

# Catholic Social Teaching

*Guidance for a faithful life*

*“The theological dimension is needed both for interpreting and for solving present day problems in society.”*

— St. John Paul II  
*Centesimus Annus*, 1991

**As** WE SEEK to live our life faithfully, how do we maneuver through the landmines of ethical and moral decisions of our day? In any given situation, the decisions we make and the actions we take can be driven by a complex array of experiences, hopes, and fears. What tools do we use to ensure we are living faithfully?

As Catholic Christians, most people are familiar with the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes. There is another lesser known treasury of principles that speak to our lives today. Sometimes called the best kept secret of our faith, Catholic Social Teaching proposes principles for reflection, provides criteria for judgment, and offers guidelines for action.

Catholic Social Teaching is a way of reflecting on the world today. It is not a fixed block of doctrine or ideology, but the result of prayerful reflection on the complex realities of human existence. Animated by the Gospel, it provides core principles that can address the demands of the time.

BY JANICE ANDERSEN

"Giving Shelter to the Homeless and Stranger," by Ade Bethune  
 Photo courtesy Archives and Special Collections, St. Catherine  
 University, Saint Paul, Minnesota, USA.



## READING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

The conviction underlying Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is the fundamental belief that God is at work in human history. God is engaged and present — with us today as we work and play, as we are hurt and heal. God invites all people to participate in this work — fashioning each person with unique gifts and abilities to join in building God's kingdom of peace and love.

Perceiving and discerning God's presence and invitation in today's events is often referred to as "reading the signs of the times." We are called to recognize each moment as an ongoing revelation of God's love. The Second Vatican Council states that the Church has "the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in light of the Gospel" (The Church in the Modern World #4).

To be faithful to this call, we are challenged to pray diligently and to live with eyes wide open to the realities of our day — to see the joy and gifts of our community, as well as the struggles and oppression experienced by our brothers and sisters. We are to ground ourselves in prayer, pay attention, and engage.

There have been key times in history that have compelled Church leaders to speak boldly, prophetically, and directly about conditions in our society. Throughout modern history, Church leaders reject the idea that the Church — the people of God — have a marginal role in society. Rather, they recognized that by its very mission, the Church has a unique responsibility for shaping values and institutions in the world. Pope Francis exercised this responsibility recently, speaking of the care for creation and the plight of immigrants.

Modern Catholic Social Teaching begins with Pope Leo XIII, as he wrestled with effects of the industrial revolution on lives of people throughout the world. Speaking

directly to the pervasive injustices experienced by working people, including women and children — as well as the extreme disparity between rich and poor — Pope Leo XIII wrote an encyclical to advocate for the rights of workers. He introduced the just wage theory, suggesting wages must realistically support the basic needs of the individual (*Rerum Novarum* – The Condition of Labor, 1891).

## CORE PRINCIPLES

**Human Dignity:** The most basic, fundamental principle of Catholic Social Teaching is the deep belief that every human person is sacred and has dignity. Made in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26, 27), each person carries transcendent worth and value simply because the person exists. Their human dignity is an essential part of each person — an intrinsic quality that cannot be taken away regardless of behavior or legal mandate.

This deep understanding of human dignity is the foundation of morality and the cornerstone for all Catholic Social Teaching. If we embrace this belief, we are challenged to look critically at the issues of our day. How do our language and actions live this out, individually and collectively? What are the basic rights to ensure dignity is realized? Human dignity becomes the standard by which the political, societal, and economic structures are to be judged.

**Option for the Poor and Vulnerable:** If we take seriously a commitment to transform society into a place where human rights and dignity of all are upheld, we are faced with the option or choice to support and protect the most vulnerable and poor among us. Individually and collectively, we are called to see the realities of those who are marginalized and downtrodden. It is for these people we are called to advocate and support. We find ourselves compelled

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*“The transformation of the world is a  
fundamental requirement of our time...”*

— *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, #55*

to see, understand, and resist any injustice, oppression, or exploitation of people in our communities.

We can see God’s actions of care for those who are poor, suffering, or marginalized throughout scripture. This is a challenging principle with theological, social, political, and economic dimensions. It can have strong implications for our personal lives, as well as for the organization of society.

**Common Good:** As we seek to build a community of love and peace, our faith calls us to a radical commitment to one another. The human person is social by nature and needs relationships with others to thrive. CST instructs us to see that the good of each human person is intimately related to the good of the whole community. It rejects the principle of “the greatest good for the greatest number,” as well as the stance of individualism. The rights of one group cannot be set aside for the convenience of the majority. As we prayerfully reflect on how this principle intersects with issues in our world today, there are many personal and institutional implications.

**Primacy of Love:** Reason was the primary organizing force in much of the Church’s early social teaching. In more recent times, however, Catholic Social Teaching has been shaped by the primacy of love. Love is at the heart of all interpretations, actions, desires, and hopes. Martin Luther King Jr. offers, “Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.”

The issues of our day are challenging and controversial. They can disturb us and make us uncomfortable. It is clear — as we engage, we will have differences. Catholic Social Teaching emphasizes that if love is the motivation, even as we disagree we can learn from one another. Especially when there is tension, we are called to engage in love, in patience, and to trust in the ultimate goodness of the other.

Rooted in love, the principles of CST broaden to include solidarity, care for creation, and promotion of peace. What is God inviting us to today? Let us live with eyes wide open to build a just and compassionate community. ✚

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**ADE BETHUNE:  
WORLD-RENOWNED LITURGICAL ARTIST  
AND SOCIAL ACTIVIST  
(1914–2002)**

Ade Bethune was one of the women pioneers of the liturgical renewal and a prolific artist. Many of Bethune’s works were dedicated to liturgy, biblical scenes, and to the Catholic Worker Movement.

She was born in Belgium and emigrated to the United States with her family in 1928. As a young art student in 1930s New York, Bethune was mentored by Dorothy Day, Peter Maurin and others of the Catholic Worker movement, as well as Arthur Graham Carey and John Howard Benson. Her early works reflect her observations and sympathies toward the poor and disadvantaged people. Her works were often published in *The Catholic Worker*; one of her drawings became its masthead in 1935 and remains so today.

Bethune was especially talented at drawings that depict Biblical scenes and at drawing saints. The people in her drawings tend to be ordinary, working-class people dressed in the common clothes of the present day. They perform everyday chores and often are shown in what she called “acts of mercy,” such as nursing the sick, feeding the hungry, and housing the homeless.

She attended the National Academy of Design in New York and is the recipient of numerous awards and honorary degrees. Bethune’s archives are located at St. Catherine University in Saint Paul, MN; images are from their Ade Bethune Collection.