

Catholic Social Teaching

Scripture Guide



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INTRODUCTION

Catholic social teaching has been called the Church’s “best kept secret.”

Yet, from the beginning of time, God’s call to justice has been clear. The Law and the Prophets both preserve a deep tradition of social justice in ancient Israel. Jesus himself proclaimed and embodied a society ruled by justice and charity—the Reign of God. For over one hundred years, the Church has contributed to this tradition in papal and episcopal writings. Finally, we see the social teachings of the Church written throughout history in the lives of holy men and women.

So what is Catholic Social Teaching?

Catholic Social Teaching

Catholic social teaching (CST) is deeply rooted in the Catholic tradition. Pope John Paul II wrote, “The Church’s social teaching finds its source in Sacred Scripture, beginning with the Book of Genesis and especially in the Gospel and the writings of the Apostles. From the beginning, it was part of the Church’s teaching. . . [It was] developed by the teaching of the Popes on the modern “social question,” beginning with the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum*.”¹

Catholic Social Teaching

Catholic social teaching is social. Pope Benedict XVI wrote, “No man is an island, entire of itself. Our lives are involved with one another, through innumerable interactions they are linked together. No one lives alone. No one sins alone. No one is saved alone. The lives of others continually spill over into mine: in what I think, say, do and achieve. And conversely, my life spills over into that of others: for better and for worse.”²

Catholic Social Teaching

Catholic social teaching is an expression of the Church’s ministry of teaching. The Bishops call Catholic social teaching a “constitutive” part of the Church’s mission to the world. It is not only the prerogative of the institutional church, but of the entire community.³ “It is the expression of the way that the Church understands society and of her position regarding social structures and changes. The whole of the Church community—priests, religious, and laity—participates in the formulation of this social doctrine.”⁴

Hope in Action

As Catholics, we are called to be witnesses to our faith in the way we live our lives. Pope Benedict XVI calls this hope in action. “On the one hand, our actions engender hope for us and for others; but at the same time, it is the great hope based upon God’s promises that gives us courage and directs our action in good times and bad.”⁵ As Catholics, our hope is grounded in the resurrection of Christ and the promises of God. Catholic Social Teaching describes how we put that hope into action in our world.



Catholic Social Teaching

Scripture Guide



JUSTICE AND CHARITY

Catholic social teaching isn't only about dropping your spare change into a bucket at Christmas. Jesus calls us to a radically different kind of discipleship—a life that is daily marked by care and concern for the poor and for one another. In his gospel, the evangelist Mark tells this story.

[Jesus] sat down opposite the treasury and observed how the crowd put money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow also came and put in two small coins worth a few cents. Calling his disciples to himself, he said to them, “Amen, I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the other contributors to the treasury. For they have all contributed from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has contributed all she had, her whole livelihood.”⁶

Jesus tells us that the widow didn't simply give what was left over after she had bought everything she needed for the week. Instead, she sacrificed her own needs so that she could give to the needs of others. Caring for one another isn't something relegated to the very rich. We are all called to contribute to the needs of our brothers and sisters. Jesus reminds us that generosity and charity are essential to the Christian life.

This parable, which follows directly from Jesus' comment about Israel's religious leaders, speaks to us on another level, as well:

Jesus said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to go around in long robes and accept greetings in the marketplaces, seats of honor in synagogues, and places of honor at banquets. They devour the houses of widows and, as a pretext, recite lengthy prayers. They will receive a very severe condemnation.”⁷

The temple treasury was intended to support the work of the priests and scribes at the temple. Everyone was expected to contribute so that the priests and scribes could afford to eat and live. Jesus' comment tells us that the scribes were doing much more than simply living. They wore fancy clothes, attended lavish parties and were getting rich off the offerings of the people. The rich contributed generously to the temple treasury—giving out of their surplus. And yet, the scribes demanded that even a poor widow give to the treasury. The widow put in all the money she had to live on, “her whole livelihood.” Thus, Jesus is not simply commending the widow for her self-sacrificing generosity, but commenting on the unjust systems that would demand a poor widow give her life so that others could live extravagantly.

When we hear this story on the one hand, we are humbled by the widow's incredible generosity. Her example calls us all to a life of giving and charity. On the other hand, we are angered by a social system that would demand a poor woman give her life so that others may live as they please. The injustice of the situation cries out to us and calls us to resist systems that perpetuate oppression and poverty. In his recent encyclical, *Charity in Truth (Caritas in Veritate)*, Pope Benedict XVI states, “If we love others with charity, then first of all we are just towards them. Not only is justice not extraneous to charity, not only is it not an alternative or parallel path to charity; justice is inseparable from charity, and intrinsic to it. Justice is the primary way of charity.”⁸



