



Catholic Social Teaching Documents

The Catholic Church's teachings on social justice have been formed from a rich foundation of Scripture, papal writings and encyclicals as well as episcopal conferences, pastoral letters and documents. Taken as a whole, these teachings provide a cohesive body of thought to guide the faithful in addressing modern social concerns. Below is a selected list of important social justice documents of the Church with summaries provided by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. A comprehensive list can be found on the Bishops' [website](#) .

Rerum Novarum (On the Condition of Labor)

Pope Leo XIII, 1891

This groundbreaking social encyclical addresses the dehumanizing conditions in which many workers labor and affirms workers' rights to just wages, rest, and fair treatment, to form unions and to strike if necessary. Pope Leo upholds the individual's right to hold private property, but also notes the role of the state in facilitating distributive justice so that workers can adequately support their families and someday own property of their own. He notes that poor "have a claim to special consideration"

Leo XIII criticizes both capitalism for its tendency toward greed, concentration of wealth, and mistreatment of workers, as well as socialism, for what he understood as a rejection of private property and an under-emphasis on the dignity of each individual person.

Mater et Magistra (Christianity and Social Progress)

Pope Saint John XXIII, 1961

The Pope notes the world's global interdependence and expresses profound concern about the arms race and the growing inequalities between rich and poor nations, noting that gains in science and technology should not lead to economic disparity, but should instead benefit the common good. He also expresses concern about the plight of small farmers and rural areas, calls for greater participation of workers

in industry and new forms of agricultural support, and notes that respect for culture must be emphasized in the Church's missionary activities.

Intervention by governments is needed to address global problems, he says, but should also respect the principle of subsidiarity (allowing the people closest to a problem to help resolve it with social support as needed). Finally, he proposes that Christians should engage in a process of observing, judging, and acting to put the Church's social doctrine into practice.

[Pacem in Terris](#) (Peace on Earth)

Pope Saint John XXIII, 1963

This was the first encyclical written to "all" men of good will, instead of just the world's Catholics. Pope John XXIII lifts up a moral order that should prevail between humans; persons and states; and states; and in the world community. He emphasizes basic human rights and responsibilities, calls for an end to the arms race based on trust and respect for human rights, and supports the creation of a world authority to protect the universal common good. He also notes both that the arms race impedes the development of societies and that underdevelopment and injustice threaten peace. He ends the encyclical with a prayer to the Prince of Peace.

[Gaudium et Spes](#)

(Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World)

Second Vatican Council, 1965

This document from the meeting of the world's bishops focuses on responding to "the joys and the hopes, the grief and the anguish of the people of our time," especially the poor. The Council develops a theological basis for the Church's engagement in the world, noting how the Church must interpret the signs of the times, both positive (growing wealth, unity, and communication) and negative (hunger and disease, war, the wealth gap, divisions based on nation, class, and race, etc.) in light of the Gospel.

The Council emphasizes the Church's concern for human dignity, the solidarity of the human community, the important role of human work and activity in the world, and the engagement of the Church in society and the world.

The second part focuses on marriage and family, cultural diversity, social and economic life, political life, peace and war, international cooperation, the need for integral human development, which is person-centered and includes spiritual development.

Populorum Progressio (On the Development of Peoples)

Pope Blessed Paul VI, 1967

In response to the worsening situation of the poor around the world, the Pope criticizes unjust structures that have led to inequality and underdevelopment, including the inequalities of the market system, the effects of colonialism, economic domination and exploitation of poor countries by rich ones, and the prioritization of military spending and the arms race over development. Pope Paul VI challenges the nations of the world to focus on the integral human development of the poorest nations. This type of development includes much more than economic growth, requiring a true commitment to solidarity (the idea that we are one human family) and genuinely human values.

On Evangelization in the Modern World (Evangelii Nuntiandi)

Pope Blessed Paul VI, 1975

Pope Paul VI articulates a "new evangelization" that links social transformation with the proclamation of the Gospel. In light of many social challenges, he calls for an evangelization that transforms both individual believers and social structures. Evangelization is both personal and social, he writes, and includes the development and liberation of peoples from oppressive structures that cause famine, disease, and poverty; injustices in trade and economic activities; and the oppression of cultural and political colonialism (the control by stronger countries of weaker ones.)

The Challenge of Peace

U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1983

This pastoral letter from the Catholic bishops offers two Christian responses to war: just war and nonviolence. The bishops describe numerous conditions that must be present in order for a war to be considered just. They condemn the use of nuclear weapons against civilian populations, the deliberate initiation on nuclear warfare, and the arms race, and they note that nuclear deterrence is only to be used as a step toward progressive disarmament. Finally, the bishops call for the Church to be involved in efforts for peace.

Economic Justice for All

U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986

In this pastoral letter, the Catholic bishops of the United States call for a "new American experiment" for the common good in order to address economic issues related to poverty, employment, food and agriculture, and developing nations. The bishops highlight the moral implications of the U.S. and global economies and discuss the need for government guidance to ensure that the free market benefits, instead of hurts, the poor.

Sollicitudo Rei Socialis (On Social Concern)

Pope Saint John Paul II, 1987

In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, Pope John Paul II celebrates the 20th anniversary of *Populorum Progressio* by updating the Church's teaching on the "development of peoples" and changes that took place in the preceding two decades.

The Pope points out that despite some progress in the two decades since *Populorum Progressio's* publication, the gap between developed and developing countries continued to widened in a variety of areas, including the production and distribution of goods, hygiene, health and housing, availability of drinking water, and working conditions (especially for women).

