

*Applying the Themes of  
Catholic Social Teaching*

# Applying the Themes of Catholic Social Teaching

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By Sr. Joan Hart SSND

## Introduction: “From Principles to Action”

The aim of Catholic social teaching is to shine the light of the Gospel on contemporary events and issues so that disciples of Jesus can look through a new, unclouded lens at the world around them and be inspired to action in keeping with this clearer vision.

Action will not always be easy; many of these issues are controversial. It will involve an honest personal assessment of our own attitudes and values if we are to locate any blockages that keep us from embracing the social teachings of our church and acting upon them.

Some will discover that, while it is relatively easy to give intellectual assent to the theory, putting it into practice in our lives can be a long-term challenge. This is, in part, because we are inescapably marked by the culture in which we live, and the social teaching will often call us to a counter-cultural stance. But who ever said that the following of Jesus would be easy? Let us begin . . .

1

### Human Dignity

Vatican II's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* describes the Church's role in the world of today as being the **sign and the safeguard of the dignity of the human person**. In a sense, there was nothing new about this. Going

back in the tradition as far as

Genesis, we read that all humans are made “in the image and likeness of God.” No exceptions! Then the Prophets pointed to some of the implications of this. We are to have special concern for defending the human dignity of the most vulnerable—the widows, the orphans, the aliens. Then, in the Gospels, Jesus gave us the great commandment of love, love of God and of our neighbor. Down through the centuries, saints have given us examples of acting as defenders of human dignity, sometimes at the cost of their lives.

But Vatican II was immersed in a world that often showed scant regard for the sacredness of the human person. It

was also contending with the remnants of a spirituality of withdrawal from the world, a reluctance to become tainted by “worldliness.” For many, the new call to engagement and participation came as a surprise. For some it was welcome; for others, a sign of contradiction.

Human dignity is the linchpin of the social teaching; all the other themes flow from it. It is crucial that we examine how deeply that teaching is operative in our lives. In a reflective setting, ask yourself the following questions:

- How strong is your belief in your own human dignity?
- When you interact with family members and friends, can you honor and reverence the human dignity of each one?
- On the national and international levels, can you continue to believe in the human dignity of each person? In all nations?

Remember that this doesn't say you must like everyone, just be open to treat them with the regard their human dignity merits. If you have found certain obstacles, take time to ponder and pray about overcoming them.

Whole industries such as alarm systems, security guards, temperature and humidity controls, etc. have grown up in recent times around protecting what is precious. How has the human community chosen to protect the treasure of human dignity? When 18th century revolutionaries in France called for recognition of their rights, the

Church was at first wary, fearing that, if these rights were recognized, the individual would have free scope for action and would lose a sense of moral obligation. But the cry for rights could not be silenced, and in 1948 it was at last codified in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, agreed to by member

nations at that time. It was seen that human dignity needed basic protection as set down in this document of the fledgling United Nations. Have these rights been universally respected? Certainly not. Has progress been made in guaranteeing these rights? Yes it has! In his 1963 encyclical *Peace on Earth*, Pope John XXIII embraced human rights and added the much-needed dimension of responsibilities which help to balance and complement human rights. From that point on, the Church has sought to be a visible and vocal defender of human rights, as a critical element in the defense and safeguarding of human dignity. There are those who see this as inimical to the role of the Church. They believe that the Church should stay in the sanctuary and not meddle in politics. Yet the message of *A Call to Action*, written by Pope Paul VI in 1971 on the 80th anniversary of the first social encyclical (1891) is clear: individuals and local Churches are urged to apply Gospel principles to contemporary situations and take appropriate political action. Make a list of human rights and compare your list to the United Nations Universal Declaration. Then list responsibilities that go with these rights and compare your list to those listed in the encyclical *Peace on Earth*, paragraphs 28–35.

- What violations of human rights can you find in today's newspaper?
- Have you ever experienced a denial of your human rights? If so, how did it affect your sense of human dignity?
- In your private and public prayer, will you remember to pray for the rights and dignity of all people?

