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# LIVING JUSTICE AND PEACE

Catholic  
social teaching  
in practice

second edition

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social teaching  
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Second Edition



In Memory of

**Chuck Trapkus**

Illustrator of  
*Living Justice and Peace*

October 21, 1959 to December 21, 2000

True artisan, loving father, and  
compassionate minister to God's poor, whose strength and  
dedication are woven throughout the pages of this book.

*" . . . to comfort the afflicted  
and afflict the comfortable."*

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Chuck Trapkus, illustrator

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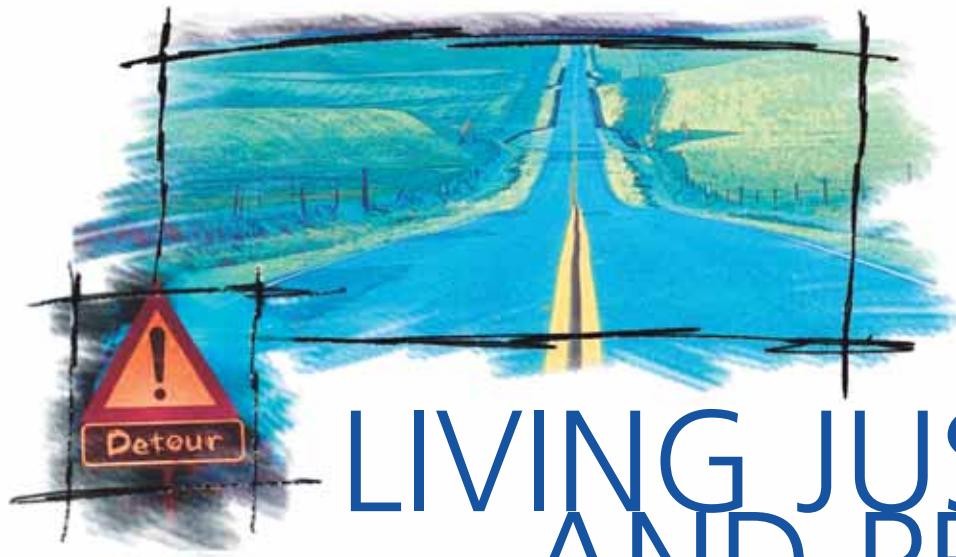
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Jerry Windley-Daoust

with contributors

Lorraine Kilmartin

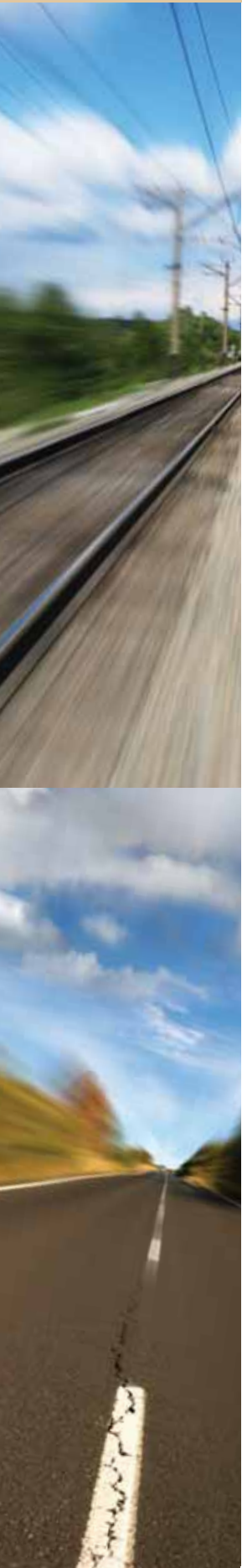
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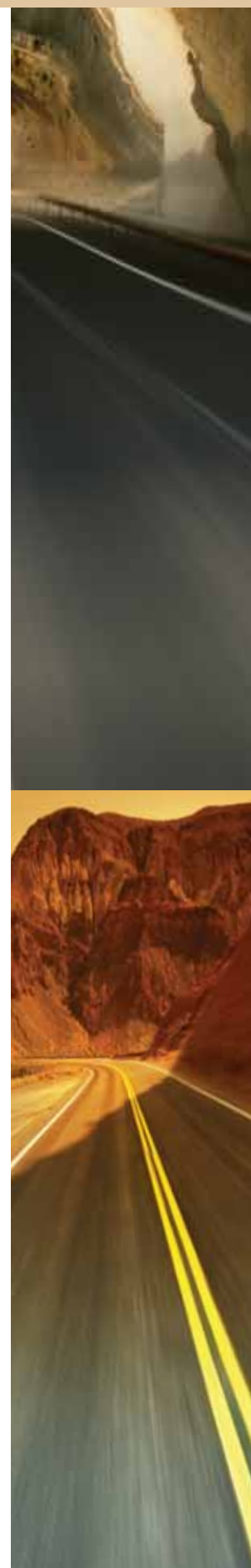


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# 1 THE SCRIPTURES AND JUSTICE



~~Individualism~~ Hope  
Compassion



# Calling Us

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to a world of goodness

In This Chapter . . .

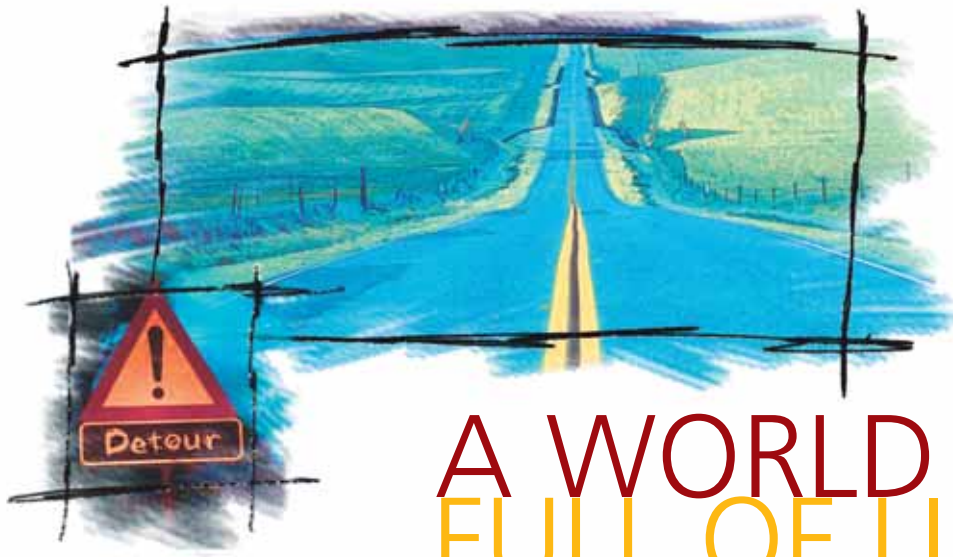
A World Full of Light and Shadows

Why Is There Suffering?

Justice: The Reign of God's Goodness

The Compassionate Way of Jesus





# A WORLD FULL OF LIGHT AND SHADOWS

It's been **fifteen or more years** since you were set down in this world. What have you found it to be like? **A**

Many people find the world to be full of goodness and joy: a first kiss, music with a dancing spirit, the jeweled beauty of new snow, basketball played so hard your body aches, friends who make you laugh, extra-cheese pizza, a loving family . . . the list could go on and on.

But for many people, this world is not only one of goodness and light but also one of shadows and suffering. Perhaps you have already encountered the shadow side of the world, as the following young people have:



Twelve-year-old Craig Kielburger was looking for the comics in the *Toronto Star* one morning when he saw this front-page headline: BATTLED CHILD LABOUR, BOY, 12, MURDERED. The story told of Iqbal Masih, a 12-year-old Pakistani boy who had been sold to a carpet factory owner when he was four and forced to weave carpets, chained to a loom, along with other boys. When human rights activists bought his freedom, he traveled the world speaking out against the widespread practice of child labor—until he was shot dead, presumably by the carpet manufacturers.

The story deeply troubled Craig. But what could he do for kids halfway around the world?

\* \* \*

“This test is positive,” the physician’s assistant said. “Are you going to terminate the pregnancy?”

“No,” Kelly Jefferson responded. That was an easy question to answer; she opposed all forms of killing, including abortion.

But the next question would prove to be more difficult for the college sophomore. Her boyfriend bailed out of the relationship halfway through the pregnancy, and she soon found that her college offered little support to women in her situation. The school apparently assumed that pregnant students would just have an abortion. Why, she wondered, should she have to sacrifice a decent education in order to choose life for her child?

\* \* \*

For fourteen years, Ferdinand Marcos had ruled the Philippines under martial law, denying ordinary citizens basic civil rights. When elections were finally held, many people thought there was a chance of restoring democracy—if Marcos didn’t “steal” the election by cheating.

Fifteen-year-old Paulo Mercado and his younger brother worked to ensure free and fair elections by volunteering as newsboys at Radio Veritas, a Catholic radio station that was broadcasting reports of election fraud to the nation. Their efforts weren’t enough: Marcos declared himself the winner, and Radio Veritas was kicked off the air.

Soon after, two top-ranking military officers broke ranks with the Marcos regime, along with a contingent of soldiers. A bloody, violent conflict seemed inevitable. Is this what it would take, Paulo wondered, to restore democracy to the country?

Exploitation of children, discrimination, poverty, violence—the world is far from perfect, as these young people found out. Confronted with the harsh reality of such suffering and darkness, each of them had to decide how to respond. **B**

In different ways, we each face the same decision. We will return to the true stories of these young people later in the course. First, let’s look at some possible responses to the suffering we encounter in the world.

—the world is far from perfect, as these young people found out.

**A** What is the world you know like? What is good about it? What is bad about it? Imagine you have the power to change the world. What does this new world look like? You may use writing, song, or art in your response.

**B** For each example, write down several ways someone could respond to the situation, giving reasons for each response.

## How Do We Respond to Suffering?

When we are confronted with suffering in the world around us, we have two basic choices: we can do something about the situation, or we can do nothing. People choose one option or the other for many different reasons. For the sake of simplicity, however, we will consider only four reasons: hopelessness, individualism, enlightened self-interest, and compassion. **C**

### Hopelessness

Sometimes it feels as if we hear too much about suffering in the world. Many people deal with the overwhelming nature of all the suffering in the world by choosing to ignore it. Others see or hear news of people suffering but choose not to act. They might offer several reasons for not responding, such as the following:

- “There are so many problems, and I’m just one person. Even if I make a small contribution, *what difference will it make* in the big picture?”
- “The problems in our community are beyond my control. . . . *I have no power* to change the situation.”
- “I’m *afraid* that if I speak up, people might get mad at me. My personal safety might even be at risk. I’d rather stay silent than rock the boat.”



These responses to the world’s suffering, though understandable, reflect a lack of hope on the part of the people who offer them. To **hope** is to believe in the possibility that what one wants can actually happen. If people do not believe in the possibility that they can make a difference—if they have no hope—they are not likely to act to change things.

### Individualism

The independence of individuals to pursue their own destiny is an important value that has led to such good things as democracy, the promotion of equal opportunities for all people, and the notion that people can achieve almost anything if they try hard enough.

Too much emphasis on individual independence, however, can break the ties that connect people with God and one another as community. Have you ever heard comments similar to those that follow?

- “That problem *doesn’t affect me* personally, so why should I care?”
- “If homeless people want shelter, they should get a job and work for it like everyone else. *They should help themselves* instead of expecting everyone else to help them.”
- “The trouble she has now is the result of her own decisions—she’s just *getting what she deserves*.”
- “The pollution our paper mill puts into the water is a *necessary trade-off*. Cleaning it up would cost so much, we would probably lose our jobs.”

Such responses to suffering might be called individualistic. Someone who is motivated by **individualism** believes that each person should take responsibility for his or her own

**C** Read your local newspaper or watch a local television news program. Clip, copy, or write down examples you find that illustrate hopelessness, individualism, enlightened self-interest, and compassion.

life, and that when people fail to take responsibility for themselves, others should not be expected to help them. An overemphasis on individualism can lead to a me-first attitude in which individuals seek good things only for themselves—even if others must suffer as a result.

### Enlightened self-interest

Hopelessness and individualism lead many people to respond to suffering by doing nothing. However, many other people respond to suffering in the world by attempting to relieve it.

In some cases, such responses are primarily motivated by **enlightened self-interest**—the realization that by helping others we are really helping ourselves in the end. People who act out of enlightened self-interest understand that every person needs other people in order to live a satisfying life. People acting out of enlightened self-interest might make the following comments:

- “The government should spend more money educating people about how to avoid health problems, because it costs less to prevent health problems than to treat them later. *It may take more resources now, but the benefits will be greater in the long run.*”
- “If we continue to let toxins pollute our drinking water, people in our community

will face an increased risk of cancer. *We have to act now, or we’ll face the consequences later.*”

- “I help my elderly neighbor to keep his yard and sidewalk neat because someday I may be in his shoes, unable to do yard work. *If I don’t help others, I can’t expect them to help me.*”

As these examples illustrate, one reason people choose to help others is that they might receive benefits in return. Sometimes helping others does not result in direct benefits, though. The woman in the third example might never receive help in return from her neighbor. But she knows that in a society in which people value helping one another, she is more likely to get help for herself if she needs it someday. By helping her neighbor, she is contributing to the importance her community places on that value.

### Compassion

The realization that everyone in a society benefits when people help one another is one reason people respond to suffering with action. But what about people who help others well beyond any benefit they might receive in return? What about people who help others even when it means that they too will suffer?

