

Catholic Social Teaching in a Nutshell



JUSTICE 
PEACE OFFICE
CATHOLIC ARCHDIOCESE OF SYDNEY

Catholic Social Teaching:

An Introduction to Charity and Justice

Catholic social Teaching concerns respect for life, the human person and the rights and duties which flow from human dignity and guarantee it. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: “Society ensures social justice when it provides the conditions that allow associations or individuals to obtain what is their due, according to their nature and their vocation.” (CCC, 1928).

“Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”

John 13:34

As Christians we should all be familiar with Christ’s new commandment “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13:34). What we may be less familiar with is that we are all also called to work for justice. The prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament exhorts us to “Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow”. (Isaiah 1:17). These are echoed by the words of the prophet Micah: “And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8). Christ also recognized the plight of those who yearn for justice and hoped that it would be fulfilled “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.” (Matt 5:6).

According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Justice is the cardinal moral virtue which consists in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and to neighbor. Social Justice is directed towards reforming unjust systems or structures in society to try and create a more just society. Charity is directed towards minimizing the effects of injustice such as providing someone who is homeless with a safe place to stay for a short while. Whereas social justice is aimed at ensuring that everyone has the means to provide for themselves to have safe and secure housing. As Christians we are called to work for both charity and justice, but to decide in which specific ways we do this takes discernment.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Matthew 5:6

There are numerous examples of faithful Catholics and Saints who worked for social justice in their lifetimes and their teachings and way of life can provide the template for how we approach social justice. Some of these saints include St Francis and St Clare of Assisi who had a great love for the poor and the environment, Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati, St Kateri Tekakwitha, Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan and St Josephine Bakhita.

The sources of Catholic Social Teaching are Sacred Scripture, the lived tradition of the Church as well as several key magisterial teachings (which are listed on the last page). In addition, there are eight principles of Catholic Social Teaching which should guide our work and are outlined in this booklet: the life and dignity of the human person; the common good; the universal destination of goods; the preferential option for the poor; caring for creation; subsidiarity; participation and solidarity (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, Chapter Four)

The Catholic approach to social justice is based on three steps: (1) See; (2) Judge (discern); 3 Act. The *Catechism* states that the Church’s social teaching proposes principles for reflection (listed above); it provides criteria for discernment (based on research and theological reflection) judgment; it gives guidelines for action (CCC 2423). This is known as the Cardijn methodology of Social Justice.

An important point to note is that Catholic Social Teaching seamlessly integrates into the rest of Catholic Teaching. As the Catholic Social Justice series paper “Reading the Signs of the Times” points out it is not “...an independent stream of thought within the broader teaching of the Church. It is part of a single theological tradition with the concern or social justice being core to the life of the Church.” (p 5).

Life and Dignity

-Ruth Moraes, Justice and Peace Office

The foremost principle of catholic social justice is the sacredness of every human life and the preservation of the dignity of every human being because every human being is made in the image and likeness of God. The sacredness of human life warrants its protection in all circumstances as the highest priority because without it, no other rights or protections can achieve their purpose. The principles of life and dignity are deeply enmeshed. It is not simply enough to protect human life, one must also work to preserve the dignity of that human life through every condition and stage of development.

From the beginning, Scripture has affirmed the sacredness of human life and the unique dignity accorded to human beings above all of creation. “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them (Gen 1:27).” Even in the Old Testament, the universal commandments of “Do not kill” (Exodus 20:13) and “...do not slay the innocent and righteous” (Exodus 23:7) were closely followed by the lesser known but equally important commandment “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Lev 19:18). Christ, in his teaching, after confirming these commandments, extended their scope declaring “But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment” (Mt 5:21-22), in the knowledge that anger often leads to the loss of human life. Christ’s teaching also exhorted us to enhance the dignity of human beings through concrete actions such as feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked and visiting the sick or imprisoned (Mt 25:34-36).

“The whole of the Church’s social doctrine in fact, develops from the principle that affirms the inviolable dignity of the human person.”