Catholic Social Teaching *Scripture Guide*



Two Feet of Social Justice



Charity and justice have been called the two feet of Catholic social teaching. Charity meets the immediate needs of persons and families. It treats the symptoms of social problems. Charity calls forth a generous response from individuals and responds to particular situations. Justice changes social structures that attack human dignity, oppress people, and contribute to poverty. It focuses on the rights of people, addresses underlying social causes, and works for long term social change. Pope Benedict XVI expresses it in this way, “The church cannot neglect the service of charity anymore than she can neglect the sacraments and the word. Charity must animate the entire lives of the lay faithful and therefore also their political activity, lived as ‘social charity.’”⁹

Using this Guide

This guide is an adaptation of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development’s *Scripture Guide*. It was created to deepen the understanding of the scriptural foundations of Catholic social teaching. The scripture passages are organized around the seven themes of Catholic social teaching. Some passages are short, just a few verses. Others are longer—stories or parables—that embody the social teachings. These are only a few suggestions, although it is likely the reader will recall many more examples of these themes in scripture. Some settings where this resource may be particularly useful include, but are not limited to, small faith-sharing groups, the Rite of Christian Initiation for adults, Journey to Justice retreats, service or immersion reflections, campus ministry activities, and courses that address issues of poverty and injustice.

¹ John Paul II. *On Human Work*, 3.

² Benedict XVI. *Spe Salve*, 48.

³ World Synod of Catholic Bishops. *Justice in the World*, 6.

⁴ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. *Compendium of the social doctrine of the church*, 34-35.

⁵ Benedict XVI. *Spe Salve*, 35.

⁶ Mark 12:41-44

⁷ Mark 12:38-40

⁸ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 6.



LIFE AND DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

All people are created in the image of God and thus, all human life, from conception to natural death, is sacred. Through the mystery of Christ, we become children of the Father and temples of the Holy Spirit. God's love for all is the foundation of human dignity. The basic dignity that each person possesses comes from God; therefore all forms of discrimination are always wrong. People take precedence over things and structures. Systems are meant to serve people. And people are meant to serve and care for one another. Scripture tells us repeatedly of God's love for us. We are called to see every person through the eyes of God and to love them because God loved them (and us) first.

Genesis 1:26-31 God created man and woman in his image.

Deuteronomy 10:17-19 God loves the orphan, the widow, and the stranger. You should too.

Proverbs 22:2 The Lord is the maker of both rich and poor.

Luke 10:25-37 The good Samaritan recognized the dignity in the other and cared for his life.

John 4:1-42 Jesus broke with societal and religious customs to honor the dignity of the Samaritan woman.

Romans 12: 9-18 Love one another, contribute to the needs of others, live peaceably with all.

1 Corinthians 3:16 You are holy, for you are God's temple and God dwells in you.

Galatians 3:27-28 All Christians are one in Christ Jesus.

James 2:1-8 Honor the poor.

1 John 3: 1-2 See what love the Father has for us, that we should be called Children of God.

1 John 4:7-12 Let us love one another because love is from God.

Catholic Social Teaching

Scripture Guide



CALL TO FAMILY, COMMUNITY, AND PARTICIPATION

Our faith is rooted in the mystery of the Trinity: the divine relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God's own essence is a communion of persons. Created in God's image, we too are social creatures. We are called to live this Trinitarian reality of self-giving love. It is in the community that we are shaped and formed. It is through the community that the dignity of every individual is realized. And it is out of the community that we are sent to love and serve the world. We find in Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, "The more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbors, the more effectively we love them. Every Christian is called to practice this charity...This is the institutional path - we might also call it the political path - of charity, no less excellent and effective than the kind of charity which encounters the neighbour directly."¹

Genesis 4:8-15 I am my brother's and sister's keeper.

Leviticus 25:23-43 What you own belongs to the Lord and is given for the good of all.

Jeremiah 7:5-7 If you act justly with one another, God will dwell in the land.

Micah 6:6-8 Act justly, love kindness, walk humbly with God.

John 15:12-17 This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you.

Acts 2:43-47; Life among the believers.

Romans 12:4-8 We are one body, individually members one of another.

Hebrews 10:24-25 Rouse one another to love and good works.

1 Peter 4:8-11 Serve one another with the gifts you have received.

1 John 3:16-18 We ought to lay down our lives for one another.

1 John 4:19-21 Those who love God must love their brothers and sisters.

¹Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 29.



RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

We are created in God's image. As such, every person has the right to life. They also have a right to those things which preserve their dignity, or quality of life: food, shelter, health care, education, and meaningful employment. Corresponding to these rights are responsibilities. Because we are created in the image of the Triune God, we must respect the rights of others and care for others according to God's commandments and example.

Leviticus 19:9-10 A portion of the harvest is set aside for the poor and the stranger.

Ruth 2:2-23 Boaz cares for Ruth, a widow and a foreigner, giving her far more than the law requires.

Tobit 4:5-11 Give from what you have received and do not turn away from the poor.

Isaiah 1:16-17 Seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

Jeremiah 22: 13-16 A legitimate government upholds the rights of the poor and vulnerable.

Jeremiah 29:4-7 Seek the welfare of the city, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Matthew 25: 31-46 Just as you did it to the least of these, you did it to me.

Luke 16:19-31 The rich man has a responsibility to care for Lazarus.

