

# Social Teaching of the Church

*Thus says the Lord of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy each to his brother, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor; and let none of you devise evil against his brother in your heart. ~ Zechariah 7:9-10*

**G**OD CREATED US AS SOCIAL BEINGS. To live in society demands that we respect one another's dignity and freedom. Such respect is crucial to the well ordering of any society, and therefore it is something we owe to one another. Justice is that virtue which consists in giving to God and neighbors their due. The just are always praised in Scripture for their right conduct shown toward their neighbor. It is in this context that we find the Church's social teaching.

Concern for social justice is an integral part of the Christian life. Jesus taught that the way to eternal life is to follow the two Great Commandments: *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself"* (Mt 22:37-39).

The social justice teaching of the Church derives from Jesus' teaching on the love of neighbor. In fact, Scripture teaches us that love of God and neighbor are inseparable:

*"If any one says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from [Jesus], that he who loves God should love his brother also"* (1 Jn 4:20-21).

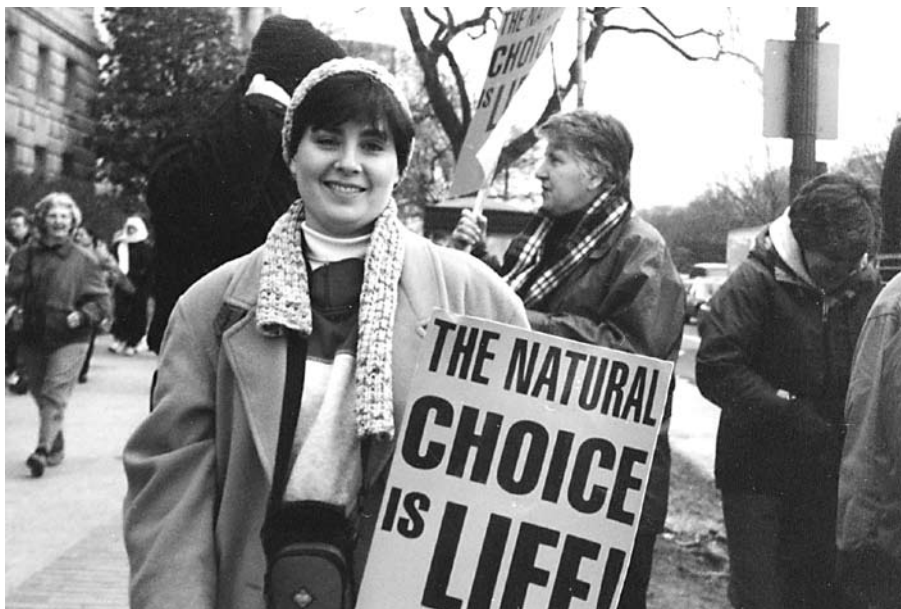
This love of neighbor must be practiced by all persons and communities and is guided by several principles, which form the foundation of social justice morality. Some of the more important of these principles include the dignity of the human person, the common good, solidarity, subsidiarity, fair distribution of goods, private property, and love for the poor.

## Dignity of the Human Person

Jesus taught us to love not only our neighbor, but even our enemies, reminding us that all persons are created in God's image and likeness (see Gn 1:26-27). All persons thus have a basic dignity that is sacred and inviolable. Because all men and women reflect God's image, all are equal with regard to their

basic dignity. This does not mean, however, that all possess the exact same abilities and gifts. All have different physical and intellectual aptitudes, varying degrees of wealth and social goods, access to education, etc. These differences,

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as well as our basic equality of dignity, are part of God's plan. His desire is that human persons would be knit together by their mutual need for one another and that the community must be governed according to the principles of social justice.

## The Common Good: Authority and Obligations

Societies are communities of persons “bound together organically by a principle of unity that goes beyond each one of them” (CCC 1880). The living members of a society are their heirs of its past and make provisions for its future. Within each community, “the human person ... is and ought to be the principle, the subject and the end of all social institutions”<sup>1</sup> (CCC 1881). Because each society is defined by a specific purpose, each has specific rules for the sake of the common good. These rules are enacted, carried out, and enforced by legitimate authority.

The common good is defined as those social conditions that are necessary for human persons, both individually and in communities, to fulfill the end for which they are created. The common good includes such elements as peace and safety, respect for the person, and the social well-being and development of the group.

