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# Survey of Catholic Social Teachings

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The Catholic Church's official teachings on social, economic, and political life are based on a Christian understanding of the human person as a spiritual being who is social by nature and whose ultimate spiritual destiny is achieved in community, as testified to by the Bible and as indicated by reason.

The teachings presuppose that the Catholic Church is called by God to proclaim and defend the dignity of the human person and to call into question social, political, and economic structures that do not respect that dignity. The church, however, is neither a political party nor merely a humanitarian organization. The church's work in defending the dignity of the human person arises out of Christian faith itself and, as such, is a reflection of the church's religious mission to proclaim, in word and in action, the good news of our redemption in Christ. The view that the proper role of

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the church is “other-worldly” and that the church has no business speaking about social, political, and economic matters is fundamentally at odds with Christian faith. Nevertheless, the Catholic Church claims no special competence in determining public policy for any particular society. Instead, the service the church provides is to clarify what is morally required of the state and society more generally, as well as what is required of the individual.

Catholic social teachings should not be confused with what is often called “liberation theology,” although there is a considerable overlap between both traditions in Catholic thought. Theologies of liberation began to appear in Latin America in the 1950s. This kind of theology is the work of individual theologians. The social teachings of the Catholic Church, on the other hand, are contained in official documents. The vast majority are written by popes beginning with the encyclical letter *Rerum novarum*, by Pope Leo XIII in 1891. Liberation theologies tend to be rooted in Marxist social analysis and biblical views of justice. Catholic social teachings are based on a philosophical, theological and biblical understanding of the human person as a social being whose fulfillment is found in self-transcendence. Liberation theologies call for local reflection on the church's pastoral praxis in solidarity with the oppressed poor. Catholic social teachings are official teachings, mostly by popes, about the human person, the responsibilities of the state, and the moral status of social, political, and economic structures.

In this brief paper, I wish to review some of these teachings' great themes and reflect on several practical ramifications that stem from these themes. Before doing so, I will provide a little historical background to the teachings. At the end of the paper, I offer a commentary on a small portion of *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis's recent encyclical on the environment. I have chosen to comment

on this part of the encyclical in order to demonstrate that *Laudato Si'* is, in fact, the latest addition to the body of encyclicals that constitutes the church's social teachings.

## History

As I remarked above, the official social teachings of the Catholic Church began in 1891 with the promulgation of the encyclical letter *Rerum novarum*, by Pope Leo XIII. In his encyclical, Leo XIII addressed the exploitation of the working class at the height of the Industrial Revolution. The encyclical did this by means of a comprehensive vision of the human person, based mostly on the theology of Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle's natural law philosophy, with the aim of determining the moral obligations that rest upon the state and society in respect to the human person.

The line of teachings initiated by Leo XIII has been in a continuous process of development to the present day. Leo XIII was motivated by fear of the appeal of socialism for the oppressed worker. Against socialism, he supported private property as "natural" but strongly advocated the state's responsibility to provide for the common good of society through education, support for the poor, and health care. In addition, the first of the social encyclicals called for limited working hours, a just wage, the right to unionize, and disability insurance for the worker. During the global economic depression of the 1930s, popes continued to defend the rights of workers by arguing that society is a community of persons, not merely an aggregation of reluctant individuals. In the 1960s, the teachings began to articulate in more detail the dignity of the human person and human rights. Popes continued to develop a critique of both capitalism and socialism. As former

colonies gained independence during this decade, the teachings began to criticize the gap between rich and poor nations and the inequities of unregulated markets. In the latter part of the century, popes continued their criticism of socialism and unregulated capitalism, and began to address the moral issues attending the globalization of markets and consumerism. Pope Francis will promulgate an encyclical on the environment very soon. This will not be the first time a pope has spoken about the degradation of the environment, but now, the pope is expected to address the disproportionate impact of climate change on the poor, making this encyclical the latest addition to the body of documents comprising Catholic social teachings.

From a broader historical perspective, Catholic social teachings should be seen as a part of the Catholic Church's centuries-long struggle to respond in depth to challenges of the modern world. The "modern world" includes the rise of the nation-state, capitalist and Marxist economics, industrialization, secularism, colonialism, the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century, and the globalization of neo-liberal economics. Since the seventeenth century, the church, as an institution, had reacted with strong opposition to the secularism and the rights of the individual championed by political and economic liberals.<sup>1</sup> Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors* (1864) condemned not only basic human rights but democracy itself as a form of government. The church's support went instead to the authoritarianism of the *ancien regime*. But in 1891, however belatedly, Pope Leo XIII began to address these "new things" (*rerum*

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1. In this paper, "economic liberalism" refers to the political philosophy that calls for unregulated markets and a minimal role for the state while arguing for the absolute value of private property.