Pope Saint John XXIII

The first grave violation of the life and dignity of a human person was the murder of Abel by his brother Cain, prompting him to ask God “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen 4:9). In *Evangelium Vitae* Saint John Paul II emphatically answers this question in the affirmative because everyone is his brother’s keeper, because God has entrusted us to each other. In his Encyclical, *Mater et Magistra* Pope Saint John XXIII also affirmed the corollary to this principle which is that: “The whole of the Church’s social doctrine in fact, develops from the principle that affirms

the inviolable dignity of the human person.”

In *Gaudium et Spes*, the Church stated that “everyone should look upon his neighbour (without any exception) as ‘another self’, above all bearing in mind his life and the means necessary for living it with dignity.” If everyone loves their neighbour as one loves himself or herself then both the life and dignity of every human being will be upheld, because no one acting in authentic freedom chooses to harm themselves. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes how violations of the dignity of the human person also lead to the loss of life: “The acceptance by human society of murderous famines, without efforts to remedy them, is a scandalous injustice and grave offense. Those whose usurious and avaricious dealings lead to the hunger and death of their brethren in the human family indirectly commit homicide, which is imputable to them”.

“Everyone should look upon his neighbour (without any exception) as ‘another self’, above all bearing in mind his life and the means necessary for living it with dignity.”

Scripture, the saints and the Church have consistently taught that protection of human life and preservation of human dignity are inseparable. One cannot work towards one, without also working towards the other. To do so would undermine the other core principles which form the basis of Catholic social teaching.

The Common Good

-Ruth Moraes, Justice and Peace Office

The principle of the common good is described as “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfilment” (*Gaudium et Spes*). It is based on the dignity, unity and equality of all human beings and concerns the life of all people in our worldwide family.

“Besides the good of the individual, there is a good that is linked to living in society: the common good. It is the good of “all of us” ...To desire the common good and strive towards it is a requirement of justice and charity.”

Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas and Veritate*

Pope Benedict XVI explained this concept more clearly in *Caritas in Veritate* stating “Besides the good of the individual, there is a good that is linked to living in society: the common good. It is the good of “all of us”, made up of individuals, families and intermediate groups who together constitute society...To desire the *common good* and strive towards it is a requirement of justice and charity...The more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbours, the more effectively we love them. Every Christian is called to practise this charity, in a manner corresponding to his vocation...”

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that the common good consists of three elements. Firstly, it presupposes respect for the person, their fundamental and inalienable rights, including the right to life and the exercise of natural freedoms. Second, it encourages social well being and development of the group itself and should make accessible to each individual member of that group what is needed to lead a truly human life. This is not limited to the necessities of life required for subsistence living but include health, work, education and culture, suitable information etc. Pope Benedict XVI affirmed this in *Caritas in Veritate* noting that a universal common good cannot be achieved “unless people’s spiritual and moral welfare is taken into account, considered in their totality as body and soul”. Thirdly, it requires peace, which is the stability and security of a just order.

The common good is oriented towards the progress of persons and therefore should be founded on truth, built up in justice, and animated by love. St Thomas Aquinas placed the common good, as part of life in society as one of the highest of human instincts. As the best human actions are what bring about individual good, similarly the best group actions bring about the common good. A society that wishes and intends to remain at the service of the human being at every level is a society that has the common good as its goal. The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* notes how the human person cannot find fulfilment in himself but lives for and with others.

However, the Church recognises, in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* that the common good is a good that is very difficult to attain because it requires the constant ability and effort to seek the good of others as though it were one’s own good. As Pope Pius IX noted in *Quadragesimo Anno* one of the gravest evils was the disparity of wealth between the exceedingly rich and the desperately poor and this needed to be brought back into conformity with the principle of the common good and social justice. As the disparity of wealth has continued to increase since then, the task of reclaiming the common good looms even greater. Pope Benedict XVI also recognised this challenge in *Caritas in Veritate* when he acknowledged “God gives us the strength to fight and to suffer for love of the common good, because he is our All, our greatest hope.” Without God, working for the common good will be a futile task.

The Universal Destination of Goods

-Dr Kim Doyle, Justice and Peace Office

The foundation of the principle of ‘universal destination of goods’ is found in Genesis 1:28—29 in which we learn that the original source of all that is good and life-sustaining comes from God, and is intended for all humankind. Pope John Paul II, in his 1981 Encyclical, *Laborem Exercens*, said that this principle is the ‘first principle of the whole ethical and social order’.

