

## Understanding CST



Seal of the Society of Jesus

# What is Catholic Social Teaching (CST)?

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The mission of JSRI reflects the intention of the founders that the institute would “apply Catholic social teaching to the concrete realities of these regions...” Rooted in the Scriptures and the teaching of the Catholic Church, Catholic Social Teaching represents a developing tradition which includes organic and systematic reflection on social realities, ethical principles, and application of those principles to current circumstances.<sup>1</sup> The foundation and primary object are the dignity of the human person with its inalienable rights, which form the nucleus of the truth about the human person.<sup>2</sup> It involves a three-fold task imposed upon the church: announcing the truth about human dignity and rights; denouncing unjust situations in society; and contributing to positive changes in society and real human progress.<sup>3</sup>

What is called “modern Catholic Social Teaching” begins with the social encyclical of Pope Leo XIII titled *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 and stretches to Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* in 2005. A number of encyclicals, synodal, and conciliar documents comprise the highlights of this tradition, along with statements of many of the conferences of bishops across the world, such as *The Challenge of Peace* (1983) and *Economic Justice for All* (1986) by the U.S. bishops. The most important and authoritative of the documents in this 115-year-old tradition is the document *Gaudium Et Spes* (*The Church in the Modern World*) of the Second Vatican Council in 1965.

The most recent *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (2005) attempts to synthesize all of Catholic Social Teaching around core four principles:

- 1) **The principle of human dignity:**  
*A just society can become a reality only when it is based on respect of the transcendent dignity of the human person. ...“Hence, the social order and its development must invariably work to the benefit of the human person, since the order of things is to be subordinate to the order of persons, not the other way around.”*<sup>4</sup>
- 2) **The principle of common good:**  
According to its primary and broadly accepted sense, *the common good* indicates “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.”<sup>5</sup>
- 3) **The principle of subsidiarity:**  
*The principle of subsidiarity protects people from abuses by higher-level social authority and calls on these same authorities to help individuals and intermediate groups [families, cultural, recreational and professional associations, unions, political bodies, neighborhood groups] to fulfill their duties. This principle is imperative because every person, family and intermediate group has something original to offer to the community.*<sup>6</sup>

- 4) **The principle of solidarity:**  
*Solidarity highlights in a particular way the intrinsic social nature of the human person, the equality of all in dignity and rights and the common path of individuals and peoples towards an ever more committed unity...there persist in every part of the world stark inequalities between developed and developing countries, inequalities stoked also by various forms of exploitation, oppression and corruption...The acceleration of interdependence between persons and peoples needs to be accompanied by equally intense efforts on the ethical-social plane, in order to avoid the dangerous consequences of perpetrating injustice on a global scale.*<sup>7</sup>

Rather than easy answers to difficult problems, the contribution of Catholic Social Teaching is the development of this body of thought in a “dynamic inductive-deductive process” which utilizes a three-step approach well known to Catholics steeped in the social tradition: see, judge, and act. Use of this framework for all JSRI activities will be part of our way of proceeding.

<sup>1</sup> *Guidelines for the Study and Teaching of the Church’s Social Doctrine in the Formation of Priests*, Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education, dated December 30, 1988, and released June 27, 1989, No. 6, in *Origins*, Vol 19, No. 11, August 3, 1989, pp. 169-92.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Compendium*, *op. cit.*, No. 132, quoting Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 26.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 164, quoting *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 26.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, Nos. 185-187.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 192.