Christian Beliefs and Church Teachings: Catholic Social Teaching

Teacher Background

Catholic social teaching is the body of social principles and moral teaching that is articulated in the papal, conciliar and other official documents issued since the late nineteenth century and dealing with the economic, political and social order. These teachings are founded in the Old and New Testaments as well as in traditional philosophical and theological teachings of the Church. The social teaching documents provide a vision for society and a clear vision for a preferred future. The following is a list of published documents on Catholic social teaching.

Rerum Novarum (On the Condition of Workers) - Pope Leo XIII, 1891
This seminal work on modern Catholic social thought addresses the plight of the industrial workers in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. It calls for the protection of the weak and the poor through the pursuit of justice while excluding socialism and class struggle as legitimate principles of change. It affirms the dignity of work, the right to private property and the right to form and join professional associations.

Quadragesimo Anno (The Fortieth Year) - Pope Pius XI, 1931
Writing in response to the alarming concentration of wealth and power in the socio-economic realm, Pius XI calls for the reestablishment of a social order based on the principle of subsidiarity. In commemorating the 40th anniversary of Rerum Novarum, this encyclical reaffirms the need for a social order animated by justice.

Mater et Magistra (Mother and Teacher) - Pope John XXIII, 1961
Applying the teachings of his predecessors to modern problems and affirming the role of the Church as a teacher and as a nurturing guardian of the poor and oppressed, John XXIII calls for a greater awareness of the need for all people to live as one community with a common good. Special attention is focused on the plight of the farmers and farm workers in depressed rural, agricultural economies.

Pacem in Terris (Peace on Earth) - Pope John XXIII, 1963
Covering the entire spectrum of relations between individuals, between the individual and the community and between nations, John XXIII affirms the inviolability of human rights. Peace, based on mutual trust, can be well-founded only if undergirded by a unity of right order in human affairs arising from a genuine respect for and adherence to the law of God.

Gaudium et Spes (The Church in the Modern World) - Second Vatican Council, 1965
Calling for a new sense of service by the Church in a rapidly changing world, the Council presents the ethical framework of the Church’s commitment to pastoral work in the world. This servant Church addresses itself to the real concerns and problems faced by Christians living in the modern age and calls for a development based on an unqualified acceptance of the inherent dignity of the human person.

Populorum Progressio (On the Development of Peoples) - Pope Paul VI, 1967
Calling attention to the worsening marginalisation of the poor, Paul VI presents the various dimensions of an integral human development and the necessary conditions for growth in the solidarity of peoples. Only with an accompanying theological reflection on liberation from injustice and genuine human values can there be true development towards a more human condition.
Octogesima Adveniens (A Call to Action) - Pope Paul VI, 1971
Realising the need for a genuine renewal in domestic and international societal structures, Paul VI calls on Christians to live up to the duty of participation in social and political reform as a way of discovering the truth and living out the Gospel.

Laborem Exercens (On Human Work) - Pope John Paul II, 1981
Exhorting Christians everywhere to be involved in the transformation of existing socio-economic systems, John Paul II presents work as a fundamental dimension of human existence through which the “social question” must be viewed. The meaning of work can only be properly understood when the dignity of labour is taken as an underlying premise.

Solicitude Rei Socialis (On Social Concern) - Pope John Paul II, 1987
Expanding on the notion of development in Populorum Progressio, John Paul II reviews the state of world development in the past two decades. The moral nature of development leading humanity to the “fullness of being” is emphasised.

Centesimus Annus (The Hundredth Year) - Pope John Paul II, 1991
Evangelium Vitae (The Gospel of Life) - Pope John Paul II, 1995

Full texts of the teachings and collections of extracts can be found online at:
www.uniya.org/education/cst.html - Uniya - Australian Jesuit Social Justice Centre

The Social Agenda, A Collection of Magisterial Texts is a publication of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (www.thesocialagenda.org). It provides a complete summary of Catholic social teaching under the categories of: The Nature of Catholic Social Teaching; The Human Person; The Family; The Social Order; The Role of the State; The Economy; Work and Wages; Poverty and Charity; The Environment; The International Community. This Collection is a precursor to the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church published by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace in October, 2004.