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## Catholic Social Teaching: Part 1

BY CYNTHIA ENGHAUSER, CAMPUS MINISTER

**T**he Catholic Church has a secret.  
A big one.

What if I told you one of the most engaging, challenging, and vibrant aspects of the Catholic faith was something you possibly hadn't been exposed to? You might wonder how I have the audacity to suggest this, or maybe you're intrigued.

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) has been referred to as "the Church's best kept secret."

"Our best-kept secret is that the Catholic church is deeply blessed with more than 100 years' worth of outstanding social justice and peace documents authored by popes, Vatican II, world synods of bishops and national conferences of bishops. But sadly, these documents attract more dust than readers. "

All of these documents outline a faith perspective that is "powerful, challenging, and relevant" to the way we live. The teachings outlined in these documents outline how the Catholic Church relates to society, and what we are called to be as Catholic community.

Catholic writer Tony Magliano claimed that CST has the power to be controversial. What is it about Catholic social teaching? And how might it threaten the status quo is so threatening to the status quo?

"The short answer is that its foundational tenets of justice and love demand that wealth and power are not selfishly hoarded by rich and powerful individuals, corporations and nations, but instead, be placed at the service of all people and all nations."

To say there is a vast amount of resources on CST is somewhat of an understatement. To begin to scratch the surface we'll look at how social teaching is evident in Scripture, the documentary heritage of the Vatican mentioned above. In a following pamphlet there will be an additional examination of other CST resources.

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## Biblical Basis of Catholic Social Teaching

The Bible outlines a foundation for Catholic Social Teaching by the multiple instance of the concern for, and treatment of the poor. Who are the poor? In our scripture and tradition they may be identified as those who are powerless in society, who struggle for justice, are outcasts, or are on the margins of society.

In the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament this is most evident by those who are outcasts and struggle for justice as an oppressed people. The Book of Exodus recounts these themes in a way that leaves little doubt that God has special care for the poor. Throughout the Old Testament narratives God empowers and sends prophets to intercede on behalf of the poor.



This understanding is expanded upon in the New Testament as Jesus himself not only intercedes and advocates on behalf of the poor but is himself a poor man the son of a carpenter (Matt. 13:55).

Throughout the gospel accounts of Jesus, we see him advocating on behalf of the materially poor and the poor in spirit. Often issuing criticisms of the civil (Roman) and religious authorities (Scribes and Pharisees).

### Questions for consideration:

What is the overall message about poverty, suffering, and justice in the Bible?

To whom does the term 'the poor' apply to in the Bible?

## The Documentary Heritage of Catholic Social Teaching

Up until the late 19th century, the emphasis on the social practices and responsibilities of Catholic Christians centered largely on scriptural influences.

By 1891 there was the occasion for a new influence as a result of the rise in industrialism which created dramatic population shifts geographically and as areas of industry shifted (primarily from agriculture to industry) so did social classes.



*Pope Leo XIII (above) issued the first papal encyclical issued on Catholic Social Thought, Rerum Novarum (Latin for "Of the New Things" in 1891*

The first papal encyclical on Catholic Social Thought, Rerum Novarum, was truly groundbreaking. It opened up the channel for popes ever since, including Pope Benedict to provide teaching and guidance on social issues. What follows are some long Latin names, for some significant documents, but don't let the Latin names fool you; these documents provide powerful commentary on some of the most significant current and historical events of the last 100 years.

### Rerum Novarum (Of New Things) 1891

Pope Leo XIII — tackles the turmoil surrounding laborers in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, touching on issues including socialism, unbridled capitalism, a living wage, the relationship between laborer and employer, and the relationship between classes. Pope Leo also makes a first mention of the preferential option for the poor.

### **Quadragesimo Anno (After Forty Years) 1931**

Pope Pius XI -- following *Rerum Novarum* by exactly 40 years, this encyclical offers an update on the state of labor and industrialization, also offering strong critiques of communism, unrestrained capitalism and classism.

### **Mater et Magistra (Mother and Teacher) 1961**

Pope John XXIII -- issued 70 years after *Rerum Novarum*, this encyclical looks to the Church as the "Mother and Teacher," calling the world to salvation and better social relationships. It looks at science and technology, noting both their power to improve the human condition, but also to limit human freedoms, calling on governments to safeguard against this and ensure human rights. The encyclical calls on wealthier nations to help poorer ones. It criticizes ideologies (not specifically naming communism) that promise to create a paradise in this world, while disregarding religion.

### **Pacem in Terris (Peace on Earth) 1963,**

Pope John XXIII -- this encyclical is the first ever to be directed to "all of good will," instead of just the world's Catholics. In a response to the Cold War, the encyclical outlines necessary conditions for a lasting world peace, looking at the rights of individuals, the relationships between individuals and states, the relationships between states, and the relationship between leaders and the whole world.

### **Populorum Progressio (On the Development of Peoples) 1967,**

Pope Paul VI -- this encyclical, which Benedict's new encyclical is believed to echo, looks at the economy on a global level and addresses the rights of workers to unionize and to have secure employment, decent working conditions.

### **Laborem Exercens (On Human Work) 1981**

Pope John Paul II -- issued in honor of the 90th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, this encyclical again looks at the rights and dignity of workers, with emphases including disabled workers, emigration, materialism, and the spirituality of work.

### **Sollicitudo Rei Socialis (On Social Concern) 1987**

Pope John Paul II -- this encyclical honored *Populorum Progressio* on its 20th anniversary, offering a then-contemporary reading of the challenges first addressed in the earlier encyclical.

### **Centesimus Annus (The Hundredth Year) 1991**

Pope John Paul II -- on the 100th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, John Paul II reflected on the current state of issues that Leo XIII had assessed in his day. Leo XIII had issued warnings about socialism before it had developed into a movement. John Paul II wrote in the immediate wake of the fall of communism.

### **Evangelium Vitae (The Gospel of Life) 1995**

Pope John Paul II -- an affirmation of the gift of human life and the need to protect it, this encyclical dealt with widespread abortion, the threat of euthanasia and renewed use of the death penalty.

### **Deus Caritas Est (God is Love) 2005**

Pope Benedict XVI -- Benedict's first encyclical, that could have been an abstract or scholarly treatise, instead dug deep into the concept of love and cited the connections between love of God and love of neighbor. Pope Benedict said the Church could no more neglect charity than it could Scripture or the sacraments and even called charity a manifestation of Trinitarian love.

### **Caritas In Veritate (Charity in Truth) 2009,**

Pope Benedict XVI -- this encyclical follows up on the themes of *Populorum Progressio*. Dealing with the ethics of contemporary economics, it's reasonable to think that the global economic crisis will weigh in heavily on what the pope has to say.

*(these overviews are available on the USCCB website)*

#### **Where can I learn more about Catholic Social Teaching?**

- Option For The Poor: A Hundred Years of Catholic Social Teaching; Dorr, Donal
- <http://usccbmedia.blogspot.com/2009/06/social-encyclical-primer.html>
- Make sure to check out part two on Catholic Social Teaching!



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