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Sacred and Social

How Catholic social teaching can guide us in coronavirus times

By Fred Kammer, SJ, JD

Every human person is sacred and social. This brief statement captures the two most fundamental principles of Catholic social ethics and offers us, Catholic or not, a framework for thinking about the current regime of remaining-in-place and “social distancing.”



A sign depicting social distancing protocols at a Florida park.

First, there is the foundational belief in the *sanctity and dignity of every human person*. This underlies the high priority in public decision-making that orders drastic shutdowns in economic, educational, and political life to slow down the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and save lives. Whether those lives are old, young, or “compromised,” they are sacred and deserve all reasonable measures to limit the pandemic’s spread. The lives of our neighbors and all others across our communities also are as precious as those of our families and ourselves.

The second principle unpacks the word “social.” The principle is *the common good*, rooted in Greek and Roman philosophy as the goal of political life and enunciated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as basic to our entire social ethics. Over against rampant individualism, the *Catechism* defines the common good as: “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.” [1] The common good applies to every human community, especially to the political community where the state’s role is “to defend and promote the common good of civil society, its citizens, and intermediate bodies.” [2]

The *Catechism* notes three essential elements of the common good: *respect for the individual*, the *social well-being and development of the group*, and *peace* which results from the stability of a just society.

Regarding the first essential of individual respect, the *Catechism* notes that all “public authorities are bound to respect the fundamental and inalienable rights of the human person.” [3] This means far more than the utilitarian “greatest good for the greatest number,” but insists that majorities respect individual rights.

The common good’s second element—the group’s social well-being and development—maintains that authority’s proper functioning is to arbitrate between various particular interests in society, which becomes ever more sensitive in our current pandemic. Essential to this is insuring the accessibility of each person to “what is needed to lead a truly human life: food, clothing, health, work, education and culture, suitable information, the right to establish a family, and so on.” [4] In applying the principle in pandemic-times, common good decisions of policy-makers will often trump the claims to individual freedom to mix socially or to open “my business” regardless of social cost.

The third element of peace and stability of a just social order presupposes that “authority should ensure by morally acceptable means the security of society and its members.” This may seem less applicable at the present moment unless and until violence comes to dominate the public scene in response to the pandemic or measures enacted to control it.

Two other principles from Catholic teaching come into play now. One is the Gospel’s *preferential love for “the least” among us*, who are already the most impacted because of unemployment or the vulnerability of their jobs (low pay, low or no benefits) and their limited resources. The other is *solidarity* with people far and wide, including first responders and “essential workers” here and the people of poorer countries with far fewer resources to control the pandemic and limit its impacts.

As we consider the constraints of this pandemic regime, we should remember the *Gospel from John* read on Holy Thursday this month. There Jesus raises the bar from loving-our-neighbor-as-ourselves to “love one another as I have loved you.”

Loyola University New Orleans
[COVID-19 Information](#)

JSRI Future Activities

JSRI staff and associates—working from home—will continue: monitoring local, state, and federal administrative, legislative, and judicial actions regarding our priority issues and the impact of Covid-19; participating in advocacy communications with authorities; recommending resources on our website and by social media; research and writing for publications; and activating our advocacy network as appropriate.

JSRI Recent Activities

March 23

Fr. Kammer participated as vice-chair in a virtual Jesuit Volunteer Board Meeting.

March 23

Dr. Dennis Kalob's article from the March issue of our e-newsletter was republished on the website of the [Ignatian Solidarity Network](#).

March 25

Fr. Kammer was the presenter for a "Virtual Solidarity on Tap" nationwide on Catholic Social Thought and the pandemic.

April 14

The JSRI Staff and Associates met by videoconference.

April 15

Dr. Sue Weishar was a guest speaker on a zoom call for students studying refugee integration at a university in The Netherlands, Centrale Medezeggenschapsraad.

April 17

The JSRI Advisory Board met by videoconference.

April 17

Dr. Kalob is serving on the new Care for Our Common Home Commission of the U.S. Central and Southern Jesuit Province and participated in their first meeting.

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[1] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 1906, citing Pope John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, 1961, no. 65 and Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, no. 26.
[2] *Catechism*, no. 1910.
[3] *Ibid.*, no. 1907.
[4] *Ibid.*, no. 1908.

Monthly articles reflect the opinions of the authors and not necessarily those of Loyola University New Orleans. Please send feedback to jsri@loyno.edu

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