

# Journey of Faith



## In Short:



- The Church's social message is based on God's justice as expressed by Jesus.
- Catholic social teaching has seven key principles.
- Christians are called to promote justice and advocate for the poor and vulnerable.

Christians are called to help establish **social justice** by ensuring that the basic needs required for a life of dignity are met for all people. These basic needs include food, clothing, shelter, and an income that supports the family. Christians are called to both share our gifts and cooperate with institutions that support the common good.

*"Make justice your aim: redress the wronged, hear the orphan's plea, defend the widow. Come now, let us set things right, says the LORD."*

Isaiah 1:17–18

## Social Justice

From its beginning, the Catholic Church has sought to understand and live out Jesus' command to "love one another as I love you" (John 15:12). Following Christ's lead, the Church cares about the whole person. In addition to spiritual support and nourishment, the Church is called to provide food, shelter, and security to the needy. We're also called to work toward changing unjust systems so that the human rights of every person are met. This is our social responsibility.

*"The duty of making oneself a neighbor to others and actively serving them becomes even more urgent when it involves the disadvantaged, in whatever area this may be."*

CCC 1932

The Church's social message grows out of the conviction that each person has priceless value because we're created in God's image. No matter how poor, weak, sick, or powerless a person may be, he or she is to be treated as a child of God.

*"You have been told, O mortal, what is good, and what the LORD requires of you: Only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God."*

Micah 6:8

- What are some social justice issues you're aware of?
- Which ones do you feel strongly about? Why



## Jesus and Social Justice

In the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus read: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord" (Luke 4:18–19; see Isaiah 61:1–2).



Jesus took a stand for social justice. He was very aware of the pain and difficulties of real life. In Luke's Gospel (16:19–25), Jesus tells the story of Lazarus, a poor man who was "covered with sores," who longed to eat "the scraps that fell from the rich man's table."

When Lazarus died, he was "carried away by angels to the bosom of Abraham." When the rich man died and begged for mercy, Abraham responded, "My child, remember that you received what was good during your lifetime while Lazarus likewise received what was bad; but now he is comforted here, whereas you are tormented" (Luke 16:19–25).

In telling this story, Jesus isn't condemning the rich man because he was rich. The rich man's sin is that he closed his eyes to the suffering surrounding him. Jesus sends us a powerful message in this story: We are called to actively help the vulnerable, the poor, and the forgotten.

*"Why do you reject one who has the same rights over nature as you? It is not from your own goods that you give to the beggar; it is a portion of his own which you are restoring to him."*

St. Ambrose

## Prioritizing the Poor

Following Christ's example, the Church calls us to a *preferential love* for the poor (see CCC 2448). Our institutions, decisions, and actions should be guided by these four priorities, according to the U.S. bishops' pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All* (90–93):

1. Fulfillment of the basic needs of the poor.
2. Increase in the active participation of the poor and those on society's margins.
3. Greater investment of wealth and talent directed at benefiting the poor.
4. Evaluation of policies in light of their impact on family life.

*"Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me....What you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me."*

