

Catholic Social Teaching on Poverty, an Option for the Poor, and the Common Good

The Catholic Church has a well-documented tradition on pursuit of the common good and care for “the least of these” (Mt. 25). This resource includes elements of Catholic teaching that highlight this tradition. This resource is intended to serve as an introduction on this issue; it is not comprehensive. To read the complete text of a cited document, simply click on the title.

[Charity in Truth \(Caritas in Veritate\)](#) [Pope Benedict XVI, 2009](#)

“If we love others with charity, then first of all we are just towards them. Not only is justice not extraneous to charity, not only is it not an alternative or parallel path to charity: justice is inseparable from charity, and intrinsic to it. Justice is the primary way of charity or, in Paul VI’s words, ‘the minimum measure’ of it, an integral part of the love ‘in deed and in truth’ to which Saint John exhorts us” (no. 6).

“To desire the common good and strive towards it is a requirement of justice and charity.... The more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbours, the more effectively we love them. Every Christian is called to practise this charity, in a manner corresponding to his vocation and according to the degree of influence he wields in the [state]. This is the institutional path--we might also call it the political path--of charity, no less excellent and effective than the kind of charity which encounters the neighbor directly...” (no. 7).

“...unemployment today provokes new forms of economic marginalization, and the current crisis can only make this situation worse. Being out of work or dependent on public or private assistance for a prolonged period undermines the freedom and creativity of the person and his family and social relationships, causing great psychological and spiritual suffering.... the primary capital to be safeguarded and valued is man, the human person in his or her integrity: ‘Man is the source, the focus and the aim of all economic and social life’” (no. 25).

“No consideration of the problems associated with development could fail to highlight the direct link between poverty and unemployment. In many cases, poverty results from a violation of the dignity of human work, either because work opportunities are limited (through unemployment or underemployment), or ‘because a low value is put on work and the rights that flow from it, especially the right to a just wage and to the personal security of the worker and his or her family’” (no. 63).

[Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship](#) [U.S. Catholic Bishops, 2007](#)

“The principle of subsidiarity reminds us that larger institutions in society should not overwhelm or interfere with smaller or local institutions, yet larger institutions have essential responsibilities when the more local institutions cannot adequately protect human dignity, meet human needs, and advance the common good” (no. 48).

“While the common good embraces all, those who are weak, vulnerable, and most in need deserve preferential concern. A basic moral test for our society is how we treat the most vulnerable in our midst” (no. 50).

[The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church](#) [Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2005](#)

“Solidarity without subsidiarity, in fact, can easily degenerate into a ‘Welfare State’, while subsidiarity without solidarity runs the risk of encouraging forms of self-centred localism. In order to respect both of these fundamental principles, the State’s intervention in the economic environment must be neither invasive nor absent, but commensurate with society’s real needs (no. 351).

“...the universal destination of goods requires that the poor, the marginalized and in all cases those whose living conditions interfere with their proper growth should be the focus of particular concern. To this end, the preferential option for the poor should be reaffirmed in all its force.... It affects the life of each Christian inasmuch as he or she seeks to imitate the life of Christ, but it applies equally to our social responsibilities and hence to our manner of living...” (no. 182).



*A Place at the Table:
A Catholic Recommitment to Overcome
Poverty and to Respect the Dignity of
All Gods Children*
U.S. Catholic Bishops, 2002

“...the table we seek for all rests on these four institutions, or legs: (1) what families and individuals can do, (2) what community and religious institutions can do, (3) what the private sector can do, and (4) what the government can do to work together to overcome poverty” (p. 14).

“The Catholic way is to recognize the essential role and the complementary responsibilities of families, communities, the market, and government to work together to overcome poverty and advance human dignity” (p. 18).

“Work must be an escape from poverty, not another version of it” (p. 17).

God is Love (Deus Caritas Est)
Pope Benedict XVI, 2005

“... love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind, is as essential to [the Church] as the ministry of the sacraments and preaching of the Gospel. The Church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the Sacraments and the Word” (no. 22).

“Seven Themes of
Catholic Social Teaching”
U.S. Catholic Bishops, 2005

Option for the Poor and Vulnerable

“A basic moral test is how our most vulnerable members are faring. In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, our tradition recalls the story of the Last Judgment (Mt 25:31-46) and instructs us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first.”

*A Catholic Framework
for Economic Life*
U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1996

“A fundamental moral measure of any economy is how the poor and vulnerable are faring” (no. 3).

“In economic life, free markets have both clear advantages and limits; government has essential responsibilities and limitations;

voluntary groups have irreplaceable roles, but cannot substitute for the proper working of the market and the just policies of the state” (no. 7).

“Society has a moral obligation, including governmental action where necessary, to assure opportunity, meet basic human needs, and pursue justice in economic life” (no. 8).

Economic Justice for All
U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1986

“Jesus takes the side of those most in need. As followers of Christ, we are challenged to make a fundamental ‘option for the poor’--to speak for the voiceless, to defend the defenseless, to assess life styles, policies, and social institutions in terms of their impact on the poor. ” (no. 16).

“...poverty is not merely the lack of adequate financial resources. It entails a more profound kind of deprivation, a denial of full participation in the economic, social, and political life of society and an inability to influence decisions that affect one’s life.... Therefore we should seek solutions that enable the poor to help themselves through such means as employment” (no. 188).

“The first line of attack against poverty must be to build and sustain a healthy economy that provides employment opportunities at just wages for all adults who are able to work. Poverty is intimately linked to the issue of employment.... Expanded employment especially in the private sector would promote human dignity, increase social solidarity, and promote self-reliance of the poor” (no. 196).

*On the Hundredth Anniversary of
Rerum Novarum
(Centesimus Annus)*
Pope John Paul II

“...what is being proposed as an alternative is not the socialist system, which in fact turns out to be State capitalism, but rather a society of free work, of enterprise and of participation. Such a society is not directed against the market, but demands that the market be appropriately controlled by the forces of society and by the State, so as to guarantee that the basic needs of the whole of society are satisfied.” (no. 35)

