

Handbook of Catholic Social Teaching

A GUIDE FOR CHRISTIANS IN THE WORLD TODAY

Edited by Martin Schlag

Foreword by Cardinal Peter Turkson

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2 What is Catholic Social Teaching in the Mission of the Church?

ARTURO BELLOCQ

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.... Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.

MT 25:35-40

Throughout the ages, these words have echoed in the consciences of Christians, moving them to open their hearts and reach out their hands to the needs of others. Concern for mankind has led the Church over time to develop a social teaching, which has its own sources, aims, and particular nature.

18. Does the Church have an interest in the concrete history of mankind?

The Church wants the salvation of God to reach each individual, wherever he or she may be; thus she shares in mankind's joys and hopes, anxieties and sadness, and stands in solidarity with every man and woman of every place and time, and brings them the good news of the Kingdom of God.

(CSDC 60; GS 1)

19. Why does the Church have an interest in social relations?

Because social life (and with it politics, the economy, work, law, and culture) often determines the quality of life, and thus the conditions in which every man and woman understands him or herself and makes decisions about his or her vocation, the Church cannot be

indifferent to what is decided, brought about or experienced in society; she is attentive to the moral quality—that is, the authentically human and humanizing aspects—of social life.

(CSDC 62)

20. Does the Church have its own message about social relations?

Yes. With the light of faith, the Church has an in-depth knowledge of what it means to be human, our origin and our end, our true happiness, and our weaknesses. This “global perspective on man and human realities” (PP 13) that the Church offers *as her distinctive contribution* sheds light on the complex web of social relations. “She teaches him the demands of justice and peace in conformity with divine wisdom” (CSDC 3, quoting CCC 2419).

(CSDC 3, 63; CCC 2419; PP 13)

21. So, the Church’s teaching about social relations forms part of her supernatural mission?

“Christ, to be sure, gave His Church no proper mission in the political, economic or social order. The purpose which He set before her is a religious one” (GS 42). But out of this religious mission a light and an energy emerge which can serve to structure the human community according to the divine law. The supernatural and the natural are not two exclusively separate entities. “The supernatural is not to be understood as an entity or a place that begins where the natural ends, but as the raising of the natural to a higher plane. In this way nothing of the created or the human order is foreign to or excluded from the supernatural or theological order of faith and grace, rather it is found within it, taken on and elevated by it” (CSDC 64).

(CSDC 64; GS 42)

22. Is the social teaching of the Church concerned with all aspects of social life?

No. The social teaching has its *own competency, which is that of proclaiming Christ the Redeemer*. This means that the Church’s

social teaching does not intervene in technical questions—which correspond to the human sciences—nor does she propose or establish concrete systems or models of social organization. Still less does the Church take on the political task of bringing about the most just society possible. Building a just society—in all its technical complexity—is the mission of politics, not the Church. However, the vision of man and his true good in Christ that the Church possesses through the faith is an important contribution to a “purification of reason,” (DCE 28) enabling the demands of justice to be recognized and put into practice.

(CSDC 68; DCE 28)

23. What right does the Church have to announce a social teaching?

The Church has not only the right but also the duty to proclaim her social teaching. It is an integral part of the mission that Christ entrusted to her—to be *teacher of the truth of faith*. This truth that the Church announces not only includes dogma, but also moral truth—including those truths about just social order—that proceed from the gospel and from human nature itself. These truths are necessary for the salvation of man and his happiness on earth.

(CSDC 69–70; DH 14; CIC 747, §2)

24. Is the social teaching of the Church a simple or complex body of teachings?

The social teaching of the Church was not initially considered to be an organic, systematic set of teachings. It has been formed over time through numerous interventions by the Magisterium on social issues. For this reason, it constitutes a “*rich and complex*” body of doctrine (John Paul II, *Address in Puebla, Mexico* 1979, III.7), in which principles of permanent value are mixed with teachings of a more transitory nature that responded to urgent needs at a particular moment. This fact requires an attentive discernment when determining to what degree a teaching forms part of the social doctrine of the Church.

(CSDC 72)

25. Is Catholic social teaching an ideology?

Because of the particular circumstances of its formation—many times characterized by confrontation with opposing conceptions of man and his social life—some confuse Catholic social teaching with an ideology, in the sense of a concrete proposal like other social projects. The Magisterium has made clear that the Church’s social teaching does not belong to the category of ideology, nor is it a “third way” between capitalism and socialism, but it is rather *theology*. It is the proclamation of the truth of faith illuminating the ultimate meaning of social realities, and reveals the demands made by the respect due to the human person.