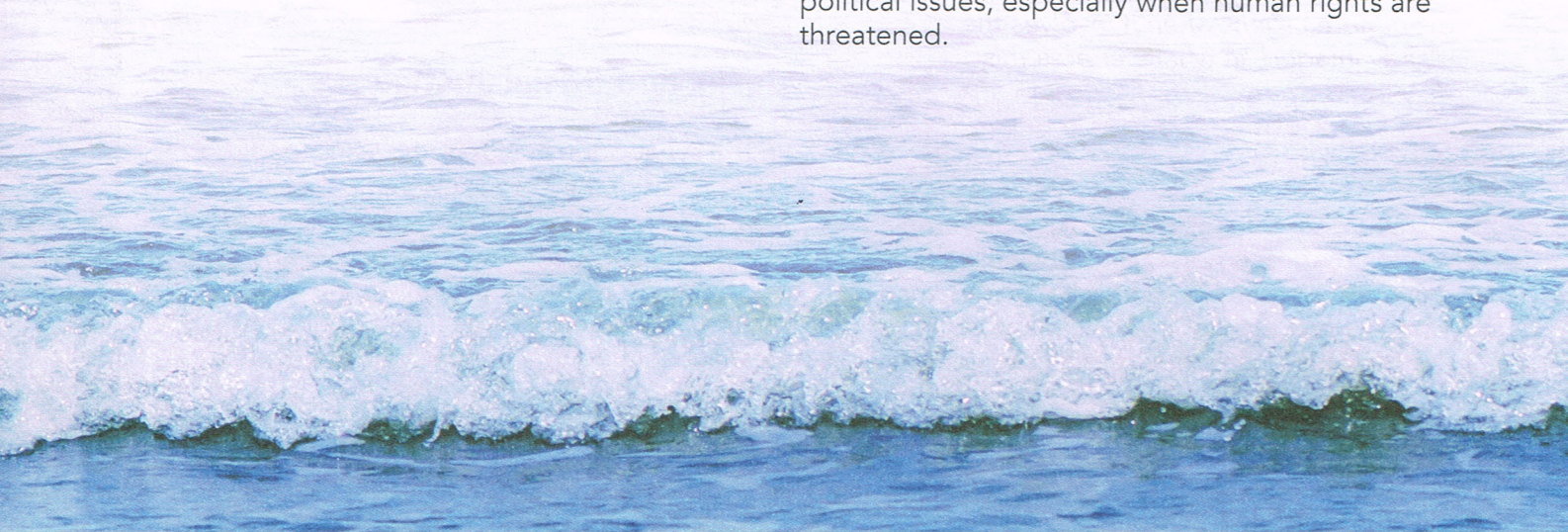
Matthew 25:40, 45

## The Church's Social Message

Jesus wasn't a politician, but he didn't hesitate to speak out on political issues. The Church tries to follow his example. A true Christ-centered spirituality must condemn any structure, policy, or practice that diminishes or demeans people. The Church, therefore, must be who and what Jesus wants it to be: a leaven of peace, justice, and equality for all people, a defender of the dignity and rights of all God's people.

While asking the clergy and religious to refrain from holding political office, the Church doesn't avoid political issues, especially when human rights are threatened.

- *When have you been tempted to close your eyes to the suffering of another/others?*
- *How willing are you to take action and take a stand for the poor and oppressed? What are you willing to sacrifice: Your time? Your money? The esteem of others?*





The modern era of **Catholic social teaching** began with Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical *On the Condition of Workers (Rerum Novarum)*. In response to changes in European society resulting from industrialization and urbanization, Pope Leo pleaded for an end to the exploitation of working people and called for a just and living wage and the right of workers to organize into unions and bargain collectively. Pope Leo also made it clear that Catholic tradition supports the right to private property and to a fair profit.

Since that time, the universal Church and national bishops conferences have spoken out about social issues such as war and peace, the economy, racism, religious freedom, capital punishment, the sanctity of life, hunger, poverty, and the environment. While Church leaders don't claim to be experts in economics, labor relations, or politics, they do understand the word of God regarding equality, justice, and human rights, and they call all people to understand and observe the law of God.

We're called to care both for the immediate needs of the poor through charitable works *and* to work to address the root causes of social problems through advocacy for just policies and helping change unjust social structures. Dorothy Day, cofounder of the Catholic Worker Movement, explained:

*"When you see a man walking on the road and he is run down by a truck, of course you will run to his aid. And if you see the same thing happen to another person, you will respond the same. And you would continue to respond to these scenes. But after a while, you would start to question where the trucks running people down are coming from. And when you found out, you would try to stop them at their source."*

Dorothy Day

• Why do you think many people are willing to "throw money" at social problems but unwilling to "get their hands dirty" through either direct service or advocacy?

• If all these things are needed, why isn't it enough for Christians to make charitable contributions?



## Principles of Catholic Social Teaching

All Catholic social teaching grows out of the conviction that every person, as a beloved creation of God, has inherent value and dignity. The seven principles of Catholic social teaching guide our care for the needs and rights of all God's people.

**Life and Dignity of the Human Person:** All life must be protected from natural conception to natural death, and all forms of discrimination must end.

**Call to Family, Community, and Participation:** Traditional marriage and family life are the central social institutions and must be strengthened and supported.

**Rights and Responsibilities:** All people should have access to basic necessities of food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, and education.

**Preferential Love for the Poor and Vulnerable:** The needs of the poor and vulnerable come first and deserve our preferential response when we're in a position to help.





**Dignity of Work and Rights of Workers:** All people have a right to employment with adequate pay and decent working conditions.

**Solidarity:** We are one human family and must work for peace and justice for every person.

**Care for God's Creation:** We're called to protect human life and the world God has given to us.

- *About which principle are you most concerned?*
- *What is God calling you to do about your concern?*

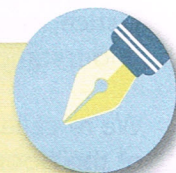


The well-being of society is a concern of the Church and must be our concern as well.

We can participate in acts of social justice by:

1. *Sharing our goods.* Sharing what we have reduces the disparity between rich and poor.
2. *Serving others.* Jesus said whoever wishes to be great must become a servant (see Mark 10:42–45). We can volunteer to perform charitable works and acts of service.
3. *Standing up for justice.* We can select a social cause and take action to raise awareness of the need for change.

Read Matthew 25:31–46, then reflect on the following questions in your journal:



- *How is God calling me to share my possessions with the needy?*
- *How is God calling me to serve others through charitable acts and acts of service?*
- *How is God calling me to stand up for justice?*
- *Who are the "least ones" crying for my attention today? How will I respond?*

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