



Catholic Social Thought and the Coronavirus

Every human person is sacred and social. This brief statement captures the two most fundamental principles of Catholic social ethics and offers us a framework to consider the current coronavirus and the responses imposed by public authorities.

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 or young, healthy or “compromised,” incarcerated or free, 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 are equally 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 fundamental to our entire social ethics. Opposing 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 element 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,” and 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 function is to mediate between various particular interests in society, which becomes ever more sensitive during a pandemic. Essential to this is ensuring 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.”⁵ This may become much more applicable as we see increasing threats of violence in the public square in response to the pandemic or measures enacted to control it.

Two other important principles apply now as well. One is the Gospel’s *preferential love for “the least” among us*—already the most severely impacted because of unemployment or job vulnerability (low pay, low or no benefits) and limited resources. The other is *solidarity* with people far and wide, including first responders and “essential workers” here and also 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 how Jesus raises the bar from loving-our-neighbor-as-ourselves to “love one another as I have loved you.”⁶

ENDNOTES

- 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.*, 1907.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 1908.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 1909.
- 6 *John* 13:34