

Living in Christ

saint mary's press

Catholic Social Teaching

Christian Life in Society



Brian Singer-Towns

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Introduction

Jesus' two Great Commandments call us to be lovers: "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37–39). The Church's commitment to social justice is based on these commandments. Working for greater justice in society is a concrete expression of our love of our neighbor that flows from our love of God. Every disciple of Christ is called to be engaged in this work of faith.

Working for justice has been very important in strengthening my relationship with God. The wisdom in the Church's social teaching documents has enriched my understanding of our faith. The frustrations that come when working for justice have called me to be more patient and to rely more on God's grace. The joy of seeing people's lives improve has made me more grateful and hopeful. And working with other Catholics on justice projects has helped me to see the Holy Spirit at work in the life of the Church. I know that as you participate in the Church's work for charity and justice, your relationship with God will grow too.

I wish to express my gratitude to Dr. Stephen M. Colecchi and Mary Hansel Parlin, who reviewed the manuscript for this book, offering many helpful suggestions for improving the content. They are two gifted teachers and their commitment to the Church's social mission has inspired many people, including me.

Blessings,
Brian Singer-Towns

Section 1

Foundational Principles of Social Justice

Social Justice and God's Plan

Upon signing the Declaration of Independence, Benjamin Franklin is reported to have said, "Gentlemen, we must all hang together, or most assuredly we will all hang separately." This was a clever way of saying that if the signers of the declaration did not support one another in the endeavor to become an independent nation, the leaders of the British Empire would have them arrested and executed one by one. Franklin's statement implicitly recognized that some important changes require a communal response. This is certainly true when confronting sins that are embedded in society.

This is but one example of a simple but profound truth recognized throughout history: God created human beings to be social creatures. God is a communion of Three Divine Persons who are in eternal, loving relationship with one another. Human beings are made in his image. We cannot exist as solitary beings and still achieve God's ultimate purpose for our lives: to live in loving communion with God and with one another. And if we are to have loving communion with God and other people, our relationships must be rooted in love and justice.

This first part of section 1 builds a solid foundation for discussing and understanding social justice issues and concerns. The articles look at the social dimension of God's original plan for human beings, the social dimensions of his plan for salvation after Adam and Eve's Original Sin, and the Church's identity as loving communion and as a just community. These articles touch on topics you have previously studied, but they do so from a unique perspective: the perspective of the social nature of human beings and the responsibilities that flow from that nature.

The articles in this part address the following topics:

- Article 1: God's Original Plan: A Just Community (page 10)
- Article 2: The Social Dimension of God's Plan of Salvation (page 15)
- Article 3: The Social Dimension of the Paschal Mystery (page 20)
- Article 4: The Church: Communion and a Just Community (page 25)



Article

1 God's Original Plan: A Just Community

genocide

The systematic and planned extermination of an entire ethnic, religious, political, or cultural group of people.

Here is a disturbing fact. According to the History Place Web site, during the last century there have been more than twenty documented genocides throughout the world, resulting in the deaths of more than twenty million people. A **genocide** is an attempt to destroy an entire people—an ethnic group or a religious group, for example—by killing every man, woman, and child in that group. These twenty million deaths did not occur because of a war, although war is often the excuse for, or the result of, genocide. These deaths occurred because one group of people decided that another group of people did not deserve to exist.

The excuses used to justify genocides are many. The group being killed might be labeled enemies of the aggressors, or they are being blamed for a societal problem or natural catastrophe, or perhaps something in their way of life is declared to be an immoral or evil influence in society. Whatever the excuse, the people doing the killing are overlooking a foundational religious truth: Every human person is created in the image of God. The great evil of genocide and other social injustices can happen only when people deny the most basic of truths that flow from God's purpose in creating human beings. This article reviews some of the truths that must be respected for just societies to exist.

God's Plan for Humanity

The Creation accounts in the first chapters of the Book of Genesis reveal important truths about the role justice plays in God's plan for human beings. The first truth is that God has given human beings a share of his divine life, creating us "in the divine image" (Genesis 1:27). We see further evidence for this truth in the second Creation account, when God shared his divine breath with the first man in order to bring him to life (see 2:7). Because human beings share in God's life, we are unique among all creatures; each human life has great value. Therefore justice requires us to recognize and respect the divine presence in every human being (see Matthew 25:37–40).

A second truth revealed in the Creation accounts is that human beings are religious beings. The desire for God

is part of our very nature, and our true purpose is to seek for the truth and happiness that only God can provide. We were created to live in communion with God, who alone is the source of our true happiness. This is symbolized in the accounts of God's presence with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (see Genesis 2:15–17, 3:8–9). In the garden God revealed himself directly to Adam and Eve, spoke to them, and gave himself to them in love without any difficulties or barriers. Their happiness flowed directly from this intimate friendship with God. We call this the state of **original holiness and justice**. Even after humanity lost the state of original holiness and justice because of Adam and Eve's first sin, God never ceased loving human beings and continued to reveal himself and give himself to us.

A third truth revealed in the Creation accounts is that God created human beings to live in loving communion with one another. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) expresses the need for human beings to live in community: "The human person needs to live in society. Society is not for him an extraneous addition but a requirement of his nature" (1879).

In the second account of Creation, God preceded the creation of the first woman by saying, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18). The creation of Eve from one of Adam's ribs symbolizes the intimate connection that



original holiness

The original state of human beings in their relationship with God, sharing in the divine life in full communion with him.

original justice

The state of complete harmony of our first parents with themselves, with each other, and with all of creation.

How do the accounts of Creation in the Book of Genesis reveal God's desire for us to live in loving communion with him and with other human beings?





common good

The good that is collectively shared by a number of people and that is beneficial for all members of a given community. Social conditions that allow for all citizens of the earth, individuals and families, to meet basic needs and achieve fulfillment promote the common good.

Fall, the

Also called the Fall from Grace, the biblical revelation about the origins of sin and evil in the world, expressed figuratively in the account of Adam and Eve in Genesis.

Original Sin

The sin by which the first humans disobeyed God and thereby lost original holiness and became subject to death. Original Sin is transmitted to every person born into the world, except Mary and Jesus.

should exist between human beings as part of God's plan. The partnership of a man and a woman is the prototype—the original model or foundation—for the loving friendship that God intends to exist between all human beings. From this follows God's plan that requires human beings to build communities of love and justice and work together for the **common good**. The primary community is the family, and all other communities are built upon and support the family. In particular the Church, the Body of Christ, is a community of love and justice with Christ as our head.

The Breakdown of God's Plan

What happens when human beings do not respect that every human person is made in God's image and likeness, when they do not trust in God for their happiness, and when they do not build communities of love and peace? The account of **the Fall** gives us insight into this question. When Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they did not respect the truths about justice revealed in the Creation accounts.

First, they doubted that they shared in God's divine life. Recall how the serpent tempted Eve to eat the fruit: "God knows well that the moment you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods" (Genesis 3:5). We know that Eve was already like God, made in his image, but the serpent tempted her to believe that she did not really share in the divine life.

Second, Adam and Eve's sin of disobedience showed their lack of trust in God for all they needed to be happy. They abused their God-given freedom and set themselves against God, believing they could find their true happiness apart from him.

Third, in committing their sin, Adam and Eve did not live out a relationship based in love, and they did not work together for their common good. For example, Adam did not try to protect Eve from doing wrong by dissuading her from eating the fruit. And after Eve ate the fruit, she invited Adam to join in her disobedience, offering the fruit to him to eat, which he willingly did.

The effect of Adam and Eve's disobedience was that they lost their state of original holiness and justice. And they lost it not only for themselves but also for all human beings coming after them, with the exception of Mary, Jesus'



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After Cain killed Abel, the Lord asked him, “Where is your brother?” and Cain replied, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” How would you answer this question based on Jesus’ teachings?

mother, and, of course, Jesus himself. **Original Sin** is the loss of our original holiness and justice—it is the wounded human nature that is transmitted to all people as a result of Adam and Eve’s first sin. Because of Original Sin, our human nature is weakened in its powers. We are subject to ignorance, suffering, and death, and it is harder for us to resist the temptation to sin. We see these results in the biblical accounts that directly follow Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden, starting with Cain and Abel.

Chapter 4 of Genesis tells us about the relationship of Adam and Eve’s sons, Cain and Abel. Cain and Abel’s relationship was marked by jealousy rather than by loving communion. Overcome by feelings of resentment and anger toward his brother, Cain was unable to resist the temptation to kill Abel and thus committed the first murder, which was also an act of injustice. Weakened by Original Sin, Cain was unwilling to recognize that both he and Abel shared in God’s life and that he must protect his brother’s life, not take it.



social justice

The defense of human dignity by ensuring that essential human needs are met and that essential human rights are protected for all people.

From there, things only got worse. Genesis goes on to describe how generations went by and human beings and their sins multiplied—until we get to Noah (see Genesis, chapters 6–9). From the story of Noah, we learn that almost all of humanity, weakened by Original Sin, was engulfed in sin and injustice. Genesis tells us: “In the eyes of God the earth was corrupt and full of lawlessness. . . . God saw how corrupt the earth had become, since all mortals led depraved lives on earth” (6:11–12). God had no choice except to begin again, destroying all life except for Noah, his family, and the animals they brought with them on the ark.