*novarum*) that have come with the modern world not with condemnation but with the aim of offering principled moral guidance. Almost every pope since Leo XIII has contributed to the production of what is now a comprehensive body of official documents that have come to be known as Catholic social teachings.

### Basic Theme: The Social Character of the Human Person

Catholic social teachings consistently affirm that human beings are naturally social. This belief can be contrasted with the views of classic liberal political thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Contrary to these Enlightenment figures, a human being is not first an autonomous individual and only secondarily a member of a human community. Our social existence is not something extrinsic to be added on to the human person's original self-sufficiency. It is part of our humanity's essential character and is necessary for human fulfillment.

The social nature of the human person brings with it three important implications. First, the flourishing of the human person takes place in community, not in isolation. Second, contrary to liberal thought, the preservation of the autonomy of the individual should not be taken as authentic freedom. Third, government is natural, necessary, and good. The role of the state is to promote the flourishing of human community, which itself is an expression of human nature and is bound in service to it.

### Basic Theme: The Dignity of the Human Person

A second prominent theme in the social teachings of the Catholic Church is that of human dignity. All human persons, regardless of their station in life or their moral failures, possess an intrinsic value (*dignitas*) that must be respected by all parts of society,

especially the state. Human dignity is the transcendent, irreducible worth of a person that accrues to persons simply by the fact that they are human. Therefore, all persons are to be treated with compassion, respect and justice.

The basis of human dignity can be found in both Christian faith and secular philosophy. Christian faith affirms that every human person has been created in the image of God, redeemed in the death and resurrection of Christ and called by God to an ultimate fulfillment beyond history. The dignity of the human person can also be established apart from Christian faith. The proper use of reason leads all people, not just Christians, to recognize that the human person is endowed with intelligence, free will, and the potential for self-transcendence. This means that a human being cannot be reduced to the status of a thing without violating human dignity. A person must never be treated as a means to an end. The philosophical basis of human dignity means that Catholic social teachings are addressed to all peoples, not just Christians, and apply to all persons universally.

Catholicism's affirmation of the dignity of the human person carries with it three important implications. First, like the human person's social nature, human dignity is an inherent quality enjoyed by every human being. It is not a potential awaiting actualization through the moral accomplishments of the individual. Neither is it conferred on the human person by the state or by any other social group. Second, in keeping with this, human dignity cannot be annulled by the state or renounced by the individual. It is a constitutive element of what it means to be human. Third, human dignity demands community. As an integral aspect of human nature, it cannot be separated from human sociality.

### Basic Theme: The Common Good

A third salient theme in the social teachings has to do with the realization of the common good. This aspect of the teachings has been criticized more than once as unrealistically idealistic. The teaching, however, is that the *ultimate* good of each person is not at odds with the *ultimate* good of the community itself. This is because the ultimate good that human beings pursue is a transcendent good, going beyond the finite aims of any individual or group. In the short term, the goods we pursue may pit us against one another. Fundamentally, however, we are not enemies. The ultimate good of the individual conforms to the common good of all. The affirmation of the common good implies that the teachings are offering an alternative both to the class warfare envisioned by Marx and Engels, and to the “war of all against all” (*bellum omnium contra omnes*) that Hobbes argued is our natural state.

The notion of the common good places a heavy burden of responsibility not simply on individuals but also on governments. The duty of the state is to promote and protect the common good so that every individual member of the community might flourish and no individual or group be marginalized.

### Practical Outcome: Criticism of Neo-liberal Economics and Totalitarian Socialism

Driven by the emphasis placed on the dignity of the human person and the human person’s social nature, Catholic social teachings have mounted a significant criticism of not only totalitarian socialism, especially in its Marxist forms, but also laissez-faire capitalism. Totalitarian socialism offends human dignity by sacrificing the morally legitimate independence of the person to the demands of the state. Against this, the social teachings argue that

the ultimate meaning of human life is eschatological and transcendent and is not exhausted in service to the state. The state exists to promote the common good and is in the service of human transcendence. As Pope Leo XIII wrote in the very first of the social encyclicals, “Man precedes the state.”

The teachings call all human beings to resist totalitarian socialism with the observance of “subsidiarity.” This principle holds that we are not to transfer to a higher level of political authority what can be accomplished at a lower level. Political life is to be kept as close to person-to-person exchanges as possible. This certainly does not mean that what is properly the responsibility of the state is to be passed on to charitable institutions. However, it does mean that society must appreciate the importance and legitimacy of “mediating institutions,” some of which are part of civil society and some of which are of the state.

Laissez-faire capitalism also offends against human dignity and the social character of the human person. As such, it is also inimical to the realization of the common good. Neo-liberal economics is based on the presumption that the human person is an autonomous individual first and a social creature second. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Pope John Paul II famously turned his attention to a criticism of “savage” (i.e., unregulated) capitalism. More recently, Pope Francis has rejected “trickle-down economics” and its demand for a “crude and naïve trust” in those who wield economic power.

