

STRONG WORDS

Ten Building Blocks of Catholic Social Teaching

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The following is taken from material written by William J. Byron, SJ, and featured in America, October 31, 1998, edition. It is based on two documents issued by the United States National Conference of Catholic Bishops: "Sharing Catholic Social Teaching-Challenges and Directions"; and "Summary Report of the Task Force on Catholic Social Teaching and Catholic Education".

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1. Human Dignity

"Every human being is created in the image of God and is invaluable and worthy of respect as a member of the human family." (*"Sharing", pages 1-2*)

This is the bedrock principle of Catholic social teaching. Every person-regardless of race, sex, age, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, employment or economic status, health, intelligence, achievement or any other differentiating characteristic-is worthy of respect. It is simply being human that establishes your dignity. Given that dignity, the human person is never a means, always an end.

The body of Catholic social teaching opens with the human person. Individuals have dignity; individualism has no place in Catholic social thought. The principle of human dignity gives the human person a claim on membership in a community, the human family.

2. Respect for Human Life

"Every person, from the moment of conception to natural death, has inherent dignity and a right to life consistent with that dignity." (*"Sharing", pages 1-2*)

Human life at every stage of development and decline is precious and therefore worthy of protection and respect. The Catholic tradition sees the sacredness of human life as part of any moral vision for a just and good society.

3. Association

"Our tradition proclaims that the person is not only sacred but also social. How we organize our society-in economics and politics, in law and policy-directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community." (*"Sharing", page 4*)

The centerpiece of society is the family; family stability must always be protected and never undermined. By association with others-in families and in other social institutions that foster growth, protect dignity and promote the common good-human persons achieve their fulfillment.

4. Participation

"We believe people have a right and a duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable." (*"Sharing", page 5*)

The human person has a right not to be shut out from those institutions that are necessary for human fulfillment.

The principle applies in a special way to conditions associated with work. "Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God's creation. If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected-the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to organize and join unions, to private property, and to economic initiative." (*"Reflections", page 5*)

5. Preferential Protection for the Poor and Vulnerable

If the good of all, the common good, is to prevail, preferential protection must move toward those affected adversely by the absence of power and who are living in poverty. Otherwise the balance needed to keep society in one piece will be broken to the detriment of the whole.

Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this declaration (of human rights) can be fully realized.

Article 28, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

6. Solidarity

"Catholic social teaching proclaims that we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they live. We are one human family." (*"Sharing"*, page 5)

The principle of solidarity functions as a moral category that leads to choices that will promote and protect the common good.

7. Stewardship

"The Catholic tradition insists that we show our respect for the Creator by our stewardship of creation." (*"Sharing"*, page 6)

The steward is a manager, not an owner. Our tradition is calling us to a sense of moral responsibility for the protection of the environment -croplands, grasslands, woodlands, air, water, minerals and other natural deposits. Stewardship responsibilities also look toward our use of our personal talents, our attention to personal health and our use of personal property.

8. Subsidiarity

This principle deals chiefly with "the responsibilities and limits of government, and the essential roles of voluntary associations." (*"Sharing"*, page 6)

The principle of subsidiarity insists that no higher level of organization perform any function that can be handled efficiently and effectively at a lower level of organization by human persons who, individually or in groups, are closer to the problems and closer to the ground.

9. Human Equality

"Equality of all persons comes from their essential dignity." (*"Summary"*, page 23-24)

Treating equals equally is one way of defining justice. Underlying the notion of equality is the simple principle of fairness; one of the earliest ethical stirrings felt in the developing human person is a sense of what is 'fair' and what is not.

10. The Common Good

"The common good is understood as the social conditions that allow people to reach their full human potential and to realize their human dignity. " (*"Summary"*, page 25)

The social conditions the bishops have in mind presuppose "respect for the person," "the social well-being and development of the group," and the maintenance by public authority of "peace and security." Today, "in an age of global inter-dependence," the principle of the common good points to the "need for international structures that can promote the just development of the human family across regional and national lines."

What constitutes the common good is always going to be a matter for debate. The absence of any concern for or sensitivity to the common good is a sure sign of a society in need of help. As a sense of community is eroded, concern for the common good declines. A proper communitarian concern is the antidote to unbridled individualism, which, like unrestrained selfishness in personal relations, can destroy balance, harmony and peace within and among groups, neighborhoods, regions and nations.

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