not a new insight; it is the lesson of the parable of the Last Judgment (see Mt 25). Our tradition calls us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first. As Christians, we are called to respond to the needs of all our sisters and brothers, but those with the greatest needs require the greatest

response. We must seek creative ways to expand the emphasis of our nation's founders on individual rights and freedom by extending democratic ideals to economic life and thus ensure that the basic requirements for life with dignity are accessible to all.

F. Solidarity

We are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers (cf. Gn 4:9). In a linked and limited world, our responsibilities to one another cross national and other boundaries. Violent conflict and the denial of dignity and rights to people anywhere on the globe diminish each of us. This emerging theme of solidarity, so strongly articulated by Pope John Paul II, expresses the core of the Church's concern for world peace, global development, environment, and international human rights. It is the contemporary expression of the traditional Catholic image of the *Mystical Body*. "Loving our neighbor" has global dimensions in an interdependent world.

There are other significant values and principles that also shape and guide the Church's traditional social teaching, but these six themes are central parts of the tradition. We encourage you to read, reflect on, and discuss the documents that make up this tradition.* They are a rich resource touching a wide variety of vital, complex, and sometimes controversial concerns. This teaching offers not an alternative social system, but fundamental values that test

* Among the major topics addressed by these documents are a wide range of economic concerns: the roles of workers and owners; the rights to private property and its limitations; employment and unemployment; economic rights and initiative; debt and development; poverty and wealth; urban and rural concerns. Central concerns include major questions touching human life: abortion, euthanasia, health care, the death penalty, and the violence of war and crime. Also emphasized are issues of discrimination and diversity: racism, ethnic prejudice, cultural pluralism, the dignity and equality of women, and the rights of immigrants and refugees.

The teaching also addresses broader questions of religious liberty, political freedom, the common good, the role of the state, subsidiary and socialization, church-state relations, and political responsibility. A major focus has been the pursuit of peace, disarmament, the use of force and nonviolence, as well as international justice. An emerging issue is the environment.

For a fuller understanding of Catholic social teaching, see the original documents; an annotated bibliography produced by the U.S. Catholic Conference; or an excellent Vatican document, *Guidelines for the Study and Teaching of the Church's Social Doctrine in the Formation of Priests* (Washington, D.C.: USCC Office for Publishing and Promotion Services, 1988).

every system, every nation, and every community. It puts the needs of the poor first. It values persons over things. It emphasizes morality over technology, asking not simply what *can* we do, but what *ought* we do. It calls us to measure our lives not by what we have, but by who we are; how we love one another; and how we contribute to the common good, to justice in our community, and to peace in our world.

The Continuing Challenge

This long tradition has led our Church over the last century to support workers and unions actively in the exercise of their rights; to work against racism and bigotry of every kind; to condemn abortion, the arms race, and other threats to human life; and to pursue a more just society and a more peaceful world. These principles are the foundation of the Catholic community's many efforts to serve the poor, immigrants, and other vulnerable people. We know our individual and institutional acts of charity are requirements of the gospel. They are essential, but not sufficient. Our efforts to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, welcome the stranger, and serve the poor and vulnerable must be accompanied by concrete efforts to address the causes of human suffering and injustice. We believe advocacy and action to carry out our principles and constructive dialogue about how best to do this both strengthen our Church and enrich our society. We are called to transform our hearts and our social structures, to renew the face of the earth.

Social justice is not something Catholics pursue simply through parish committees and diocesan programs, although these structures can help us to act on our faith. Our social vocation takes flesh in our homes and schools, businesses and unions, offices and factories, colleges and universities, and in community organizations and professional groups. As believers, we are called to bring our values into the marketplace and the political arena, into community and family life, using our everyday opportunities and responsibilities, our voices and votes to defend human life, human dignity, and human rights. We are called to be a leaven, applying Christian values and virtues in every aspect of our lives.

We are also called to weave our social teaching into every dimension of Catholic life, especially worship, education, planning, and evangelization. The Holy Father can teach; bishops can preach; but unless our social doctrine comes alive in personal conversion and common action, it will lack real credibility and effectiveness. We need to build on the experience and commitment of so many parishes where worship consistently reflects the gospel call to continuing conversion, caring service, and creative action. The call to penance and reconciliation must include both the social and the individual dimensions of sin. Our schools and catechetical efforts should regularly share our social teaching. We know that liturgy, religious education, and other apostolates that ignore the social dimensions of our faith are neither faithful to our traditions nor fully Catholic. We also know that parish life that does not reflect the gospel call to charity and justice neglects an essential dimension of pastoral ministry. We cannot celebrate a faith we do not practice. We cannot proclaim a gospel we do not live. We must work together to ensure that we continue to move together from strong words about charity and justice to effective action, from official statements to creative ministry at every level of the Church's life.

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1991—A Celebration and a Call

The 100th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum* is a unique opportunity to take up these challenges with new urgency and energy. We hope 1991 will be a time of deepening roots, broadening participation, and increasing collaboration on our common social mission. We urge parishes, dioceses, national organizations, and educational and other institutions to use this opportunity to share our social teaching and further integrate it into ongoing efforts. We especially ask that parishes make a major effort to celebrate and share our social teaching during this year, especially from Ascension Thursday to Pentecost Sunday, May 9-19, including May 15, the actual 100th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum* (or at some other specific time if local circumstances suggest a more appropriate date).

We are very pleased that so many people are already preparing impressive efforts to celebrate this centennial. The creative response of so many demonstrates the vitality, diversity, and unity of the Catholic community in recalling and applying our social teaching.



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And it is the powerful vision of our present Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, who by word and deed calls for a new global solidarity that respects and enhances the dignity of every human person.

Conclusion

As we celebrate this century of social teaching, it is important to remember who calls us to this task and why we pursue it. Our work for social justice is first and foremost a work of faith, a profoundly religious task. It is Jesus who calls us to this mission, not any political or ideological agenda. We are called to bring the healing hand of Christ to those in need; the courageous voice of the prophet to those in power; and the gospel message of love, justice, and peace to an often suffering world.

This is not a new challenge. It is the enduring legacy of Pope Leo XIII, who a century ago defended the rights of workers. It is the lasting message of Pope John XXIII, who called for real peace based on genuine respect for human rights. It is the continuing challenge of Pope Paul VI, who declared, "if you want peace, work for justice." It is the commitment of the Second Vatican Council, which declared, "the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties" of people of this age, especially those who are poor or afflicted, are "the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ." And it is the powerful vision of our present Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, who by word and deed calls for a new global solidarity that respects and enhances the dignity of every human person.

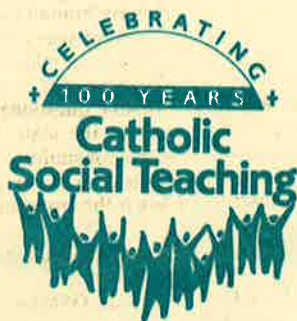
Most of all, it is the challenge of our Lord Jesus Christ, who laid out our continuing challenge in the Sermon on the Mount. In 1991, let us explore together what it means to be "poor in spirit" in a consumer society; to comfort those who suffer in our midst; to "show mercy" in an often unforgiving world; to "hunger and thirst for justice" in a nation still challenged by hunger and homelessness, poverty and prejudice; to be "peacemakers" in an often violent and fearful world; and to be the "salt of the earth and the light of the world" in our own time and place.

We hope and pray that, in this centennial year of *Rerum Novarum*, we will become a family of faith evermore committed to the defense of the life, the dignity, and the rights of every human person and a community of genuine solidarity, working every day to build a world of greater justice and peace for all God's children.

Conclusion



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