From these accounts we learn an important religious truth: the loss of our original holiness and justice can easily lead to evil and corrupt societies. But there is good news too, as we learn from Noah’s story; God’s salvation is near to those who remember him and who remain faithful to his original plan in creating humankind. †

A Summary of the Social Justice Principles in the Creation Accounts

The truths revealed in the first chapters of *Genesis* lead to these important principles for **social justice**:

- Because human beings are made in the image and likeness of God, each human life has great worth and must be protected. Therefore societies must not place greater value on prestige, power, or material goods than on human life.
- Because our true happiness comes from God and from God alone, human beings cannot find the happiness they long for by pursuing things that do not lead us to God. Societies must not promote the belief that true happiness can be found in things such as fame, success, or the accumulation of material goods but must instead promote values that emphasize the inherent worth of each individual.
- Because God intends that human beings form communities of love and justice that work together for the common good, we must have the same concern for other people’s welfare that we do for our own. Therefore societies must be committed to the common good; power and wealth must not be concentrated in the hands of a privileged few.

These principles are foundational to the Church’s mission to be an instrument of God’s justice in the world.

Article

2 The Social Dimension of God's Plan of Salvation

The heavens proclaim God's justice;
all peoples see his glory.

(Psalm 97:6)

How do we know that our God demands justice? Human beings can know God with certainty by his works and by our own use of human reason. But Original Sin has clouded our reason and our ability to know God through the natural world, so he has also gradually revealed himself and his saving plan through mighty works and words. This **Divine Revelation** is communicated through Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. Together **Scripture** and **Tradition** “make up a single sacred deposit of the Word of God” (*Dei Verbum*, 10; in *CCC*, 97), through which the Church comes to know the one, true God and understand his will.

Scripture and Tradition reveal how God has been at work throughout human history to save humanity from sin and death and restore our original holiness and justice. The Church calls this pattern of saving events **salvation history**. The **covenants** that God makes with humanity are a crucial part of salvation history, and they help us to understand how God's saving plan unfolds. This article reviews those covenants, pointing out their social dimensions. God is just and calls us to love others and to build communities that practice justice.

The Covenants with Noah and Abraham

The covenants of the Old Testament, even though they were often made between God and a particular person, reveal God's respect for all life and his concern for justice. Consider the first explicit covenant in the Old Testament, the Covenant God made with Noah (see Genesis 9:1–17). This was the heart of that Covenant: “I will establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all bodily creatures be destroyed by the waters of a flood; there shall not be another flood to devastate the earth. . . . This is the sign that I am giving for all ages to come, of the covenant between me and you and every living creature with you: I set my bow in the clouds to serve as a sign of the covenant between me and



Divine Revelation

God's self-communication through which he makes known the mystery of his divine plan. Divine Revelation is a gift accomplished by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit through the words and deeds of salvation history. It is most fully realized in the Passion, death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Jesus Christ.

Scripture(s)

Generally, the term for any sacred writing. For Christians, the Old and New Testaments that make up the Bible and are recognized as the Word of God.

Tradition

This word (from the Latin meaning “to hand on”) refers to the process of passing on the Gospel message. Tradition, which began with the oral communication of the Gospel by the Apostles, was written down in the Scriptures, is handed down and lived out in the life of the Church, and is interpreted by the bishops of the Church in union with the Pope under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

salvation history

The pattern of specific salvific events in human history in which God clearly reveals his presence and saving actions. Salvation was accomplished once and for all through Jesus Christ, a truth foreshadowed and revealed throughout the Old Testament.

covenant

A solemn agreement between human beings or between God and a human being in which mutual commitments are made.

the earth” (9:11–13). This Covenant clearly shows God’s love and respect for all life, because God extended its saving promise not just to Noah but to all living beings for as long as the world lasts.

The Covenant with Noah also placed additional social demands on Noah and all human beings who have come after him:

For your own lifeblood, too, I will demand an accounting: from every animal I will demand it, and from man in regard to his fellow man I will demand an accounting for human life.

If anyone sheds the blood of man,
by man shall his blood be shed;
For in the image of God
has man been made.

(9:5–6)

In these verses we see that God calls all human beings to respect the lives of other people. If you harm another person (shed his or her blood), God will hold you accountable for that death or injury. The Covenant with Noah calls us to respect and care for all human life.

The next Old Testament covenant is the Covenant God made with Abraham. In this Covenant God began the formation of his Chosen People. Variations of this Covenant are found in Genesis 12:1–3, 15:1–22, and 17:1–22. These passages describe the three promises that God made to

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Abraham: (1) the promise of numerous descendants who would become a great nation, (2) the promise of a land for Abraham and his descendants to call their own, and (3) the promise that “all the communities of the earth / shall find blessing” in Abraham (12:3). The third promise is understood in two ways, and both understandings have important social dimensions. First, it is understood as a promise that Abraham and his descendants would be a blessing to other nations and groups of people through their faith in the one, true God. Through the example they set for others in living out their faith, they have also shown other people how to live in just and peaceful societies.

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This early Christian image (circa AD 330) depicts both the Nativity and the sacrifice of Isaac. Why do you think these two biblical accounts were selected to appear side by side in this image?

Second, Christians understand it as a promise that has been fulfilled through Jesus Christ forever. Christ is a direct descendent of Abraham (see Matthew 1:1). God has fully revealed himself in and through him. Through Christ's Passion, death, Resurrection, and Ascension, all people, of every race and nation, are “blessed.” Through faith in Christ, any person can regain his or her original holiness and justice and live in loving communion with others. Christ's disciples will form the Church and she, like the Israelites, will be an example for all in building communities of justice and peace.

The Sinai Covenant

The next Old Testament covenant is the Covenant God made with the Israelites at Mount Sinai. The Sinai Covenant, also called the Mosaic Covenant, was made during the Exodus from Egypt. The Exodus itself was an event with important implications for social justice. After settling in Egypt as welcome immigrants, the Israelites had become enslaved by



Old Law

Divine Law revealed in the Old Testament, summarized in the Ten Commandments. Also called the Law of Moses. It is succeeded by the New Law of the Gospels.

the Egyptian empire. When the Israelites cried out to God, he had compassion for them because of their unjust suffering. God sent Moses as his messenger to confront Pharaoh and delivered the Israelites from their enslavement with mighty deeds (see Exodus, chapters 1–15). From the Exodus accounts, we learn that God is on the side of those who have been unjustly treated—often called the oppressed—and that nations or groups that treat others unjustly lose his favor.

As part of the Sinai Covenant, God gave the Israelites laws to live by. According to the biblical account, Moses

Pray It!

Prayers for Justice in the Psalms

Many of the Psalms proclaim God's desire for justice. Here are two examples. Perhaps you can make these Psalms part of your own prayer.

The LORD rules forever,
 has set up a throne for judgment.
 It is God who governs the world with justice,
 who judges the peoples with fairness.
 The LORD is a stronghold for the oppressed,
 a stronghold in times of trouble.
 (Psalm 9:8–10)

Happy those whose help is Jacob's God,
 whose hope is in the LORD, their God,
 The maker of heaven and earth,
 the seas and all that is in them,
 Who keeps faith forever,
 secures justice for the oppressed,
 gives food to the hungry.
 The LORD sets prisoners free;
 the LORD gives sight to the blind.
 The LORD raises up those who are bowed down;
 the LORD loves the righteous.
 The LORD protects the stranger,
 sustains the orphan and the widow,
 but thwarts the way of the wicked.
 The LORD shall reign forever,
 your God, Zion, through all generations!
 Hallelujah!

(Psalm 146:5–10)

delivered the laws to the Israelites at Mount Sinai (see Exodus, chapters 19–40), delivered another version of laws sometime later from the meeting tent (see the Book of Leviticus), and summarized the laws again before his death (see the Book of Deuteronomy). These laws are summarized by the Ten Commandments (see Exodus, chapter 20) and are often called the **Old Law** to distinguish them from the **New Law** of Christ. Many Scripture scholars believe that these collections of laws developed over many years, even centuries, before they were recorded as we have them in the Bible.

God gave his Law to the Israelites to teach them how to live as holy people, his Chosen People. The Old Law contains laws about worship of God, ritual purity, sexual morality, and just behavior in society. The laws governing just behavior are of particular interest to our study of social justice and are discussed in article 5, “Social Teaching in the Old Testament.” Here is a brief summary of some those laws:

- One must not cause another person physical harm. If someone does injure or kill another human being, even accidentally or through negligence, a just recompense must be made for the harm done.
- One must act fairly in financial affairs and must not profit from someone else's misfortune.
- The natural resources people need to survive must be fairly distributed. When the ownership of natural resources becomes unbalanced, they must periodically be redistributed.
- One must treat foreigners, widows, orphans, and other people in poverty with compassion and generosity.

The Old Law was a step in God's plan, the first stage of revealed law. It was meant to teach the Israelites how to live holy and just lives. But it was insufficient on its own to bring



New Law

Divine Law revealed in the New Testament through the life and teaching of Jesus Christ and through the witness and teaching of the Apostles. The New Law perfects the Old Law and brings it to fulfillment. Also called the Law of Love.