## 2 Human Rights

"In our vision of the common good, a crucial moral test is how the weakest are faring. We give special priority to the poor and vulnerable since those with the greatest needs and burdens have first claim on our common efforts. In protecting the lives and promoting the dignity of the poor and vulnerable, we strengthen all of society." (*A Call to the Common Ground for the Common Good*, 1993)

The call to a preferential option for the poor reaches back to the prophets. Isaiah spoke of God's wishing us to share bread with the hungry, shelter the oppressed and the homeless, clothe the naked. (58:6–7) Jeremiah urged us to "do no wrong or oppress the resident alien, the orphan or the widow" (22:3–4). Saint Ambrose continued this theme when he wrote, "You are not making a gift of your possessions to the poor person. You are handing over to him what is his. For what has been given in common for the use of all, you have arrogated to yourself. The world is given to all, and not only to the rich."

The Latin American Catholic bishops, meeting at Medellin, Colombia in 1968, helped us to focus anew on this call. During the meeting the bishops said that "the church—the people of God—will lend its support to the downtrodden of every social class so that they might come to know their rights and how to make use of them." (20). A year before, in Pope Paul VI's encyclical, *On The Development of Peoples*, the call had taken on greater urgency: "No one is justified in keeping for his exclusive use what he does not need when others lack necessities" (23).

The United States Catholic bishops took up the call in their document, *Economic Justice for All*, when they said, "As followers of Christ, we are challenged to make a fundamental 'option for the poor'—to speak for the voiceless, to defend the defenseless, to assess lifestyles, policies and social institutions in terms of their impact on the poor" (16).

In spite of all these words, the gap between rich and poor in our world only widens.

- When you encounter a poor person, how do you reverence his/her human dignity?
- How do you help guarantee his/her human rights?
- What are you doing to change the structures that oppress the poor?

## 3 Option for the Poor

When a newborn infant is presented for Baptism by parents and godparents, the water, words, oil, white garment and candle flame surround the new birth of a child of God. Held high for all to see, the infant is welcomed, often with applause, into the Christian community. As the child grows, the wider community invites this developing person to participation within the Church. There can be no doubt;

the child is not alone, but called from Baptism onward to be part of a community and to participate in that community. The baptized person is not an onlooker or a spectator; he or she is linked to others in the family, parish, workplace, neighborhood, and global community. Those who think

that the baptized merely "Pay, pray, and obey" are mistaken; those who think that church attendance is just an individual "feel good" experience are mistaken. The call to follow Jesus is much more challenging and more rewarding; it is inextricably bound to the community at every step of the way. The call is to nothing less than the transformation of society. On the 80th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, the first social encyclical, Pope Paul VI wrote, "It is not enough to recall principles, state intentions, point to crying injustices and utter prophetic denunciations; these words will lack real weight unless they are accompanied for each individual by a livelier sense of personal responsibility and by effective action." (48.1) In the same year, a Roman synod, writing on *Justice in the World*, said, "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." (6)

- Does your experience of Church challenge you to engage actively in the community and to participate fully in society? If so, how? and if not, what can you do about it?
- How do you exercise your role as participant in the world of politics?
- What are you doing to liberate others from oppressive situations?

4  
Community  
and  
Participation

In our lifetime, we have been awed by the moon's "bird's-eye view" of our planet, a small, blue, fragile sphere, spinning in space. National boundaries separating "your land" from "our land" are not visible. Cultural, religious, language differences do not appear. What does strike the earthbound beholder is the smallness and the unity of this earth home, surrounded as it is by measureless space. One can easily conclude from this contemplation of earth that we must learn to live together in peace, or perish in the dark vastness around us. The word "solidarity" was cleansed of its Communist overtones in 1987 by Pope John Paul II's insistent use of it in his encyclical, *On Social Concern*. True, we have always known that our baptism called us into the Mystical Body of Christ, a worldwide family deserving of our love and concern. But solidarity as described by the Pope adds an even stronger dimension. "Solidarity," he says, "is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, the good of all and of each individual because we are all really responsible for all." (38.4) Clearly, it is not enough to be well disposed toward the six billion inhabitants of earth; our commitment to them must be "firm and persevering." Is this a "hard sell?" To be sure! "You're either with us or against us," our leaders proclaim. Jobs, health care, and education seem to take precedence over any international concerns. Yet what happens to people in remote corners of the earth is also bound to affect us, just as our indifference affects them. Is this a new burden the Church has invented? Far from it. Rather, think of it as a noble calling that will help give meaning to your life and will contribute to the legacy you will leave to the human family. For, as Pope John Paul II concludes, "The fruit of solidarity is peace." (39.8)

