



CATHOLIC
Social Justice
TEACHINGS:
A PRIMER

By Father Larry Lynn

Nihil Obstat

Reverend Father Richard Au, STL

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Introduction

*“The Church sees in men and women,
in every person,
the living image of God himself”.¹*

It is my hope that this primer on Catholic Social Justice Teachings will help parishioners to understand the truths of our faith and lead us to a better knowledge of why Catholics are called to behave in the world in a manner that is so different from and at odds with, the secular worldview. When we are confronted with the secular point of view, this knowledge will help develop a strong sense of the Catholic ethos, enabling us to stand up with confidence for what is true. You will see that our Catholicity comes from a deep-seated understanding of human anthropology. It is not based on which way the wind blows.

The Church teaches that there are four pillars of Catholic Social teachings: Dignity of the Human Person, Solidarity, Subsidiarity and the Common Good.

The Church’s opposition to certain practices that our modern society deems normal or even good, is based on these fundamental pillars of Catholic teaching. The governments say people have a “right” to abortion or that our medical system should promote and, with our tax dollars, use doctors and nurses to kill innocent human life through euthanasia.

It is my hope that, in reading this document, one might begin to see how those acts of taking innocent human life are always intrinsically and morally wrong.

Obviously, in a format such as this, we can barely scratch the surface of how these concepts operate through individual persons, the family, the parish, the Church and the greater society. It is a start, though, and I encourage you to seek more deeply the truth of Jesus’ teachings.

Peace,
Father Larry

¹ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, para. 105, p. 49*

Dignity

What is the one thing that all human beings possess equally, and which cannot be taken from them? Of course, it is the dignity of every human person.

Dignity! It's the first of the four pillars of Catholic social doctrine, and with good reason.



"The dignity of the human person is rooted in his creation, in the image and likeness of God, therefore all humans receive an incomparable and inalienable dignity from God himself. This means that each human individual possesses the dignity of a person, who is not just something, but someone, a someone who is capable of self-knowledge, of self-possession and of freely giving himself and entering into communion with other persons."²



Human dignity is not the measure of some list of external factors, attributes, or abilities. It is not earned; it is not dependent on one's abilities. It is not surrendered, nor is it lost by the deterioration of physical, psychological, or cognitive abilities. The severely impaired hospice patient lying in a coma has no less dignity than a superstar athlete at the top of her game. Human dignity is not conditioned on anything that we can do, or fail to do, or lose the ability to do.

The human person has the unique ability to make abstractions about himself, has the capacity to wonder, to think about tomorrow, to reach for the stars, literally.

*"I often looked up at the sky and asked myself the question - what is the stars, what is the stars?"*³

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) 357*

³ *Juno and the Paycock, (Sean O'Casey 1924)*

Dignity

We are made to wonder, and we're made to search for truth and to seek the right order for our lives. We find that order when we search for the end and the purpose to which all creation is ordered.

"Creation, including the human person, is properly ordered when, and only when, it is oriented toward God."⁴

And yet we can see all around us massive dismissal of human dignity by society at large. People with limited imaginations believe that the child growing in the womb of its mother is not really human. They dismiss the dignity of that person in the womb because an embryo or a fetus, or a child, has no power. They believe dignity depends on some attribute or another, like size, viability, ability to communicate or have some other sign of usefulness. The entire euthanasia industry in Canada comes down to the usefulness of a person compared to the cost effectiveness of caring for someone deemed "not useful".

This lack of imagination and lack of right thinking has huge implications for all of us: for individuals, for families, for nations, for humanity itself. For ignoring the dignity of the human person at the level we do, is catastrophic.



So, please look into this word 'DIGNITY', walk all around it, size it up, find its meaning, have discussions about it. It's an important word.

This isn't only about abortion and euthanasia. It's about the dignity of all throughout life. It's about the many ways we lose or sell our dignity by participation in pornography, prostitution, addictions of all kinds, hatred, and any activities that diminish our humanity. It has been said, "The saddest thing in the world is not poverty; it is loss of dignity." Perhaps, understanding that, might compel us to stand for and uphold the dignity of every person on earth.