(CSDC 72; SRS 41)

26. So what exactly is the social teaching of the Church?

The social teaching of the Church is “the *accurate formulation* of the results of a careful reflection on the complex realities of human existence, in society and in the international order, in the light of faith and of the Church’s tradition. Its main aim is to *interpret* these realities, determining their conformity with or divergence from the lines of the Gospel teaching on man and his vocation, a vocation which is at once earthly and transcendent; its aim is thus to *guide* Christian behavior” (CSDC 72, quoting SRS 41).

(CSDC 72; SRS 41)

27. What are the sources of Catholic social teaching?

As in other areas of theology, the sources of Catholic social teaching are Revelation and human nature, especially in its social dimension. Faith *guides* reason in its search for a way to organize a society worthy of man; but faith *does not substitute for reason* in reason’s task of understanding the basic concepts and specific dynamics of the distinct areas of social life, which fall under the disciplines of philosophy and the various social sciences.

(CSDC 74–75)

28. So the Church's social teaching enters into dialogue with the social sciences?

Yes. The social teaching needs the social sciences in order to have a proper understanding of its object—the various social realities. The Church's social teaching respects the legitimate autonomy of earthly realities and the various human sciences that study them. However, it invites them to open themselves to a fuller truth, known by faith, so that they can find their ultimate meaning and contribute to the authentic development of man.

(CSDC 76; GS 36)

29. What do we mean by "legitimate autonomy of earthly realities"?

We mean that created things and earthly affairs have their own laws and values which must be respected. This does not mean that they are independent of God and the gospel message. There are moral limits, which are always binding. "For without the Creator the creature would disappear" (GS 36). For instance, markets have their own laws, for example the law of supply and demand; they are, however, subject to God's moral law.

(CSDC 45; GS 36)

30. Does Catholic social teaching propose its own social, political, or economic doctrine?

No. Revelation does not propose any sort of political, economic, or social system at the level of the social sciences that the Church should teach or promote. In these fields, faith invites reason to honestly and diligently investigate the causes of and best solutions for problems. Faith guides reason with its fundamental principles concerning man and his social dimension. These principles serve as a guide, without proposing concrete answers that, in many cases, are contingent from the point of view of the human sciences.

(CSDC 72)

31. Who formulates the Church's social doctrine?

As with other areas of Christian teaching, the Church herself, as the custodian of Revelation, formulates and teaches the social doctrine. Each member of the ecclesial community—priests, religious, lay people, theologians, scientists, and pastors—contributes according to his or her own charism and ministry. However, only the Magisterium is competent to teach the social doctrine with authority. In this case, the doctrinal weight of the various teachings depends on the nature of the teachings, their contingent and variable elements, and the frequency with which they have been invoked.

(CSDC 79–80)

32. Are there both perennial and contingent elements in the Church's social teaching?

Perhaps more than in any other area of theology, the Church's social teaching intertwines various perennial or lasting principles—pertaining to Revelation and to man's immutable nature—with contingent applications. This is because the cultural, political, and economic circumstances in which the Church announces her message are constantly changing. Furthermore, the Church—along with humanity—continues to grow in her understanding of complex social realities and of the specific contribution offered by the gospel (cf. Benedict XVI, *Christmas Address to the Roman Curia* 2005). This characteristic specific to social teaching requires careful discernment on the part of those who receive it; but, far from being a disadvantage, it is a sign of the teaching's capacity for renewal while maintaining its fundamental principles.

(CSDC 80, 85–86; SRS 3; DonVer 24)

33. What are the tasks of proclamation and denunciation in Catholic social teaching?

Because of her profound knowledge of man, the Church has a special sensibility for recognizing violations of the dignity of the person and social groups, and must make her voice heard in defense of the most vulnerable. But prior to this task of *denunciation*, the

Church must *proclaim* the truth of man and society that she possesses as her own, and then must proclaim the norms and directives of action that derive from them. With this teaching, the Church does not attempt to structure or organize society, but to appeal to, guide, and form consciences.