The Church and Racism: Towards a More Fraternal Society

Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 1989

"All racist theories are contrary to Christian faith and love" is the unequivocal affirmation of *The Church and Racism: Towards a more Fraternal Society* document, requested by Pope John Paul II and prepared by the Pontifical Commission "*Iustitia et Pax*" (Justice and Peace) of the Vatican. The document condemns all forms of racism.

In addition to looking at the phenomenon of racism, the document treats other manifestations of conflictual attitudes of intolerance and prejudice, often akin to racism or containing racial elements.

Centesimus Annus (The Hundredth Year)

Pope Saint John Paul II, 1991

On the centenary of *Rerum Novarum* (On the Condition of Labor), Pope John Paul II proposed a re-reading of Pope Leo's encyclical, an invitation to "look back" at the text itself to "discover anew the richness of the fundamental principles" that it formulated for dealing with the question of the condition of workers. The

occasion was also an invitation to "look around" at the "new things" that surround Catholics and in which "we find ourselves caught up, very different from the "new things" which characterized the final decade of the last century. The Pope also invites us to look to the future so filled with uncertainties but also with promises — uncertainties and promises which appeal to our imagination and creativity, and which reawaken our responsibility, as disciples of the "one teacher" to show the way, to proclaim the truth and to communicate the life which is Christ

Evangelium Vitae (The Gospel of Life)

Pope Saint John Paul II, 1995

The Pope affirms the gift of life and need to protect it at all stages. He proclaims the good news of the value and dignity of each human life while decrying the culture of death and calling for a renewed culture of life. The encyclical addresses a wide range of old and new threats to life, especially abortion, euthanasia, experimentation on human embryos, and the death penalty.

The culture of death, he says, is caused by an overemphasis on individual freedoms and a lack of recognition of relationship with others. This mentality, reflected in materialism's embrace on "having" over "being" must be replaced by one of solidarity (recognition that we are all one family) and seeing life as a responsibility. The pope notes that the family is "the sanctuary of life" and connects respect for life with the need for social and economic policies that support families and integral human development, which promotes the dignity of the person.

Communities of Salt and Light

Reflections on the Social Mission of the Church

U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1996

The bishops write: "In these challenging days, we believe that the Catholic community needs to be more than ever a source of clear moral vision and effective action. We are called to be the "salt of the earth" and "light of the world" in the words of the Scriptures. This task belongs to every believer and every parish. It cannot be assigned to a few or simply delegated to diocesan or national structures. The pursuit of justice and peace is an essential part of what makes a parish Catholic."

Dignitas Personae (The Dignity of a Person)

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1998

Dignitas Personae provides doctrinal directives on certain embryonic ethical controversies. The document takes a critical stance against selective reduction, prenatal diagnosis, pre-implantation diagnosis, in vitro fertilization, cryopreservation, para-humans, embryo transfer, genetic engineering, embryo donation—practices that criticized as unethical by pro-life ethicists because they provoke the termination of embryonic cell reproduction.

The doctrinal material is not only addressed to Catholic couples, but also to pharmacists, doctors, ethicists, theologians, politicians and industrialists so that they may try and tackle these issues together.

[Everyday Christianity: To Hunger and Thirst for Justice](#)

U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1998

A pastoral reflection on lay discipleship for justice in a new millennium, this document highlights the one essential dimension of the lay vocation, often overlooked or neglected: the social mission of Christians in the world. Every believer is called to serve "the least of these," to "hunger and thirst for justice," to be a "peacemaker." Catholics are called by God to protect human life, to promote human dignity, to defend the poor and to seek the common good. This social mission of the Church belongs to all of us. It is an essential part of what it is to be a believer.

[Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church](#)

Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004

The document serves as a tool to inspire and guide the faithful, who are faced with moral and pastoral challenges daily. It is divided into five sections: an introduction, three parts, and a conclusion entitled "For a Civilization of Love." The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church is a must-have resource for leaders of social ministry at the diocesan and parish level as well as those in religious education, schools, and youth and young adult ministry.

[Deus Caritas Est \(God is Love\)](#)

Pope Benedict XVI, 2005

The Pope writes that the human person's ability to love is rooted in the Father's love for humankind and the person's identity as created in the image of God. Benedict XVI locates love for the poor at the center of Catholic life, noting that the "exercise of charity" is one of the Church's three "essential activities, along with the administration of the sacraments and the proclamation of the word."

He writes that the Church must form the consciences of the laity so that they can work for a just ordering of society. Their political activity should be lived as "social charity" infused with the light of faith and love.

Caritas in Veritate (Charity in Truth)

Pope Benedict XVI, 2009

Pope Benedict identifies justice as the primary way of charity and notes the obligation of "every Christian" to take a stand for the common good and work for institutional change. The values of love, truth, and solidarity, he writes, must inform all aspects of economic life, such as finance, trade, and globalization, which must be humanized and re-oriented to the common good.

Business owners, investors, and consumers all have a role to play in guaranteeing that businesses operate to benefit the common good.

Benedict XVI criticizes modern society's appeal to right without acknowledging corresponding duties, and he emphasizes the international community's duty toward solidarity, which should be realized in many ways, such as attention to the needs of workers and immigrants and development assistance to poor countries implemented in a way that prioritizes respect for life and the authentic human development of the person. He links concern for life with the duty to care for creation, emphasizing environmental concerns more than in any past encyclical.

Lumen Fidei (The Light of Faith)

Pope Francis, 2013

Pope Francis' first encyclical builds on the work of his predecessor, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, completing a trilogy of encyclicals on the theological virtues—faith, hope, and love. This encyclical, "written by four hands," intends to encourage the People of God to embrace their faith more fully.

A continuation of Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical letters on charity and hope, *Lumen Fidei* addresses the gift of faith that God has extended to us and how the light of faith needs to be nourished and reinforced so that it can guide us on our collective and individual faith journey.