Consider Jean Donovan, a young single woman who left her job as an accountant to



When compassion is accompanied by hope, . . . it moves people to love.



Student art: Acrylic; Lindsey Warren, Notre Dame High School, Sherman Oaks, California

spend some time as a Maryknoll lay missionary in El Salvador. A civil war raged in that country at the time, causing much suffering for the people she served—and putting the lives of the missionaries in danger.

As the violence around her grew worse, Jean considered leaving. It would have been reasonable to protect herself from suffering, but that is not what she chose to do. She explained why in a letter to a friend:

Several times I have decided to leave El Salvador. I almost could except for the children, the poor, bruised victims of this insanity. Who would care for them? Whose heart could be so staunch as to favor the reasonable thing in a sea of their tears and loneliness? Not mine, dear friend, not mine. (Carrigan, *Salvador Witness*, page 218)

Two weeks later Jean and three nuns were raped and killed by soldiers. Many believe the soldiers wanted to “send a message” to missionaries who work on behalf of the poor.

Jean knew that the reasonable thing to do would have been to leave. Instead she stayed. Why? Certainly not out of enlightened self-interest alone; painful suffering and dying

are not typically considered to be in anyone’s self-interest.

No, Jean said she stayed because her heart was moved by a “sea of . . . tears and loneliness” among the people she had come to know. She could give no logi-



Jean Donovan chose to care for others, even at great risk to herself.

cal reason for her response beyond her own experience of the people’s suffering, which she longed to ease.

Jean Donovan’s response was motivated by **compassion**, a word from the Hebrew plural of the word *womb*. The biblical sense of compassion is similar to the feeling a mother has for the child in her womb—a feeling of life-giving closeness and protective care. People who have compassion understand, both in their mind and heart, others’ experience of suffering. When compassion is accompanied by hope, it moves people to commit themselves to easing suffering. In other words, it moves them to love.

The following are all acts of love, though not quite as dramatic as Jean Donovan’s:

- Kyla not only performs the duties she is paid to do as a nurse but also takes extra time to listen to her patients’ needs and worries.
- Erik stands up for the kid everyone else picks on, even though he might lose some popularity as a result.
- Brianna takes time out of her busy day to e-mail her state representatives about legislation to protect migrant farmworkers from pesticides in the fields. **D**

## Called to Respond with Compassion

Although we cannot avoid the shadows of suffering in this world, we can choose how we respond to that suffering. Those who follow Jesus are called to respond to the world’s suffering as he did, with compassion—even to the point of giving one’s self for the good of the world.

**D** Which of the four responses to encounters with suffering in the world most closely matches your own? Why? Write several paragraphs explaining your position.



For many people, such a response might seem unreasonable and even extreme. Are people like Jean Donovan naive fools? If not, what would bring them to risk their lives to help alleviate the suffering of others?

Perhaps the best way to begin to answer that question is to consider the Christian answer to another more basic question: Why is there suffering in the world in the first place?



1. When confronted with suffering in the world, what are two basic ways we can choose to respond?
2. Name four reasons for our responses to suffering, and provide a definition for each.
3. When accompanied by hope, what does compassion lead to?



- 
4. Provide your own example of each of the four types of responses to suffering.

# Why Is There Suffering?

Why is there suffering? It is an important and a challenging question, especially for anyone who believes in a good and all-powerful God. Why doesn't God just stop the suffering of the world with the snap of a finger? To answer that question, Catholics turn to the Tradition of the Church and to the Scriptures, which they believe contain the truth that God has revealed to humanity. Two main themes found in this revelation provide some insight into the question of suffering:



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God created the world to be a place of goodness.  
(*The First Seven Days*, by Fritz Eichenberg)

- **God is love.** Love has many meanings in our culture, but in the way Christian faith means it, to **love** is to will the good for another. God is love because he is the source of all goodness, bringing everything into being, and bringing everything into harmony with itself and the rest of creation.
- **When humans fail to love as God does, the result is disorder, destruction, and suffering.** The opposite of love is **selfishness**—seeking things for oneself in a way that ignores the good of others and causes suffering.

According to the Scriptures, God did not create a world of suffering. The original state of the world was one of harmony and abundant goodness. You have probably heard the Creation story many times by now. Still, it contains religious truths that so significantly influence the Christian response to suffering that it is worth examining the story again on a deeper level.

As we revisit the Creation story (you can begin by reading Genesis, chapters 1 to 3), it is important to know that Catholics focus on the religious, rather than the scientific, truth of the story. After all, Genesis was not written for the purpose of recording a scientifically accurate account of Creation; rather, the purpose of the Genesis Creation stories is to reveal the more important truths about the nature of God, humanity, and creation.

**E** Can you think of three other examples in which people sacrifice something for a good cause?

## Creation: “And God Saw It Was Good”

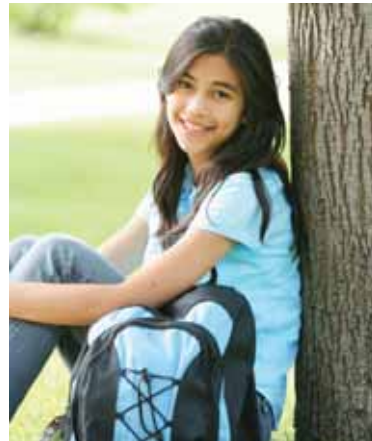
The Genesis Creation story begins by describing the universe as a deep darkness that would be completely empty except for the Spirit of God, which moves through it like a wind (see 1:1–2). God could have let the universe remain that way, full of nothing but God. Instead, out of love, God creates something else. And so the darkness is dispelled with the words, “Let there be light” (1:3).

God continues to speak new things into being: water, land, plants, stars, animals, and so on. He is depicted working much as an artist does, stepping back occasionally to judge what is being made. God judges it to be *good*. As if to emphasize the point, the phrase “And God saw it was good” is repeated seven times in the Creation account. Creation is good because it unfolds from God’s own goodness.

Humans are capable of imitating God’s creative giving. Childbirth is perhaps the most obvious example: a pregnant woman gives up part of her physical self for the sake of bringing a new person into being. And both parents inevitably give up part of their lives in order to help their child grow into the best person he or she can be. **E**

## Humans: Made in the Image of God

Genesis tells us that the similarity of human love to God’s love is no accident. In fact, God intentionally made humans in the **image of God**:



God created man in his image;  
in the divine image of God he created him;  
male and female he created them.  
(1:27, NAB)

What does it mean to be made “in the image of God”? Think of your reflection in a pool of still water: your reflection, or image, is not you, but it resembles you. Similarly, as images of God, humans are reflections of God. Because God is a mystery, what it means to be an image of God is also something of a mystery. But we can be certain of at least three truths: we were made good, we were made to be in relationship with God and others, and we were made free. **F**

### Human dignity

The first attribute of human beings is that they are made essentially good—God says “*very good*,” in fact (1:31). The only reason anything or anyone in creation exists is because God wills it to exist, because he loves it. Even Hitler, who is so often given as an example of evil personified, was loved by God; of course, what Hitler did and stood for are another matter.

**F** Draw a portrait of someone you know, or use a mirror to draw a portrait of yourself. The quality of your drawing is unimportant for this activity. Instead, as you form an image of your subject on the paper, reflect on Genesis 2:7, “Then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.” When you are finished, record at the bottom of the portrait a few words from your reflections.



The basic goodness of human beings that comes from always being loved by God is called **human dignity**. Only humans were created to share in God's own life by knowledge and love; this special destiny is the reason for their dignity. Nothing can take away the love of God, and so nothing a person does can take away his or her inherent dignity.

### Made to love and to be loved

God made creation in order to love it by sharing his own goodness with it. Like any lover, God desires to be loved in return. Because they are made in God's image, people also desire to love and to be loved. In other

words, human beings are made not to be alone but to be in relationship:

**With other people.** In the Genesis story, God makes humans to be "partners" or "helpers" to one another because "it is not good that the man should be alone" (2:18). God brought Adam and Eve together to form a family—the most basic unit of society.

The very nature of God is three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) united as one through their shared love. As images of God, each of us is also made to be united with all other people through love.

**With creation.** Human beings are meant to have a loving relationship with creation too. Genesis depicts God giving humans "dominion" over everything on the earth (1:28).

## THE WAY GOD CREATED THE WORLD TO BE

**God**, like sunshine and rain,  
gives life to humanity  
and creation . . .

. . . and **each person**  
is most true to him or her self  
by living in loving relationship  
with God, creation, and others.

. . . and for  
**one another.**  
In doing so,  
people love God, . . .

. . . and **creation**  
is humanity's home.  
People care for  
creation . . .

Some people have interpreted this to mean that humans “own” creation and can do whatever they want to with it, but Genesis makes it clear that creation is a gift from God.

Humans are placed in the Garden of Eden, which represents all creation, “to cultivate and care for it” (2:15, NAB). Like God, then, humans are creative. God calls them to share in his work of creation—work that is carried on today whenever people help to make the world the good place God intended it to be.

**With God.** Finally, humans are made to have an intimate friendship with God—that is the very reason God made us. Humans have a deep longing to complete themselves by connecting with the loving power of God. It has been said that all people have a “God-shaped hole” inside themselves. We may try to fill that inner sense of emptiness with many things, but nothing really makes us feel complete until we enter into an intimate friendship with God that begins in this life and reaches its fulfillment when we are united with God. The state of perfect communion with the Holy Trinity is called **heaven**. Although heaven is something we hope to experience after we die, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that heaven is not so much a place as it is a way of being (number 2794). As such, we get a little taste of heaven whenever God lives in us.

### Free will

Another attribute humans have because they are created in God’s image is **free will**, the ability to choose what to do. Without free will, people would not be able to love, because love is always a freely given gift—it cannot be forced or taken, bought or sold.

That is why God does not stop people from doing things that cause suffering for

themselves or others. If, for instance, you could be forced by God to be nice to others, you would not have free will, and so you would not truly love others. You would be just a puppet in God’s hand, not the reflection of his goodness that you were made to be.

Of course, if humans are free to choose love, it also means they are free not to love. The first humans (represented in Genesis by Adam and Eve) chose to turn away from God’s goodness, a choice that disrupted the harmony that existed at the beginning of creation. **G**

## Original Sin

When most of us hear the story of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit, it reminds us of being disciplined by our parents when we were children. It is true that Adam and Eve are a little like children who disobey their parents. But the story told in chapter 3 of Genesis is about more than stolen fruit.

### “You will be like God”

At first, Adam and Eve have a close friendship with God. The love between them is symbolized by the Garden of Eden, a place where Adam and Eve receive God’s goodness in abundance.

Then the serpent tells Adam and Eve that if they turn away from God, “your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (3:5). Of course, having been made in the image of God, Adam and Eve already are “like God” in many respects, and God has declared them to be “very good” just as they are.

But the serpent is saying that because Adam and Eve rely on God, they are not

**G** Respond to the following reflection questions with a few sentences for each: In what ways do others see your human dignity? What kind of relationship do you have with other people, with creation, and with God? What is the most important way you have used free will, and why is it important?

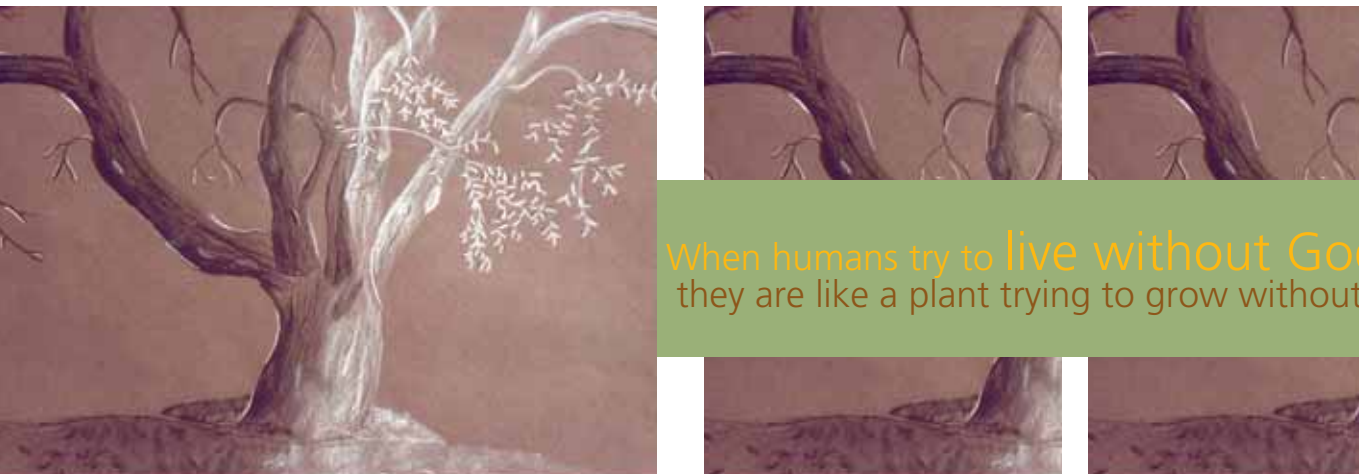
good enough. The serpent encourages them to be their own gods, to betray their friendship with God so that they can decide for themselves what is right and wrong. Adam and Eve go along with the serpent: instead of choosing to live in love, they choose to live selfishly. In the Tradition of the Church, this is called the Fall.

