Human Dignity & Catholic Social Teaching

Sperindio Cagnola, *Works of Mercy (Feed the hungry)*, 1514-24, Paruzzaro, San Marcello Church
Opening Prayer

Pray aloud together:
Grant us, Lord God,
a vision of our land as your love would make it:
a land where the weak are protected,
and none go hungry or poor;
a land where the benefits of civilized life are shared,
and everyone can enjoy them;
a land where different races and cultures live in tolerance and mutual respect;
a land where peace is built with justice,
and justice is guided by love.
And give us the inspiration and courage to build it,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Note to the Catechist

There may be more material than you can use in a one-hour session. Select and arrange accordingly. Use questions and material that is best suited for your particular group.

Prodigal Son by Glastonbury
Sharing Human Experience

The Catechist introduces the topic with the following points, and then leads participants in a small group sharing. If your group is large, break into small groups (three or four). Remind participants to make time for all in the group to respond to the questions.

► How we live and act as a Catholic Christian is defined by theological principles.
► Once we embrace principles, we are led to action.
► Principles prompt action—they direct our choices.
► Principled people always stand for something. They know what they believe and are willing to stand by it.
► Principled people are led to do something or to choose not to do something.

For discussion
► Have you ever met a person you would describe as a principled person?
► What are the characteristics within this person that would make you think this person has principles?
► What are some of the principles you live by?

The Catechist uses their responses to launch into a discussion about Catholic Social Teaching. Here are some key points with which to begin.

► The US Bishops document, “Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions” and the United States Catholic Catechism defines the principles upon which Catholic Social Teaching is based.
► Catholic Social Teaching is not always popular. It often flies in the face of our patriotism and our limited sense of fair play. But as we know, what is right is not always the popular thing to do. Pope Francis has asked the whole church to become active in living more simply, sustainably, and in solidarity with the poor – and in calling others to the same lifestyle.

The Catechist invites participant to respond to the following questions with one or two other persons.
► Have you ever stood up for someone or have you ever done the right thing when it was not a popular thing to do?
► Do you know anyone else who similarly stood up for someone or did the right then when it was not a popular thing to do?
► What were the results? What did you learn from the experience?

Note to catechist: There may not be enough time to address all the reflection questions after each section. You may need to choose which reflection questions you want to address if time is a consideration.
Catholic Social Teaching is a collection of Church teachings that are designed to reflect the Church’s gospel-driven social mission. These teachings address the concerns, issues, and challenges of contemporary society. They flow from gospel imperatives and the biblical covenant God forged with the human race at the dawn of creation. The Church challenges, invites, and calls all of the baptized, rich people and poor people together, to address the needs of the poor and oppressed peoples of our world. The Church further exhorts its members to work toward eliminating and/or at least reducing the effects of poverty, injustice, and oppression of all peoples everywhere. When Christ exhorted his disciples to continue his mission of establishing the reign of God, the world he envisioned was God’s original intention for the world which is the harmony, peace, and justice of Eden. Working toward a just society is an act of faith; it is a deeply religious act. While social justice issues often stir heated debate and end up in political and ideological categories, we must not allow such categories to define our response to Christ’s command in the gospel to care for the poor, the oppressed, the widows, orphans, the sick, the dying, and those on the marginalized edge of society.

As Catholics, we are called to bring the healing hand of Christ to those in need, the courageous voice of the prophet to those in power, and the gospel message of love, justice, and peace to a suffering world. The Introduction to the Bishop’s document, “Sharing Catholic Social Teaching,” reminds us that Catholic social teaching is rooted in what we know and understand about the Trinity. God’s nature is communal; a loving relationship exists between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Scriptures teach us that human beings are made in the image and likeness of God. As such, we too are communal and social beings. We do not live as isolated inhabitants of some deserted island. We are part of the human family with inherent rights and responsibilities as members of that family. Our reciprocal covenant relationship with God demands that we uplift the
human community, enter into loving relationship with God’s people and work toward establishing peace and justice in that human community.

► Our Christian response to the social mission of the gospel flows from our intimacy with Christ. Just as he shed his blood, so too are we called to bleed for the poor among us.