Acts 4:32-35 There was not a needy person among them.

2 Corinthians 9:6-15 God's gifts are given to be shared.

James 2:14-18 Faith without works is dead.



OPTION FOR AND WITH THE POOR

The morality of society is judged by how well our most vulnerable members are faring. Just as a parent gives more care and resources to a sick child, in order that the child might become healthy, so we as Christians are called to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first. Those with the greatest need require the greatest response. In a society marked by the deepening divide between rich and poor, the gospel calls us to radical and self-giving love—to meet the needs of the poor and vulnerable and to oppose the structures that perpetuate poverty and abuse the vulnerable.

Exodus 22:20-26 You shall not oppress the poor or vulnerable. God will hear their cry.

Job 34:20 The Lord hears the cry of the poor.

Proverbs 31:8-9 Speak out in defense of the poor.

Sirach 4:1-10 Don't delay giving to those in need.

Isaiah 25:4-5 God is a refuge for the poor.

Isaiah 58:5-7 True worship is to work for justice and care for the poor and oppressed.

Luke 4:16-21 Jesus proclaims his mission: to bring good news to the poor and oppressed.

Luke 6:20-23 Blessed are the poor, theirs is the kingdom of God.

1 John 3:17-18 How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's good and sees one in need and refuses to help?



DIGNITY OF WORK AND THE RIGHTS OF WORKERS

Work is about more than making a living; it is a form of participation in the creative work of God. People have a right to decent, meaningful work and fair wages. Workers have the right to organize and join unions, own private property, and to economic initiative. Work should promote the dignity of the worker. Our economy exists to serve people, not vice versa. Our faith calls us to demand justice for all workers and a just economy that serves the life and dignity of all. Likewise, our work contributes to the good life of our brothers and sisters.

Genesis 2:1-3 God rests on the seventh day.

Deuteronomy 5:13-15 The Sabbath is for everyone—all are allowed to rest from their work.

Deuteronomy 14:28-29 The Lord blesses our work so that we may share its fruits with others.

Deuteronomy 24:14-15 Do not withhold wages from your workers, for their livelihood depends on them.

Sirach 34:20-22 To deprive an employee of wages is to commit murder.

Isaiah 58:3-7 To observe religious practices, but oppress your workers is false worship.

Jeremiah 22:13 Woe to him who treats his workers unjustly.

Matthew 20:1-16 All workers should be paid a just and living wage.

Mark 2:27 The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath.

Luke 3:10-14 Practice integrity in your work.

Luke 12:13-21 One's worth is not determined by an abundance of possessions.

James 5:1-6 Those who become rich by abusing their workers have sinned against God.



SOLIDARITY

We are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic and ideological differences. We are our brother's and sister's keeper. As Christians, we are as St. Paul reminds us, one body. Love of neighbor has global dimensions in our rapidly shrinking world. At the core of solidarity is the pursuit of justice and peace. Peace is more than a lack of conflict. Peace, or in Hebrew Shalom, means literally "right relationship." The gospel calls us to be peacemakers: that we live in right relationship with others, ourselves, and God. Pope Paul VI taught, "If you want peace, work for justice." Our love for our entire human family demands that we work for justice and for peace, that we promote God's shalom in our world.

Genesis 12:1-3 God blessed Israel so that all nations would be blessed through it.

Psalms 72 Living in right relationship with others brings peace.

Psalms 122 Peace be with you! For the sake of the Lord, I will seek your good.

Zachariah 8:16 These are the things you should do: Speak truth, judge well, make peace.

Matthew 5:9 Blessed are the peacemakers, they will be called children of God.

Matthew 5:21-24 Be reconciled to one another before coming to the altar.

Romans 13:8-10 Living rightly means to love one another.

1 Corinthians 12:12-26 If one member suffers, all suffer. If one member is honored, all rejoice.

Colossians 3:9-17 Above all, clothe yourself with love and let the peace of Christ reign in your hearts.



CARE FOR GOD'S CREATION

In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth and set humans as his stewards to care for his creation. Care for God's creation was God's fruitful commandment to humanity and a fundamental requirement of our faith. Moreover, creation witnesses to God's existence. God reveals himself in creation and we see in nature the fingerprints of God. Creation is always an object of praise in Israel's prayer and the prayers of the early Christians. We are called to honor and protect our planet and its people—to live in relationship with all of God's creation. At the dawn of creation, God commanded us not only to be fruitful and multiply, but also to use for his good creation.

Genesis 1:1-31 God made the heavens and the earth and it was good.

Genesis 2:15 Humans are commanded to care for God's creation.

Leviticus 25:1-7 The land itself must be given a rest and not abused.

Deuteronomy 10:14 All of heaven and earth belong to the Lord.

Psalms 24:1-2 All the earth is the Lord's.

Daniel 3:56-82 Creation proclaims the glory of God.

Matthew 6:25-34 God loves and cares for all of creation.

Romans 1:20 Creation reveals the nature of God.

1 Corinthians 10:26 Creation and all created things are inherently good because they are of the Lord.



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