As a result, Adam and Eve do indeed come to know evil as well as good. Rather than living in loving relationship with themselves, each other, creation, and God, they become separated:

- **From their own goodness.** Adam and Eve believed the serpent's lie that they were not good enough. So then their nakedness, which was part of their God-given goodness, embarrassed them. By seeking to become something they were not, they failed to respect their own human dignity.
- **From God.** Once Adam and Eve had walked in friendship with God, but now

they "[hide] themselves from the presence of the LORD" (3:8). God tells Adam and Eve that their choice will result in suffering and death. This is not a punishment, but a natural consequence of their action. When humans try to live without God, they are like a plant trying to grow without water. Eventually the plant will wither and die.

- **From other people.** When God confronts them about their action, instead of taking responsibility for what they did and repenting, Adam blames Eve and Eve blames the serpent. Selfishness causes division in the human family.
- **From creation.** Rather than living in peace with the animal world, animals and humans will fight each other. Food was plentiful in the garden, but after the Fall, people have to work hard for it: "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread" (3:19). In the Tradition of the Church, even the suffering caused by natural disaster or disease is somehow a result of the Fall.



When humans try to live without God, they are like a plant trying to grow without water.

Student art: Charcoal pencil; Jason Oglio, Trinity High School, Garfield Heights, Ohio

**H** One way young people experience suffering is through the breakup of romantic relationships. If the Christian understanding of love is to want goodness for another person, is it possible to break up with someone and still have Christian love for him or her? Explain your answer.

The sin of our “first parents” had consequences not only for them but also for all humankind: all people inherit a broken relationship with God that results in the breakdown of relationships with one’s self, other people, and creation. The **Original Sin** of Adam and Eve—the rejection of their humanity as created in God’s image—became a basic tendency of human nature that all people inherit as well. Original Sin is a condition people are born into. It is not a personal sin that people commit.

Because of Original Sin, people have a tendency to sin as their “first parents” did, selfishly betraying the loving relationships they are meant to have with God, with others, and with the earth. These wrongful actions or omissions that humans choose are called **personal sins. H**

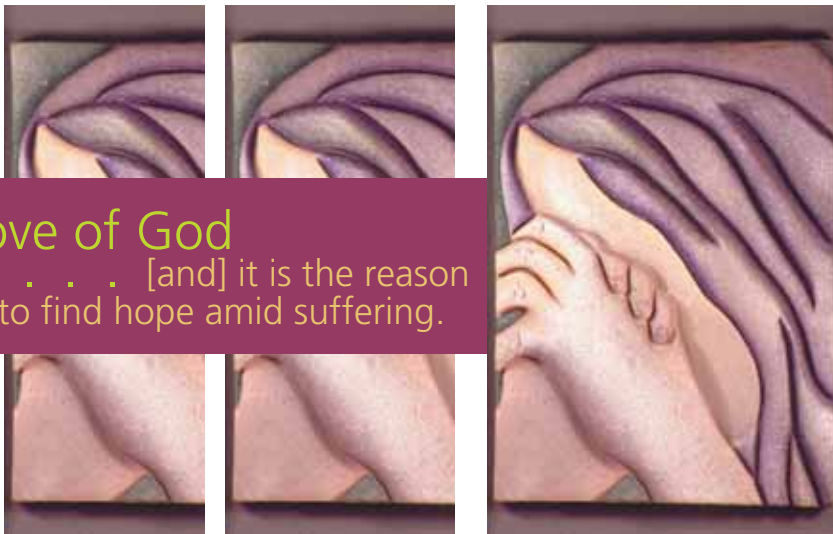
Cain’s murder of Abel vividly illustrates the effects of Original Sin. When God calls Cain to account, Cain responds, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (4:9). In a world in which people open themselves to love, the answer would be, “Yes!” But with the Fall, that was not the world chosen by the first humans.

## Grace: A source of hope

If this were the end of the story of humans’ relationship with God, hopelessness would be a realistic response to suffering. But although the first humans chose not to allow God’s love to rule their lives, it did not stop God from loving them. When Adam and Eve hid themselves from God’s presence, he called out to them, “Where are you?” (3:9).

The call for humanity to return to its friendship with God echoes throughout the rest of the Bible. Ever since the first sin, God’s love has worked to restore creation’s original goodness. That transforming love of God is known as **grace**. Grace overcomes Original Sin, restoring our relationship with God and one another. At the end of time, grace will renew all of creation in “a new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1) in which God will dwell with his people and “mourning and crying and pain will be no more” (21:4). Grace, then, is the reason Christians are able to find hope amid suffering.

That transforming love of God  
is known as **grace** . . . [and] it is the reason  
Christians are able to find hope amid suffering.



*Student art: “Darkest Hour.” Balsa foam; Annie Bursiek, Boylan Central Catholic High School, Rockford, Illinois*



5. What are three truths about human beings that result from their being made in the image of God?
6. What is human dignity? Can anyone lose his or her human dignity? Why or why not?
7. Define the following terms: *Original Sin*, *grace*.
8. What is a consequence of Original Sin?



- 
9. What is the difference between wanting what is good for oneself and being selfish? Use examples to explain your answer.

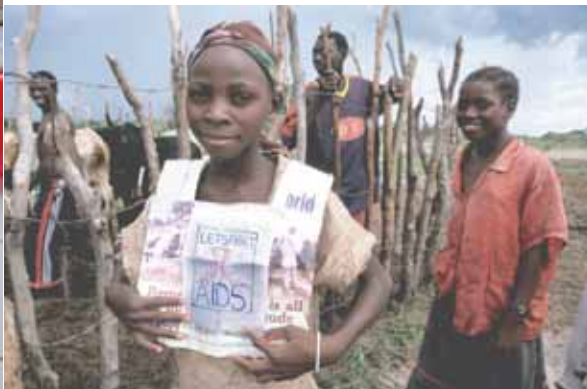
## Justice: The Reign of God's Goodness

The story of Creation and the Fall teaches us that God did not bring suffering into the world, people did, because the Original Sin of Adam and Eve disrupted the order of creation. God does not take away the freedom that allows people to bring suffering into the world because that same freedom is what enables us to love.

Although God allows people to bring suffering into the world, he does not want people to suffer. In fact, the whole history of God's relationship with humanity is the story of how he has acted to lead us out of a world of suffering into a world of goodness.

### "I Have Heard My People's Cry"

Throughout the Scriptures, God shows compassion for the poor, the oppressed, the weak, and the outcasts from society—not because God loves



Just as God called Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, God calls each of us to lead people out of suffering.

them more than others, but because they are more in need of his attention by virtue of their suffering.

In the Old Testament, the best-known story of God's concern for oppressed people is the story in the Book of Exodus about how God frees the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.

As slaves, the Israelites work hard building cities and farming the land—yet all the benefit of their work goes to the Egyptians. To ensure that the Israelites do not become powerful enough to revolt against their oppressors, Pharaoh decrees that all newborn Israelite boys be drowned in the Nile River, which the Egyptians regard as a god.

When the people of Israel cry out to God for help, he responds through a revelation to Moses. The words of God that follow are directed to the Israelites specifically, but they are also an expression of compassion for suffering people everywhere:

Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land flowing with milk and honey. . . . So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." (Exodus 3:7–10)

Note that although God promises to take the people from a place of suffering (Egypt) to a place of goodness (the Promised Land), he will not accomplish that transition with a snap of a finger; rather, God recruits Moses, who at the time is a shepherd and a fugitive from the Egyptians, to help win freedom for the Israelites.

Moses balks at God's invitation to leadership. As it turns out, he has good reason to be hesitant. The road to freedom is not quick and easy, but takes many years of struggle and hardship. Moses himself never lives to enter the Promised Land. Yet in the end, the Lord and his people are victorious. **I**

### A source of hope for people everywhere

The Exodus story is the central story of the Jewish people. But it also has long been a source of hope for oppressed peoples everywhere, one that has motivated them to take courageous action for the sake of goodness. Slaves in the United States often referred to the Exodus story in their songs, and it inspired the leaders of the twentieth-century civil rights movement as well. Most recently, the Exodus story has influenced liberation theology movements in South America and around the globe. More will be said about liberation theology in chapter 2. **J**

**"Indeed, I know their sufferings,  
and I have come down to deliver them . . ."**

**I** Recall a time when you were called on to take leadership or responsibility—in a job, on a sports team, or in a social situation. Describe your experience: Were you hesitant? How did it turn out? How did it affect your willingness to take on leadership roles in the future?

**J** Form a small group with some of your classmates. Working together, make a collage depicting a modern Exodus by pasting or taping pictures from old magazines and newspapers onto poster board. Here are some images you might include in the collage: all sorts of people who are oppressed or suffering, landscapes symbolizing Egypt or the Promised Land, leaders working for change ("Moses"), barriers to freedom, people living in goodness, and newspaper headlines to serve as captions.

## Life in the Promised Land

Before the people enter into the Promised Land, Moses gives them a Law to live by. The requirements of the Law sought to promote goodness and harmony among the people. Moses tells the people that they must live in a way that promotes goodness and peace among them “so that you may live and occupy the land that the LORD your God is giving you” (Deuteronomy 16:20).

Moses was referring to the land of Israel, but, in fact, any place where people live in God’s goodness is the Promised Land. Like the Garden of Eden, the harmony and abundant goodness of the Promised Land is a rich symbol of God’s life-giving love.

The Law that Moses gave the people included not only the Ten Commandments but also hundreds of very specific rules about the way people were to live. At the heart of all these laws was the **Shema**, which Jews still recite daily. Here is the beginning of that prayer:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. (Deuteronomy 6:4–5)



Community Service is one way people today live out the scriptural call to love our neighbors.

The Israelites lived out the Shema in part by following the many rules about worship and holiness. They saw keeping their worship pure and perfect as a way of loving God with everything they had.

### “Love your neighbor as yourself”

The Law also emphasized that true worship is expressed in the way people live with one another. The law commanding the Israelites to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 19:19) was expressed in many specific regulations that reflected God’s compassion for poor and oppressed people. For example, Israel was given the following regulations:

- Leave some of the harvest for gleaning by the poor.
- Do not set dishonest prices.
- Welcome the stranger; treat foreigners as you would your own people.
- Every seven years, cancel all debts.
- Give God thanks for your harvest by giving the first part of it to foreigners, orphans, and widows, “so that they may eat their fill” (Deuteronomy 26:12).

Sprinkled in among these laws are constant reminders of how much God has given the people by bringing them from slavery into the Promised Land. The implication is that these are not just rules the people are to follow but a way of giving thanks to God by sharing what they have been given. **K**

## The Prophets: Voicing God’s Call

Despite the Law, the people of Israel were often unfaithful in their relationship with God. Fortunately for the Israelites, God did not turn

**K** Make an inventory, or detailed list, of all the things you own, listing how many types of clothes, sports equipment, games, bicycles, or cars you have, and how many DVDs, CDs, video games, shoes, shampoos, jewelry, money, and so on, that you have. Now imagine that you live in ancient Israel. The law asks you to give part of your “harvest” away for the benefit of others. Would you do it? If so, why? What would you give? If not, why not?

away from them but instead chose **prophets** to call the people back to divine friendship. But often the prophets had as little self-confidence about their mission as Moses did; it seems to be a habit of God to choose the lowly or the most unlikely persons for the most important roles.

A common theme of the prophets' call was the important connection between love of God and love of neighbor. Often the people would focus on the laws pertaining to proper worship and sacrifice, but would neglect the laws about loving their neighbors. The prophets made it clear that following all the rules about worship was pointless—even offensive to God—if that worship was not accompanied by compassion for others.

The Book of Isaiah, for instance, describes the practice of fasting, in which people cover themselves in ashes, dress in rough clothes, and bow their heads to show sorrow for their sins and to renew their relationship with God. But these outward signs of repentance are meaningless unless people restore relationships of love with one another, Isaiah says. God says the following to Israel:

Will you call this a fast,  
a day acceptable to the LORD?  
Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?  
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your  
house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own  
kin?

.....  
If you remove the yoke from among you,  
the pointing of the finger, the speaking  
of evil,  
if you offer your food to the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness  
and your gloom be like the noonday.  
(Isaiah 58:5–10) **L**

In the Book of Micah, God offers a similar response to Israel's question about the best form of sacrificial worship:

“Will the LORD be pleased with thousands  
of rams,  
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?  
Shall I give my firstborn for my  
transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my  
soul?”  
He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the LORD require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?  
(Micah 6:7–8) **M**

## The Call to Justice

In both of the preceding passages, justice is the first thing God names when the people ask what he wants of them. And what happens when justice rules the land? Isaiah says that “your light shall rise in the darkness”—the shadows of suffering are dispelled. Elsewhere, Isaiah describes the rule of justice as a peaceful kingdom in which the wolf lies down with the lamb, and children play in the dens of poisonous snakes: “They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for

**L** Imagine that the prophet Isaiah was commenting on your school, family, or community. What would he say? Beginning with the phrase, “Is not this the fast that I choose, . . .” write his prophecy in your own words.

**M** Do you find echoes of the prophets in the music you listen to? Write down the lyrics of songs you think might be prophetic for people today, and explain why you think they are prophetic.





# SOJOURNER TRUTH: FROM SLAVE TO PROPHET

God has a habit of choosing the most unlikely people to be prophets. That was certainly the case with Isabella Hardenbergh, a child born into slavery in rural New York in about 1797.

