

Catholic Social Teaching: All Are in God's Image, Likeness

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My friend Trevor employs Rosa, a woman from El Salvador, to clean his apartment. On each cleaning day, Trevor gets lunch for Rosa and for himself, and they eat together. By these simple acts, Trevor is practicing Catholic social teaching. By paying Rosa a just wage, he recognizes the dignity of her work. By buying her lunch and by inviting her to eat with him, he shows that he respects her and is in solidarity with her. All of these elements—showing respect for human beings, honoring the dignity of work, and being in solidarity—have long been part of Catholic social doctrine.

The social teaching of the Church instructs the faithful on how to live the teachings of Christ amid the challenges of a changing society.

The seeds of Catholic social teaching are found in the 1891 encyclical *Rerum novarum* (*Rights and Duties of Capital and Labor*). In this encyclical, Pope Leo XIII addressed social and economic issues at a time when the industrial revolution and political changes created a widening gap between the wealthy and the working poor. The encyclical affirms the dignity of the poor, a worker's right to just wages, the right to form trade unions, and the right to own property. The seven social teachings are:

Life and dignity of the human person: The foundation of all Church social teaching is the understanding that every human being is made in the image and likeness of God and is therefore sacred. This fundamental belief, the Church says, is the basis for a moral society.

Anything that insults human dignity—from abortion to capital punishment to social and economic disparities—is contrary to Catholic social teaching and to the Gospel.

Call to family, community, and participation: Humans are social beings who depend on one another in both good and bad times. The human community has a right and a duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and the well-being of all. At the heart of the community is the family. The family, the domestic church, is a sign of

unity and gives witness to the Gospel by participating in human institutions for the betterment of society.

Rights and responsibilities: Because every human life has value, all persons, regardless of status, are entitled to basic human rights, including the right to life, the right to health, the right to work, the right to food, the right to shelter, the right to family, and the right to participate in society. Along with those rights comes the responsibility to ensure that others are afforded those same human rights.

Option for the poor and vulnerable: The Church's love and concern for the most vulnerable is rooted in Jesus' compassion for the poor. The commitment to the poor is not simply for the sake of charity, it is to help the poor become active participants in society so that they might contribute to the common good.

The dignity of work and the rights of workers: According to Catholic social teaching, a job is more than a means to earn a living; it is a participation in God's work. Therefore, the worker must be protected by rights such as the right to productive work, the right to decent wages and benefits, the right to organize, the right to own property, and the right to economic initiative.

Solidarity: Despite our ethnic, economic, and political differences, we are one human family. In a world that is becoming more and more global, it is critical to focus on what we have in common rather than what makes us different. At the heart of solidarity is the desire for and pursuit of peace and justice.

Care for creation: Human beings have been entrusted as the stewards of all creation. We are called to do our part to protect and preserve our common home, to temper consumption with moral considerations for the poor, for humanity as a whole, and for future generations.

For some, Catholic social teaching brings comfort: for others, challenge. Reflect on which of the teachings challenge your beliefs and which affirm your beliefs. Discern how you might be called to act so that the Church's social teaching is no longer a secret but a new way of being for the human race.



The family, the domestic church, gives witness to the Gospel as it participates in groups that seek the common good.