Catholic Social Teaching:
The Best Kept Secret in the Catholic Church

Introduction and Overview

Do you know what our Church tells us about workers’ rights and a just wage, about political, economic and cultural rights, racism, or responsibility for the common good, about agriculture and global interdependence, or about war and peace, and political participation? This is just to name a few of the issues taken up by the Church for over a century and compiled in a compendium of Catholic Social Teaching (CST).

Many of us are familiar with major papal documents such as Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si’* (2015). We may not be aware, however, that there are at least 25 Papal and Vatican documents, and dozens of other documents and letters by bishops on a wide spectrum of social issues of the times.

Catholic Social Teaching reflects a commitment to the poor and the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* calls us to work for the “healing” of human institutions and structures, requiring a transformation of our own hearts.

While rooted in Scripture starting with the Hebrew prophets, and built on the gospel call to “… bring glad tidings to the poor, liberty to captives, and new sight to the blind” (Lk 4:18), the body of work that we now refer to as CST in modern times began with Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical, *Rerum Novarum (The Condition of Labor).*
Some have referred to *Rerum Novarum* as the “Magna Carta for a humane economic and social order,” because it laid the foundation for understanding human dignity and the just and equitable relationships necessary to preserve that dignity. Since then, the social teachings of the Church — for more than 100 years now — expanded with urgency fueled by the burning concern about growing inequity and social injustices. Each encyclical and pastoral letter that is part of this body of work builds upon the ones that came before. They are timely, timeless and interdependent.

CST is dynamic, based on experience of the community, and uses Scripture as the touchstone.

The *Compendium* identifies seven themes or principles:

- The dignity of work and the rights of workers.
- Solidarity.
- Preferential option for the poor and vulnerable.
- The call to family, community and participation.
- Rights and responsibilities.
- Care of God’s creation.
- Life and dignity of the human person.

Two more, *Subsidiarity* and *The Common Good* are often combined with the others.

A study of these teachings reveals an evolution in the Church’s thinking about its place and the People of God in the world on the complexities of social and economic issues. Especially since Vatican II, many of the encyclicals call us to action to work for policy and funding reforms to bring about the change necessary for justice and peace.
CST is central to our faith.

*Catholic Social Teaching emerges from the truth of what God has revealed to us about himself. We believe in the triune God whose very nature is communal and social...God reveals himself to us as one who is not alone, one who is Trinity. Therefore, we who are made in God’s image share this communal social nature. We are called to reach out to build relationships of love and justice.*

*Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions*

*USCCB*

While CST does not provide easy answers to complex problems, the principles help us to align ourselves as disciples of Christ as we interpret and make choices about the common good and correcting inequitable relationships.

In their letter “Communities of Salt and Light”, the U.S. Bishops put the responsibility squarely in parish life for living in service to our brothers and sisters, our neighbors, wherever they may be in the world.

It is timely that now with national discord and social alienation, we at St Vincent’s take time to reflect on an important part of our Catholic heritage and explore the ways that we can – personally and collectively – help to build a peaceable world.

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