“The first principle of the whole ethical and social order, [is] the principle of the common use of goods.”

**Pope St John Paul II,
Laborem Exercens, 19**

The Church teaches that we each have a natural, or inherent, right to the material goods that allows us to sustain our physical lives but also that lets us to fulfil our potential, not merely subsist. That is, to allow everyone to participate in the world and be able to use their gifts to build up the Kingdom. Further, because it is a natural right any human intervention in this regard must be subordinated to this primary right.

This means that human regulations and interventions in the legal, economic or social systems must not hinder or diminish, or at worst entirely ignore, the right we each have to the gifts divinely given to us. All decisions about the use of the Earth’s resources are to be made in order to promote the well-being of everyone and for preventing their exclusion and isolation. It is especially important that the development of some should never come at the cost of the development, or worse, enslavement, of others.

However, this is not simply to say that there ought not be any interventions in the sharing, use and division of the Earth’s goods; indeed intervention at all levels of society—local to international—must bring about context specific agreements and systems that allow equitable distribution of goods in a way that creates a society of fairness and solidarity. None of this is to suggest that the ownership of private property is disallowed. Rather, the Church has always taught that private ownership is a good for building a dignified, secure life. But it has its limits as it exists within the broader context of our common right to the Earth’s goods. In that way private ownership rights are *always* secondary to the common good of all.

More than just having our ‘fair share’ the Church teaches that any form of private property, because it comes from the common pot, has a social function. That means any private ownership should not just benefit the ‘owner’ but the society to which he or she belongs—monetary wealth, goods, knowledge, objects etc should not be accumulated and left idle for their own sake or used for the excessive benefit of the owner, but should instead be channelled productively for the benefit of all humankind.

“When we attend to the needs of those in want, we give them what is theirs not ours. More than performing works of mercy, we are paying a debt of justice”

St Gregory the Great

In all of this, as always, the message of the Gospel and the Social Teaching of the Church is that we also have a special calling to give preferential option to the poor. We have a particular responsibility to bring to an end living conditions that interfere with a person’s integral development. No greater is the burden of this responsibility when our own development or misuse of the Earth’s goods is the cause of those marginalising and impoverishing conditions.

To give each person, especially the poor, their due is not an optional act of charity, but a moral duty of justice derived from the eternal truth that God’s freely given gift is for all of us. As St Gregory the Great said, ‘When we attend to the needs of those in want, we give them what is theirs not ours. More than performing works of mercy, we are paying a debt of justice’.

Preferential Option for the Poor

-Dr Kim Doyle, Justice and Peace Office

The Church's love of the poor is essential for the Church and a constant part of our tradition. This love is born from the Gospels, especially the Beatitudes and the poverty of Jesus himself and his abiding concern and love for the poor around him.

For Catholics 'the poor' include the materially poor and those whose living conditions keep them from their proper growth and potential. But it also includes those marginalised in other ways. Pope John Paul II included those who were spiritually and culturally poor while Pope Benedict extended our understanding to include children, people with disabilities and people suffering oppression, amongst others. All forms of poverty deserve our care and attention, but we must be careful to attend to the most pressing need to alleviate material poverty. At the same time the Church reminds us that there is a limit to our ability to eradicate poverty and suffering entirely, the experience of which is an inherent part of the human condition and can only be fully redeemed by God.

“The principle of the universal destination of goods requires that the poor, the marginalized and in all cases those whose living conditions interfere with their proper growth should be the focus of particular concern. To this end, the preferential option for the poor should be reaffirmed in all its force.”

Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church,
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That does not mean we wash our hands of any efforts and most especially not of those kinds of poverty that are caused largely by our own decisions, both personally and those that our governments make on our behalf.

In this regard the Church is clear that is not an act of charity to lessen poverty, especially material poverty, but it is our obligation. This is because the 'preferential option for the poor' is a principle that grows out of another of the Church's social principles – 'the universal destination of goods'. This is the belief that God gave Creation to humankind equally for all. We are each entitled to partake in Creation to the point that we can live a simple and dignified life; we are not entitled to take more than we need or indulge in a love of riches, and we are absolutely not entitled to take more at the cost of others.

“The demands of justice must be satisfied first of all; that which is already due in justice is not to be offered as a gift of charity.”