Civil government has been established by God to protect and promote the common good. Every human community needs authority, and all authority in civil government comes from God, as an ancient pagan king recognized: “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The Lord, the God of Heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth” (Ezr 1:2). St. Paul teaches us: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of him who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for



*Pope Leo XIII, reigning from 1878 to 1903, issued a landmark body of teaching on the Church’s social doctrines*

*the sake of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay all of them their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due” (Rom 13:1-7).*

The common good always has the advancement of persons as its goal, not the elevation of the state or any particular social class or group. The common good considers the good of each person in the community, both material and spiritual, and the good of the community as a whole. Thus, no individual person may be sacrificed or treated unjustly in the name of the common good. For the common good to be fostered, persons must be valued over things; to elevate material goods to a higher value than persons offends against our human dignity.

The duty of governing authorities in carrying out the common good includes using only those means that are just and in accordance with the natural law, the source of which is God. Because authority derives its moral legitimacy from God, not itself, unjust laws and behaviors are a form of violence against the human person. This includes forms of tyranny and despotism that do not respect the fundamental rights of the person which, by their very nature, cannot achieve the common good. Specifically contrary to the natural law are statutes that give a means the value of an end in itself, that is, any law whose purpose seems to be the law itself rather than to promote a specific good. Laws contrary to the moral order can create unjust social structures and make it almost impossible to live a moral life. Such laws are not binding on the conscience. To the contrary, authorities are obliged to support and restrain social and economic institutions, and to so improve living conditions, that they are manifestly just and advance the common good rather than act to promote sin and moral degradation.

Apart from clearly unjust

***“Charity must lead the way in all dealings between persons and between nations.”***

<sup>1</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* 25 § 1

regimes, a wide variety of types of regimes, freely chosen by citizens, are acceptable, so long as they serve the good of the communities that choose them and do not seek harm to other communities. It is preferable not to concentrate power in a single element of authority, and essential that law, not arbitrary power, be the rule of conduct. To these regimes, citizens are duty-bound to offer their loyalty, obedience, respect, and good will.

In addition to these duties, citizens have a responsibility to participate in promoting the common good. The primary obligations are to family, work, and church, but there is also a serious obligation to the public life of the community in whatever ways are appropriate to the political structures of a given society. In this respect, nations that permit the widespread involvement of their citizens are especially commendable. In their turn, authorities are obliged to encourage participation, and to so seek to strengthen the common values of the society that citizens have confidence in them. These obligations include a civic culture that supports human dignity and protects the most vulnerable of its citizens, and that seeks to educate all citizens in this culture.

### Solidarity

Solidarity, which is the social expression of friendship and charity, seeks the common good of the whole human family, as well as individuals, communities, or nations. Charity must lead the way in all dealings between persons and between nations. Solidarity tends toward social justice and is expressed in the proper distribution of goods and just wages. It is the key to settling economic conflicts in the social order and is a prerequisite for world peace.

Solidarity also means an inclusive rather than an exclusive approach to members of a society that can too easily be pushed aside or forgotten. God has specifically identified the lifting up of the oppressed and freeing the enslaved (see Ex 3:7-9), the fair treatment and love of the stranger and the foreigner (see Lv 24:22; Dt 10:19), the care of the widow and the orphan (see Ex 22:22-23), and justice to the wage-earner (see Dt 24:14-15) as hallmarks of a society that truly embodies justice and love of neighbor.

Closely related to solidarity is the principle that

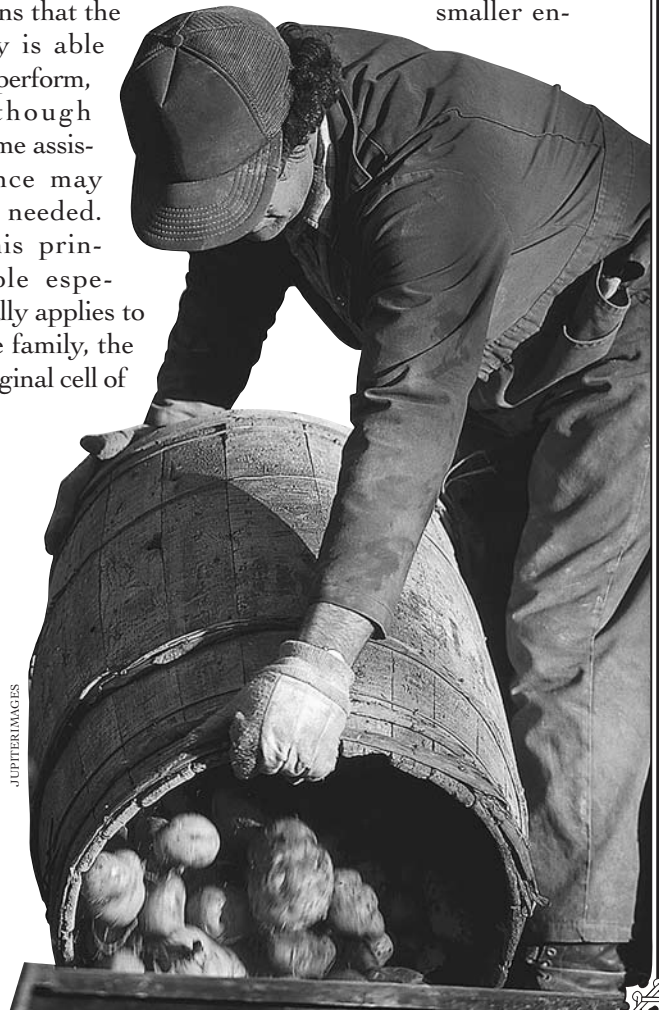
*“Social relationships may not be determined solely by economic factors.”*