Slavery, Isabella said, had left her soul crushed and confused. Over time, however, she realized that God loved her just as much as God loved the white men who oppressed her—and that realization gave her a new sense of dignity and strength. When she heard God calling her to preach, she took the name Sojourner Truth. A sojourner is one who is always on the move, which she was as she traveled around the country preaching the truth—the abolition of slavery, the rights of freed slaves, an end to the death penalty, and women’s rights—among other things.



Born into slavery, Sojourner Truth eventually became a prophet for her own time.

Sojourner not only preached but took action as well. She escaped from slavery, and later successfully sued in court for the freedom of her son. She protested segregation on public transportation in Washington, D.C., by forcing her way onto whites-only horse cars. During and after the Civil War, she

worked to improve living conditions for freed slaves, even urging them to protest unjust treatment. When she was threatened with arrest for this, she retorted that if she were arrested, she would “make this nation rock like a cradle.” She attributed all her accomplishments to her unshakable faith in God.

Sojourner Truth is perhaps best known for the impromptu speech she gave at a women’s rights convention in 1851. As feminist Frances Gage tells it, various Christian ministers had come to the gathering to give their own opinion of women’s rights—basically, that God had made women inferior to men. No one challenged the ministers, until Sojourner got up to speak. Her words were recalled years later by Gage:

Sojourner walked to the podium and slowly took off her sunbonnet. Her six-foot frame towered over the audience. She began to speak in her deep, resonant voice: “Well, children, where there is so much racket, there must be something out of kilter. I think between the Negroes of the South and the women of the North—all talking about rights—the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what’s all this talking about?”

Sojourner pointed to one of the ministers. “That man over there says that

bared her right arm and flexed her powerful muscles. “I have plowed, I have planted, and I have gathered into barns. And no man could head me. *And ain’t I a woman?*”

“I could work as much, and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! *And ain’t I a woman?* I have borne children and seen most of them sold into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me. *And ain’t I a woman?*”

The women in the audience began to cheer wildly.

She pointed to another minister. . . . “That little man in black there! He says women can’t have as much rights as men. ‘Cause Christ wasn’t a woman.” She stood with outstretched arms and eyes of fire. “Where did your Christ come from?”

“*Where did your Christ come from?*” she thundered again. “From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with him!”

The entire church now roared with deafening applause.

Sojourner’s “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech cleverly showed the contradictions in the logic of oppression. She used her former status as a slave whose dignity and rights had not been respected to prove that

## She attributed all her accomplishments to her unshakable faith in God.

women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody helps *me* any best place. *And ain’t I a woman?*”

Sojourner raised herself up to her full height. “Look at me! Look at my arm.” She

women had just as much dignity and as many rights as men. The speech electrified the convention, and only added to her fame. (From Stanton et al., *The History of Woman Suffrage*, 1889).

the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea” (11:9). Still elsewhere, justice is described as causing the barren desert to become a fruitful orchard.

It is not a coincidence that these descriptions of the effects of justice contain echoes of the Book of Genesis and the Garden of Eden. God created the world good, but the Fall of our “first parents” disrupted the harmony and goodness of relationships in creation. Justice actively seeks to re-establish the original goodness and order. We might say **justice** is the establishment of loving relationships among human beings, God, and creation so life can flourish in the way God intends. **Injustice**, on the contrary, is a condition in which people have put obstacles in



Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta responded to God’s call by compassionately caring for those who were poor, dying, or orphaned.

the way of loving relationships, thus preventing life from flourishing as God intends.

### An impossible dream?

People are called by God to respond compassionately to suffering with justice, so that the world becomes the good place it was always meant to be. That call might seem unrealistic, even impossible—and it would be if people were expected to change the world by themselves. But believers hear the voice of God reply: “Don’t be afraid! I am with you.”

**N** God’s plan to lead humans out of suffering and into a life of goodness began when he called out, “Where are you?” to Adam and Eve. It continued when God delivered the Israelites from their suffering in Egypt, and when he spoke to the people through the prophets.

God’s compassion for humanity is so great that the Son of God became human in the person of Jesus Christ. Through Jesus, God dives deep into human suffering and uses that suffering to break open a way through death into goodness and eternal life. When we follow the way opened by Jesus, we too can pass through a world of suffering to a world of hope.

But believers hear the voice of God reply:  
“Don’t be afraid! I am with you.”

**N** Is it possible for the world to become the good place envisioned in the Book of Genesis and by the prophets? Explain your answer.



10. Why does God lead the people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land?
11. Name at least three ways God asked the Israelites to live out the Law “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 19:19).
12. According to the prophets, what kind of worship does God want from humans?
13. Define *justice* and *injustice*.



- 
14. Why is worship of God pointless if people do not love one another?

## The Compassionate Way of Jesus

Who is Jesus? Christians believe Jesus is the one sent by God the Father to save the world from sin and death. They believe that those who follow Jesus will live a new life, both on Earth and in heaven. This much is familiar to Christians from the time of their childhood.

But what does justice have to do with following Jesus? For Catholics, justice is a central part of Christian faith. In other words, a full response to Jesus involves more than just believing in him, praying to him, and going to church—although those are essential parts of Christian faith. Truly following Jesus means more than just saying yes to God with our lips; it means actually *living* that yes as Jesus did. A closer look at the life and teaching of Jesus reveals the meaning of justice.

### God Is with Us

The Gospel of Matthew calls Jesus Emmanuel, a name that means “God is with us.” Jesus’ followers eventually came to recognize that in him, God was quite literally with them, for Jesus Christ is “true God and true man,” to use the language of the Church—that is, fully the divine Son of God and fully a human being at the same time.

That must have been a stunning realization: God the Father loved humankind so much and thought humankind was so good that he sent his Son to be “born in human likeness” (Philippians 2:7) in the person of Christ. Remember Jean Donovan’s decision to stay with the people of El Salvador in order to ease their suffering? The **Incarnation**—the Son of God becoming human in the person of Jesus Christ—was the result of God’s choice to be with humanity in order to lead us out of

suffering and death, just as Moses led the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land. **O**

The compassion that moved God to enter humanity is imitated whenever Christians like Jean Donovan have compassion for those who suffer, by being with them.

## Jesus' Mission of Justice

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus begins his public ministry by going to the synagogue in his hometown and reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, whose vision of a just and peaceful world was described earlier. The passage Jesus reads is about one who was sent by God “to bring good news to the poor, . . . to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:17–21).

In choosing to read that passage, Jesus identified himself with the one who would bring about the just world imagined by Isaiah. In fact, Jesus’ ministry was characterized by the same outpouring of God’s love that made the world such a good place to begin with. Through his words, actions, and miracles, Jesus worked to restore a world of loving relationships.

But if Jesus’ mission was to share God’s goodness with people, why would anyone want to kill him?

The official reason for executing Jesus was written on a sign above him on the cross: “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.” Supposedly, Jesus was killed for wanting to be king. Nothing Jesus ever said or did would support that claim, however.

Jesus *did* talk about the coming of a new kingdom, or reign, though—the Kingdom of God.



Through his words, actions, and miracles,  
Jesus worked to restore  
a world of loving relationships.

*Student art: "Brotherly Love." Photograph; Melissa C. Hansen, Ramona Convent Secondary School, Alhambra, California*

**O** The Scriptures tell us that God is like a mother comforting her child (see Isaiah 66:13). Describe a time when you were suffering from sickness, disappointment, or rejection. How did the presence of a friend or parent make you feel better? Are there times when you would rather be alone when you suffer? Why or why not?

## The Kingdom of God

For Jesus, the Kingdom of God was not an earthly kingdom held together by armies and soldiers. Nor was it a specific place at all. Instead, the Kingdom, or Reign, of God is the way things are when God is the “king” who “rules” in people’s hearts. Because God’s rule is love, we can say the **Kingdom of God** is the way things are when love is more important than anything else in people’s lives. The Kingdom of God is both initiated and fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who is the embodiment of divine love, and it is already present wherever people and communities are centered in love.

We know from our experiences, though, that people’s actions in the world are characterized not only by love but also by cruel indifference. Clearly, the Kingdom is not yet completely here, or the world would be a different place. Human sinfulness prevents the Kingdom from being fully present now, but Christians believe it will be fully realized through Christ’s final victory over evil at the end of time. This is why they pray in the Lord’s Prayer, “your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven” (Matthew 6:10), at the same time they proclaim the Kingdom in both word and action.

Jesus did not invent the idea of the Kingdom of God. The Israelites had talked about God as king for many centuries. For them, God was their ultimate ruler, and love of God was the greatest commandment in Jewish Law.

But Jesus put his own twist on what it means to love God. In the following passage from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus teaches that love of God (a commandment from the

Shema) is impossible without love of neighbor (a commandment from the Book of Deuteronomy):

One of the scribes . . . asked [Jesus], “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and 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.” Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” When Jesus saw that [the scribe] had answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” (Mark 12:28–34)

Jesus does not answer with just one commandment but with two. The scribe sees that Jesus is teaching that love of neighbor is essential to loving God. Jesus says that those who understand this important lesson “are not far from the kingdom of God.” **P**

### Love God by loving one another

Jesus takes his point even further in the well-known story of how the Kingdom of God will be fulfilled through Jesus, the king, in the final judgment at the end of time. In that story, Jesus shows how his Kingdom is based on love:

**P** In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus’ reply to the scribe is followed by the parable of the good Samaritan. In that story, the priest and the Levite are going to worship at the Jerusalem Temple and do not want to help the beaten man because his blood might make them “unclean” and unable to worship. The Samaritans were despised by the Jews because they did not worship God at the Temple—but, as a result, the good Samaritan is able to help his neighbor. He knows that he honors God by caring for the beaten stranger on the road.

Read the story of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:29–37. Then rewrite the parable as if it took place today in your community.



## HE'S GOT THE WHOLE WORLD IN HIS HANDS

It is not **uncommon** for students taking justice and peace courses to feel discouraged or overwhelmed as they learn about all the suffering and injustice in the world. That's okay—some of the greatest figures in the Bible and in Christian history have had similar feelings.

At the same time, Christians find reason to hope when they remember that God has a plan for overcoming the powers of evil so that justice and peace will reign. For Christians, all work for justice and peace flows out of God's plan of salvation, which can be summarized as follows:

- **God is love.** The very nature of God is three persons—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—united as one in love. The Father's plan is to share that love through the work of creation, the whole history of his loving relationship with humanity, the missions of the Son and the Spirit, and the mission of the Church.
- **God made the world good.** In the beginning, God created the world to be a good place. God made human beings so that they might one day be united in love with him forever. Humans—and through humanity, all of creation—find their ultimate destiny in God. This is what makes human life sacred.
- **Sin is the root of injustice.** By turning away from God, humans introduced sin into the world. As long as people are sinful, injustice will be part of the world.
- **Jesus Christ is the source of all justice and peace.** In his compassion for humankind, the Son of God "came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit, he was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man," as

Catholics recite every week in the Nicene Creed. Jesus became a human being for the sake of all people, and shared in our suffering even to the point of being killed because of our sinfulness. By suffering and dying for us, he redeemed us from sin and restored the image of God in us. By the power of God's love, he was raised to a new, transformed life, opening the way to this new life for all who would follow him. It is through his death and Resurrection that the whole world will ultimately be redeemed, and that Christians hope to experience resurrected life in heaven as the completion of Christ's plan of redemption in their own lives.

- **Christ continues to transform the world through his Church.** Jesus Christ continues to be present to his followers, especially through the Sacraments they celebrate in the liturgy. When Christians celebrate the liturgy, they enter into communion with Christ, participate in his dying and rising, and so are transformed by his grace. This unites Christians with Christ and one another, so that together they become the Body of Christ—Christ's presence in the world.
- **The Kingdom of God.** As the Body of Christ, Christians are called to continue Christ's saving mission in the world. So the seed of the Reign of God on earth has already been planted in the Church, as well as in all people who allow God's love to rule their hearts.

- **The Reign of God will be fulfilled only when Christ comes at the end of time.** Although the Reign of God began in Christ's death and Resurrection and continues in the Church, it will not be fully present in the whole world until Christ's final victory over evil at the end of time initiates a new heaven and a new earth—one in which justice and peace reign.

Understanding God's plan helps us realize that it is ultimately God who saves the world, not us.

Although it is God who brings justice to fulfillment, that does not mean we should sit on the sidelines doing nothing about the world's problems. As we see in the Genesis Creation stories, God invites us to fulfill our human dignity by participating in his ongoing work of creation. Pursuing justice and peace is part of that work. Moreover, the Scriptures make it clear that we cannot really love God while ignoring the suffering of others.

As we work for justice and peace, knowing that we are not responsible for saving the whole world can be a source of hope. As the old Christian hymn says, God's "got the whole world in his hands": he is doing justice for us, alongside us—and if we let him, through us.



“Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’” (Matthew 25:34–40)

Jesus and the prophets agree, *True love of God is best shown by loving one another*. Genuine worship comes from a sincere heart, one that recognizes God in the needs of others.

## Love Turns the World Upside Down

As strange as it may sound, Jesus’ “kingdom of love” frightened the political leaders of the time. If love reigned, they would lose their power.

We hear the word *love* so much (especially in religion classes) that it may be difficult to imagine how it could be so threatening. But, in fact, when love, willing the good for each

other, is the most important law in a society, everything changes. By making love the law of the land, Jesus was turning the world of first-century Palestine upside down.