*Second Vatican Council,
Decree on the Laity*

In this way the 'preferential option for the poor' is a reminder that the way we structure society has to give equal access to ownership and use of goods to all, with a particular focus on those who wield less power and are more vulnerable. Ultimately this means decisions about the distribution and ownership of goods should preference the needs of this most needy group first. The poor should not be an after-thought or the recipients of the paltry leftovers, nor should their legitimate due be bestowed grudgingly.

In preferencing the poor the Church makes clear that this is not an act of charity but is instead simply recognising and honouring what already belongs to

them. The Second Vatican Council famously pronounced in its 'Decree on the Laity' in 1965 that 'the demands of justice must be satisfied first of all; that which is already due in justice is not to be offered as a gift of charity'. Or put more succinctly by Jesus, 'you have received without paying, give without pay' (Mt 10:8).

Caring for Creation

-Ruth Moraes, Justice and Peace Office

While Catholic social teaching on caring for creation had a resurgence since Pope Francis' Encyclical *Laudato Si'* in 2015, it is important to remember that it responsible stewardship of the environment has always been an important Christian principle.

We see this in the earliest passages of Scripture, where after creating man and woman, we are told "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good." (Genesis 1:31) Humanity was given "dominion" (Genesis 1:28) over the earth and told to "till it and keep it" (Genesis 2:15). While Pope Francis acknowledges that in the past some Christians have incorrectly interpreted these Scriptures, he clarifies that "nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God's image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures". (*Laudato Si'*).

"Everything is connected. Concern for the environment thus needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society."

Laudato Si', 91

In the history of the church many saints can be attributed with having a sincere love for God's creation and God's creatures. St. Francis of Assisi is well known among Catholics and non Catholics alike for authentically and joyfully living in harmony with God, with others, with nature and with himself. Pope Francis said of him, "He shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace." (*Laudato Si'*) St Philip Neri is known to have always treated animals with gentleness and St Kateri Tekakwitha is the patron of those working for ecology. St Hildegard von Bingen said "Gaze at the beauty of earth's greenings. Now, think. What delight God gives to humankind with all these things...All nature is at the disposal of humankind. We are to work with it. For without we cannot survive."

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that God entrusted the earth and its resources to the common stewardship of mankind to take care of them, and that the goods of creation are destined for the whole human race. This is a corollary of another important principle of Catholic social teaching which is the universal destination of goods. The *Catechism* goes as far as to include a religious respect for the integrity of creation under the seventh commandment because nature was destined for the common good of the past, present and future of humanity.

Given the more drastic changes in the global environment over the last century, several Popes of recent times have commented on the importance of respecting nature. As early as 1971, in his Apostolic Letter *Octogesima Adveniens*, Pope Paul VI recognised that "Due to an ill-considered exploitation of nature, humanity runs the risk of destroying it and becoming in turn a victim of this degradation." Following this, Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* further confirmed that the "lordship" God gave to humanity over nature was not tyrannical but ministerial and should be exercised in wisdom and love. Pope Benedict XVI, in his message for the World Day of Peace 2010, recognised that humanity has a duty to exercise responsible stewardship of creation because if we do not, it will provoke a rebellion on the part of nature, the effects of which are already plainly visible.

"Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace, and the joyful celebration of life."

Laudato Si', 91

The interesting reality about caring for creation, is that even though it is a global problem, it is one that we as individuals can most easily act towards resolving. This can be done through little daily actions which can make a huge difference such in the lives of other human beings, especially the poor who most keenly face the consequences of environmental degradation. Helpful practices include using less heating and wearing warmer clothes, reducing the use of paper and plastic, conserving water, cooking only what can reasonably be consumed, using public transport or car pooling. After recognising that everything is connected, Pope Francis exhorted us in *Laudato Si'*, "Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace, and the joyful celebration of life."

Subsidiarity

-Dr Kim Doyle, Justice and Peace Office

Subsidiarity is not a word we hear much outside of big business, but it is a central principle of the Church's teaching on what makes a just society. In short, this principle declares that decision making and organising power should be left to the people, group or association at the most local level possible. It is most especially concerned with the State not taking to itself functions and roles that individuals or groups can do for themselves. The ultimate responsibility of the State is not to take these privileges and responsibilities from citizens, but rather to create spaces and supportive infrastructure for citizens to freely and creatively exercise them.