Of the many events from Moses' life portrayed in this image, why are the Commandments the central focus?



salvation to humanity. Saint Paul called the Old Law a disciplinarian; it prepared us for the fullness of salvation that is found through faith in Jesus Christ:

Before faith came, we were held in custody under law, confined for the faith that was to be revealed. Consequently, the law was our disciplinarian for Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a disciplinarian. For through faith you are all children of God in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:23–26) ✚

Article 3 The Social Dimension of the Paschal Mystery

A priest who was well known both as a pastor and as an advocate for social justice was sometimes asked about his commitment to social justice. “Your stances on social justice issues sometimes make people uncomfortable, even angry” said one questioner. “Shouldn’t you just be concerned about people’s spiritual lives? Why do you need to mix politics with religion?”

The priest had a reply ready. He stated:

Christ came to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. He challenged the people of his time to be compassion givers, justice builders, and peace makers, which made him unpopular with some people. His obedience to his Father’s will made it possible for all people to know the peace and joy of the Kingdom of God. And even though we will know the perfection of the Kingdom only when we get to Heaven, God doesn’t ask us to wait until we get to Heaven to have a taste of his Kingdom. The Holy Spirit empowers us to participate in building the Kingdom of God and to be its ambassadors. Our Baptism calls us to cooperate with God’s grace as compassion givers, justice builders, and peace makers. It is impossible for true faith to be just a private faith; true faith always has a social dimension.

Salvation and Social Justice

Some Christians insist that faith in Christ does not have a social dimension. They believe that Christ’s Passion, death, Resurrection, and Ascension are for only our individual sal-

vation. These Christians believe that faith is a personal matter and that the Church should not get involved with social issues. For them, Christian morality is concerned solely with personal moral issues, and social justice has no place in Church teaching. Though these Christians may be well intentioned, they have failed to understand a central truth of Christian faith: God's plan of salvation is both personal and communal.

Let's quickly review the essential elements of the culmination, or complete fulfillment, of God's plan for our salvation. Out of his great love for us, when the time was right, God the Father took the initiative to send his only Son to save us from sin and death and restore our holiness and justice. The Son of God, the Eternal Word who is one with the Father, assumed a human nature without losing his divine nature and was born of the Virgin Mary. The mystery of the Incarnation is the union of the human and divine natures in one Divine Person, Jesus Christ. As a teacher and a healer, Christ revealed the Kingdom of God. All of his life teaches us about God's saving plan: his poverty, his humility, his prayer, who he lived with, who he called to be his disciples, his teaching and preaching, his healings, his exorcisms, his acceptance of the cross . . . everything. In the moral realm, he gave us a New Law (summarized in the Sermon on the Mount; see Matthew, chapters 5–7) to teach humanity how to live as citizens of the Kingdom, completing the instruction that began with the Old Law.

The New Testament reveals that God's plan is fulfilled through the life and work of Jesus Christ, especially through his Passion, death, Resurrection, and Ascension. We call this the **Paschal Mystery**. As true God and true man, Jesus Christ is the one and only perfect mediator between God and humanity. He freely offered himself for our salvation in obedience to his Father's will. His suffering and his cruel death—real in every respect—bought forgiveness for the sins of all humanity. His Resurrection—a historical reality confirmed by his disciples who encountered the Risen Christ—affirms that everything Jesus taught and promised is true, particularly his promise that those who believe in him will conquer death and share in his resurrected life. At his Ascension, Jesus, still retaining his humanity, entered Heaven and prepared the way for the coming of the Holy Spirit. The Holy



Paschal Mystery

The work of salvation accomplished by Jesus Christ mainly through his Passion, death, Resurrection, and Ascension.

Spirit is poured out by Christ on the members of the Church to call us to conversion, to empower us for service, and to help us to grow in holiness. At the end of time, Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead; he will reward the just who accepted his grace and punish the unjust who refused to cooperate with his grace.

The Paschal Mystery is the fulfillment of the New Covenant that God makes with all people. The New Covenant fulfills all the promises of the Old Covenant. In the New Covenant, God extends the forgiveness of sin and the promise of eternal life to people of every race and nation. For people to enter into the New Covenant, they must place their faith in Jesus Christ, be baptized, and follow Christ's New Law of Love.

The New Law of Love is where the social dimension of the Gospel enters, for the New Law of Christ requires us to be compassionate toward others and to live justly. It requires that we respect the life and dignity of every person, share our material goods to help other people in need, and build just societies that protect the essential rights of all people. Specific teachings of the New Law that pertain to these responsibilities are covered in article 7, "Social Teaching in the New Testament." For now, reflect on these two New Testament quotations about living justly:

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. (Matthew 7:21)

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well," but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead. (James 2:14–17)



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How does Jesus call us to act with love and justice through his teachings and the Paschal Mystery?

Jesus' Teachings on Social Justice

Throughout his active ministry, through his words and actions, Jesus' teachings on social justice challenged many of the contemporary norms regarding the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless, the "haves and have-nots." In Jesus' time, it was believed that wealth was a sign of special favor from God, and that sickness and suffering were retribution from God for sin. Jesus instead taught that the wealthy must not see themselves as superior or favored by God, but must instead share their material goods with the poor (see Luke 16:19–25) and that those in power have a responsibility to use their power in service to others (see Matthew 20:25–27). In the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–25), Jesus tells of a rich man who dressed in fine clothes and dined on sumptuous meals every day while a beggar named Lazarus lay at his door hungry and sick. When the two die, Lazarus rejoices with the angels while the rich man is tormented with suffering, because he refused to share his material comforts during his life on earth. On another occasion, when there was disagreement among the Apostles about who was the greatest among them, Jesus reminded them that unlike those in the world who lord their power over others, they are called to greatness by serving others. He tells them, "Whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave" (Matthew 20:25). In other words, whoever humbly serves others will be truly great in God's Kingdom.

There are also countless examples in the Gospels of Jesus caring for those who are poor or overlooked in society, and of his call to us to do the same. Jesus cures the blind and the lame (see, for example, Matthew 15:30–32), he shows mercy to the sinner (see, for example, Luke 19:1–10), and he repeatedly calls us to treat others with the same love and mercy he shows us (see, for example, John 13:34).

Individual Salvation but a Communal Process

The Paschal Mystery teaches us that our salvation has both individual and communal dimensions. The individual dimension flows from the truth that each person's salvation is based on his or her personal decisions and actions. Each of us has to decide to cooperate with God's grace and put our faith in Christ and commit to being a member of the Body of Christ. Each of us must make decisions to participate in the Sacraments, make good moral choices, serve others, and

live a just life. No one can decide this for us, and no one can completely take this choice away from us (although someone could make it more difficult).

The communal dimension of salvation flows from the truth that the process of salvation is based in community. When people respond to God's call and become members of the Church, they commit to following Christ and become part of a communion with one another, a communion that is rooted in union with God. The members of the Church rely on one another's support in living holy lives. They participate in the Sacraments as a community, and through the Sacraments they are united as one family. Guided by the Holy Spirit, the members of the Church are a loving community that models for the world what it is like to live as a just and peaceful society. The decision to follow Christ is an individual one, but the result of that personal decision is that we belong to and participate in a community, the Body of Christ.

As members of the Church, we continue Christ's saving mission, reaching out to the entire human community. Our commitment to social justice flows directly from this mission. In 2005 Pope Benedict XVI said:

As the years went by and the Church spread further afield, the exercise of charity became established as one of her essential activities, along with the administration of the sacraments and the proclamation of the word: love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind, is as essential to her 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. (*God Is Love [Deus Caritas Est]*, 22)

Catholic Wisdom

Salvation Has Always Been Considered a Social Reality

Pope Benedict XVI offers the following short reflection on the communal nature of salvation.

The *Letter to the Hebrews* speaks of a "city" (cf. 11:10, 16; 12:22; 13:14) and therefore of communal salvation. Consistently with this view, sin is understood by the [Church] Fathers as the destruction of the unity of the human race, as fragmentation and division. . . . Hence "redemption" appears as the reestablishment of unity, in which we come together once more in a union that begins to take shape in the world community of believers. (*On Christian Hope*, 14)



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Thus, a commitment to social justice, when it is properly understood, is an essential part of Christian life. It was part of God's original plan for humanity and is taught in both his Old Law and his New Law. God expects us to care for the good of others just as much as we care for our own good. However challenging or uncomfortable it might make us, God even expects us to sacrifice our comfort, our wealth, and perhaps even our lives to protect other people's lives and rights and to ensure that their essential human needs are met. ✚

Article

4 The Church: Communion and a Just Community

People who participate in church activities often experience close relationships with the groups they are involved in. These relationships can develop during retreats, conferences, work camps, Mass, and so on. We are able to develop these relationships through God's grace. Our communion with one another should resemble the communion of the Holy **Trinity**. The Three Divine Persons of the Trinity, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are in perfect, loving relationship with one another. Through God's grace the Church is the sacrament of the Holy Trinity's communion with humanity; that is, the Church is both a sign of true communion and the cause of our communion. Through God's grace the Church is a true communion of persons, a community of love, truth, and justice.

"For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20).



Trinity

From the Latin *trinus*, meaning "threefold," referring to the central mystery of the Christian faith that God exists as a communion of three distinct and interrelated Divine Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity is a mystery that is inaccessible to human reason alone and is known through Divine Revelation only.

The Sacrament of Salvation

Church

The term *Church* has three inseparable meanings: (1) the entire People of God throughout the world; (2) the diocese, which is also known as the local Church; and (3) the assembly of believers gathered for the celebration of the liturgy, especially the Eucharist. In the Nicene Creed, the Church is recognized as One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic—traits that together are referred to as “marks of the Church.”

