

The Strengths of Catholic Social Teaching

[Now] we consider three reasons why we use CST [Catholic Social Teaching] as a foundation for discussing Catholic responses to contemporary ethical challenges. The first reason is that CST is grounded in practical reality. CST does not arise from speculative theology or from technical theological arguments, but from the reality of people's lives. Pope Leo XIII wrote *On the Condition of Labor* in 1891 from the perspective of what was happening in Europe at the time, most notably the effects of the Industrial Revolution and the rise of Marxist socialism. Subsequent papal and bishops' conference documents have been similarly grounded in real life. John XXIII's *Peace on Earth* examined challenges to world peace within the context of the Cold War, Vatican II's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* aimed to update the Church in light of contemporary (1960s) society, and John Paul II's *On the Hundredth Anniversary* spoke to the emerging world reality following the fall of the Soviet Union. In more recent years, Pope Benedict XVI wrote *Charity in Truth*, in part, to offer a moral analysis of the near collapse of the world financial system in 2008. While always maintaining continuity with previous writings, these and other CST documents addressed issues specific to the authors' audiences. The authors were speaking in the "here and now" and sought to articulate the Church's response to important social issues as they actually existed. Similarly, the principles of CST do not exist in a vacuum. Although one can understand them abstractly (as they have been presented in this chapter), they only take on their true moral character when applied in real, concrete situations.

A second reason why we employ CST is that its principles apply to all people, not just Catholics. The reason these principles apply universally is that they can be understood both philosophically (through human reason) and theologically (through God's revelation). The principle of human dignity illustrates this point well. From a philosophical perspective, we humans maintain dignity because of our free will and our capacity to reason. We are the only animal that possesses these characteristics and thus we are the only earthly beings that can make moral choices. For these reasons, philosophers (among others) hold that humans possess an inherent dignity simply by virtue of the fact that we are persons. In fact, Article I of the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* explicitly states that because all humans "are endowed with reason and conscience," all human persons are "equal in dignity and rights."⁽²⁴⁾

Catholic theology certainly incorporates this philosophical perspective, but expands on it by maintaining that dignity is rooted in the fact that humans are created in the image and likeness of God. Being created in God's image and likeness is an honor bestowed on humans alone, an honor that demonstrates just how precious and valuable human life really is. Catholic theology also holds that we maintain an inherent dignity through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Through Christ, God chose to become human in order to teach us, heal us, and ultimately redeem us through his Passion and death. Christ, by deigning to become a human being and doing all that he did for us, demonstrates how profoundly significant human life really is.

The same philosophical-theological foundations are true with the other CST principles as well. Because each has both a philosophical and theological basis, they speak to, and are morally binding upon, all people no matter what their religious affiliation. It is precisely because of this reality that many post-Vatican II documents are addressed not only to Catholics, but to all people "of good will."

A third reason we focus on CST is that it does not tell people exactly how they should act in a particular situation. Notwithstanding its statements concerning reproductive ethics, the Church does not usually propose single, concrete teachings on social issues. This means that faithful Catholics, and non-Catholics, can disagree as to how the principles of CST should be applied in a specific situation.



The reason for this is that the Church recognizes three distinct “levels” in its social teachings, each of which demands a different level of assent. The highest level is that of universal moral principles, those that require the assent of, and are morally binding upon, all people. The next level is formal Church teaching, which is binding on Catholics only. The third level is the application of the universal principles to specific ethical situations, an application that involves “prudential judgments . . . that can change or which can be interpreted differently by people of good will.”(25)

While all this may seem confusing, in reality it is simpler than it sounds. The Church is saying that the principles of CST are morally binding on all people in a general sense, but they can be concretely applied in different ways. For example, all people are morally bound to uphold the principle of human dignity, but how do we apply this principle in terms of a specific issue such as welfare reform? Since the late 1990s, many states have revised their welfare programs by limiting the time recipients can receive benefits, as well as requiring them to get a job or start a job-training program. Some argue that welfare reform violates the principle of human dignity because it removes necessary services such as food stamps, housing subsidies, and medical care from needy women and children. Others counter by asking how dignity is fostered when recipients receive benefits without being required to do anything in return, or without being offered any incentive to improve their condition in life. We will not be examining the morality of welfare reform in this text; we cite this issue—which remains an open question for the Church—simply as an example of how the principles of CST offer a moral framework within which specific policy decisions must be made, but without dictating exactly how one should act. People “of good will” can and do apply the principle of human dignity differently with respect to welfare reform, and they often come up with different, but moral, solutions. The Church recognizes that moral certainty is much easier to achieve at a general level than when it comes to specifics. As such, in the areas of economics, politics, and the other social sciences, it yields the practical application of its principles to the expertise of those working in the field. (26)

Endnotes

24. See Article I of the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948). In its introduction (Preamble), the *Declaration* also states, “Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.”
25. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response*, in *Catholic Social Thought*, no. 10. See also *Economic Justice for All*, nos. 134–35.
26. The U.S. bishops make this point clear in *Economic Justice for All*: “In our letter, we write as pastors, not public officials. We speak as moral teachers, not economic technicians. We seek not to make some political or ideological point but to lift up the human and ethical dimensions of economic life, aspects too often neglected in public discussion” (no. 7). For further discussion on the gradations of authority in Catholic Social Teaching, see Richard Gaillardetz, “The Ecclesial Foundations of Modern Catholic Social Teaching” in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, ed. Kenneth Himes et al. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 89–90.

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