

Journey of Faith



In Short:

- Catholic social justice has its foundation in the Church.
- There are seven themes of Catholic social teaching.
- Christians should always advocate for the poor and vulnerable.



From the beginning, the Church has sought to understand and live out Jesus' command to "love one another as I love you" (John 15:12). The Church isn't just an institution for saving souls but one that cares about the whole person. In addition to spiritual support and nourishment, the Church is called to provide food, shelter, security, respect, and support for the human rights of every person. This is called 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

Social Justice

Malala Yousafzai shared the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014, making her the youngest recipient at age 17. Malala came from a Pakistani family that valued education for both boys and girls. Malala was an outspoken advocate for education for all, especially girls who had not always been given that opportunity. When Malala was 15, her advocacy enraged the Taliban regime. Assassins tried to kill her, shooting her in the head. The bullet went through the left side of her forehead, and though it caused serious injuries Malala survived. She vowed to continue her struggle to make education an opportunity available to young people all over the world.

- What can you learn from Malala's story?
- What does it say about acting on your beliefs?



All Catholic social teaching grows out of the conviction that each one of us has priceless value because we have been created in God's image. We are the summit of all creation, destined to spend eternity with God. No matter how poor, how weak, how sick, or how powerless a person is, she or he is still a child of God.

"God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."

Genesis 1:27

Why Do We Need Social Justice?

Social injustice has existed as long as people have existed, and wise and just men and women have always condemned it. During the time of the great prophets, even the land of Israel was full of injustice and oppression. The words of the great prophets often became a strong warning against injustice.

"When you spread out your hands, I will close my eyes to you; Though you pray the more, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood! Wash yourselves clean! Put away your misdeeds from before my eyes; cease doing evil; learn to do 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 1:15–18

And who were these people whose hands were full of blood? They weren't terrible criminals, but the elders of the people. In Isaiah's time, these were religiously observant people and leaders of the community, but they seemed unaware of the terrible suffering of the poor who surrounded them.

Isaiah proclaims with certainty that we cannot serve the Lord and ignore the poor in our midst. No matter how much we pray, no matter how much time we spend in church, we cannot truly know God if we don't serve our neighbor in need.

When we speak of "the poor," we don't just mean people with no money. "The poor" also refers to those suffering from loneliness, great sadness, or failing mental or physical health. "The poor" includes the elderly woman who lives alone next door, the child in class who can't seem to learn, and the kid on the team who is always on the bench alone. All of us have been in some kind of need.

- What might cause good people to overlook the poor around them?
- How has someone come to your aid in a time of need?



Jesus and Social Justice

Jesus took a stand on social justice from the very beginning of his public life. In the synagogue in Nazareth, he 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).

The Jesus we see in Scripture is very much involved in the pain and sadness 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 this story, Jesus isn't condemning the rich man because he was rich. The rich man's sin is that he did nothing. The rich man 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.

Jesus also tells his followers to take a stand against those who abuse authority or those who profit on others' misery. Jesus said to stand firm, even if that meant getting persecuted, too.

"Before all this happens, however, they will seize and persecute you, they will hand you over to the synagogues and to prisons, and they will have you led before kings and governors because of my name."

Luke 21:12

Jesus' words apply to our lives today, too. When you reach out to the classmate who is ridiculed and ignored, you may be ridiculed and ignored yourself.

When you take time to visit the elderly woman next door, you will likely lose out on time spent with friends. But when following Jesus gets difficult, we have the Lord's promise: "What eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and what has not entered the human heart, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9).

Seven Themes of Social Justice

1. Human life is sacred and every person has dignity.
2. We are called to participate in community and family.
3. All people have rights and responsibilities.
4. We must remember the poor and vulnerable.
5. All work should have dignity and all workers respected.
6. We are one human family, in solidarity.
7. We must care for God's creation.

What Does the Church Teach?

The way we think about Catholic social teaching today began with an 1891 encyclical from Pope Leo XIII called *On Capital and Labor (Rerum Novarum)*. Pope Leo pleaded for an end to the exploitation of working people, called for a just and living wage, and for the right of workers to organize themselves into unions. Pope Leo also made it clear that Catholic tradition supported the right to private property and to fair profit.

The Dogmatic Constitution of the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), a 1964 document from Vatican II, addressed social issues. It emphasizes what Pope Leo stated: All people should be allowed to work, work should be dignified, and workers should be treated with respect. People who have more than they need should share with those who don't have enough.

From the moment we're born, we rely on others to help us. First, we rely on our parents and family to take care of us. Then we turn to friends to support us, teachers to instruct us, bosses to treat us fairly, neighbors to respect us, the Church to guide us, and the list could go on and on. We have the right to help, support, and compassion as well as the responsibility to provide that help, support, and compassion to others whenever we're able.

- *Where could you apply these teachings to your own life?*



Further Reading on Social Justice

On Capital and Labor (Rerum Novarum)
—Pope Leo XIII, 1891

On Christianity and Social Progress (Mater et Magistra)—Pope St. John XXIII, 1961

On Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity, and Liberty (Pacem in Terris)
—Pope St. John XXIII, 1963

Declaration on Religious Freedom (Dignitatis Humanae)—Second Vatican Council, 1965

On the Development of Peoples (Populorum Progressio)—Blessed Pope Paul VI, 1967

On Human Work (Laborem Exercens)
—Pope St. John Paul II, 1981

On Social Concern (Sollicitudo Rei Socialis)
—Pope St. John Paul II, 1987

The Church and Racism: Toward a More Fraternal Society—Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 1989

Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church—Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004

But What Can I Do?

Share Your Stuff. Jesus asks us to share what we have with those who have less. If you have old clothes, games, electronics, or anything else that you've just outgrown or don't use, consider passing it on.

Share Your Money. This can be a real sacrifice, especially when it feels like you never have enough money yourself. But you don't have to donate millions to make a difference. Try giving up soda, coffee, or other treat once a week and save up that money to donate at the end of the month.

Share Your Time. Life gets busy, and giving away your time can seem more difficult than giving away your money or stuff. But try. Plan one or two hours every week where you give your time to someone else who needs your help, such as tutoring a fellow student in a subject that you know well.

Share Yourself. Being a Christian is all about giving yourself to others. Stand up for the kid who's usually singled out. Ask if you can help when someone seems overwhelmed. Be proud to be a servant.



With your class, think about your community.

Who are the poor in your midst? Brainstorm ways you can give back to your community. Try to come up with at least one action for each of the seven themes of social justice.



Pick one of the activities you listed with your class above or come up with one on your own.

Write a plan for how you can put this plan into action. If it's possible, try to carry it out in the next few weeks.

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