Christ founded the **Church** as both the means and the goal of his saving mission. The Church is the *means* God uses for fulfilling his plan of salvation because the members of the Church witness to the saving power of the Paschal Mystery. When Christians practice their love for one another and their compassion for those who are suffering and in need, they are witnessing to Christ’s love alive in their lives. This witness helps others to understand what the love of God truly is and encourages them to put their faith in Christ. Loving and compassionate witness includes speaking out for justice and advocating for moral issues as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

But the Church, when she is brought to perfection by grace of God, is also the *goal* of God’s plan. When Christians practice all the things that Jesus requires in the New Law—sacrificial love, forgiveness, prayer, a commitment to live justly, and so on—their actions are signs that the seed of the Kingdom of God on earth has been planted in the Church. When God brings this seed to its full fruition, there will be no injustice: no hunger, no inequality, no prejudice, no poverty, and no disrespect for God’s gift of life. At the end of time, when the Kingdom of God is fully realized, all the People of God will be gathered together in communion with God and with one another in the perfected Church.

Another way of saying this is that “the Church in this world is the sacrament of salvation, the sign and the instrument of the communion of God and men” (CCC, 780). A sacrament is both a sign and a cause of God’s **grace**. As the sacrament of salvation, the Church is both a sign of God’s saving power and the cause that makes God’s saving power real in the world.

Some people disagree with the idea that the Church helps to bring about the growth of the Kingdom of God here on earth. They point out times in the Church’s history when members of the Church persecuted others, sometimes committing

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Ecumenism and Social Justice

Despite differences in doctrinal beliefs, Catholics and other Christians have found common ground in working and advocating for justice and peace. By doing so we grow in our understanding and respect for our brothers and sisters in Christ. Reflect on this passage from the Second Vatican Council's *Decree on Ecumenism (Unitatis Redintegratio)*, which urges Catholics to work together with other Christians on social issues:

In these days when cooperation in social matters is so widespread . . . cooperation among Christians vividly expresses the relationship which in fact already unites them, and it sets in clearer relief the features of Christ the Servant. This cooperation, which has already begun in many countries, should be developed more and more, particularly in regions where a social and technical evolution is taking place be it in a just evaluation of the dignity of the human person, the establishment of the blessings of peace, the application of Gospel principles to social life, the advancement of the arts and sciences in a truly Christian spirit, or also in the use of various remedies to relieve the afflictions of our times such as famine and natural disasters, illiteracy and poverty, housing shortage and the unequal distribution of wealth. All believers in Christ can, through this cooperation, be led to acquire a better knowledge and appreciation of one another, and so pave the way to Christian unity. (12)

horrible atrocities in the name of the Church. They point to leaders in the Church who have committed terrible sins. They point to ordinary people in their parishes who sometimes act unjustly or unkindly. All of these things have been true and are a scandal to the mission of the Church. Sin is a reality among the members of the Church; thus the Church on earth is an imperfect taste of the perfect communion that awaits us in the Kingdom of God. Still, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Church is the seed and the beginning of the Kingdom on earth and gives us a glimpse of the Kingdom of God, which will come in fullness at the end of time.

Just as Jesus is one Divine Person with two natures, human and divine, so too the Church is one reality formed of two dimensions: the human and the divine. Knowing that the Church has a visible reality and a spiritual reality is



grace

The free and undeserved gift of God's loving and active presence in the universe and in our lives, empowering us to respond to his call and to live as his adopted sons and daughters. Grace restores our loving communion with the Holy Trinity, lost through sin.

essential in understanding how the Church can be a sacrament of the Kingdom of God despite the sin of her members. Any person—whether a believer in the Church or not—can see the visible signs of a hierarchical society: church buildings; the Pope, bishops, priests, and deacons; people attending Mass; groups doing service projects; families praying together; and so on. But only a person with faith can accept the invisible but very real spiritual dimension of the Church. In the spiritual dimension, the Holy Trinity is at work to save and make holy the human race—and God will not fail in this saving work.

Describing the Church's Communion

Many of the ways we describe the Church express some aspect of the communion of the members of the Church with one another and with God. The word *Church* means “convocation.” A convocation is a group of people who have been called together for a special purpose. The Church is called together by the Holy Spirit to be the People of God. As the People of God, we are fed by the Body of Christ, the Eucharist, so that we might become the living Body of Christ. The Body of Christ as a description of the Church comes from the New Testament epistles. In First Corinthians, chapter 12, Saint Paul uses the analogy of the human body to explain that the members of the Church must work together for the common good just as the different parts of the human body all work together. The Letter to the Ephesians states that Christ is the head of this Body: “Rather, living the truth in love, we should grow in every way into him who is the head, Christ” (4:15). Thus the Church lives for and with Christ, and he lives with and in the Church. Describing the Church as the Body of Christ helps us to understand that she has diversity among her members and their functions and that these diverse members work together, supporting one another in building a community of love and justice, and continuing the mission of Jesus Christ.

The Church is also sometimes called the Mystical Body of Christ. Adding the word *mystical* to the description emphasizes that the Church has an unseen, spiritual dimension. The Church also includes all the saints who have died before us and are now with God in Heaven. The members of the Church alive at the present time are not just



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This painting depicts the Mystical Body of Christ, the saints both in Heaven and on earth. What does the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ imply about how we should treat one another?

in communion with one another and with Jesus Christ, our head; we are in communion with all the holy members of the Church who have died before us.

Another popular name for the Church is the Family of God. This is another biblical image that comes from the New Testament writings. It is based on the truth that God is our heavenly Father and that his only Son, Jesus Christ, is our brother. This means that the members of the Church must

Pray It!

Pope Benedict Prays for Peace and Justice

Pope Benedict XVI ended an Advent talk with this beautiful prayer for peace and justice. Let it be a model for your own personal prayer.

Dear friends, in this preparation for Christmas, now at hand, the Church's prayer for the fulfillment of the hopes of peace, salvation and justice which the world today urgently needs becomes more intense. Let us ask God to grant that violence be overcome by the power of love, that opposition give way to reconciliation and that the desire to oppress be transformed into the desire for forgiveness, justice, and peace. . . . May peace be in our hearts so that they are open to the action of God's grace. . . . May all members of the family community, especially children, the elderly, the weakest, feel the warmth of this feast and may it extend subsequently to all the days in the year. Amen! ("General Audience," December 19, 2007)

treat one another as beloved brothers and sisters. Jesus set the standard for this: “For whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, and sister, and mother” (Matthew 12:50).

Summary

Because the Church is a true communion, building just relationships and working for social justice are essential elements of her identity. As a sign of the Kingdom of God on earth, the Church must be a just community where the common good is a lived reality. In this way the Church is a teacher for the rest of society, showing others what it is like to live together in compassion, justice, and peace. She continues Christ’s mission by being a social conscience for the world. †

Part Review

1. What are three truths about the nature of justice that are taught through the Creation accounts in Scripture?
2. How do the accounts of Cain and Abel and of Noah and the Flood demonstrate the impact of Original Sin on society?
3. Describe the social dimension of God’s Covenant with Abraham.
4. What important truth about social justice is taught through the Exodus event?
5. Define the Paschal Mystery.
6. What is the social dimension associated with our salvation?
7. The Church is both the means and the goal of Christ’s saving mission. What are the social justice implications of this truth?
8. Describe the Church in two ways that emphasize her social nature.

The Social Teaching of the Church

Throughout her history the Church has worked tirelessly to protect human life, defend the common good, and promote justice in society. Consider that since the late 1800s, popes have written numerous encyclicals addressing social justice concerns; bishops have advocated with governments about life and justice issues; and priests, religious, and laypeople have worked together to defend the right to life, racial equality, workers' rights, peace, and many other important social concerns. The Catholic Church, through her various organizations and ministries, has provided more schools, hospitals, and programs to fight hunger and poverty than any other non-governmental institution. Catholics can be proud of their history in promoting social justice and working for the common good.

The Church's action for justice flows from Church teaching on social justice themes. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Magisterium—the bishops of the world in union with the Pope—apply God's truth to the social concerns of the day. Changing political and economic systems call for further prayer and study leading to a new application of God's truth to address these new situations. This is especially true in the last two centuries, as rapid technological progress has brought about major changes in health and medicine, political systems, economics, and warfare.

The articles in this part address the following topics:

- Article 5: Social Teaching in the Old Testament (page 32)
- Article 6: The Justice Message of the Prophets (page 36)
- Article 7: Social Teaching in the New Testament (page 38)
- Article 8: The Social Doctrine of the Church: Papal Social Teaching (page 44)
- Article 9: The Social Doctrine of the Church: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (page 51)
- Article 10: Defining *Justice* (page 55)

Article 5 Social Teaching in the Old Testament

The term *social justice* has come into frequent use only in the last century, but the concept of social justice is ancient. The Old Law of the Old Testament had many laws dealing with moral questions that today we would classify as social justice issues. This article gives a brief overview of the social justice themes found in these laws.

Teachings in the Old Law

The specific laws that compose the Old Law are collected mainly in the Books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. As mentioned in article 2, “The Social Dimension of God’s Plan of Salvation,” these books contain laws about proper worship of God, laws about diet, laws about purity and impurity, laws about sexual morality, and laws governing just behavior in society. Through these various laws, God was teaching the Israelites how to be a holy people—that is, how to live in true, loving communion with him and with one another.