### The social world of first-century Palestine

By knowing the social situation of Jewish society at the time of Jesus, we can more fully appreciate the impact of Jesus’ mission. As you read about that situation, keep in mind that Jewish society of the first century was in many respects advanced for its time. Jesus did not challenge only Jewish society, but all societies not ruled by love—and his challenge is as valid for Christians in the twenty-first century as it was then.

Imagine Jewish society of Jesus’ time as a pyramid, with those at the top of the pyramid closest to God (and therefore “most holy”) and those at the bottom farthest from God (“least holy”). At the very top was the high priest, the only man who could go into the holiest part of the Temple.

Next came the other religious authorities. Because they worshiped at the Temple and tried to follow the Law exactly, they thought they were closer to God than everyone else.

All other men who tried to follow the Law were next on the pyramid. Rich and healthy men came first, their prosperity seen as a sign that they had earned God’s favor by following the Law.

Women were next down the pyramid. Most of women’s worth came from their relationship to their fathers, husbands, or brothers. They were treated like property and had few rights. Men could easily divorce their wives, but women could not divorce their husbands.

**Q** How is the world as you see it today the same as or different from the world of the ancient Jews? Draw a diagram showing how groups of people relate to one another. Your diagram does not have to be a pyramid—it should reflect the shape of society as you see it.

Women generally could not be disciples of rabbis or preachers, nor could they have friendly conversations with men in public.

Next on the pyramid came foreigners. Because the Jewish people were especially chosen by God, people who were not Jewish were considered outside of God's covenant, although "righteous" non-Jews were often treated with more respect. Samaritans, considered to have a corrupt, inferior version of Judaism, were especially despised.

Next came sinners. Poverty and sickness were seen by many as evidence of sin. People who were poor or sick were thought to have earned their situation by not obeying the Law. People who worked in unclean professions, such as shepherds or tax collectors, were considered to be sinners too.

At the bottom of the heap came people such as prostitutes and murderers.

Those at the top of the pyramid (the ones who followed the Law) did not associate with those at the bottom. If they entered a sinner's house, for instance, or ate with sinners, or touched a leper, they would become unclean and would have to perform elaborate rituals to purify themselves.

Of course, this quick sketch of ancient Jewish society does not reflect its complexities. But the point is clear: Jewish society was one of division, as ours is today. **Q**

### "The last shall be first"

In the Kingdom of God, that pyramid is turned on its head. Jesus taught that far from being unloved by God, people who are poor, suffering, and oppressed are especially loved by God—not because they are better than everyone else, but because they need his love the most. In the **Beatitudes**, Jesus calls them "blessed." They are blessed not because poverty, suffering, and oppression are good, but because their experience teaches them the importance of love and justice—a lesson that rich and comfortable people may have more difficulty understanding.

On the other hand, anyone who wants to be "first" must not be selfish, but must bring goodness to others—the opposite of what Adam and Eve did. "I am among you as one who serves," Jesus said, urging his followers to do the same: "The greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves" (Luke 22:26–27).



"Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans," the Gospel of John notes (4:9), and Jewish women were not to speak with strange men in public. It is no wonder that when Jesus asked the Samaritan woman at the well for a drink of water, the disciples "were astonished that he was speaking with a woman" (4:27).

Can you imagine what society would look like if instead of trying to get ahead, everyone tried to serve everyone else? Catholic thinker and social activist Peter Maurin put it this way:

Everybody would be rich  
if nobody tried to become richer.  
And nobody would be poor  
if everybody tried to be the poorest.  
And everybody would be what he ought  
to be  
if everybody tried to be  
what he wants the other fellow to be. **R**

(*Easy Essays*, page 72)

### A new family

In Jesus' kingdom, *all* people are related to one another when they love one another: "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:35). Throughout the Gospels, Jesus constantly breaks through society's divisions to bring everyone into his family, including the following:

**Women.** Jesus talked to women in public all the time—his disciples "were astonished that he was speaking with a woman" at the Samaritan well (John 4:27). Jesus touched women to heal them, and was touched by them in return. Jesus taught women and had them among his disciples. And women, who were not thought to be reliable witnesses, were the first witnesses of the Resurrection.

**Sick people.** Jesus totally rejected the idea that sickness comes from sin, and he touched the sick to heal them. Over and over, the religious leaders charged Jesus with breaking

the command not to work on the Sabbath because Jesus healed people on that day. Jesus said that having compassion for the suffering "keeps the Sabbath holy," but ignoring them in order to honor God does not.

**Sinners.** Jesus frequently associated with sinners and even ate at their homes, an act that would have made him ritually unclean. Likewise, he forgave sins—an act punishable by death. On the other hand, Jesus said that the ones who think they are holier than everyone else are also sinners because they sin by scorning others.

**Rich and powerful people.** Jesus must have known that the top of the pyramid can be a lonely place. He challenged rich and powerful people to give up their wealth and power—not just to benefit poor and oppressed people, but because doing so would allow those who are rich and powerful to love. In the Kingdom of God, love is more valuable than gold.

**Enemies.** Jesus even wanted to bring our *enemies* into the Kingdom of God. He said people should respond to violence not with retaliation but with love: "You have heard that it was said [by some of the teachers of law], 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:43–44). This is a hard saying for people to accept even today because it seems to be the way of weakness. In fact, the power of love is stronger than the power of violence, as we will discuss in a later chapter.

**R** Form a small group with some of your classmates. Together, make up a humorous skit about what would happen if people suddenly started living out Peter Maurin's vision. Or write a skit by yourself.

## Love's Surprise: The Cross and the Resurrection

As we have seen, the mission of Jesus was to take a world built in large measure on selfishness and turn it upside down to make it a world built on love. But the people in power feared Jesus' new Kingdom based on love. They were afraid of a man who questioned everything about how the world works, everything that made sense to them. In a world based on Jesus' teaching, how would they fare? In fact, love multiplies God's goodness for everyone—but their deep fear kept them from understanding that truth, and so they sought to kill Jesus. **S**

Jesus could have avoided suffering and death by giving up the mission God had given him. After all, he was afraid of pain, suffering, and death just like any other human being. But Jesus was totally committed to following the will of his Father, which is for people to love one another as God has loved them. Jesus loved God and humanity completely—even though this meant that some people would cause him to suffer and die. On the cross, Jesus gave up everything he had for the sake of love. He did exactly the opposite of what Adam and Eve did when they turned away from God to seek greater power for themselves.



The cross and the Resurrection are signs that unselfish love, not selfishness, leads to goodness and joy and life.

**S** The political leaders of Jesus' time feared his vision of a world based on love. Have you ever been afraid of love? If so, why? If not, can you imagine reasons people might fear love?



## THE JOY OF JUSTICE

The dissatisfaction with “the way the world works” that leads people to **do justice** often results in the **surprise of joy**.

Lou Nanni, now a director of a center for the homeless, discovered this truth during a two-year mission trip to Chile that he undertook after graduating from the University of Notre Dame, and he writes as follows:

After four enjoyable and affirming years at Notre Dame, I was abruptly displaced, living in a Santiago shantytown under the ruthless dictatorship of a military regime. Distant from family and friends, I struggled with health problems as I adjusted to a new language, culture, political situation and socio-economic reality. Loneliness and self-doubt filled the spaces where pride and confidence had only recently dwelled.

Satisfaction and happiness, which [depend on] external circumstances, were for the first time in my life no longer present. I cried myself to sleep many nights thinking of the profound



suffering which surrounded me in our neighborhood. Children not clothed adequately against the cold and rain. . . . Teens and adults tortured, some to death, because they courageously stood for the truth. Masses of people who had lost belief in themselves and hope for the future. What was there to be happy about? In fact, I soon came to feel that I was as powerless as they to change this unjust reality, even for one lost soul. Or so it seemed.

“Nobody ever said the Holy Spirit was going to make us happy, but [he] is going to make us joyful,” [explains theologian Michael Himes]. In fact, [he says,] “the Holy Spirit will make us unsatisfied.” I was unsatisfied and disgusted not so much by the military regime and its instruments of destruction as by the majority of individuals who cowardly [gave in] and remained indifferent before it. I was also distressed by the abrupt recognition of my own limitations. I realized to my horror that I was not going to become another Martin Luther King Jr. . . . I was unsatisfied, unhappy . . . and though I did not realize it, the Holy Spirit was at work.

While searching in vain for fulfillment and satisfaction, I discovered joy. I found hope in the common-day prophets all around me. People who had transformed suffering into joy. People who had found resurrection in their own crucifixion, and who shared it with others. A very poor family would invite me into their home and serve hot dogs, and a young child would inadvertently say, “This is the first time we’ve eaten meat in two years.” Or it was a mother who learned that a couple of neighborhoods over, a young man had been tortured to death, and she would protest in the street before the armed forces knowing full well she could be orphaning her own children in the process. She knew it was the right course of action, that it had to be done, and her faith and shared pain with that mother nearby allowed her to rise above her fears and self-interest. . . . This was joy, and I found it emerge through the cracks of broken lives, not from the satisfied and comfortable of this world. (Quoted in Himes, *Doing the Truth in Love*, pages 46–47) **T**

This was joy, and I found it emerge through the cracks of broken lives, not from the satisfied and comfortable of this world.

**T** Respond to this statement: “Nobody ever said the Holy Spirit was going to make us happy, but [he] is going to make us joyful. In fact, [he] will make us unsatisfied.”

Turning away from God, who had been their source of life, brought the first humans suffering and death. But Christ did just the opposite: he lived out the will of his Father through his loving sacrifice for us, and in doing so he restored the relationship of all humans with God. It is through his death and Resurrection that humanity is freed from sin and death, and a world of justice will ultimately be restored.

That was not at all what the political leaders expected to happen; the Resurrection was a complete surprise to them. But to those who believed, it was a sign that God, through his Son, had succeeded in turning the world upside down; unselfish love, not selfishness, led to goodness and joy and life.

It is through the loving sacrifice of Jesus Christ that people receive the grace to follow him by loving God and neighbor, even through suffering. In loving God and neighbor, they live in Christ and become more fully images of God, whose love never runs out even though it is constantly given away. **U**

## The Story Continues

Earlier in this chapter, we asked why people such as Jean Donovan would be moved by compassion to ease the suffering of others, even if by doing so they might suffer too.

Christians believe the source of such compassion is the Holy Spirit alive and moving within us. God gave his own self to humanity in Jesus, and Jesus continues to give all of himself—his body and blood—to his followers in the Eucharist. Just as the bread and wine are changed into the Body and Blood

of Jesus, those who receive the Eucharist with open hearts are changed as well. They are called to become like Jesus, giving themselves in love for the goodness of the whole world. Responding to the call of grace unites us more closely with God, who makes it possible for us to work for God's justice in the world.

Of course, it is easy to talk about the *idea* of justice; responding to God's grace by *doing* justice is a messier matter, one that requires good supplies of imagination, creativity, endurance, courage, and hope. Jean Donovan and countless others are aware that people who seek justice sometimes suffer—and even die—for it. Yet they seek it anyway, because in doing so, they find the true joy that comes only from being united in love with God and one another. **V**

### An invitation and a promise

For the remainder of this course, we will focus on how Christians work to cast light on the world's shadows so that it might become a world of justice. Many students find courses in Christian justice to be among the most difficult of their religion courses—not because the material is harder, but because justice challenges people's most basic values today just as much as it did in Jesus' day.

This course is not meant to make you feel guilty about the ways you do not live justly—few Christians are completely just. Nor is it expected that you will agree with everything in this textbook.

So what is this course about? It is an invitation for you to imagine what the world might look like if it were a world of justice. It is an invitation to consider how the Catholic tradi-

**U** Describe a time when you were surprised by love. If you cannot think of a personal experience, describe a way you or someone you know might like to be surprised by love.

**V** Respond to the following statements: (a) God alone can bring justice to the world. (b) Humans can bring justice to the world on their own. Do you agree or disagree with each? Why?

tion of Christian justice seeks to bring about that world. And it is an invitation to ask yourself how *you* might contribute to a world of justice.



