

FOUR KEY PRINCIPLES OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

KEY PRINCIPLES

Principles for reflection are one of the elements of Catholic Social Teaching. The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, in its Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, and the Congregation for Catholic Education in its Guidelines for the Study and Teaching of Catholic Social Doctrine in the Formation of Priests, both identify just four principles of Catholic Social Teaching that are valid always and everywhere.

They are:

- Human dignity,
- The common good,
- Subsidiarity, and
- Solidarity.

These four are not the only principles of Catholic Social Teaching, but they are the most important. They are sometimes called permanent or perennial principles, and they sum up the core of Catholic Social Teaching. These four key principles are dynamically interrelated and a range of other principles and criteria can be derived from them. This is why you will find that various writers may present different lists of principles, or major lessons, of Catholic Social Teaching.

Let us examine each of these principles in turn.

HUMAN DIGNITY

The principle of the dignity of the human person reminds us that every human being is made in the image and likeness of God and has an inalienable and transcendent human dignity which gives rise to human rights. It is the bedrock of all Catholic social ethics.

It follows that people are always more important than things. People must never be treated as a means or an instrument to be used for the benefit of another.

Every human person is equal in dignity and rights. Every human community, every race and culture is equal in dignity and rights. The human family is one because we are all children of the one God. This aspect of human dignity is sometimes referred to as the principle of the unity of the human family.

The *Catechism* explains it this way:

“Created in the image and likeness of the one God and equally endowed with rational souls, all persons have the same nature and the same origin. Redeemed by the sacrifice of Christ, all are called to participate in the same divine beatitude: all therefore enjoy an equal dignity.”

Catechism of the Catholic Church, n 1934

THE COMMON GOOD

The principle of the common good reminds us that we are all really responsible for each other – we are our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers - and must work for social conditions which ensure that every person and every group in society is able to meet their needs and realize their potential.

It follows that every group in society must take into account the rights and aspirations of other groups, and the well being of the whole human family.

Related to this is the principle of the universal destination of goods - God intended the goods of creation for the use of all, and so everyone has a right to access the goods of creation to meet their needs.

Writing in 1965, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council already understood the relevance of this principle not only to small communities or nations, but the whole international community:

“Every day human interdependence grows more tightly drawn and spreads by degrees over the whole world. As a result the common good, that is, the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment, today takes on an

increasingly universal complexion and consequently involves rights and duties with respect to the whole human race. Every social group must take account of the needs and legitimate aspirations of other groups, and even of the entire human family.”

Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n 26

SUBSIDIARITY

The principle of subsidiarity concerns how participation and decision making should be organized.

Responsibility should be kept as close as possible to the grassroots. The people or groups most directly affected by a decision or policy should have a key decision making role in it.

More encompassing groups should only intervene to support smaller, more local groups in case of need, and where this is necessary in order to coordinate their activities with the activities of other groups in order to promote the common good. It is from this aspect of help offered by larger to smaller groups that the term subsidiarity (from the Latin *subsidium* for help or assistance) comes.

This is perhaps the most widely misunderstood of the four key principles. The Pontifical Council for Justice & Peace explains it in this way:

“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. In this way, intermediate social entities can properly perform the functions that fall to them without being required to hand them over unjustly to other social entities of a higher level, by which they would end up being absorbed and substituted, in the end seeing themselves denied their dignity and essential place.”

Pontifical Council for Justice & Peace
*Compendium of the Social Doctrine
of the Church*, n 186

SOLIDARITY

Human beings are social by nature. We cannot survive without others and can only grow and achieve our potential in relationship with others.

We are made in the likeness of a Trinitarian God – a community of persons in perfect relationship. God is community and makes community. It follows that our salvation is bound up with that of each other.

Solidarity can also be understood as a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good.

Pope John Paul II frequently stressed the virtue of solidarity:

“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, a helper (cf Gn 2:18-20), to be a sharer, on a par with ourselves, in the banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God.”

John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, n 39

REFLECTING WITH THE PRINCIPLES

One simple way of reflecting on an issue or situation is to ask if these four principles are being honoured or disrespected.

FOR REFLECTION

- Do you think that these principles hold true in all societies, times and places? Why / why not?
- Share an experience in which one or more of these principles was engaged. How did it feel when these principles were respected? And when they were not?

REFERENCES:

- Catechism of the Catholic Church,
<http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/INDEX.HTM>
Congregation for Catholic Education, *Guidelines for the Study and Teaching of Catholic Social Doctrine in the Formation of Priests*, St Paul’s, 1989.
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