Though all the laws in the Old Law have a communal dimension, the laws governing just behavior in society most clearly reflect the principles that later develop into the social teaching of Christ and the Church. By identifying the major themes that emerge from these laws, we see the foundational social justice principles that Jesus elaborated on in the New Law. This article organizes the laws governing just behavior in society into five themes: respect for human life, respect for private property, honesty in business, the just distribution of wealth, and special concern for the vulnerable.

Respect for Human Life (Exodus 21:12–32, Numbers 35:12–30)

A section of the laws in the Books of Exodus and Numbers gives the penalties for causing bodily harm or killing another person. The basic principle in these laws is that the penalty must be equal to the crime. So if someone deliberately murders another person, the murderer is sentenced to death (unless the person who is killed is a slave). Or if someone intentionally injures another person, the attacker is punished with the same injury. This is where the well-known phrase

“an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” comes from (see Exodus 21:23–25).

The uniqueness of these laws is that the punishments prescribed were less severe than the typical punishments at the time these laws were written. For example, if you lived during this time and someone killed a member of your family, you would most likely retaliate by attacking and killing several members of the murderer’s family—or even the whole family. Or if someone blinded your brother in a fight, you would avenge the injury by killing his attacker. By making the punishment equal to the crime, the Old Law limited vengeful practices and taught a greater respect for human life.

Social Justice in the Proverbs

The Book of Proverbs has many short sayings that illustrate the Old Testament’s perspective on social justice. Here is a sampling:

False scales are an abomination to the LORD,
but a full weight is his delight. (11:1)

He who trusts his riches will fall,
but like green leaves the just flourish. (11:28)

Better a poor man who walks in his integrity
than he who is crooked in his ways and rich. (19:1)

He who has compassion on the poor lends to the LORD,
and he will repay him for his good deed. (19:17)

Injure not the poor because they are poor,
nor crush the needy at the gate;
For the LORD will defend their cause,
and will plunder the lives of those who plunder them.
(22:22–23)

If your enemy be hungry, give him food to eat,
if he be thirsty, give him to drink. (25:21)

Evil men understand nothing of justice,
but those who seek the LORD understand all. (28:5)

Respect for Private Property (Exodus 21:33–22:14, 23:4-5; Deuteronomy 22:1–4, 24:6)

A number of laws in the Old Law protect private property. They give penalties for stealing or causing damage to someone else's property, particularly harm to livestock, fields, orchards, and vineyards. Livestock, fields, orchards, and vineyards were the possessions necessary for a family to feed and clothe itself; by protecting these things, the laws protected a family's ability to provide for itself. Thus the Old Law taught the Israelites that the right to private property is a basic human right necessary for a person's or family's survival. But we should also note that the right to private property is not an absolute right in the Old Law. This point is explicitly made in Deuteronomy 24:6: "No one shall take a hand mill or even its upper stone as a pledge for debt, for he would be taking the debtor's sustenance as a pledge" (a hand mill is used to grind flour for bread).

Honesty in Business (Exodus 22:24–26, 23:6–8; Leviticus 19:35–36, 25:36–37; Deuteronomy 24:10–15, 25:13–16)

Several laws in the Old Law call for honesty in business practices. These laws cover a variety of topics. For example, scales were often used in business transactions because people were paid in grains or precious metal for goods and services. So there are laws commanding that honest weights be used in scales. There are also laws covering the making of loans. They forbid charging interest when making a loan to another Israelite. And if an Israelite took another Israelite's cloak as collateral for a loan, the cloak had to be returned by nightfall so the borrower would not freeze at night. There are also laws against taking bribes.

Through these laws the Old Law taught a basic social justice principle that Christ perfected in the New Law: the common good takes precedence over an individual person's right to accumulate wealth. People come before money; we must not practice dishonesty or take advantage of another person's need to make ourselves richer.



Just Distribution of Wealth (Leviticus, chapter 25; Deuteronomy 15:1–11)

We now come to the section of the Old Law that contains the laws governing the forgiveness of debts and the redistribution of land. Deuteronomy, chapter 15, commands that in every seventh (or sabbatical) year, any financial debt that one Israelite owes another is either completely or partially forgiven (it is unclear exactly what the law required). Leviticus, chapter 25, contains an even more challenging law. Every fiftieth (or jubilee) year, all the land of Israel is to be returned to the families that originally owned it. The law required landowners to sell any land purchased in the last fifty years back to the family that originally owned it. In this way the land in Israel would be fairly distributed among the Israelites once again.

Though scholars and historians are uncertain how—or even if—these laws were observed, what the laws teach is clear: every Israelite should have access to the material goods needed to live a dignified life. The laws extend special consideration to poor Israelites to help them keep or obtain the material possessions they need to earn their own living. It is God’s will that the people who have more wealth than they need share with those who are struggling to survive. The basis for these laws is the religious truth that God is the ultimate “owner” of the goods of the earth and that human beings should never consider themselves the permanent owners of the earth’s resources: “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity; for the land is mine [God’s], and you are but aliens who have become my tenants” (Leviticus 25:23).

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The Missionaries of Charity, a religious order founded by Mother Teresa, devote their lives to the care of the poor and vulnerable.



prophet

A person God chooses to speak his message of salvation. In the Bible, primarily a communicator of a divine message of repentance to the Chosen People, not necessarily a person who predicted the future.

The prophet Jeremiah called the people of Israel to repent and be faithful to their Covenant with God. What message would a prophet of God have for us today?



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Special Concern for the Vulnerable (Exodus 22:20–26, Leviticus 25:35–41, Deuteronomy 24:17–22)

The fifth theme is implied in the other themes but is also stated explicitly in laws found in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. These laws command the Israelites not to take advantage of the most vulnerable members of their society and, even more, to make special provisions for their welfare. Here is the version of the law from Deuteronomy:

You shall not violate the rights of the alien or of the orphan, nor take the clothing of a widow as a pledge. For, remember, you were once slaves in Egypt, and the LORD, your God, ransomed you from there; that is why I command you to observe this rule. (24:17–18)

In ancient Israelite and other Middle Eastern cultures, a person's survival depended on his or her membership in a tribe or extended family. Shepherding and farming requires a group of people working together at the many tasks required to produce food, clothing, and shelter and to protect themselves from thieves and marauders. Aliens (travelers or immigrants), orphans, and widows were therefore at risk because they had no family to provide for them and protect them. Thus God commanded the Israelites to be especially attentive to their rights and to leave food for them in the fields, orchards, and vineyards.

Through these laws the Old Law taught the Israelites that it is sinful for a society to take advantage of poor and vulnerable people and sinful not to provide for their basic needs. This theme is continued in the New Law and becomes one of the distinguishing characteristics of the early Church. †

Article 6 The Justice Message of the Prophets

The **prophets** of the Old Testament were the guardians of the Old Law. When the Israelites failed to keep the Commandments of the Sinai Covenant, the prophets spoke for God, reminding kings and peasants what the Law required them to do. The prophets called the Israelites to

put their total trust in God, to turn away from false gods and goddesses, to be authentic in their worship, to repent of their sins and turn back to God, and to practice justice in their relationships with one another. This chart lists key passages of the social justice teachings of the prophets. †

Key Passages Highlighting the Social Justice Message of the Prophets	
Passage	Summary of Prophet's Message
Isaiah 1:11–16, 21–23; 2:13–15	God condemns the kingdoms of Israel and Judah: Their religious observances are empty of meaning because they have failed to act justly and they mistreat people who are poor and vulnerable.
Isaiah 58:5–11	God declares the fasting he desires is the freedom of oppressed people and the care of those in need.
Jeremiah 22:1–17	God warns the kings of Judah that he will bring their kingdom to ruin if they do not act justly, care for the vulnerable, respect human life, and give workers their fair wages.
Hosea 12:8–9	God condemns those who use dishonest scales in order to increase their wealth.
Amos 2:6–8, 3:9–10, 4:1–3, 5:7–15, 6:4–7, 8:4–7	In a series of prophecies spoken by Amos, God condemns the mistreatment of people who are poor and vulnerable, material greed, bribery, corruption, and the arrogance of wealthy people who ignore the human needs around them.
Amos 5:23–24	In this well-known quotation, God tells the Israelites: “Away with your noisy songs! I will not listen to the melodies of your harps. But if you would offer me holocausts, then let justice surge like water, and goodness like an unending stream.”
Micah 2:1–3, 3:1–4	God condemns those who develop schemes to take other people's lands and leaders who do evil to their people.
Micah 4:1–7	In this optimistic prophecy from Micah, God promises a future in which he will bring justice and peace to the world's peoples.
Micah 6:8	In this inspirational quotation, Micah proclaims: “You have been told, O man, what is good, / and what the Lord requires of you: / Only to do the right and to love goodness, / and to walk humbly with your God.”



Article

7 Social Teaching in the New Testament

synoptic Gospels

From the Greek for “seeing the whole together,” the name given to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, because they are similar in style and content.

“I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). What is the abundant life that Jesus talks about in the Gospel of John? Is he talking only about our resurrected life in Heaven? Is he talking only about our spiritual life? In speaking about this passage, Pope John Paul II said:

New life, the gift of the risen Lord, then spreads far and wide, flowing into every sphere of human experience: the family, the school, the workplace, everyday activities and leisure time.