(CSDC 81)

34. Who receives Catholic social teaching?

All members of the Church receive her social teaching. Each of the faithful, according to his or her vocation, must contribute to the building of a more just society. In a special way, this teaching is directed to lay people because it involves responsibilities related to the building, organizing, and functioning of society: political, economic, and administrative obligations that pertain to lay people in virtue of the secular nature of their vocation, and not to priests or religious. The light of faith does not undermine the rational power of the Church's social teaching, and it is therefore also directed toward all men and women of good will who are outside the Church.

(CSDC 83)

35. When lay people work to permeate social realities with a Christian spirit, do they act in the name of the Church?

No, when lay people order earthly realities according to the spirit of the gospel, they do not do so in name of the Church, but as citizens of the State, according to their own responsibilities. The Church, because of her religious mission, is not tied to any political or economic system. Sometimes "the Christian view of things will itself suggest some specific solution in certain circumstances. Yet it happens rather frequently, and legitimately so, that with equal sincerity some of the faithful will disagree with others on a given matter" (GS 43). Given the contingency of social matters, there will always be a legitimate plurality of temporal options for lay people.

(DCE 29; GS 43, 76)

36. When was Catholic social teaching born?

The Church has always demonstrated her concern for social matters and offered guidance concerning ever-changing historical realities. Drawing from Revelation, and owing to the teachings of the Fathers and the Doctors of the Church, a rich heritage of Christian social morality has been formed over time. The economic and political events of the nineteenth century, however, transformed society in such a way that a new effort of discernment of the fundamental principles of the social order was necessary. Leo XIII's emblematic encyclical *Rerum Novarum* is considered the beginning of this new organic and synthetic way of confronting social problems.

(CSDC 87–88; John Paul II, *General Audience* May 13, 1981)

37. What are the central points of the social magisterium of Leo XIII?

In his numerous social and political encyclicals, Leo XIII explained the Christian teaching on temporal power and its relationship to religious power, stated his judgment on the new forms of government and social organization, and offered criteria for the participation of Christians in public life. Many of these teachings contain contingent elements specific to the circumstances and mentality of the time, but as a whole, these documents express the fundamental principles of the faith in social matters. The encyclical *Rerum Novarum* is especially important. It studies in depth the *labor question*, brought to the fore by the economic and political revolutions of the nineteenth century. The document outlines the errors of this period that resulted in certain social ills. It rules out socialism as a remedy and sets forth a number of teachings regarding work, law, and property, the principle of collaboration instead of class struggle as the means to social change, the rights of the weak, the dignity of the poor and the obligations of the rich, the perfection of justice in charity, and the right to form professional associations.

(CSDC 89)

38. What did the teachings of Pius XI contribute to Catholic social teaching?

Pius XI was forced to confront grave political and economic crises during his pontificate, and he responded with several important documents. Shortly after the serious economic crisis of 1929, he published the encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*. In this encyclical, he developed Christian social principles at a time when industrialization coincided with the expansion of the national and international power of financial entities. The encyclical rejects both materialistic socialism and the liberal ideology of the times and re-affirms the value of private property, insisting on its social value. The encyclical's teachings on the *principle of subsidiarity* and the notion of a just wage are of particular importance. Furthermore, Pius XI never ceased speaking out against the totalitarian regimes that took hold in Europe during his pontificate. In 1931 he protested against the atrocities of the fascist regime in Italy with publication of the encyclical *Non Abbiamo Bisogno* ("We Do Not Need"). In 1937, in the encyclical *Mit Brennender Sorge* ("With Burning Anxiety"), he rejected the Nazi ideology and the Nazi regime's repressive measures. In the same year he also promulgated the encyclical *Divini Redemptoris* on atheistic communism.

(CSDC 91–92)

39. What characterizes the social magisterium of Pius XII?

Pius XII was responsible for guiding the Church during the Second World War and afterward during reconstruction of the social order. While he did not write any social encyclicals, he consistently demonstrated his concern over upheavals in the international order. In his many speeches and radio messages on social issues, he emphasized the need for a harmonious relationship between law and morality so that a just social order can be constructed at national and international levels. Additionally, in his many encounters with people across various social classes and professional societies, he provided concrete guidance on ways of contributing to the common good.