Commitment to Catholic social teaching assumes that one is converted to Christ with heart, mind, and soul.

► The most recent addition to the body of Catholic Social Teachings came from Pope Francis in June, 2015, with his landmark encyclical, *On Care for Our Common Home (Laudato Si’)*.

Principles gleaned from the Bishop’s document, “Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions” and the *United States Catholic Catechism* are as follows:

For all sections below, participants read these faith statements aloud, rotating readers:

**Life and Dignity of the Human Person**

► Each human being possesses dignity. Each human being is created in the image and likeness of God. Each human being is redeemed by the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Thus, each human being is worthy of dignity and respect. Each human being is a valued member of the human community (SCST, P. 25).

► Catholic social teaching is inexorably connected to our understanding of human life and human dignity. Every human being, redeemed by Christ and made in the image and likeness of God—is worthy of dignity and respect.

► The honor and respect due each person is afforded to him or her from the first breath taken to the last breath drawn. Human dignity is a gratuitous gift from God; it cannot be earned or merited.

► Belief in the sanctity of human life and inherent dignity of each person is the foundation of all of our social teachings.

► All have dignity regardless of race, sex, age, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, employment or economic status, health, intelligence, achievement or any other differentiating characteristic.

► Simply being human establishes one’s dignity.

► Today this value is threatened by abortion, assisted suicide, euthanasia, the death penalty, poverty, disease, illiteracy, and oppression. These are among the many ways in which people are treated with disregard for their human dignity.

► We believe that every person is precious, that people are more important than things, and that the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person.

► Working for human dignity is a fundamental dimension of our faith. It is not a mere political action.
The Catechist invites participants to gather in small groups of three or four and respond to the following question, then surface insights in the wider group.

► Are you aware of a situation in your workplace, civic community, or parish in which human dignity is not respected?
► Have you ever thought about your own participation in not respecting the human dignity of others – in your own home, neighborhood, parish, or wider world?
► What does God have to say about not respecting one of his children?

Call to Family, Community, and Participation

► The human person is social as well as sacred. Our Catholic tradition teaches that human beings grow and achieve fulfillment in community. The family is the central social institution. Family life needs to be supported by other institutions and governments. Excessive individualism, competition, and greed work against community and the common good.
► We believe people have a right and a duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and wellbeing of all, especially the poor and vulnerable.

The Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in the wider group.

► Can you think of a situation in your workplace, civic community, or parish, where family life is not supported to the detriment of the whole?
► Can you think of an instance in which greed, power or excessive individualism has hurt the common good in your area?

Rights and Responsibilities

► People have a fundamental right to life and to those things necessary for human decency, such as food, shelter, health care, education, and employment.
► People have a right to participate in decisions that affect their lives.
► Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities to respect the rights of others and to work for the common good.
► When people lack the basic necessities to live a life of dignity, their fundamental rights are being denied.
► In a world where some speak mostly of “rights” and others mostly of “responsibilities,” the Catholic tradition teaches that human dignity can be protected and a healthy community can be achieved only if human rights are protected and responsibilities are met.

Option for the Poor and Vulnerable

► Catholic teaching proclaims that the moral test of a society is how it treats its most vulnerable members.
► This calls us to look at public policy decisions in terms of how they affect the poor.
► In our present society, a minority of 20% of the people control more
than 80% of the world’s resources, leaving few resources to be shared by the majority of the people.

► In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, our tradition recalls the story of the Last Judgment (Mt. 25:31-46) and instructs us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first.

► Pope Francis addresses this head on in both The Joy of the Gospel (Evangelii Gaudium) and On Care for Our Common Home (Laudato Si’)

The Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in the wider group.

► Who are the ones in your community who are unable to participate in the life of the community because they are poor?
► What should be our response? What might we do about it?

The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers

► People have a right to humane working conditions, productive work, and fair wages.
► The economy exists to serve the people, not the other way around.
► Many corporations have lost sight of the rights of workers and look only at the profit margin. From 1988 to 1998, the salaries of corporate executives grew by 15% while those of the bottom level workers grew by only 1%, not enough to meet even the rise in cost of living. The gap is no doubt much wider today in the midst of this economic crisis.
► Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God’s creation.
► If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected, which includes the rights to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to organize and join unions, to private property, and to economic initiative.
► Workers have the right to safe working conditions, the right to participate in decisions that affect them in the workplace, and the right to security in case of sickness, disability, unemployment, or old age.