That new life begins to flower here and now. The sign of its presence and growth is love. . . . Life flourishes in the gift of self to others, in accordance with each person’s vocation. . . . so that all can share the gifts they have received, in a spirit of solidarity, especially with the poor and the needy.

The Two Great Commandments

Jesus summarized the New Law in his two Great Commandments, which are found in all three of the **synoptic Gospels**. This is how they appear in the Gospel of Mark:

Jesus replied, “The first is this: ‘Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (12:29–31)

The first Great Commandment places God at the center of our life. All of our thoughts, attitudes, and actions should flow from our love of God. As we have seen in previous articles, it is God’s will that we treat every human life with ultimate respect, distribute the earth’s resources fairly, and live in just societies. Further, the second Great Commandment emphasizes the social justice principle of the common good. If we truly love our neighbor as ourselves, we will take action to protect essential human rights and ensure that all people have what they need to live with dignity. Christ’s Great Commandments are another foundation for the Church’s commitment to social justice.

The person who is “begotten from above” thus becomes able to “see the kingdom” of God (cf. Jn 3:3), and to take part in building up social structures more worthy of every individual and of all humanity, in promoting and defending the culture of life against all threats of death. (“Message of the Holy Father Pope John Paul II for the VIII World Youth Day,” 5)

Pope John Paul II taught us that Jesus’ words mean that we need not wait until Heaven to know the abundant life. The new life we receive from Christ calls us to put love into practice through acts of charity and the building of just social structures. For he is not Lord of a Kingdom that begins in Heaven—his Kingdom is made present here and now through the Church, which is the seed and the beginning of his Kingdom on earth. This article highlights teachings from the New Testament that are foundational to the Christian’s call to “take part in building up [just] social structures.”

Jesus did not abolish the Old Law; rather his New Law has its foundation in the Old Law. The examples given in this article show how the New Law fulfills the Old Law so perfectly that the New Law reveals the Old Law’s true meaning. Indeed because Jesus fulfilled the Old Law perfectly, he took upon himself all the sins against it and redeemed them, making salvation possible for all people. The social justice teachings of the New Law are one aspect of the fulfillment of the Old Law.

Teachings on Human Dignity

In teaching us about human dignity, Jesus started with the laws from the Old Law and commanded us to go beyond them. In the Sermon on the Mount, he says: “You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, ‘You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment” (Matthew 5:21–22). A few verses later he says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on [your] right cheek, turn the other one to him as well” (5:38–39).

Why would Jesus command these difficult things of his followers? The reason is because in these teachings he asks

us to see other human beings from his divine perspective. Jesus sees his own image in every person and loves every person no matter how evil the acts he or she commits. He asks his followers to do the same. This is one of the most foundational principles of social justice: we must see the image of God in every human person and therefore must love all people as best we can, no exceptions allowed.

Seeing the image of God in other people is true even for our enemies. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus also says: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust” (Matthew 5:43–45). Jesus demonstrated this commitment to love his enemies by refusing to do harm to them, even when he was attacked, tortured, and killed. At his arrest, when one of his followers attacked those who had come for him, Jesus said: “Put your sword back into its sheath, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot call upon my Father and he will not provide [for] me?” (Matthew 26:52–53). And at his death, in a tremendous act of love, Jesus forgave those who crucified him, saying, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). In the New Law, Jesus

Jesus’ healing of the lepers reveals to us the dignity of all human beings. Who might be considered the lepers in our world?

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teaches us that mercy and forgiveness are an essential part of God's justice.

Jesus also teaches us unconditional respect for human dignity by his love for people who were considered unimportant or who were societal outcasts. He spent time with and blessed the children his disciples tried to turn away (see Mark 10:13–15). He spent time with and even dined with public sinners, a practice that some religious leaders found shocking (see Luke 19:1–10). He touched lepers even though doing so made him ritually unclean (see Mark 1:40–42). He told parables about inviting “the poor and the crippled, the blind and the lame” to banquets (see Luke 14:16–24). Through these examples Jesus demonstrated the unconditional love and respect he expects us to have for every person, whether friend or enemy, celebrity or social outcast, religious or nonreligious, in the womb or at the end of life.

Teachings on Money and Material Possessions

Christ had a lot to say about money and material possessions; it was one of the topics he taught about most frequently. In the first beatitude Christ says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, / for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3). The Lukan version is more direct:

Blessed are you who are poor,
for the kingdom of God is yours.
Blessed are you who are now hungry,
for you will be satisfied.

(6:20–21)

Jesus pairs this beatitude with a warning:

But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.
But woe to you who are filled now,
for you will be hungry.

(6:24–25)

Most of those listening to Jesus would have been shocked at this teaching. The common belief at the time was that wealth was a sign of God's favor and blessings. Jesus seems to be saying the exact opposite. Or more precisely, he

is saying that detachment from wealth is necessary for entering the Kingdom of God. He makes this point even more clearly in later sections of the Sermon on the Mount:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and decay destroy, and thieves break in and steal. But store up treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor decay destroy, nor thieves break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be. . . . No one can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon [an Aramaic word meaning wealth or property]. (Matthew 6:19–21,24)

These teachings in the New Law continue the tradition of the Old Law when it comes to material possessions: the goods of the earth are meant for all people, not just a privileged few. Jesus even asked some of his wealthy followers to share their wealth with those who were poor. In his

encounter with the rich young man, Jesus told him: “There is still one thing left for you: sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor, and you will have a treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Luke 18:22).

The Acts of the Apostles and the letters of the New Testament give evidence that the early Church embraced the sharing of material possessions very seriously. Acts has this description of the practice of the first Christian community: “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one’s need” (2:44–45). And in the Second Letter to the Corinthians, Paul appealed to the Corinthians to

This painting is an artistic interpretation of mammon. Why do think the artist depicts mammon as a king? What do you believe the artist is trying to say through the presence, placement, and posture of the two other people?



© Tate, London/Art Resource, NY

be generous in helping another Christian community: “Your surplus at the present time should supply their needs, so that their surplus may also supply your needs, that there may be equality” (8:14).

Concern for the Poor and Vulnerable

Jesus’ compassion for, and commitment to, those who are poor and vulnerable is well known. In a pattern you are now familiar with, he takes the teaching of the Old Law and intensifies it. The Old Law called the Israelites not to harm poor and vulnerable people and to minimally provide for their welfare. Now Jesus makes their care a requirement for entering the Kingdom of God. This is the message of the Last Judgment as told in Matthew 25:31–46. In this passage, those who care for people who are poor and vulnerable, as represented by the **corporal works of mercy**, are placed at God’s right hand and receive the gift of eternal life. Those who do not care for people who are poor and vulnerable are placed at God’s left hand and sent off to eternal punishment. The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus contains a similar warning (see Luke 16:19–31).

The Letter of James challenged the early Christian communities to be faithful in living out this commitment to care for those who are poor and vulnerable. The letter warns



corporal works of mercy

Charitable actions that respond to people’s physical needs and show respect for human dignity. The traditional list of seven works includes feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick, visiting prisoners, and burying the dead.

Pray It!

A New Testament Prayer for Justice

Dear Jesus,

Help me to respect the dignity of every person I meet,
including my enemies and the people others turn away from.

Help me to be poor in spirit,
and share my material goods with people in need.

Help me to take action to help the poor and vulnerable,
and demonstrate my faith through my good works.

You know it isn’t easy to serve the needs of others,
and to build a just society.

So I ask to be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit,
that I might become the just and peaceful person
you call me to be.

Amen.



social doctrine

The body of teaching by the Church on economic and social matters that includes moral judgments and demands for action in favor of those being harmed.

social encyclical

A teaching letter from the Pope to the members of the Church on topics of social justice, human rights, and peace.

against treating wealthy people with greater honor than poor people (see 2:1–9). It chastises people who say they have faith but who do nothing to help with the material needs of others: “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,’ but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it?” (2:14–16). The Acts of the Apostles recounts the appointment of seven men who were charged with caring for the widows (6:1–7). This appointment is regarded as the beginning of the diaconate. The New Law makes clear that action on behalf of those who are poor and vulnerable is a necessary requirement for being a follower of Christ. †

Article

8 The Social Doctrine of the Church: Papal Social Teaching

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (the 1700s and 1800s) were a time of dramatic change in the western world. In Europe and the United States, numerous scientific discoveries and applications led to new developments in navigation, medicine, communication, and manufacturing. These developments led to the rise of factories, an increase in international commerce, and the growth of ever larger cities with working-class populations.

At the same time, leading thinkers were also proposing new economic and political systems, such as capitalism, socialism, and popular democracies. There was a growing belief in society that the world’s problems could be solved through the use of human reason and scientific understanding. This thinking had its roots in the Age of the Enlightenment, an eighteenth-century period in Western philosophy. During the Enlightenment some people rejected the belief that any truth could be known through Divine Revelation; they believed that all truth could be discovered solely through human reason. Unfortunately, this meant that some people also ceased to believe in the authority of the Church.

The developments resulted in big changes in governments and economics. Kings and queens were replaced with popularly elected parliaments and congresses. Agricultural economies were replaced by manufacturing economies.

Guilds and craftsmen were replaced with factories employing hundreds of people. Human society was changing in dramatic and fundamental ways, bringing new opportunities for human growth and development and new moral challenges. The Church responded by applying God's eternal moral truth to these new social challenges; the resulting body of teaching is called the **social doctrine** of the Church.