“On the basis of this principle, all societies of a superior order must adopt attitudes of help (“subsidium”) — therefore of support, promotion, development — with respect to lower-order societies.”

Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 184

The underlying reasoning is that a flourishing civil society grows out of citizens actively participating in the political, social and cultural reality of their own lives and as part of the wider social fabric to which they belong. Shouldering this privilege and responsibility is a means through which people experience their inherent dignity and in which they have it affirmed and recognised. The Catechism puts it this way, ‘society ensures social justice by providing the conditions that allow associations and individuals to obtain their due’.

In practical terms subsidiarity can be enacted in many ways. One simple example is that parents should be left to make decisions and carry out the education of their children in ways that make sense

to and meet the needs of that family. Another example may be that a local governing body rather than a national governing body ought to be in charge of how and in what ways parks or recreational facilities are created and used in response to the specific needs and desires of that immediate community.

As these even rather prosaic examples show there is often great complexity in trying to manage and define what is the appropriate group, association or governing body to be assigned decision making power. The Church teaches that our guide in making and evaluating the application of subsidiarity is the common good, which at its heart is about the primacy and dignity of the human person. Therefore the usurping of people's ability to form associations and have real power to make decisions for themselves should only ever be the exception, not the rule.

Subsidiarity as a core part of Catholic Social Teaching is evident in the earliest ‘social’ papal encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* in 1891, but it finds its most formal and cogent discussion in the 1931 encyclical of Pope Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*. As in all the encyclicals that celebrate an anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, Pius is deeply concerned with the relationships between workers and capital, and the increasingly alienating and overly-centralised architecture of economic systems, but he is also deeply influenced by the growing fascist and dictatorial regimes beginning to bloom around Europe at this time. Pope Pius concern for people living in an ever more powerful State is an indication that this rather abstract and complex principle of subsidiarity is profoundly important and its loss can result in some of the most brutalising human experiences.

Subsidiarity requires a great deal from each of us and is always a process of negotiation rather than simplistic application. It requires that we not only hold governments, at all levels, accountable for their decisions, but more importantly that we take up civic roles and get involved in our communities in ways that set clear and healthy boundaries for governments and other authorities about what decisions they get to make on our behalf. We must do all we can to combat the idea that we abdicate power, responsibility or participation after we've filled in a ballot form. To not do this gives States a worryingly large portion of power, but it also decimates our sense of belonging to and being beholden to the human family. Without an active, robust civil society we cannot rightly claim to be in relationship with each other as God intended, but rather with a State.

Subsidiarity is not just the wanton abolishment of the State, nor a rigid political ideology of small government for its own sake, but rather a constant discernment of the right and proper place of all decision making bodies and organisations. It is about tempering them by making sure there is no way we could meet the needs they address in more locally specific, connected and more responsive ways that allow people to make more decisions for themselves. This process, however complex or simple, is to be guided by our belief in and commitment to the common good, to the creation of the Kingdom on Earth.

Participation

-Ruth Moraes, Justice and Peace Office

An important corollary of the principle of subsidiarity is that of participation both in society and political life. Participation in political life is not just a legal duty, but in Catholicism, also a moral one, so much so that participation is considered inherent to the dignity of the human person (CCC, 1913). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines participation as the “voluntary and generous engagement of a person in social interchange” and deems it necessary that “all participate in political life each according to his or her position and role, in promoting the common good.” (CCC, 1913)

Participation in society and public life can take various forms from joining local associations to raising awareness about important issues or voting to running for office. Pope St Paul VI said “The Christian has the duty to take part in this search and in the organisation and life of political society.” (*Octagesima Adveniens*, 124) “A good Catholic meddles in politics, offering the best of oneself, so that those who govern can govern” said [Pope Francis](#) in 2013 shortly after his election to the papacy. While the task may appear too daunting, we are first asked to participate by taking charge of the areas of our life and society for which one assumes personal

“Participation is the voluntary and generous engagement of a person in social interchange. It is necessary that all participate, each according to his position and role in promoting the common good.”

