



## THE ELEMENTS OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

*“We need to build on the good work already underway to ensure that every Catholic understands how the Gospel and church teaching call us to choose life, to serve the least among us, to hunger and thirst for justice, and to be peacemakers.”*

—Sharing Catholic Social Teaching:  
Challenges and Directions  
Reflections of the U.S. Catholic Bishops,  
June 1998

Questions are often asked by legislators, government officials, citizens of various faiths, and even members of the clergy as to how the Catholic Church comes to take positions on public policy issues, why it pursues particular issues, and from what sources are the policy positions derived. The answer is a set of principles, a body of thought, and a call to action known as Catholic social teaching.

Catholic social teaching is a central and essential element of the Catholic faith. This faith calls people to work for justice, serve those in need, pursue peace, and to work toward the full realization of the dignity and rights of people around the world.

For more than 100 years, beginning with Pope Leo XIII’s defense of labor unions in 1891 (*Rerum Novarum*), Church documents have addressed urgent issues which have both national and international reach – such as human rights, economic justice, educational opportunity, political participation, war and peace, and the rights of the unborn. These messages are not only Church doctrine, but also provide individuals with a framework for action as every believer is called to be an informed, active and responsible participant in the political process.

The following brief reflections highlight several of the major themes that are at the heart of the Catholic social teaching tradition.

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## **Seven Principles of Catholic Social Teaching**

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### **Life and Dignity of the Human Person**

We believe that every person is precious, that people are more important than things, and that the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person.

### **Call to Family, Community, and Participation**

We believe people have a right and a duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable.

### **Rights and Responsibilities**

Every person has a fundamental right to life and a right to those things required for human decency. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities to one another, to our families, and to the larger society.

### **Option for the Poor and Vulnerable**

In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, our tradition recalls the story of the Last Judgment (Mt 25:31-46) and instructs us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first.

### **The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers**

If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected – the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to organize and join unions, to private property, and to economic initiative.

### **Solidarity**

We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they live. Learning to practice the virtues of solidarity means learning that "loving our neighbor" has global dimensions in an interdependent world.

### **Care of God's Creation**

We are called to protect people and the planet, living our faith in relationship with all of God's creation. This environmental challenge has fundamental moral and ethical dimensions that cannot be ignored.

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## LIVING THE PRINCIPLES IN EVERYDAY LIFE

These principles form the moral framework for the Church's public policy decision-making. The Catholic Bishops in Michigan established the Michigan Catholic Conference to translate Catholic teachings into action in the public policy arena. The Michigan Catholic Conference serves as the public policy voice for the Church so that positions on issues are presented with one voice to the legislative, executive and judicial branches of state government.

The following examples provide insight into how individuals might apply the principles in everyday life. They are certainly not meant to be exhaustive but will hopefully serve as a starting point for those interested in living the Catholic social tradition more fully.

### **Life and Dignity of the Human Person**

- Advocate for public policies that respect human life from conception until natural death.
- Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper on a life issue.
- Support and volunteer in a program that assists pregnant women.

### **Call to Family, Community, and Participation**

- Attend municipal council meetings, township meetings, or neighborhood meetings.
- Write a thank you note to a civil servant, legislator, or judge whose work you admire.
- Advocate for equal educational opportunities for all children in your community.

### **Rights and Responsibilities**

- Participate in a voter registration drive.
- Vote in every election, exercising your responsibility for participation in decisions that affect the common good.
- Run for political office or support someone who is running for office and shares your values.

### **Option for the Poor and Vulnerable**

- Volunteer or donate resources to an agency that supports and empowers the poor.
- Advocate for public policies that treat the poor with dignity.
- Participate in your diocesan ministry to migrants.

### **The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers**

- Respect and show appreciation for all occupations.
- Share your job knowledge and skills with others.
- Advocate and/or provide for just wages and benefits.

### **Solidarity**

- Seek out opportunities to know people of other races, cultures, and religions.
- Encourage an inner city parish or school partnership.
- Support and promote Catholic Relief Services.

### **Care for God's Creation**

- Participate in a neighborhood beautification project.
  - Support planning efforts to establish areas that are maintained in a natural state.
  - Encourage and support public policies that protect the Great Lakes water system.
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## For Reflection

The Church's social teaching is a rich treasure of wisdom about building a just society and living lives of holiness amidst the challenges of modern society. It offers moral principles and coherent absolute values that are sorely needed in our time of moral relativism and declining respect for life. Catholic social teaching has been articulated through papal encyclicals and in pastoral statements by national Bishops' conferences. The depth and richness of this tradition can be understood best through a direct reading of these documents.

Should you want more information regarding Catholic Social Teaching and its practical application, please go to [www.micatholicconference.org/social\\_teaching](http://www.micatholicconference.org/social_teaching) or contact one of the following:

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There will, of course, be legitimate differences and debate over how the challenging moral principles of Catholic social teaching are applied in concrete situations. The Church recognizes a continuing need for social analyses and prudential judgments on the specifics of many policy issues. Yet the Church will always pursue the common good of society, foster social justice and peace, and defend the dignity of the human person.

The Michigan Catholic Conference invites and encourages Catholics across the state to become more aware, concerned and active in the public square so as to shape public policies for the betterment of all.

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