Factory conditions in the middle to late 1800s often dehumanized workers, treating them as a resource to be used, with little concern for their safety, comfort, or dignity.

On the Condition of Labor (Rerum Novarum)

In the middle to late 1800s, life in parts of Europe could be described only as completely miserable. In some countries the majority of people were unemployed and starving. Those with jobs were often little more than slaves, working seven days a week for wages that could barely put food on the table. Some factories were filled with children working in dangerous conditions for cruel supervisors.

In light of this social situation, Pope Leo XIII wrote the first of the modern **social encyclicals**, *On the Condition of Labor (Rerum Novarum)*, in 1891. In the opening of the encyclical, he states the conditions that he felt obligated to address:



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Catholic Wisdom

The Challenge of Transforming Social Realities

Transforming social realities with the power of the Gospel . . . has always been a challenge and it remains so today at the beginning of the third millennium of the Christian era. The proclamation of Jesus Christ, the “Good News” of salvation, love, justice, and peace, is not readily received in today’s world, devastated as it is by wars, poverty and injustices. For this very reason the men and women of our day have greater need than ever of the Gospel: of the faith that saves, the hope that enlightens, of the charity that loves. (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, presentation page)

In any case we clearly see, and on this there is general agreement, that some opportune remedy must be found quickly for the misery and wretchedness pressing so unjustly on the majority of the working class: for the ancient workingmen's guilds were abolished in the last century, and no other protective organization took their place. Public institutions and the laws set aside the ancient religion. Hence, by degrees it has come to pass that working men have been surrendered, isolated and helpless, to the hardheartedness of employers and the greed of unchecked competition. The mischief has been

increased by rapacious usury, which, although more than once condemned by the Church, is nevertheless, under a different guise, but with like injustice, still practiced by covetous and grasping men. To this must be added that the hiring of labor and the conduct of trade are concentrated in the hands of comparatively few; so that a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of the laboring poor a yoke little better than that of slavery itself. (3)



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Recognizing the changing economic and political situation in the world, Pope Leo XIII wrote *On the Condition of Labor* (*Rerum Novarum*), the first modern social encyclical, in 1891.

On the Condition of Labor was a groundbreaking document. It addressed these new social problems and made specific judgments about how to respond morally based on Divine Law. These are some of the important points this social encyclical makes:

- There must be cooperation between workers and business owners, and each must respect the rights of the other. Class warfare will not lead to a just and peaceful society.
- Workers have a right to work with dignity. Workers are owed a wage that can support families, reasonable work hours (including time off for Sundays and holidays), safe working conditions, and strict limits on child labor.
- Workers should be free to organize associations (now known as unions) to negotiate working conditions.

- Socialist answers that do away with all private property are false answers to these problems. People have a right to private property because it is the motivation for which people work. But workers and business owners must strive for a fair distribution of private property to avoid class warfare.
- The wealthy have a moral obligation to share their material wealth to alleviate the material needs of others, once their own basic needs have been met.
- Governments must serve the common good and make the protection of basic human rights (of all people and classes) their first priority.


On the Condition of Labor was a prophetic call to the people of the world to solve modern problems through reason and Divine Law. Though it can only be summarized here, it should be read in its entirety; you will find that it is still very relevant to today's world problems. It is online at the Vatican Web site.

Catholic Social Doctrine Documents

Since *On the Condition of Labor*, numerous papal and Vatican documents have added to the wealth of the Church's social doctrine. This chart lists many of these documents, with a few key points from each of them. Many of these are referred to in other articles. †

On the Condition of Labor (Rerum Novarum, 1891)

Pope Leo XIII

- addresses the Church's right to speak on social issues
 - affirms that every person has basic rights that must be respected by society
 - promotes the rights and just treatment of workers
- 

subsidiarity

The moral principle that large organizations and governments should not take over responsibilities and decisions that can be carried out by individuals and local organizations, and that large corporations and governments have the responsibility to support the good of human beings, families, and local communities, which are the center and purpose of social life.

The Reconstruction of the Social Order (Quadragesimo Anno, 1931)

Pope Pius XI

- criticizes both capitalism and socialism
- criticizes the growing gap between those who are rich and those who are poor
- introduces the concept of **subsidiarity**

Christianity and Social Progress (Mater et Magistra, 1961)

Pope John XXIII

- shows concern for workers and women
- criticizes the gap between rich nations and poor nations
- says that excessive spending on weapons threatens society

Peace on Earth (Pacem in Terris, 1963)

Pope John XXIII

- warns against modern warfare, especially nuclear weapons
- says peace can be achieved only through a just social order
- gives a detailed list of the human rights necessary for a just social order

The Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes, 1965)

Vatican Council II

- says the Church must serve the world and work with other organizations in promoting the common good
- condemns the use of weapons of mass destruction
- maintains that peace is not just the absence of war but is justice throughout society
- addresses many specific topics related to social justice

The Development of Peoples (Popularum Progressio, 1967)

Pope Paul VI

- calls for true progress toward the economic, social, cultural, and spiritual fulfillment of human potential
- teaches that economic development of those who are poor and the moral development of those with material wealth are linked
- criticizes unrestrained capitalism where profit is the primary motive and where private ownership is an absolute right



Evangelization in the Modern World (Evangelii Nuntiandi, 1975)

Pope Paul VI

- teaches that evangelization is the Church's central mission and that working for justice is an essential part of evangelization
- says that Christians must work for the common good and promote institutions that improve the conditions of human life



On Human Work (Laborem Exercens, 1981)

Pope John Paul II

- says work is at the center of social issues
- says all people who are able to work have both the right and the duty to work
- emphasizes the rights of workers; says that people are more important than profits or the things they make



The Hundredth Year (Centesimus Annus, 1991)

Pope John Paul II

- says communism collapsed because it treated people as objects, not spiritual beings
- says capitalism is efficient, but it is flawed when it is not oriented toward the common good
- teaches that the right to private property does not take precedence over the just distribution of the world's resources

***Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (2004)***

Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace

- was created to provide “a concise but complete overview of the Church's social teaching” (presentation page)
- serves as an instrument for moral discernment and a guide to inspire attitudes and choices that promote the common good

***Charity in Truth (Caritas in Veritate, 2009)***

Pope Benedict XVI

- says justice must be applied to every aspect of economic activity
- teaches that both the exclusion of religion from society and religious fundamentalism are obstacles to a just society
- says that technology should not drive our society but should serve the common good

Some Foundational Principles

By studying the Church's documents on social justice, we can deduce three foundational principles upon which the social teaching of the Church is built:

1. Societies and their economic and political leaders must follow God's moral law, which is accessible by both faith and reason and applies to social and economic decisions as well as personal decisions. There are God-given rights and duties that apply to all human beings and that must be respected and protected by society.
2. The authority of governments and social institutions flows from God's own authority. Thus they have a responsibility to be sure that their decisions and actions reflect God's will and the common good of all (see Wisdom 6:1–8).
3. It is by respecting and promoting the common good that the lives of individuals are perfected—not just in providing for material needs but through the peace and truth that come from living with others in true community. Governments and economic institutions must protect and provide for the material needs of their citizens and allow them the exercise of the natural freedoms they need to develop their vocation and in matters of religion.

Article

9 The Social Doctrine of the Church: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

Since 1917 the bishops of the United States have had a national organization to help them to lead the charity, peace, and social justice work of the Church in the United States. The bishops provide the teaching and the specific responses to social justice issues, and the bishops' staff—a combination of clergy, lay, and religious men and women—assist them with the day-to-day work necessary to engage the Church in responding to the bishops' teaching.

After World War I (1914–1918), the bishops began a program of social reconstruction, which included teachings on minimum wage, social security, and worker participation in management. Since the 1960s the bishops have released a number of teaching documents on social justice issues to

USCCB Department of Justice, Peace, and Human Development

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has a Department of Justice, Peace, and Human Development, which addresses social justice issues in the United States as well as internationally. The work of this department is guided by three bishops' committees: the Committee on International Justice and Peace, the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, and the Subcommittee on the Catholic Campaign for Human Development. This structure sometimes changes when the USCCB updates its committees and organization to efficiently respond to needs in the Church and in the world.

What will not change are the concerns addressed by the Justice, Peace, and Human Development Department. These include the Catholic Church's efforts to overcome poverty through programs that help low-income people to improve the quality of their lives, programs that educate Catholics about Catholic social teaching, programs that involve Catholics in advocacy and action on social issues, and direct advocacy by the bishops with state, national, and international leaders on important social and economic justice issues. In one six-month period, from January to July 2010, the USCCB addressed the following social justice, peace, and human development issues: tax credits and housing for low-income persons, health care reform, immigration reform, advocacy for earthquake victims in Haiti, policies to stop violence in the Congo, advocacy for peace in the Holy Land, advocacy for funding to fight poverty in underdeveloped nations, and advocacy to reduce the number of nuclear weapons in the world. The department's Web site has information on the issues and concerns the bishops are currently working on.

Catholics in the United States. This article provides an overview of some key documents, and subsequent articles refer to specific teachings from these documents.

