

Catholic Social Teaching

Our Best Kept Secret

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“The best kept secret in the Roman Catholic church in the United States!” That is how the church’s social teaching has frequently been described. *That* the church has a developed body of teaching on social, economic, political, and cultural matters and *what* that body says seem to have been forgotten—or have never been known—by a majority of the Roman Catholic community in the United States. Even the 1991 commemorations of the one hundredth anniversary of the beginning of modern Catholic social teaching did not receive sustained attention in the secular or Catholic media. Catholic social teaching still remains outside the mainstream of ordinary parish life.

All too few Catholics know about the Church’s social teaching. The reactions of many U.S. Catholics to their Bishops’ Peace Pastoral of 1983 and Economics Pastoral of 1986 provided telling evidence. These two important letters of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) were called “radical” and criticized for not being authentically Catholic.

Much of what the bishops called for in those two letters remains unaccomplished and largely ignored two decades later. Yet both drew heavily for their inspiration and direction upon the documents authored in recent decades by Popes, the Second Vatican Council, the Synods of Bishops, and national conferences of Bishops. About the only sign of growing influence of the social teaching in the church is the attention that its conservative critics now invest in opposing, reinterpreting or reinventing it.

The traditional roots of the U.S. Bishops’ messages can be readily noted:

The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response examines the morality of war and peace and questions the arms race from the perspectives presented

by Pope John XXIII in his encyclical *Peace on Earth (Pacem in Terris)*, 1963) and by the pastoral constitution *The Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*, 1965) of Vatican II.

Economic Justice for All: Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy addresses such issues as unemployment, international trade, welfare policy, and governmental planning with perspectives raised in Pope Paul VI’s *Progress of People (Populorum Progressio)*, 1967), the Synod of Bishops’ *Justice in the World (Justitia in Mundo)*, 1971), and Pope John Paul II’s *On Human Labor (Laborem Exercens)*, 1981).

Not to know the foundation and background of these pastoral letters is to be seriously hampered in understanding their message and responding to their call.

In the not too distant past, courses in the social encyclicals were routinely offered in colleges and seminaries. Many adult education programs—such as labor schools—provided intense study of their teachings and applications. Popular handbooks explained the significance of the messages to a wide audience. But this has not been the case in recent years. The ordinary Catholic has heard very few homilies in her or his local parish on the topic of the social teachings.

Why is this so? Why are we keeping the social teachings “secret”? Many factors seem to have contributed to this unfortunate situation.

1. The documents are abstract, dry in content, and not very attractive to pick up and read.
2. The topics frequently are quite challenging, dealing as they do with controversial social issues, and therefore they may disturb readers and make them uncomfortable.

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3. A “papal encyclical” is, at least in some people’s minds, almost immediately associated with *On Human Life (Humanae Vitae, 1968)* and all the debates, disputes, and dissent over the Church’s position on birth control.

4. In general, authoritative statements—whether from church or government—have less attraction today than acts of authentic witness.

5. Renewed clericalism and serious scandals within the church in recent years have seriously undermined its moral authority.

But it is noteworthy that there has been a small resurgence of interest in the social teachings. What the church has to say on the political and economic issues of the day is gaining new attention in ever wider circles. Courses that extensively cover Catholic social teaching are being offered in more Catholic high schools, universities, seminaries, and adult education programs. People are responding with enthusiasm and sometimes with astonishment: “I didn’t know there were so many good things in the encyclicals!” It is true that the controversial nature of some of these issues leads to many lively political debates. But it also reveals a much deeper longing on the part of Catholics and others, in response to contemporary needs.

The serious crises we face in the social order, nationally and internationally, have challenged Catholics as parents, citizens, teachers, students, workers, business and professional people, and politicians. We are looking for explanations and guidelines which offer a Christian perspective on the contemporary social events and issues confronting our nation and the world. What can we say, as Christians, about peace and the arms race, globalization and economic justice, international development,

racism and sexism, human rights, the dignity of all persons and the sacredness of human life, work and labor unions, and the ecology? The list of concerns continues to grow.

Easy answers to hard problems cannot be found in the social teachings. We must resist the temptation to look for clear solutions. But what can be found is a social wisdom based on:

- biblical insights
- the tradition of the early writers of the church
- scholastic and other Christian philosophies—
theological reflection
- and the contemporary experience of the People of God struggling to live out their faith in justice.

Discussion Questions

1. What has been your own understanding of the Church’s social teachings?
2. Has this understanding influenced you?
3. How important is it for you to have the guidance of the Church’s teachings in social matters?