In classic liberal political theory, the state is seen as a necessary evil, the result of mere social contract, and is responsible only for protecting the individual’s civil and political rights. Parallel to the maximalist view of the state found in extreme forms of socialism, this minimalist view of the state is also severely criticized in the

documents. Contrary to liberal economics, the state is more than just a protector of private property and civil rights. It must protect human dignity and pursue policies that foster the common good.

The social teachings call us to resist the degradations of unregulated capitalism through the practice of “solidarity.” In *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, one of his social encyclicals, Pope John Paul II drew attention to our increasing interdependence. This interdependence is not only economic but also social, cultural, and political. Our interdependence can be dehumanizing, as the exploitation of immigrants and cheap labor in developing nations indicates. We practice the virtue of solidarity when the brute fact of our interdependence becomes an opportunity for promoting the common good. The tendency of global capitalism to pit workers against one another must be resisted with new forms of solidarity that promote the common global good.

### Practical Outcome: Distributive Justice

Not surprisingly, the documents have a good deal to say about justice. Given the affirmation of the dignity and social nature of the human person, and the prominence of the principle of the common good, the social teachings favor distributive justice, not commutative justice. Commutative justice has to do with establishing fairness in relationships among individuals. Distributive justice has to do with the distribution of goods based on needs. For example, in some circumstances, women have greater needs than men and should receive more. This is a matter of justice, not charity. The same holds for the poor. Of course, the pursuit of distributive justice can at times be in conflict with the dictates of commutative justice. The Catholic Church teaches that, because of the dignity and social character of the human person, and because the purpose

of created things is to provide for the common good, fundamental human needs must be satisfied, regardless of what commutative justice might deem fitting. Thus, in the social teachings, the principle of distributive justice is used to lend support for a living wage, a progressive tax system, universal health care, and the rights of immigrants. Distributive justice can seem strange, if not objectionable, to many Americans. The roots of distributive justice, however, are found in the Bible. Biblical justice is not impartiality. God favors the weak, the poor, and the marginalized and judges kings and the rich by the way they treat marginalized groups.

The documents also speak of “social justice.” After World War I, Pope Pius XI was first to use this term. Today, it has come to be used in secular contexts as well. Pius XI taught that the solution to social problems cannot be found in charity alone. Charity, however laudatory, is only a short-term response to the *effects* of social ills. The *causes* of social ills are structural and must be addressed as a matter of justice, not charity, toward those who suffer.

In the social teachings, the themes of justice and the common good are often associated with the notion of “participation.” Realizing the common good requires the full participation of the human person in social, economic and political life. This too is a matter of justice. The failure of participation produces marginalization in society. The state, in enacting public policy, cannot marginalize any individual or group by thwarting their participation. The notion of justice as participation, therefore, provides a basis in the teachings for criticizing social ills as disparate as structural unemployment, racism, the marginalization of undocumented immigrants, inadequate public education, the exclusion of women, and the unequal distribution of wealth.

### **Practical Outcome: Authentic Development Based on an “Integral Humanism”**

Since the 1960s, when the social teachings began to reflect the needs of the newly independent former colonies, the documents came to speak of “the authentic development of peoples” based on an “integral humanism.” Social development must reflect a comprehensive view of the human person’s material, cultural, and religious needs. Development, therefore, cannot be restricted to material prosperity. It must include access to education and cultural resources, religious freedom, and opportunities for individuals to contribute to the common good through full participation in the life of society. Only an integral humanism can serve as the proper basis for authentic progress and development. In addition, integral humanism and authentic development provide a basis in the teachings for criticizing what has been called “acquisitive individualism” and “consumerism.”

### **Practical Outcome: The Correlation of Rights and Responsibilities**

In the early documents, the social teachings placed more emphasis on the responsibilities of the state than on the rights of individuals. The state was seen paternally as a benevolent authority with the responsibility to promote the common good. After 1963, the emphasis on the responsibilities of the state came to be augmented with an unambiguous affirmation of rights that accrue to the individual. There are two principal reasons for this turn to human rights. First, human rights give concrete content to human dignity and offer a practical, although hardly the only, way to achieve the common good. The second reason has to do with the fact that the teachings are directed to all peoples. Human rights

are a useful way to set moral standards for societies with a wide range of economic circumstances, cultural exigencies, and political systems.

What rights are endorsed? The teachings endorse “first generation” civil and political rights. These are the rights enumerated in the Bill of Rights of the Constitution of the United States. The social teachings emphasize, however, “second generation” social and economic rights. These rights include the right to education, employment, health care, a pension, as well as support for the poor. The social teachings, therefore, recognize immunities but argue strongly for entitlements.