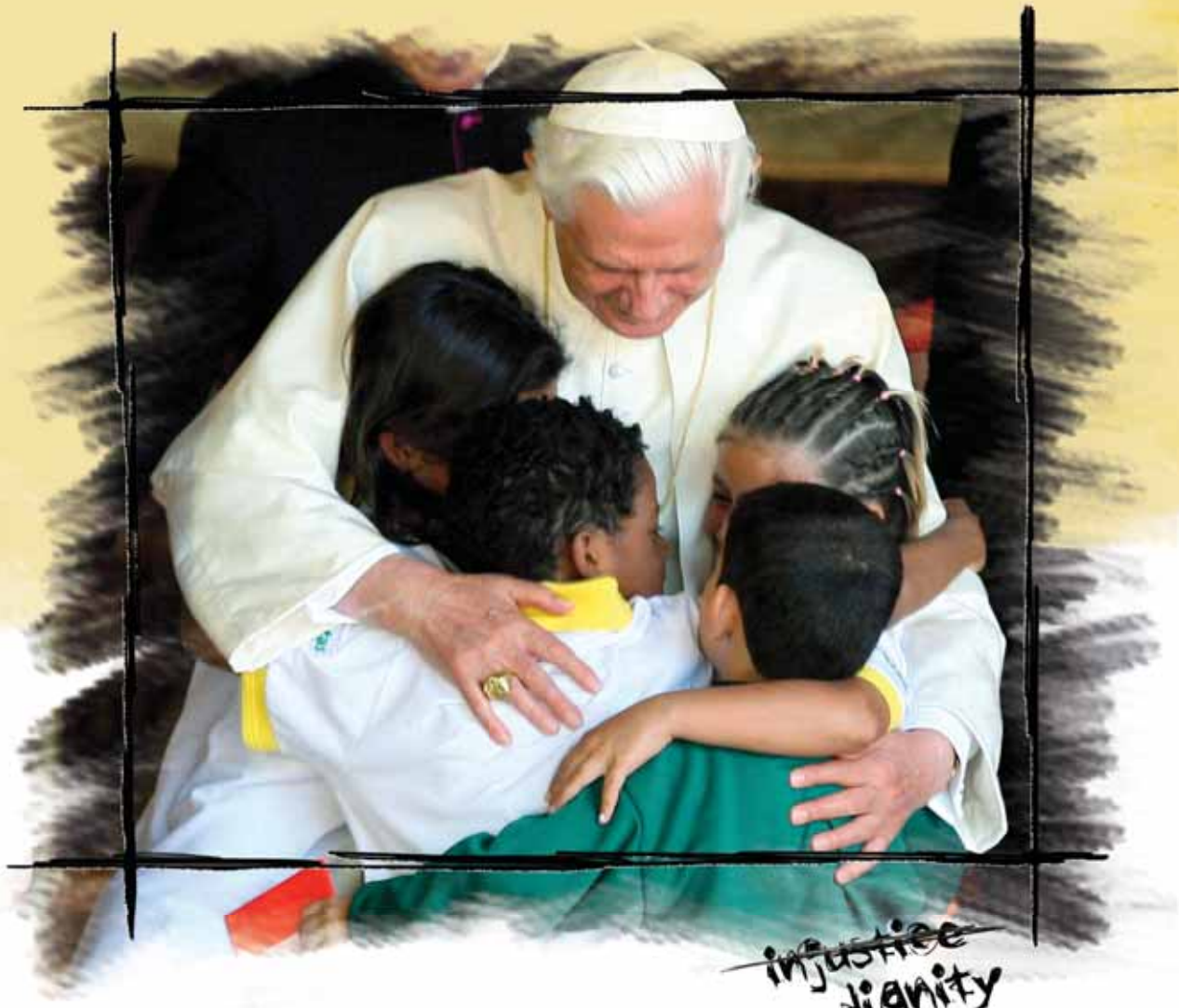
15. Why did the Son of God become a human being in the person of Jesus Christ?
  16. What is the Kingdom of God?
  17. According to Jesus and the prophets, how is true love for God best shown?
  18. Briefly explain how Jesus invited each of the following groups of people into the Kingdom of God: *women, sick people, sinners, rich and powerful people, enemies.*
- 



19. In two paragraphs, describe the significance of *(a)* the Original Sin committed by Adam and Eve, and *(b)* Jesus' death on the cross. How are they related?
20. Why do Christians such as Jean Donovan work for justice, even if they might die doing so?



# 2 CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING



*injustice  
dignity*

*community*



# Envisioning

## a world of justice and peace

### In This Chapter . . .

A Message of Hope

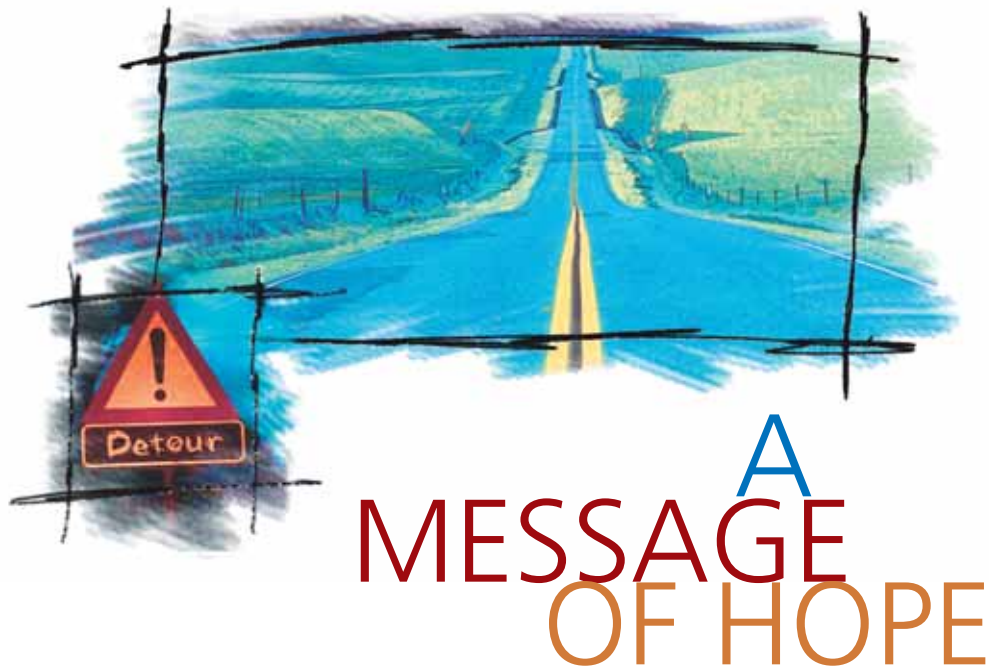
The Church in the World

The Development of Catholic Social Teaching

Themes of Catholic Social Teaching, 1–3

Themes of Catholic Social Teaching, 4–7

Toward a World Based on Love



# A MESSAGE OF HOPE

**1 May 1933:** Two hundred thousand workers paraded noisily through the streets of New York City, filling the air with a profusion of banners and pennants and signs, most of which were bright red—the color of the Communist Party.

There was a sense of desperation, even anger, in this crowd of people who worked for poverty wages, if they worked at all; the Great Depression was well under way, leaving millions without work, food, or shelter. The previous winter, thousands of farmers and unemployed workers had come together for a hunger march on Washington, D.C., as a dramatic appeal for help from the politicians—only to be rebuffed



Catholic social teaching was a source of hope for these Depression-era New Yorkers, who read about it in the *Catholic Worker* newspaper.

by armed police and soldiers. To many of the hungry and unemployed, the Communist Party seemed to be the only group that cared about their plight.

To dispel that notion, Dorothy Day and three young men ventured into the chaotic crowd of May Day marchers with a new newspaper, the *Catholic Worker*. Some in the crowd probably recognized Dorothy, a journalist and social activist who had frequently run in communist and socialist circles prior to her conversion to Catholicism four years earlier.

"Read the *Catholic Worker!*" they called out, waving copies of their paper. The reaction from the marchers was often hostile—communism claimed that religion was the enemy of the poor, but the *Catholic Worker's* message was the opposite. Those who bothered to read the paper were greeted in this way:

#### To Our Readers

For those who are sitting on park benches in the warm spring sunlight.

For those who are huddling in shelters trying to escape the rain.

For those who are walking the streets in the all but futile search for work.

For those who think that there is no hope for the future, no recognition of their plight—this little paper is addressed.

It is printed to call their attention to the fact that the Catholic Church has a social program—to let them know that there are men of God who are working not only for their spiritual, but for their material welfare. . . .

In an attempt to popularize and make known the encyclicals of the Popes in regard to social justice and the program put forth by the Church for the "reconstruction of the social order," this news sheet, the *Catholic Worker*, is started. (Based on Roberts, *Dorothy Day and the "Catholic Worker,"* pages 1–3) **A**

"Read the *Catholic Worker!*" they called out, waving copies of their paper.

**A** The *Catholic Worker* was started "for those who think that there is no hope for the future." Where have you heard a message that gives you hope for the future? Whether it is from a song, a poem, a book, a movie, or something someone told you, write down that message and why it gives you hope. Be prepared to discuss it in class.

# The Church in the World

From its humble beginnings, the *Catholic Worker* was soon read by more than one hundred thousand people who wanted to hear about the ideas for social justice described in Church documents that are collectively known as Catholic social teaching. Those ideas can change the world—so much so that in some countries, Church people who voice them are at risk for their lives. Catholic social teaching calls for society to be transformed in ways that will make it easier for all people to experience the goodness God wills for them—but that transformation requires changes that make some people uncomfortable.

What kind of teaching is this, and where does it come from? That's the question we will explore in this chapter.

## What Is Catholic Social Teaching?

What is Catholic social teaching? Simply put, it is the call of the popes and bishops for people to let the reign of God's love shape their world, a call that is rooted in the mission of Jesus Christ.

Jesus' mission did not end with his Ascension into heaven; rather, he handed it on to the Apostles, so that it continues even today through the Church. That mission is nothing less than to save all people from sin and death so that they can share in God's love. In *The Church in the Modern World*, an important document of the Second Vatican Council, the Church describes its mission as an expression of compassion:

The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts. (1)



Former United States Vice President Al Gore is a leader in the movement to lessen global climate change, a concern of Catholic social teaching.

This mission of compassion is carried out whenever the Church makes Christ's saving action present in word and deed, primarily through the celebration of the liturgy. But it does not end within the walls of church buildings. Having been transformed by Christ in the liturgy, the Church is called to bring Christ's saving presence into the world so that all people might be transformed by his love. Catholic social teaching and the action for justice that flows from it are therefore critical to the Church's mission. As the bishops of the world put it:

Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a [necessary part] . . . of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation. (*Justice in the World*, 6)

Some people might wonder why the Church needs special teaching to guide action for justice; after all, it already has the Scriptures. Yet the specific social situations of the world today are much different from those of the Mediterranean world some two to three thousand years ago when the Scriptures were written. Catholic social teaching serves as a kind of bridge, applying the timeless truths

of the Scriptures—as well as the accumulated wisdom of the Church’s sacred Tradition—to the new and complex social situations of the modern world.

**Catholic social teaching**, then, is the teaching of the Church that examines human society in light of the Gospel and Church Tradition for the purpose of guiding Christians as they carry on the mission of Jesus in the world. It is issued by popes and bishops in letters, statements, and official documents that are addressed to the whole Church, and ultimately, the whole world. **B**

## “Signs of the Times”

Of course, it would be impossible for the Church’s social teaching to be a compassionate response to humankind’s “joy and hope, grief and anguish” if it were not based on a deep understanding of the realities faced by people in the world. The Church’s response to the world flows out of its interpretation of those realities, which it calls the **signs of the times**. Those realities include the religious, political, cultural, and economic factors that shape the overall situation of society.

It was the signs of the times in nineteenth-century Europe, in fact, that first sparked the modern Catholic social teaching tradition. Although the Church has always taught about justice in one form or another, the formal social teaching of the bishops and popes began in 1891, when Pope Leo XIII issued the encyclical *On the Condition of Labor*. The encyclical is more frequently called by its Latin title, *Rerum Novarum*. That first document was a response to the social situation brought about by various forces: the Enlightenment,

the Industrial Revolution, capitalism, and Marxism, to name a few.

Although the modern world is different now, the forces that changed the face of nineteenth-century Europe are still major influences on the social situation of the world today. Likewise, the basic concerns of *Rerum Novarum*—the suffering of poor people, cooperation between groups, the dignity of work, the role of the state, and so on—have continued to be major themes of Catholic social teaching. Examining the social context out of which it developed provides a better understanding of Catholic social teaching as a whole.

The new “rulers”:

**Reason, science, individual liberty**

Europe in the eighteenth century was full of ferment. New philosophies and approaches to life were springing up that would eventually reshape all Western societies. The **Enlightenment**, the up-and-coming social, political, and philosophical movement,



The French Revolution was just one product of the Enlightenment, which said that science and reason—not religion—are the basis for knowing truth.

**B** The term “Catholic social *teaching*” implies that the Church attempts to be a teacher of society through its official documents. In your opinion, who are the most influential “teachers” of society in the world today, and what is their message?



# A GUIDE TO READING THE SOCIAL TEACHING DOCUMENTS

## Why do many of the Church's documents

**have two titles?** Catholic Church documents published by the Vatican generally have an official Latin title—the opening two or three words of the document—which is printed in Latin, the official language of the whole Church. Then there is a title in a modern language, in our case, English. In this text, the English title will be given first, with the Latin title following in parentheses the first time the document is mentioned in a chapter. But *Rerum Novarum* is so well known by its Latin title that we will use that instead of the English title.

**What do the numbers in parentheses mean?** Church documents are usually numbered by paragraph. When a document is quoted, the quote is usually followed by the paragraph number in parentheses, making it easier to find the quote in the document.

**What are *encyclicals*, *pastoral letters*, and *constitutions*?** Church documents are divided into several types, according to author and audience. **Encyclicals** are letters from the Pope to all the bishops of the world; sometimes they are also addressed to all Christians and to all people “of good will.” **Pastoral letters**, such as the U.S. bishops’ *Economic Justice for All*, are typically written by a bishop or group of bishops for all the Catholics in a specific location. And *The Church in the Modern World* (*Gaudium et Spes*) is a **constitution**, a text from a council of all the world’s bishops, including the Pope, written for all the world’s Catholics and others.

asserted that reason and science are the basis for knowing truth. The movement dismissed religious teachings, the Bible, and any claims of Church or royalty to have authority in matters of truth or in directing human beings. The **liberalist** philosophy of individual rights and autonomy, together with limited government and the ownership of private property, was part of the “program” of the Enlightenment. **C**

The Enlightenment’s stance became the basis for at least two political revolutions. In North America, the British colonies revolted against the king of England (see the Declaration of Independence as a classic statement of Enlightenment thinking). And in France, the revolution against the monarchy and the Church actually brought about a bloody “reign of terror” by the new rulers, who were hardly people of reason. So the push for individual rights and the rule of reason did not sit well with leaders in the Church.