Pastoral Letters

The Catholic bishops of the United States have released numerous letters, some short and some long, on social justice issues. This chart lists a few of the major letters with key points from each of them. †

Brothers and Sisters to Us (1979)

The bishops have issued several letters on **racism**, but *Brothers and Sisters to Us* was their most comprehensive statement on the evils of racism. Here are some of the points they make in the letter:

- Racism is a sin because it violates the basic truth that all human beings have the same God-given dignity.
- Though some of the more obvious forms of racism have generally been eliminated from society, less obvious forms continue to exist.
- The letter also makes specific recommendations for Catholic churches and schools to support racial and ethnic diversity in the Church.

The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response (1983) and Sowing Weapons of War (1995)

The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response was written when the United States and the Soviet Union were at the peak of the nuclear arms race. The letter includes these points:

- Peace based on **deterrence** may be acceptable as an interim measure, but it is not a genuine peace and is not an acceptable long-term solution to the threat of nuclear war.
- Money spent on the nuclear arms race is money that cannot be used to help fight poverty and hunger.
- The nuclear arms race must end, the stockpiles of existing nuclear weapons must be reduced and eventually eliminated, and the creation of new nuclear weapons must be stopped.
- The bishops' letter *Sowing the Seeds of War* condemns the international arms trade as a scandal. The sale of weapons of war only for profit must be stopped. The letter makes the following points:
 - The United States must put its energies into building peace, not supplying arms.
 - The United States should lead the international effort to reduce and eliminate the use of landmines.



racism

Treating people of a different race without the full respect their equal dignity requires.

deterrence

The belief that war, especially nuclear war, can be prevented through the ability to respond to a military attack with a devastating counterattack.

Economic Justice for All: A Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy (1986)

This letter is a comprehensive examination of economic justice in the United States, identifying good and bad aspects of the U.S. economic system. It echoes many of the themes in the papal documents on social justice, including the following:

- Economic decisions must be judged by how they protect or undermine human dignity.
- All members of society have an obligation to help those who are poor and vulnerable.
- The Church should be an example of economic justice in how she treats her employees, invests her savings, and serves people in need.

Confronting a Culture of Violence: A Catholic Framework for Action (1994), A Good Friday Appeal to End the Death Penalty (1999), and A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death (2005)

The bishops of the United States have released a number of letters condemning violence in all its forms. A pastoral letter called *Confronting a Culture of Violence: A Catholic Framework for Action* was approved in 1994. This letter recognizes that the United States has higher rates of murder, assault, rape, and other violent crimes than many other countries. Some members of our society mistakenly turn to violence, especially abortion, to solve social problems. The bishops call Catholics to be leaders in confronting the culture of violence with Christ's message of peace.

Responding to Pope John Paul II's teaching that the death penalty is rarely if ever needed to protect society, the bishops of the United States have repeatedly called for an end to the death penalty in the United States. In a Good Friday letter (1999), they repeat what they said in *Confronting a Culture of Violence*: "We cannot teach that killing is wrong by killing." Six years later, in 2005, they released a booklet called *A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death*. The booklet calls for all Catholics to join the Catholic Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty.

Article 10 Defining Justice

Previous articles have explored the foundations for the social teaching of the Church found in Scripture and Tradition, teaching that has led to a rich understanding of the virtue of justice. The Catholic understanding of justice has many nuances and can become confusing at times. To help prevent this confusion, this article summarizes the different perspectives and definitions of *justice* used by the Church.



Magisterium

The Church's living teaching office, which consists of all bishops, in communion with the Pope, the Bishop of Rome.

Justice in the Bible

God originally created human beings to live in a state of justice. In their original state of justice, Adam and Eve were in good and loving relationships with God and with each other (also called right relationships, or righteousness). Thus, in the biblical vision, a just or righteous person is first in right relationship with God and second in right relationship with other human beings. The biblical understanding of justice reminds us that all justice flows from God and that human beings are called to participate in God's justice.

In the Old Law, justice is primarily about treating members of one's own community fairly and equally. For example, punishments are to be equal to the crimes, business practices must be honest, and the earth's resources are to be fairly

Live It!

Be an Informed Catholic

It is frequently said that the social teaching of the Catholic Church is her “best-kept secret.” This expresses the frustration of those who believe that many people are not familiar with the Church's rich and specific teaching on social justice issues. For example, how many Catholics are aware that the Church supports the positive values of the free market but also warns against an unregulated free market that fails to protect human dignity? How many citizens are aware that the Church is opposed to the death penalty in the United States?

You can become an informed Catholic by reading the magisterial documents on social justice, which can easily be found on the Vatican's Web site or on the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Web site. Then you will have firsthand knowledge of the truth taught by the **Magisterium** and will better understand the Church's stance on challenging moral issues.



cardinal virtues

Based on the Latin word for “pivot,” four virtues that are viewed as pivotal or essential for full Christian living: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance.

virtue

A habitual and firm disposition to do good.

justice

The cardinal virtue concerned with the rights and duties within relationships; the commitment, as well as the actions and attitudes that flow from the commitment, to ensure that all persons—particularly people who are poor and oppressed—receive what is due them.

distributed. In the New Law, the understanding of justice goes beyond fairness to one’s immediate community. In the New Law of Christ, justice means extending God’s compassion, forgiveness, and mercy to all people, even when that means sacrificing our own comfort and material wealth. Justice is one of the primary qualities of the Kingdom of God, and the Church is called to be a witness to, and an advocate for, justice on earth.

Justice as a Cardinal Virtue

As the Church’s understanding of Divine Law has grown, she has added to her teaching about justice, noting that it is one of the four **cardinal virtues**. The cardinal virtues are human virtues—that is, **virtues** that we develop by our own effort with the help of God’s grace. They guide our intellect and our will in controlling our passions and in making good moral choices based on reason and faith. The four cardinal virtues—prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude—play a pivotal role in our moral lives. All other human virtues can be grouped around the cardinal virtues. As we develop the cardinal virtues in our lives, we become persons of moral character, meaning that we will do the right thing, even under difficult circumstances.

As a cardinal virtue, **justice** is the virtue concerned about the rights and duties within relationships and societies. It guides us in giving both God and neighbor what is their due

and in working for the common good. Justice takes into account the needs of others as much as our own needs. It is about more than



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This image depicts the cardinal virtues (the images in the four corners). What relation does the center image have with the cardinal virtues?

simple fairness; it asks us to bring God's compassionate and merciful love to those who are most in need. The virtue of justice recognizes that some people have greater physical and spiritual needs than others and require a greater sharing of material goods and spiritual support. It takes determination and dedication to be a person who lives the virtue of justice.

Classical Types of Justice

The Middle Ages saw the rise of Church-sponsored universities and the development of theology as an academic discipline. Great Church scholars like Peter Lombard, Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, and Duns Scotus developed comprehensive, systematic, and nuanced explanations of Church doctrine. Distinctions between commutative justice, legal justice, and distributive justice came out of their work. These distinctions continue to guide Church teaching on justice today. As you read the following descriptions about these types of justice, notice how they reflect the biblical understanding of justice.

Commutative Justice

Commutative justice is the fairness that should exist when exchanging goods and services among individuals and institutions. For example, if you pay two dollars to buy a soda, you should get the full amount of the soda you purchased, not half a glass. On the other hand, the money you used to purchase it must be real dollars, not counterfeit money. Commutative justice requires that both parties receive exactly what they agreed to; in this way the human dignity of everyone involved in the exchange is protected. Commutative justice is the most fundamental form of justice in societies; without it all other forms of justice are impossible.



commutative justice

This type of justice calls for fairness in agreements and contracts between individuals. It is an equal exchange of goods, money, or services.



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Saint Thomas Aquinas, pictured on the left, helped explain the distinctions between commutative, legal, and distributive justice. How would you describe each of these types of justice?



legal justice

The social responsibilities that citizens owe their country and society.

distributive justice

The responsibility that society has for safeguarding essential human rights and ensuring the just distribution of the earth's resources, with special regard for those people whose basic needs are going unmet.

Legal Justice

Legal justice concerns the responsibilities that individuals owe society. It is called legal justice because these responsibilities are usually spelled out in laws or other legal documents. Our country and community organizations cannot fulfill their responsibilities unless we fulfill our obligations to society. For example, we must obey just laws, pay our taxes, vote, and offer help in times of crisis. Legal justice requires us to fulfill these responsibilities to the best of our ability.

Distributive Justice

Distributive justice concerns the responsibilities that society has to its members. It is called distributive because it calls for the just distribution of the earth's resources to all people. In 1986 the United States Catholic bishops provided this explanation of distributive justice in *Economic Justice for All*: “Distributive justice requires that the allocation of income, wealth, and power in society be evaluated in light of its effects on persons whose basic material needs are unmet” (70). Thus the principle of distributive justice means, for example, that it is a social sin for people to go hungry in a country that can produce enough food for all its citizens.

Nations have a right and a responsibility to create and enforce laws safeguarding distributive justice. An example of this is laws that ensure that workers earn a livable wage and work in a safe environment.

Social Justice

Article 5, “Social Teaching in the Old Testament,” mentions that the term *social justice* is a relatively recent addition to Church teaching. The term was needed to explain the teaching of the Church as it applies the virtue of justice to the complex reality of international politics, global economics, ecological dangers, and the horrific weapons of our time. The concept is introduced in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “Society ensures social justice when it provides the conditions that allow associations or individuals to obtain what is their due, according to their nature and their vocation. Social justice is linked to the common good and the exercise of authority” (1928).