(CSDC 93)

40. What were the central characteristics of John XXIII's pontificate in the area of social teaching?

With his personality and his teaching, John XXIII promoted the universal dissemination of Catholic social teaching, in dialogue with all men and women of good will. In years marked by recovery after the war, the beginning of decolonization, and the first signs of dialogue between the American and Soviet blocs, John XXIII showed himself capable of reading “the *signs of the times* and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” (GS 4, italics added). He wrote two social encyclicals. The first, *Mater et Magistra* (1961), updates the social teaching of *Rerum Novarum* for a context in which social problems had become universalized, and speaks to certain concrete problems including agriculture, relations between poor and rich countries, and the demographic problem. The second, *Pacem in Terris* (1963), addresses the conditions for promoting national and international peace, and the need to respect human rights.

(CSDC 94–95)

41. What was the importance of the Second Vatican Council for Catholic social teaching?

The council was a moment of great importance for Catholic social teaching; it brought about a profound reflection on the mission of the Church in the world, and therefore also on her contribution to the solution of social problems. The pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* outlines the face of a Church that is “truly linked with mankind and its history” (GS 1). The Church walks with humanity and together they are subject to the same earthly circumstances; but at the same time the Church serves “as a leaven and as a kind of soul for human society as it is to be renewed in Christ and transformed into God’s family” (GS 40). *Gaudium et Spes* offers a systematic presentation on culture, economic and social life, marriage and family, the political community, and peace and the community of nations—all in the light of Christian anthropology and the Church’s mission. Another important council document in the body of Catholic social teaching is the declaration *Dignitatis Humanae*, in

which the right to religious freedom is clearly proclaimed, accompanied by important clarifications on the relationship between religion and political power.

(CSDC 96–97)

42. What were Paul VI’s contributions to Catholic social teaching?

Paul VI wrote two important social documents. In the encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (1967), he explained the Christian teaching on authentic social development—which must be comprehensive, fostering “the development of each man and of the whole man” (PP 14)—and urged those in power to act in solidarity with the most vulnerable. In the same year, the Pope established the Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace “to stimulate the Catholic community to promote progress in needy regions and international social justice” (CSDC 99, quoting GS 90). Later, in the apostolic letter *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971), in the midst of strong ideological controversies inside and outside the Church, he reflected on post-industrial society with its many complex problems, underlining the inadequacy of current ideologies in responding to the challenges of the day: urbanization, the condition of young people, the status of women, unemployment, discrimination, emigration, population growth, the influence of the media, and the ecological problem.

(CSDC 98–100)

43. What were John Paul II’s most important social documents?

John Paul II’s long and fruitful pontificate was rich in contributions to social questions, including three social encyclicals. *Laborem Exercens* (1981) focuses on human work as being key to the entire social question. Human work cannot be reduced to its objective and material aspects, but should be considered as the place where one’s personal, natural, and supernatural vocation is realized. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987) returns to the topic of development in order to set out its moral implications and the moral obligations it imposes on people in the contemporary world; it outlines the Christian and human meaning of solidarity among various countries and social groups, and also explains in detail the nature of Catholic social teaching as

a theological discipline. Lastly, *Centesimus Annus* (1991), written to commemorate the 100-year anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, offers an analysis of the fall of communism and an in-depth explanation of the advantages of democracy and the free economy while highlighting the risks that these present when they are not based on an adequate anthropology.

(CSDC 101–103)

44. What are the most relevant teachings that Benedict XVI has left us in social matters?

Benedict XVI wrote a social encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), in which he analyzed the causes of society's profound cultural crisis and proposes a new *Christian humanism*, centered on charity as the fundamental criterion of all social relations. On numerous occasions he reflected on the Church's mission in society and the contribution that faith offers to social problems, particularly by assisting reason, often threatened by relativism, in perceiving ethical obligations.

45. What are the main features of Pope Francis's teaching on social issues?

In word and in deed, Pope Francis has worked to promote, both inside and outside the Church, a greater awareness of the grave social and cultural problems of our time, calling all people of good will to their personal and societal responsibilities. Evangelical poverty, characterized by a detachment from material goods, and attention to the most needy, are two criteria that must always be present in a society aspiring to be worthy of man. In his social encyclical *Laudato Si'*, the Pope addresses many contemporary issues with the idea of an "integral ecology" which respects all human and social dimensions. Against the current individualistic cultures, this ecology recognizes that everything is connected, and therefore our decisions must be based on ecological, social, and economic concerns together with an awareness of our common origin, our mutual belonging, and our responsibility toward future generations.