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1913

responsibility, such as our family, parish or community. (CCC, 1914). The Second Vatican Council recognised that nations “whose systems permit the largest possible number of the citizens to take part in public life in a climate of genuine freedom” deserve particular recognition (*Gaudium et Spes* 31)

Despite, or perhaps as Pope Francis precisely has [identified](#), politics has become its own worst enemy, we should not abandon politics but be inspired to engage in politics to pursue justice, protect human dignity and the common good. In his apostolic exhortation, Pope Francis recognised “politics, though often denigrated, remains a lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity, inasmuch as it seeks the common good” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 205). In particular, it is absolutely vital to include and encourage the participation of the poorest and most disadvantaged. (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 189). From a Catholic perspective, furthering the common good of the entire human family, is the highest aim of politics.

The Church provides some guidance on discerning how to vote as a common means of participation: “all citizens, therefore, should be mindful of the right and also the duty to use their free vote to further the common good” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 75). But the Church also cautions against limiting one’s participation to the electoral process (*Gaudium et Spes*, 30-31). Other forms could include: trying to get an issue which you think is important on the agenda of your local member, making submissions to inquiries and appearing before them, writing to your local politician and meeting with them to make your concerns known, organising petitions and letter writing campaigns in your parish.

At the other end of the spectrum of political involvement we are presented with the rare and unique option of standing for office. The Second Vatican Council called on those who are suited to “prepare themselves for the difficult, but at the same time, the very noble art of politics, and should seek to practice this art without regard for their own interests or for material advantages. With integrity and wisdom, they must take action against any form of injustice and tyranny, against arbitrary domination by an individual or a political party and any intolerance” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 75)

Our participation in society and in particular, political engagement should not be driven by any selfish ambition of our own but to bring about justice and to protect the life, dignity and the common good of the worldwide human family and in particular the poorest and most disadvantaged.

Solidarity

-Ruth Moraes, Justice and Peace Office

“No man is an island, entire of itself”, wrote the poet John Donne in the 17th Century, and the words ring no less true today as Pope Benedict XVI chose to quote them in his encyclical *Spe Salvi*. They were both referring to solidarity, which in the Catholic understanding means that we are all responsible for every other human being. Solidarity is both a moral virtue and a social principle which recognises that God, our Creator, has entrusted us to each other as brothers and sisters. Solidarity should extend between individuals, between different social groups and between the nations of the world.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, St Paul’s description of the body of Christ helps us to envision solidarity. Although each part of the body is different, they all make their unique contributions to the body as a whole for it to function properly and to its full capacity. “But God so adjusted the body...that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together, if one member is honoured, all rejoice together” (1 Corinthians 12). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that because of this bond and interdependence that we share, “the least of our acts done in charity redounds to the profit of all,” but also that “every sin harms this communion”.

Similarly in the global human family, though each of us is different, God willed that each one is needed by the other, even if some people have lost sight of that fact, especially in our extremely individualistic society today. Our inequalities or privileges should not be seen as an opportunity to exploit or oppress the weak and marginalised, but if we are blessed, whether materially or spiritually we should use our advantages to foster charity and generosity. Though everyone is different the church has always affirmed the equal dignity and rights of all human beings and we should act to reduce excessive social and economic inequalities, especially those caused by sinful tendencies such as greed.

In reference to material goods, the *Catechism* states that respect for human dignity requires temperance so as to moderate our desire and attachment to earthly goods, justice to render our neighbour what is his or her due and solidarity in keeping with the golden rule and our Lord’s generosity. Solidarity is not limited to material goods as it extends to spiritual ones as well. By opening up new horizons for spreading the spiritual goods, the church has also facilitated the spread of temporal goods into new areas.

Saint John Paul II said that solidarity “is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all” (*Solicitudo Rei Socialis*). He continued to say that “solidarity helps us to see the ‘other’ - whether a person, people or nation-not just as some kind of instrument, with a work capacity and physical strength to be exploited at low cost and then discarded when no longer useful, but as our ‘neighbour,’ ... to be made a sharer, on a par with ourselves, in the banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God.”