The Catechist invites participants to respond to the following question in the wider group.

► Who are the people in our society who are underpaid, who suffer from inhumane working conditions and corporate excesses?
► What should be our response to those who simply shrug it off as the price of having a good economy?

Solidarity

► We are all one human family, and we are responsible for the well-being of one another.
► This responsibility reaches across national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences.
► Indifference to the pain and suffering of others has no place in our interdependent society. We are all responsible for all.
Learning to practice the virtue of solidarity means that ‘loving our neighbor’ has global dimensions in an interdependent world.

**Promotion of Peace and Disarmament**
- Catholic teaching understands peace as a positive, action-oriented concept.
- Peace is not just the absence of war.
- It involves mutual respect and collaboration between peoples and nations. There is a close relationship between peace and justice.
- Peace is the fruit of justice and is dependent upon right order among human beings and human institutions.
- Just cause theory of war: Catechism #2309: “The damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or community of nations [is] lasting, grave, and certain.” Is there clear and adequate evidence of a direct and imminent attack of a grave nature?

Legitimate authority. The moral credibility of the use of military force also depends heavily on whether there is legitimate authority for using force. For example, there must be compliance with national law in each nation, broad consensus, international sanction, probability of success and proportionality. The use of force must have “serious prospects for success and ‘must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated” (Catechism, #2309).
- We are to ask the question: How would war affect the civilian population, in the short- and long-term?

**Care for God’s Creation**

Note: If time permits and you are so inclined, use the Creation Care Curriculum which reflects the teachings in Pope Francis’ *On Care for Our Common Home (Laudato Si’)*. The curriculum can be found at the web site in the footer.

- All of creation is a gift from God and should be respected as such.
- We show our respect by the way we care for the earth as stewards of all that has been entrusted to us.
- We need to examine how our excessive consumerism and poor environmental practices are exploiting the earth and take measures to correct our destructive patterns.
- Care for the earth is not just an Earth Day slogan; it is a requirement of our faith.
- We are called to protect people and the planet, living our faith in relationship with all of God’s creation.
- It does not take a rocket scientist to know the impact of oil spills, deforestation, pollution, depletion of our rain forests; it is already having observable impact on our environment.
For discussion

Catechist leads wider group discussion.

► What are some ways that we show a lack of respect for our environment?

The Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in small groups and then share brief, general insights in the wider group.

► When it comes to the principles of Catholic Social teaching were there any that: Challenged you? Affirmed you? Troubled you?

► When you consider your communities at the local, civic, parish, state, and national level, who are the people that are not treated as our Church insists they deserve to be treated? What issues are particularly important at this time?

► Choose one principle of Catholic Social Teaching that interests you the most. Why does it interest you? Who are most impacted by the principle you chose? Do you know anyone who is impacted by the principle you chose? What is currently being done to correct the wrong? If not, what should and could be done? What might you do to help?

Mystagogy & your decision for change

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following challenges.

► What, if any, behaviors or attitudes are you willing to change in response to today’s liturgy and session on Catholic social teaching?

► Which, if any, spiritual or corporal works of mercy are you willing to commit to do in response to today’s liturgy and session?

► What, if any, action are you willing to take in response to what we have shared today?

Jan Luykan: Works of Mercy: Clothing the naked. Public domain
Closing Prayer

Let us pray for peace with a greater justness in ours and every land:
   God of justness and mercy,
   we pray for an end to terrorism in any form.
We pray for wisdom that will bring greater peace in our world.
   We pray for understanding and compassion
   that will safeguard the innocent and feed and find home for all refugees
   and all who suffer.
We pray for companionship and strength for all who mourn.
   We pray in Jesus' love. Amen.

— From Cardinal Roger Mahony, Los Angeles, Oct 7, 2001

Jan Luyken: Works of Mercy: Visiting the prisoner, public domain