⁴ *Citizens Yet Strangers: Living Authentically Catholic in a Divided America, Our Sunday Visitor, Huntingdon, Indiana, Kenneth Craycraft, p51*

Solidarity

In dignity, all people are equal, no matter what attributes, abilities, assets or skills they may have, or circumstances they may be in, we are all called to respect the dignity of the other.

This brings us to **solidarity**.

In his book, *Citizens Yet Strangers*, Kenneth Craycraft, takes us on a journey to the foundational roots of the virtue of solidarity. And that lands us squarely in Genesis 1:27, *"God created man in his image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."*

Here we find the first human community and we are confronted by the fact that *"the human person shares in the essential social nature of the Triune God: the eternal fellowship of love among Father, Son and Holy Spirit."*⁵

This means that **we humans share certain essential attributes with God, including his social nature. The Triune God is a community!** It would be unimaginable for us to think that the Persons of the Trinity could be in tension with one another or in disagreement with one of the other Persons. It is impossible.



Therefore, "Solidarity is an intrinsic quality of the Triune God."⁶

Made in his image, the human person participates in that solidarity. **It is in fact, our model for solidarity.**

Another aspect of this solidarity shows up in chapter 2 of Genesis. We find that man is not meant to be alone, and the man receives a

⁵ CYS, Craycraft, p 78.

⁶ Ibid, p. 79

Solidarity

partner who “...is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” This tells us that one is not complete without the other and the other is only known in reference to the one. Professor Craycraft says, “...the **humans are both dependent upon and known in relation to one another**...This description of **the essential social nature of the human person** is the basis for the Church’s understanding of solidarity.”⁷

As social beings, we are called to recognize each other’s intrinsic worth and know that we are interdependent, that is, we are dependent on each other.

This all falls apart in Chapter 3 of Genesis. “There we find a rupture of the solidarity for which we are all created. The alienation of the man and the woman is not their natural state but their fallen state.”⁸



This is precisely the reason the Word was made flesh. **Christ came to help us to work toward the restoration of the solidarity of human beings.**

St. John–Paul II, who knew a thing or two about Solidarity, writes in his encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, solidarity is “not a feeling of vague compassion...it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say the good of all... **because WE ARE ALL REALLY RESPONSIBLE FOR ALL.**”⁹

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 79, 80

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 80

⁹ *JPII, Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*

Subsidiarity

As we have seen, **Imago Dei** is important in any understanding of Catholic Social Teaching because from the idea that we are made in the image of God, flows all the main themes on which the teaching is based. *The Dignity of the Human Person* is the first great theme. As Catholics, we recognize the dignity of all people because we see the reflection of God in every person and that becomes the measure of how we treat them. It is no doubt why, after loving God, Jesus' greatest commandment is to "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*" (*Mark 12:32*). Loving our neighbor is fundamental to building a just society and requires solidarity. Solidarity describes the essential social nature of the human person in which we are called to be supportive of the "other" or our neighbor whoever that may be.

*"It is impossible to promote the dignity of the human person without showing concern for the family, groups, associations, local territorial realities, in short, all the economic, social, cultural, sports-oriented, recreational, professional and political expressions to which people spontaneously give life and which make it possible for them to achieve effective social growth."*¹⁰

Under the Principle of Subsidiarity, no higher level of organization has the right to take over the responsibilities that are due to the lower level of organization, i.e. the federal government cannot usurp the duties and responsibilities of the provincial government. The public school system has no right to interfere with the parenting of children.



¹⁰ CCC 1882

Subsidiarity

The most complete and succinct definition of subsidiarity I have found is given by Pope John Paul II (who is paraphrasing Pius XI from *Quadragesima Anno*). In subsidiarity:



"a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to coordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good."¹¹

In other words, smaller units, such as the family, must not be deprived of the possibility and the means for realizing that of which they are capable, like raising children. Larger units, such as the different levels of government, must restrict their activities to spheres which surpass the powers and abilities of the smaller units, such as providing schools, infrastructure, roads, commerce etc.