5  
Solidarity

- Ponder in your heart: At the time of the latest natural disaster in a far-off region of the world, what did you do to help these suffering brothers and sisters?
- As you spin a globe or page through a world Atlas, are there areas where your heart closes off because you cannot love the people there? What can you do about it?
- Begin in the circle of your family and work outward into ever-growing circles. Where is your sense of solidarity strong and where is it weak?

Unemployed recent college graduates and recently laid off workers in their 50s have this in common: a deep-seated awareness of what they have to offer the

human community which seems for the moment not to want or need their contribution. Even when a financial crisis does not threaten immediately, there is a potentially debilitating feeling of exclusion. We need work, and for more than the pay check, important as that is. In the late 19th century when the industrial revolution had led to extremes of worker exploitation,

*Rerum Novarum*, the first of the "social encyclicals" identified and defended the rights of workers: the right to work, the right to a just wage, the right to organize into worker associations, the right to engage in collective bargaining, and the right to a safe work environment. It has taken a long time for these rights to become realities and they are constantly being threatened by new abuses toward the work force. Recently, millions of jobs in the U.S. have been lost when companies exported those jobs to poorer countries with a much smaller pay scale. When activists in the U.S. protest, the companies may simply move their operations to other countries where respect for human rights is less of an issue. Globalization may well be inevitable, but when workers are made to feel expendable the human cost of economic competition is far too high. The tragic story of a Delaware unemployed teamster who accepted a job in Iraq as a civilian truck driver in order to support his family ended in his death at the hands of insurgents. This is replicated throughout the world as workers seek to place their abilities at the service of humankind and thereby support their families. On the brighter side, there are a few stories of workers in other countries striking in global solidarity with striking workers elsewhere. Church leaders have maintained over the years that workers who give their employer an honest week's work should be paid a living wage that will enable them to support their family without having to seek a second or third job. The current minimum wage in the U.S. is far from a living wage. The struggle for worker justice continues?

- What stories of mistreatment of workers can you tell?
- What have you done recently to help workers? (e.g., not crossing a picket line, observing a product boycott, writing to legislators, etc.)
- Describe your experience of justifiable pride in a job well done. Beyond remuneration, what did it do for your sense of making a contribution to the community?

## 6 The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers

Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* is usually credited for providing the inspiration behind the modern environmental movement. Indeed, industrialization and human disregard had for too long damaged this fragile sphere we call home. Carson's book helped show how seriously earth has been degraded by human actions (or inaction). Yet, we need to trace the story all the way back to the two accounts of creation in Genesis.

The first, in Genesis 1:26 and 28, we read, "Fill the whole earth and subdue it; have dominion over all the living things that move on the earth." It is easy to see how this call to establish dominion has been wrongly used to justify industrial exploitation and the squandering of earth's precious resources. It would seem that, in order to be "like God" the human would have to "subdue" creation.

But in the second account of creation in Genesis 2, the emphasis shifts in the words "it is not good for the human being to be alone." Humans are meant to be in relationship to one another. We are stewards of this earth-garden given to us by the Creator, but we are also called to a mutuality with other humans and with non-human creation. Here, being "like God" calls us into relationships which mirror, however faintly, the inner life of the Trinity.

The response to this new environmental awareness runs the gamut from anti-littering and conscientious recycling to more radical life style changes. It has given rise to lawsuits against polluting corporations, to concern for endangered species, even to fierce battles between those who favor the dominion camp and the relationship proponents. Yet it is increasingly clear that we cannot continue to abuse the earth, closing our eyes to the harm being done to all its inhabitants, as well as to future generations.

- What steps have you taken already to care for creation?
- What more can you resolve to do?
- Have you written to decision-makers, both legislative and corporate, to express your concerns and convictions about the environment?
- How can you spread the word to others about the critical needs for our planet?

## 7 Care for the Earth, God's Creation