### Economic upheaval

By the nineteenth century in Europe, the **Industrial Revolution**—the shift from a farming and craft trade economy to an economy based on factory production—was well under way. As machines in factories enabled goods to be produced faster and cheaper, those who owned the means of producing goods, which is called **capital**, became wealthier. People moved to cities to sell their labor to the factory owners for pitifully small wages, living and working in inhumane, filthy, and dangerous conditions.



Following the Industrial Revolution, the liberalist approach to capitalism resulted in inhumane working conditions for millions of people, including this young girl working in an American cotton mill around 1905.

This new economic system, in which a few owned the means of production for their own profit, and workers sold their labor to the owners for whatever wage they could get, came to be known as **capitalism**. Under the new philosophy of liberalism, capitalism was often left unfettered and unlimited by governments, producing much wealth for a few, but an intolerable life for the masses. The situation was crying out to be challenged. **D**

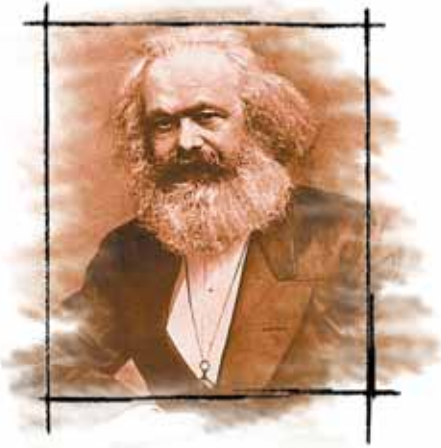
### Marx’s challenge

The greatest challenge to unregulated capitalism came through various socialist movements in Europe in the nineteenth century. **Socialism** advocated distributing wealth according to need, not ownership of capital and profits. The German philosopher **Karl Marx**,

**C** The Catholic Church has argued that both faith and reason are necessary to know God and live according to God’s wishes. Do you rely primarily on faith or reason in your life, or both? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each approach? Be prepared to discuss your answers in class.

**D** To demonstrate the impact of the Industrial Revolution, do a scavenger hunt for handmade items (items not made in a factory) in your home. Bring a list of as many items as you can find—or, if possible, the items themselves—to class. As you do this, consider these questions: What might have been some of the benefits and drawbacks of the preindustrial way of making things? What are some of the benefits and drawbacks of industrialization?





Karl Marx advocated revolution as a response to injustice—an approach the Church rejects.

with his works *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) and *Capital* (1867), provided a bitter critique of capitalism. His theory of history predicted that the masses would rise up, overthrow the capitalist class, abolish private property, and create a form of socialist state. Eventually, he proposed, socialism would give way to **communism**, an ideal, equitable society in which government and laws would be unnecessary. Marx's atheistic theory, later called **Marxism**, was adopted as a model for social change by many workers' movements around the world, and for the formation of

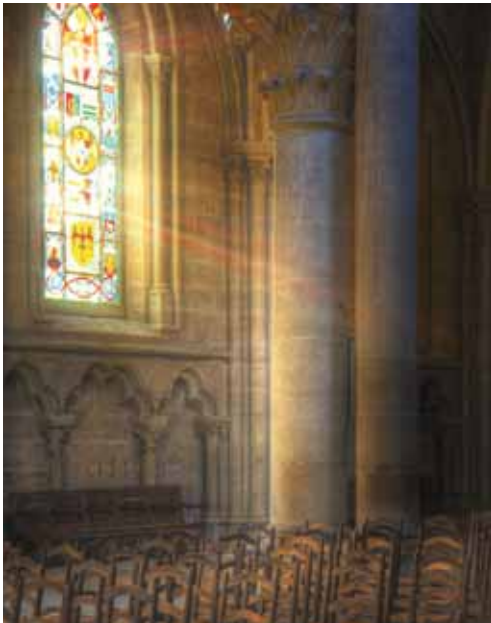
modern-day socialist and communist states—none of which has been quite the ideal society Marx envisioned. **E**

## The Church Responds

All these forces radically changed Western society, as well as the Church's role in that society. For the most part, the Church strongly resisted those changes, in part because it was losing its political power and authority.

But the Church also resisted aspects of the new social, political, and economic systems because it saw these systems as unjust. It was especially concerned with the plight of the new working class. That concern led Pope Leo XIII to issue the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*.

Leo XIII was not the first Catholic to address the injustices faced by the working class. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, a number of bishops around the world were actively supporting the associations and unions the workers were forming—even though labor unions were widely outlawed in the belief that they disrupted society.



Church on Sunday is intimately connected to choices Catholics make during the week.

Groups of Catholic thinkers and activists also worked on solutions to what was being called the social question. Twenty-year-old **Frédéric Ozanam**, for instance, started the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, a worldwide charitable organization for the poor. In the United States, by 1886 many working Catholics were organizing into a controversial organization known as the Knights of Labor, a union supported by some of the U.S. hierarchy, such as **Cardinal James Gibbons** of Baltimore.

Leo XIII was sympathetic to these early efforts; he himself had taken action by establishing a savings bank for the poor. The foundation was laid for *Rerum Novarum* to appear in 1891.



1. Define *Catholic social teaching*.
2. What are the signs of the times, and what role do they play in Catholic social teaching?
3. Define the following terms: *the Enlightenment, capitalism, socialism, communism*.



4. Choose one of these social influences—the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, capitalism, socialism, Marxism—and in a paragraph or two, explain how it continues to influence society today.

Groups of Catholic thinkers and activists also worked on solutions to what was being called the social question.

**E** Marxism says that privately owned property is the primary source of conflict between groups of people. Considering the differences between the economic groups in your school, do you think Marx was right? Explain why or why not.

# The Development of Catholic Social Teaching

## *Rerum Novarum*

*Rerum Novarum* was hotly debated when it was issued in 1891. Some praised it, and others scorned it—but it certainly was not ignored. Novelist Georges Bernanos would describe the impact of the encyclical in his fictional work *The Diary of a Country Priest* nearly forty years later:

“When it was published, sonny, it was like an earthquake. The enthusiasm! . . . The simple notion that a man’s work is not a commodity, subject to the law of supply and demand, that you have no right to speculate on wages, on the lives of men, as you do on grain, sugar or coffee—why it set people’s consciences upside down!” (Page 57)



Pope Leo XIII responded to the plight of nineteenth-century workers by calling for workers’ rights and for concern for society’s poorest people in *Rerum Novarum*, the first of the modern Catholic social teaching documents.

Why did *Rerum Novarum* cause such a stir in its time, and why is it still so influential? The answers to both questions lie in the encyclical itself.

### The themes of *Rerum Novarum*

Like socialism, *Rerum Novarum* criticized the abuses of liberal capitalism that left the majority of workers with lives “little better than slavery itself” (2). But it opposed the socialist solution to that situation, which was for the workers to take over and abolish the private ownership of property so that it would be owned in common by all people.

*Rerum Novarum* offered an alternative solution, one based on the Gospel and Church Tradition. That Tradition includes the notion of **natural law**—the God-given need for creation, including human beings, to follow what God intended it to be. The following are some major elements of the solution offered by Pope Leo XIII:

- *Cooperation between classes.* The social system proposed by *Rerum Novarum* was based on cooperation, not inevitable class warfare, between workers and capitalists, with rights and duties for both.
- *The dignity of work.* Work’s primary purpose is to provide a decent life for workers and their families. Workers are owed reasonable work hours, Sundays and religious holidays off, and safe working conditions, with strict limits on child labor.

“A man’s work is  
not a commodity.”

- *The just wage and workers' associations.* Workers must receive a **just wage**—an amount sufficient to provide a decent life for a worker's whole family—and must be free to organize associations, now known as **unions**, to negotiate working conditions. These proposals were well ahead of their time.
- *The role of the state.* A balance between the liberalist and socialist philosophies of government is needed. Government should avoid interfering in private matters, but in some situations government has to take action through laws for the good of society.
- *Private ownership of property.* All people have a right to own property, but private property must be fairly distributed and used responsibly for the good of all.
- *Defense of the poor.* Christians and governments should make the protection of the poor a priority.

Like all social teaching documents, *Rerum Novarum* provides general guidance for how society can become more just. Although that guidance has changed as the many challenges that face society have changed, Catholic social teaching since then has continued to echo the major themes of its first document.

## F

### Did it work?

In the end, the Church's social teaching is only effective to the extent that people actually act on it. In the case of *Rerum Novarum*, the short-term reaction was mixed.

Many Catholics ignored or misunderstood the teaching, but many others took it to heart. Catholic labor unions, mutual-aid societies,

cooperatives, and other organizations flourished as a result of the encyclical. It also enabled various Catholic political leaders to more boldly suggest and support legislation to improve the lives of the common people.

Over time, *Rerum Novarum*, along with the influence of socialism, indirectly led to the development of government policies such as minimum-wage laws and the right to strike. As Pope Pius XI would say forty years later, "Great credit must be given [to *Rerum Novarum*] for whatever improvement has been achieved in the workers' condition" (*The Reconstruction of the Social Order [Quadragesimo Anno]*, 28).

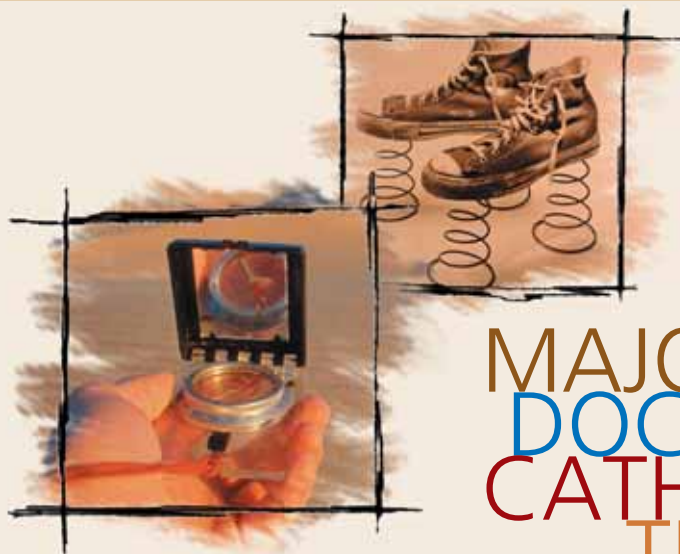
But perhaps most important, *Rerum Novarum* established a precedent for the Church to speak out on social matters. It observed that individual moral choices affect society, and society affects individual morality; the two cannot be separated. Therefore, the Church has to be concerned with moral issues not only on the individual level but on the social level as well. **G**

By making that claim, *Rerum Novarum* helped the Church shift its approach to helping poor and vulnerable people. The Church had always called for Christians to ease poverty through charitable giving. But now it was also asking Christians to look for the social causes of such problems as poverty, and to change the way society was set up so that the root causes of those problems would be eliminated as much as possible.

In doing that, *Rerum Novarum* opened the doors to more than one hundred years of social teaching and action in the Church.

**F** Consider your own work experience, and talk to your parents and friends about theirs. Based on these experiences, write down some ways *Rerum Novarum* could be updated for modern workers.

**G** "Individual moral choices affect society, and society affects individual morality." In several paragraphs, describe some ways your individual moral choices affect society, and then describe several ways society affects your own moral decision making.



# MAJOR DOCUMENTS OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

The following list of major documents of Catholic social teaching is provided as a **brief introduction** to the names and the general themes of the documents. **H**

***Rerum Novarum***  
***(On the Condition of Labor)***

Pope Leo XIII, 1891

Prompted by social changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution and the Enlightenment. Addresses the Church's right to speak on social issues and the rights and duties of workers and employers. Supports unions and the just wage.

***The Reconstruction of the Social Order***  
***(Quadragesimo Anno)***

Pope Pius XI, 1931

Written for the fortieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, in the context of the Great Depression and the rise of fascism and dictators in Europe. Re-examines the themes of *Rerum Novarum*. Critical of capitalism and communism. Advocates a just distribution of wealth. Introduces the concept of subsidiarity (see page 61).

***Christianity and Social Progress***  
***(Mater et Magistra)***

Pope John XXIII, 1961

Says modern society is becoming more complex and interdependent. The gap between rich and poor nations threatens society, as does military spending on nuclear weapons. Although governments should respect individual freedom, when necessary they must act on these problems to protect the common good.

***Peace on Earth  
(Pacem in Terris)***

**Pope John XXIII, 1963**

Written amid worldwide concern about nuclear war. Says peace can be achieved by respecting rights and duties, and describes these in detail. Says the race among nations for more weapons “must cease.” Calls for the strengthening of the United Nations and an end to racism.

***The Church in the Modern World  
(Gaudium et Spes)***

**Vatican Council II, 1965**

Has the most authority of the social teaching documents because it was written during an ecumenical council of the Church. Says the Church can and must serve the world, and that it can learn from other cultures in the world. States human beings are the “source, the centre, and the purpose of all economic and social life” (63). Condemns the use of weapons of mass destruction. Maintains peace is not just the absence of war but justice throughout society. Covers many other topics as well.