Beginning with the family then, subsidiarity offers a way for this kind of network of associations to most efficiently interact and support each other. It strengthens the social fabric and constitutes the basis of true community of persons.

¹¹ (John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, Encyclical Letter, 1991, 48.)

The Common Good

I have been taking you on a little journey through the basic principles of Catholic Social Justice teaching because these teachings are the blueprint for how human beings are made to behave toward one another. Pope Leo XIII, writing about these principles with some modicum of optimism, asks:

*“Were these precepts carefully obeyed and followed out, would they not be sufficient of themselves to keep under all strife and all its causes?”*¹²

All the teachings are rooted in the fact that we are made in the image and likeness of God – **Imago Dei**. Believing that means we must see God in each other and see each other as children of God. Each person who ever lived, even if they only lived for a millisecond after conception or to 120 years old, no matter their circumstances, has inherent **Dignity** because – Imago Dei.

Solidarity means we are made for relationship with God and with our fellow humans; to live in families, in community and to know, as St. John-Paul II said *“We are all really responsible for all.”*



The purpose of **Subsidiarity** is to protect the moral development of the human person; to allow the moral space a person needs to exercise his own moral judgement and action. Its default position is that small and local is better than large and remote.

And all these principles, when enacted honestly, benefit the **Common Good**.



*“Perhaps the best way to define the common good is as a state of affairs in which dignity, solidarity, and subsidiarity are acknowledged and achieved.”*¹³

The Catechism describes the common good as *“the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or individuals to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.”*¹⁴

¹² Pope Leo XIII *Rerum Navarum* /20, May 15, 1891

¹³ CYS, p.92

¹⁴ CCC1906

The Common Good

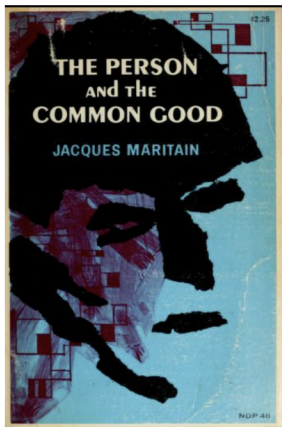
So, when we treat each other with dignity, are in solidarity with our fellow humans, and work in groups at the appropriate level of organization, we contribute to the common good.

Unfortunately, in so many ways, we don't do that.

In our world, there are governments, laws, policies and public institutions that promote abortion, euthanasia, contraception, torture, pornography, surrogate parenting, in vitro fertilization, body mutilation, capital punishment, restrictions on freedom of religion, and freedom of assembly and travel. *"These things are detrimental to authentic human fulfillment and flourishing"*¹⁵ and therefore, do not contribute to the common good but in fact destroy dignity, solidarity and subsidiarity which are necessary for the common good.

And the reason the world is in such dire straits is because too many of us forget that we are made in the image of God. "The human soul, alone, is properly the image of God."¹⁶

I'll leave you with a quote from Jacques Maritain, which tells us precisely what the true common good is.



*"Together, God and the soul, are two in one; two natures in a single vision and a single love. The soul is filled with God. It is in society with God. With him, it possesses a common good, the divine Good itself."*¹⁷

My soul and your soul are in society with God. We are made in his image. We are one with God and in God and he is in us which means we are in solidarity with him and with each other and that we need to live our lives as though that were true, thereby contributing to each other's good.

With that, we can all live in the peace of Christ.

¹⁵ CYS, p. 93

¹⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, 93, 2.

¹⁷ Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, p.17

*You have been told, O mortal, what the Lord
requires of you. Only to act justly, love mercy and
to walk humbly with your God.*

(Micah 6:8)



“Brothers and sisters, this is the hour for love! The heart of the Gospel is the love of God that makes us brothers and sisters. With my predecessor Leo XIII, we can ask ourselves today: If this criterion ‘were to prevail in the world, would not every conflict cease and peace return?’”¹⁸

¹⁸ Pope Leo XIV, from his homily at his inauguration as Pope, May 18, 2025

Father Larry Lynn is the Chaplain for Pro-life in the Archdiocese of Vancouver, BC, and Pastor at Our Lady of Lourdes Parish in Coquitlam, BC.