The number of canonised saints who lived solidarity are too numerous to name, but among them Saints Peter Claver, Maximilian Kolbe and Theresa of Calcutta stand out. Saint Peter Claver was a 17th Century Jesuit who dedicated his life to African slaves by bringing them the Gospel, both in word by evangelisation and deed by working to alleviate their suffering. Saint Maximilian Kolbe would selflessly share his meagre rations with other prisoners in Auschwitz and finally made the ultimate sacrifice by giving up his life to save another’s, as Christ called on us to do. Saint Theresa of Calcutta also embodied solidarity in her work among the poorest of the poor, especially the unwanted, the unloved, and the uncared for, whom she felt were entrusted to her care.

So how should we live in solidarity? Saint John Paul II, in *Solicitudo Rei Socialis*, recognised that structures of sin could only be conquered with the help of divine grace, which instills in us a commitment to the good of one’s neighbour with the readiness, in the gospel sense, to lose oneself for the sake of the other instead of exploiting him and to serve the other instead of oppressing him for one’s own advantage.

“Solidarity is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.”

Pope St John Paul II

Methodology

In his encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, Pope St John XXIII outlined what the methodology for catholic social teaching:

There are three stages which should normally be followed in the reduction of social principles into practice. First, one reviews the concrete situation; secondly, one forms a judgment on it in the light of these same principles; thirdly, one decides what in the circumstances can and should be done to implement these principles. These are the three stages that are usually expressed in the three terms: look, judge, act. #236

This methodology is known as the Cardijn methodology after the Belgian Cardinal Joseph Cardijn.

1 See

What is it about a particular situation that strikes us as unjust. What is the testimony of the people suffering through that situation

2. Judge

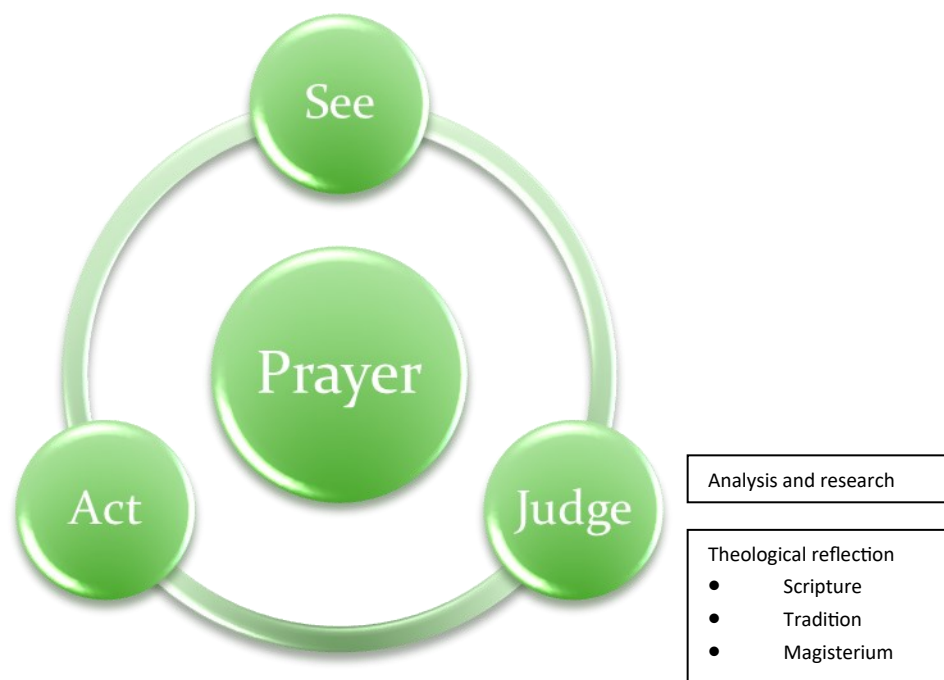
Discern is a more appropriate word to use than judge but it requires us to analyse the situation by substantial research and to reflect on it in light of theological and catholic social teaching principles mentioned previously.

3. Act

From your seeing and discernment, are you able to decide what action can be taken to address the root causes of the structural injustices you see? If you are uncertain what action to take, it may be necessary to conduct some additional research.

As with everything in the Christian life, prayer should be the centre and guiding force of the whole process.

This very brief summary is adopted from the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council Series Paper No. 70 *Reading the Signs of our Times: A basic introduction to Catholic Social Teaching*.