### **Practical Outcome: The Preferential Option for the Poor**

Closely aligned with the pursuit of the common good is the principle of a “preferential option for the poor.” This term comes from Latin American liberation theology, where the phrase “preferential option” connotes a deliberately chosen perspective for interpreting social, political, or economic realities in solidarity with the poor. Concretely, the preferential option means that all are required to create conditions in which the concerns of the poor are heard and social policy and economic practices are evaluated in terms of their impact on the poor.

This preferential option may at first seem incompatible with the notion of a “common” good. The option for the poor, however, does not mean pitting one group within society against another, as with Marxist class warfare. Rather it requires us to strengthen the common good by responding to the needs of those members of society who are the most vulnerable. As was the case with distributive justice, the origin of this aspect of the social teachings is biblical. In the Christian scriptures, especially the Old Testament,

God judges society based on its treatment of the poor. The poor are agents of God's transforming power in the world.

### Practical Outcome: The Structural Analysis of Sin

The structural reality of sin is little recognized around the world. This is certainly the case in the United States, where the illusions of individualism have reached toxic levels. The Catholic Church teaches, however, that recognizing structural sin is necessary if we are to respond adequately to the evils that confront us today. An appreciation of the structural character of sin is required to understand the economics of world hunger, the exploitation of cheap labor (including child labor), the intractability of un-fair ("free") trade, and the impact on other societies of America's consumption of drugs.

The Catholic analysis of the structure of sin, however, is not like that of Marxist theorists. The social teachings argue that while structural sin may be experienced as an impersonal social force, it is rooted in personal sin. Ultimately, structural sin is always the result of concrete acts of individuals. Social, political, and economic structures can mediate evil, influence behavior, and make sin hard to recognize and impossible to avoid. The "communion of sin" is a demonic reflection of true social solidarity. Evil, however, is always the result of human acts. The social teachings about structural sin, therefore, offer a double affirmation: (1) social structures, and not just individuals, are sinful; and (2) human beings are responsible for these structures of sin.

This means that, in phrases like "structural sin" or "the institutionalization of sin," the word "sin" must be understood analogously. Social structures and institutions are not evil in themselves. They are the result of specific sinful acts by human beings. To

believe otherwise is to risk attributing culpability to "the system," and not to individual persons, a position vehemently rejected in the documents. Human beings are responsible for structural sin and are responsible for changing such structures.

### Reflection: Catholic Social Teachings and *Laudato Si'*, the New Encyclical on the Environment

On May 24, 2015, less than a month before the Buddhist-Catholic dialogue at Castel Gandolfo, Pope Francis promulgated his much anticipated encyclical letter on the environment. *Laudato Si'* is noteworthy as the most in-depth treatment of concern for the environment by any pope to date. In the long run, I believe that the encyclical will be appreciated as an important new development within the ongoing tradition of the church's social teachings. The encyclical is remarkable for its depth in integrating a contemporary concern for the environment with a sophisticated understanding of the social teachings of the church.

To document this aspect of the encyclical, I would like to offer a brief analysis of sections 156–58 that is sub-titled: "The Principle of the Common Good." To the extent that several major themes in the social teachings appear in these three sections of the encyclical, sections 156–58 serve to illustrate what is, as of now, an underappreciated aspect of this complex and important document.

Section 156 of *Laudato Si'*, begins with the claim: "Human ecology is inseparable from the notion of the common good, a central and unifying principle of social ethics." This statement places concern for the environment squarely within the ethical framework established by the responsibility of individuals, social groups, and the state to promote the flourishing of all. In the section that follows, the pope elaborates on this linkage. Since concern for the



environment must be governed by the principle of the common good, environmental policy and practices must correspond to the “basic and inalienable rights” of the human person and to his or her “integral development.” The state of the environment is inseparable from the overall welfare of society. In keeping with the “principle of subsidiarity,” therefore, concern for the environment requires the empowerment of “a variety of intermediate groups,” including “the family, as the basic cell of society.” In addition, promoting the common good requires “peace, stability and security,” that can be secured only by a “concern for distributive justice.”

In section 158, Francis completes his reflection on the environment and the common good by noting that the present condition of “global society” abounds with “injustices.” “The principle of the common good,” therefore, constitutes a “summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters.” In pursuing the preferential option, therefore, we must recognize that the true purpose of worldly goods is fulfilled only in service to the common good. In addition Pope Francis goes out of his way in section 158 to remind the reader that the preferential option requires us to recognize “the immense dignity of the poor in light of our deepest convictions as believers.”

These observations are but a brief reflection on a small portion of the encyclical. In sections 156–58, the pope touches on a number of prominent themes in the social teachings. These selections from the encyclical demonstrate Francis’s conviction that moral concern for the environment must be integrated with the church’s social teachings. *Laudato Si’* should be recognized not only as the latest contribution by a pope to the social teachings of the church, but also as a significant new direction in these teachings.

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