social relationships may not be determined solely by economic factors. Thus, profit cannot be the only consideration in economic considerations. Reducing persons to a mere means to profit enslaves man, idolizes money, and ignores the spiritual needs of men and women. Profit in itself is not immoral, but it must be balanced by a proper treatment of workers, which respects the dignity of the human person and payment of a just wage.

### Subsidiarity

Subsidiarity is a principle of social justice that regulates the relationships between various structures within the social order. Subsidiarity is defined as the right of a community to exist and function without interference in its internal affairs from more powerful social institutions. For example, when a child is very young, he or she needs help performing such tasks as getting dressed, tying shoelaces, and brushing hair. However, as children grow older, it would be an offense against their dignity to continue doing these simple tasks for them instead of teaching them to do the tasks themselves. This same injustice applies when government or other social institutions take over functions that the smaller en-

tity is able to perform, although some assistance may be needed. This principle especially applies to the family, the original cell of



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social life. Society has a responsibility to support and strengthen, not replace, the family. For example, the family has the fundamental right and responsibility for the education of its children, which government may supplement through public education but not usurp.

All forms of collectivism also violate the principle of subsidiarity in that they absorb all lesser institutions into one single massive social organization. The proper role of social organization of a higher order to those of a lower order is to assist in case of need, support their legitimate functions, and coordinate their activi-

persons, especially when these relationships involve the exchange of goods and obligations.

Stewardship over creation also includes animals. Animals are part of the created order that was given to us for our proper use. Thus, it is within the realm of justice to use animals for food, clothing, medical experiments, and work. Animals may be also domesticated and loved as pets, so long as the affection directed to them is not what is due only to persons. However, to cause needless suffering or death to animals offends against their Creator.

*“Justice requires that those with abundance share with those who have little or nothing. This is the ultimate test of our faith.”*



ties with the rest of society. As with solidarity, subsidiarity is ordered to the common good, which necessarily respects the dignity of the human person.

#### **Fair Distribution of Goods and Private Property**

Another important principle of social morality is that the goods of creation are given to the entire human race. Human persons should view the distribution of created goods as sharing among brothers and sisters. This does not mean, however, that no single person can own anything individually. The distribution of goods must respect the right of private property. However, the proper use of private property is to benefit others and promote the common good. In creation, God made men and women stewards of the material world (see Gn 1:26, 28).

Carrying out this stewardship includes respecting the property of others and honoring promises and contracts. This aspect of social justice is called “commutative justice,” and without it no other form of justice is possible. The term “commutative” means that realm of justice that concerns relationships between

#### **Care for the Poor**

The dignity of the person, the common good, solidarity, and the fair distribution of goods all demand that each and every person must have access to at least the basic necessities of sufficient food, shelter, and clothing. To give to those who are in need is not solely an act of fraternal charity, but also fulfills what is just. To *refrain* from giving is an injustice.

In order for human persons to achieve the end for which they were created, sharing in God’s Trinitarian life, they must have their basic material needs provided. For those who cannot provide for themselves, justice requires that those with abundance share with those who have little or nothing. Scripture teaches that this is the ultimate test of our faith. *“If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead”* (Jas 2:15-17).

(CCC 344, 369, 373, 378, 1807, 1849, 1867, 1878-1889, 1897-1917, 1928-1942, 1951, 2207-2210, 2224, 2419-2449, 2831-2833)