Key Catholic Social Teaching Documents

1891 Rerum Novarum – “Of New Things” – Leo XIII

The Condition of Labour examines working conditions in industrialised countries and insists on workers' rights. The Church, employers & workers should work together to build a just society.

1931 Quadragesimo Anno – “On the Fortieth Year” – Pius X

The Reconstruction of the Social Order at the time of major economic depression: QA criticises abuses of capitalism & communism. Unity between capital & labour. Ownership brings social responsibilities. Subsidiarity.

1961 Mater et Magistra – “Mother & Teacher” – Pope St John XXIII

Christianity & Social Progress: Updates earlier teaching and applies to agriculture and aid to developing countries, thus 'internationalising' CST. Role of laity in applying social teaching as an integral part of Christian life.

1963 Pacem in Terris – “Peace on Earth” – Pope St John XXIII

Peace on Earth: With the imminent threat of nuclear war this is a plea for peace based on the social order from a framework of rights and duties applying to individuals, public authorities and the world community.

1965 Gaudium et Spes – “The Joys and Hopes” Vatican II

The Church in the Modern World: Church's duty is discernment of the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel. Principles of cultural development and justice, enhancing human dignity and the common good. Work for peace.

1967 Populorum Progressio – “The Development of Peoples” Pope St Paul VI

The Development of Peoples Charter for development – ‘the new name for peace’: Deals with structural poverty, aid and trade. Limits put on profit motive and the right to private property. Christians to strive for international justice.

1971 Octogesima Adveniens – “On the Eightieth Year” – Pope St Paul VI

A Call to Action Rome doesn't necessarily have the answer: Need for local church to respond to specific situations. Urbanisation has brought new injustices. We are called to political action.

1971 Justitia in Mundo – “Justice in the World” – Synod

‘Justice is a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel...’ The Church must examine its conscience about its lifestyle and so witness to the Gospel. Importance of Education for Justice.

1975 Evangelii Nuntiandi – “Evangelisation in the Modern World”- Pope St Paul VI

Profound links between evangelization and development and liberation. Only the kingdom is absolute; everything else is relative. All levels of society are to be transformed by the power of the good news.

1981 Laborem Exercens – “On Human Work” – Pope St John Paul II

On Human Work For JP II work is the central social issue. Work increases human dignity. Priority of labour over capital. Rights of workers (especially women) and unions. Critique of capitalism as well as Marxism.

1987 Sollicitudo Rei Socialis – “The Social Concern of the Church” – Pope St John Paul II

Social Concern Updates Populorum Progressio with analysis of global development: North/South divide blamed on confrontation between capitalism and Marxism. Conversion from ‘Structures of sin’ towards solidarity and option for the poor.

1991 Centesimus Annus – “The One Hundredth Year” – Pope St John Paul II

One Hundred Years Review of CST and major events of the last century, constantly affirming human dignity and human rights, justice and peace. The fall of Marxism does not signify a victory for capitalism.

1995 Evangelium Vitae – “The Gospel of Life” – Pope St John Paul II

John Paul II reiterates Catholic teaching on the importance of protecting the sanctity of human life and dignity right from conception until natural death, paying particular attention to the growing threats against human life from abortion and euthanasia.

2009 Caritas in Veritate – “Charity in Truth” – Pope Benedict XVI

Charity in Truth Updates Populorum Progressio with a comprehensive review of development and some reflection on the economic crisis and business ethics. Provides a theological framework for CST.

2013 Evangelii Gaudium – “The Joy of the Gospel” – Pope Francis

The Pope speaks on numerous themes, including evangelization, peace, homiletics, social justice, the family, respect for creation, faith and politics, ecumenism, interreligious dialogue, and the role of women and of the laity in the Church.

2015 Laudato Si' – “Praised Be to You” – “On Care for Our Common Home” – Pope Francis

Laudato Si' is a letter to all people about our our global family and our common home, which encourages us to “acknowledge the appeal, immensity and urgency of the challenge we face.” It speaks to our need to enter into dialogue with each other, share our resources and be responsible stewards of creation.

2020 Fratelli Tutti – “On Fraternity and Social Friendship” – Pope Francis

Fratelli Tutti emphasizes that we are all brothers and sisters who are part of the same human family and calls for a love that transcends geographic boundaries and distance especially during the extremely difficult times of pandemic.