

The Ministry of Peace and Justice

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Session 2 Handout

What Is Catholic Social Teaching?

Catholic social teaching (CST) seeks to answer a question posed by the great Russian writer Leo Tolstoy:¹ “How, then, shall we live our life?”

The Catholic Church has been wrestling with this question since her very first days. When you start with an enormous question like that, hundreds of other questions follow. Here are just a few:

- What does each and every child of God need to live a good life?
- How might we build communities that provide the conditions for human flourishing for all?
- What are the different threats to the well-being of individuals and communities, and how might we respond to those threats?
- What rights does every person have? What responsibilities do we each have to make sure those rights are protected?

1. “What is Catholic Social Teaching?,” Catholic Social Teaching in Action, https://capp-usa.org/what_is_cst.

As the church has sought answers to these questions in every age, our Scriptures have been the first place to start. In the Old Testament, we hear that God created every person in his own image (Gen 1:27). This means that for believers, human beings are not merely animals or clumps of cells. Each unique person is a beautiful work of art fashioned by the Creator, and is therefore deserving of the utmost respect. Any time a person is threatened by violence or neglect or lack of necessities, believers are called to take action.

In the book of Exodus, God tells Moses that God has heard the cries of the enslaved Israelites, and will take their side against the oppressive Pharaoh (3:1-21). As we try our best to imitate God's love in the world today, we should follow God's lead and also side with those who are most vulnerable.

The prophets of the Old Testament "comforted the afflicted and afflicted the comfortable." When the Israelites forgot to care for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger in their midst, the prophets criticized them and called the Israelites to emulate the compassionate God who led them out of slavery (cf. Isa 58).

In the New Testament, Jesus emphasizes over and over again that to be his disciple means to love God and to love your neighbor with your whole heart. The love Jesus talks about—the love he perfectly modeled on the cross—goes beyond sentimental feelings. This sort of love is marked by self-giving action that puts the needs of others first. He tells us that we will ultimately be judged by how fully we gave ourselves to others, especially to those we encountered who were hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, ill, or in prison (Matt 25:31-46). When we see someone who is poor and vulnerable, we see who Mother Teresa called "Christ in his most distressing disguise."

Inspired by the countless scriptural examples of how God wants his people to live, CST is a body of writings by popes, bishops, and other faith leaders who have read the signs of the times with the eyes of faith.

The first document of modern CST is an encyclical letter written in 1891 by Pope Leo XIII called *Rerum Novarum*. Written

against the backdrop of the Industrial Revolution, Pope Leo supported the rights of workers and decried the awful conditions many factory laborers faced.

Following Pope Leo's example, many Catholic leaders have applied Gospel values to global events and trends. Saint Pope John XXIII, for instance, responded to the Cold War and the threat of nuclear destruction with the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (1963), which stresses the importance of peaceful, diplomatic negotiation and presents the Catholic vision of human rights and responsibilities. Saint Pope John Paul II, responding to the widespread existence of abortion, euthanasia, and capital punishment around the world, condemned this "culture of death" and called upon people of goodwill to build a "culture of life" in his letter *Evangelium Vitae* (1995). Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have contributed to CST in more recent years.

Surveying the vast body of literature that makes up CST, the Catholic bishops of the United States have identified seven primary themes that are addressed often:

1. Life and Dignity of the Human Person
2. Call to Family, Community, and Participation
3. Rights and Responsibilities
4. Option for the Poor and Vulnerable
5. The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers
6. Solidarity
7. Care for God's Creation

These themes are defined and explored in chapter 2 of *The Ministry of Peace and Justice*. In just a few minutes, you will have a chance to dig into these themes through a group activity.