***The Development of Peoples  
(Populorum Progressio)***

**Pope Paul VI, 1967**

About human development—in other words, progress toward the economic, social, cultural, and spiritual fulfillment of human potential. Says the gap between rich and poor nations blocks human development. Criticizes capitalism for focusing on profit, competition, and private ownership of property while ignoring social duties. Rich nations must help poor nations. *Peace* means full human development.

***A Call to Action  
(Octagesima Adveniens)***

**Pope Paul VI, 1971**

An apostolic letter calling individual Christians and parishes to take personal responsibility for promoting justice not only through charity but also through political efforts to change the structures of injustice. Calls for all people to be cared for and allowed to participate in society, regardless of race, age, or gender. Calls for care of the environment.

***Justice in the World***

**World Synod of Bishops, 1971**

Written by a gathering of bishops from around the world, many from poor, undeveloped countries. Influenced by liberation theology. Says justice is a necessary and central part of the Church’s mission. “Christian love of neighbour and justice cannot be separated” (34). Discusses global justice and liberation of the poor and oppressed. Calls for more countries to share power, and for rich nations to consume less.

***Evangelization in the Modern World  
(Evangelii Nuntiandi)***

**Pope Paul VI, 1975**

Church’s central mission is to preach the Gospel to the world. Justice is an essential part of that evangelization. The ways society is organized—its structures—are an obstacle to justice when they are sinful. Christians must liberate people from injustice by transforming the social structures of sin. True liberation is not only political or economic but spiritual as well.

**H** As you read the summary of the Catholic social teaching documents, consider the following questions: Does any aspect of the Church’s social teaching surprise you? Do you disagree with aspects of the teaching, and why? In what areas do you think the world best reflects the values of Catholic social teaching? What areas seem to need the most work? Be prepared to discuss your answers in class.

***On Human Work  
(Laborem Exercens)***

**Pope John Paul II, 1981**

Written for the ninetieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, this encyclical says work is at the center of social issues. The purpose of work is to develop creation and to support family life. All who are able have the right and duty to work, regardless of race, gender, or disability; those who cannot work must be supported by society. Discusses rights of workers. Says people are more important than profits or the things they make.

***The Challenge of Peace***

**U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1983**

Written as the United States and the Soviet Union were at the height of the nuclear arms race. Calls the arms race “an act of aggression against the poor” (128) because money that should help the poor is used to build weapons. Calls for an end to the arms race, reduced numbers of weapons, and a ban on nuclear weapons testing. Supports active nonviolence and conscientious objection.

***Economic Justice for All***

**U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1986**

Examines economic justice in the United States. Finds both good and bad aspects of the U.S. economic system. Echoes other themes of Catholic social teaching, especially the option for the poor and vulnerable. Says the morality of all economic decisions, policies, and institutions is determined by whether they serve “all people, especially the poor” (24).

***On Social Concern***

***(Sollicitudo Rei Socialis)***

**Pope John Paul II, 1987**

Written for the twentieth anniversary of *Populorum Progressio*, the encyclical addresses the increasing gap between rich and poor countries. Says while poor countries experience underdevelopment, many rich coun-

tries experience “superdevelopment”—an overabundance of material goods that leads to consumerism and waste. Calls for rich nations to show solidarity with poor nations through cooperation and sharing.

***The Hundredth Year  
(Centesimus Annus)***

**Pope John Paul II, 1991**

Written for the centennial of *Rerum Novarum*. Notes that the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989 came about through nonviolent action, not war; the Church played an important role. Says socialism collapsed because it treated people as objects, not spiritual beings. Says capitalism is efficient but flawed when it does not respect human dignity. Calls for a business economy that serves and protects human beings.

***The Gospel of Life  
(Evangelium Vitae)***

**Pope John Paul II, 1995**

Warns that society is increasingly influenced by a “culture of death,” in which people ignore the spiritual side of being human, treating one another as objects and focusing only on their own wants and needs. Abortion, infanticide, capital punishment, and euthanasia are symptoms of the culture of death. Proposes a “culture of life,” in which Christian love leads people to actively protect and care for one another. ■

***God Is Love***

***(Deus Caritas Est)***

**Pope Benedict XVI, 2005**

In this encyclical, Pope Benedict XVI defines different types of love, both human and divine. People who are open to God’s love begin to see other people with the eyes of Christ and naturally choose to love others through serving them. “The Church’s deepest nature is expressed in her three-fold responsibility: of proclaiming the word of God . . . , celebrating the sacraments . . . , and exercising the ministry of charity.” (no. 25)

## A Dynamic Tradition

The major Catholic social teaching documents that followed *Rerum Novarum* continued to build on it—in fact, four documents have been issued to commemorate its anniversary. The core themes of modern Catholic social teaching have not changed much since its first document was issued.

At the same time, society has undergone considerable change since *Rerum Novarum*, and Catholic social teaching has developed to respond to those changes, as the summary of its major documents on pages 52–54 shows.

For instance, beginning in the 1960s, the documents became more concerned with global issues, rather than just focusing on Western society, because more of the Church’s bishops were from poor, undeveloped countries. This new global concern allowed the Latin American bishops to call the whole Church to a “preferential option for the poor,” a theme that has been especially prominent in the Church’s social teaching since then.

Another example is Catholic social teaching’s special attention to international peace and the morality of nuclear weapons during the **Cold War**. This was the period between about 1945 and 1990, when the United States and the Soviet Union competed to dominate the world through military might.

Likewise, the Church has shifted its attitude toward private property. Leo XIII felt it was important to emphasize the right to own private property because socialism was challenging that right. Since then, however, the Church has seen that the Western world, despite its wealth, largely ignores the majority of the world’s population that suffers in poverty. So although the Church does not dispute the right to private property, it has put more emphasis on the responsibility to use the goods of the earth for the benefit of all.

Despite some changes, however, the social teaching documents have more in common than not. An exploration of the common themes can provide a good overview of what Catholic social teaching is all about.

Beginning in the 1960s, the documents became more concerned with global issues.



The Cuban missile crisis, which brought the world to the brink of nuclear war, prompted Pope John XXIII to issue *Peace on Earth*.

Now that you have been introduced to the Catholic social teaching documents, write your own social teaching document together with some of your classmates. Begin by discussing the various social situations that concern you most, and then choose a specific situation to address. Write a letter that expresses your vision for making the situation better. Base your letter on values expressed by the Scriptures and Church Tradition.





5. What are six themes of *Rerum Novarum*?
6. What has been one of the most important results of *Rerum Novarum* for the Church?
7. In a short paragraph, describe one way Catholic social teaching has developed to respond to social changes.



8. Review the summary of Catholic social teaching on pages 52–54 and identify what you think might be some of its major themes (for example, human dignity, the gap between rich and poor people). For each theme, describe in a short paragraph how it reflects an aspect of the teaching or mission of Jesus.

## Themes of Catholic Social Teaching, 1–3

Although some scholars have listed ten, fourteen, or even twenty basic themes of Catholic social teaching, the U.S. Catholic bishops have limited their list to seven. The following themes are taken from two of their documents, *A Century of Social Teaching* (1991) and *Sharing Catholic Social*

### THE SEVEN THEMES OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

As you read through the rest of this book, watch for these icons—they're signals to help you notice the themes of Catholic social teaching in the text.



**1. THE LIFE AND DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON**



**2. CALL TO FAMILY, COMMUNITY, AND PARTICIPATION**



**3. RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES**



**4. THE OPTION FOR THE POOR AND VULNERABLE**



**5. THE DIGNITY OF WORK AND THE RIGHTS OF WORKERS**



**6. SOLIDARITY**



**7. CARE FOR GOD'S CREATION**

*Teaching* (1998). As you learn about the themes of Catholic social teaching, keep in mind that the themes do not stand alone; they cannot be separated from one another. Instead, they are interdependent, woven together to support and complement one another.

## The Life and Dignity of the Human Person

Yevgeny Yevtushenko was only a child when he and his mother witnessed twenty thousand German prisoners of war being marched down the streets of Moscow in 1944. Crowds of women lined the streets to show their contempt for the defeated enemy—the enemy who had taken the lives of their brothers, sons, and husbands, and who had caused them to suffer a long winter of near starvation. At first the soldiers and police had to restrain them, so great was their anger. But as the enemy paraded by, the women encountered only bloody, exhausted men and boys who passed with their heads hung low:

The street became dead silent—the only sound was the shuffling of boots and the thumping of crutches.

Then I saw an elderly woman in broken-down boots push herself forward and touch a policeman's shoulder, saying: "Let me through." . . .

She went up to the column, [and] took from inside her coat . . . a crust of black bread. She pushed it awkwardly into the pocket of a soldier, so exhausted that he was tottering on his feet. And now suddenly from every side women were running towards the soldiers, pushing into their hands bread, cigarettes, whatever they had.



German prisoners of war during World War II. Catholic social teaching says that all people, without exception, are given dignity by God.

The soldiers were no longer enemies. They were people. (Yevtushenko, *A Precocious Autobiography*, pages 24–25)

Those Russian women experienced a transformation on that cold day in 1944. The goodness within them overcame their deep pain and anger, allowing them to see their enemies not as monsters but as fellow human beings that suffered just as they did. And by caring for the men as God cared for them, the women became more truly people who reflected the image of God.

### All are loved by God

In their compassionate response, the Russian women recognized and acted on the most basic principle of Catholic social teaching: All human beings have dignity because they are loved by God and made in his image. People, motivated by selfishness, fear, or hate, have always found reasons not to respect the dignity of others: race, gender, nationality, disability, age, and history, just for starters. But Catholic social teaching insists that nothing can take away the fundamental dignity of any person, not even his or her own destructive actions.



The insight that *all* people have equal dignity because they are loved by God has some major implications for Christians. If God loves and wants goodness for every person, then how can Christians do anything less than to love and seek goodness for all people?

### For human life

In other words, Christians are called to be for human life. At the most basic level, this means allowing people to live. Respect for human life is the basis for the Catholic Church's opposition to abortion, the death penalty, euthanasia, and other forms of violence, including most wars.

But respecting human life means a lot more than simply allowing others to live—it also means helping others live to the fullest, experiencing all the dignity and goodness that God intended for them in the physical, social, mental, and spiritual aspects of their lives.

Specific examples of the principle of respecting human life and dignity might include the following:

- not using genetic engineering to manipulate human life for the creation of products
- giving poor, rural communities in underdeveloped countries access to clean water and the means to produce their own food
- placing human needs before profits when making business decisions

Promoting the life and dignity of human beings is the most fundamental of the Catholic social teaching principles. It is the one by which Catholicism judges the morality of social institutions and policy decisions, and it is the one on which all the other principles are based. **J**



Nothing can take away the fundamental dignity of any person.

Student art: Linocut; Alida Novarese, Saint Agnes Academy, Memphis, Tennessee

**J** Choose one of your favorite songs and write down the lyrics. Then, in a few paragraphs, explain how the lyrics support or oppose human dignity and life.



## The Call to Family, Community, and Participation

When we arrived at the school, the driver urged me to get out quickly. The white hand of a uniformed officer opened the door and pulled me toward him as his urgent voice ordered me to hurry. The roar from the front of the building made me glance to the right. Only a half-block away, I saw hundreds of white people, their bodies in motion and their mouths wide open as they shouted their anger. “The niggers! Keep the niggers out!” The roar swelled, as if their frenzy had been fired up by something. It took me a moment to digest the fact that it was the sight of us that had upset them.

As I entered a classroom, a hush fell over the students. The guide pointed me to an empty seat, and I walked toward it. Students sitting nearby quickly moved away. I sat down surrounded by empty seats, feeling unbearably self-conscious. One of the boys kept shouting ugly words at me throughout the class. I waited for the teacher to speak up, but she said nothing. My heart was weeping, but I squeezed back

the tears. I squared my shoulders and tried to remember what Grandma had said: “God loves you, child. No matter what, He sees you as His precious idea.” (Beals, *Warriors Don’t Cry*, pages 108, 111–112, 121, and 311–312)

Once the students were able to attend school regularly under the protection of the 101st Airborne Division, they no longer had to contend with mob violence, but school life was not easy for Melba or the other eight students of the “Little Rock Nine.” Throughout the year, classmates who wanted the students to quit or be expelled regularly harassed them. Melba was often pushed and tripped. At one point, someone squirted acid into her eyes.

The National Park Service made Central High School a National Historic Site because of its importance in the civil rights movement. Fifty years later, in 2007, many dignitaries gathered to honor the Nine for their role in making equal education available to all Americans. Even as the Nine celebrated advances in civil rights, some of these 1957 heroes still expressed concerns about segregation in area schools and the lower achievement of African American students attending them. **K**



Although Melba Beals and eight other students helped to desegregate Little Rock Central High School, barriers such as poverty and discrimination continue to prevent many people from fully participating in the life of society.

**K** Most of the time, the exclusion of people from the mainstream of society is not as obvious as it was in Melba’s case. Do you see examples of people being marginalized, perhaps in more subtle ways, in your own school? In your opinion, what are some of the reasons people are excluded?

Melba's struggle to be fully a part of society reflects the Catholic social teaching theme of **participation**—the right and responsibility of all people to participate in all aspects of human society—educational, political, cultural, religious, economic, and so on. Those who are not able to fully participate in society are often said to be **marginalized**, or forced outside the main group.

In chapter 1, we noted that relationships are an important part of being human. In fact, the human desire to be in relationship is a basic part of what it means to be made in the image of God, who is the relationship of three persons (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) united in one divine love. That is why the popes and bishops say human beings “realize,” or fulfill, their dignity in relationship with others and in community.

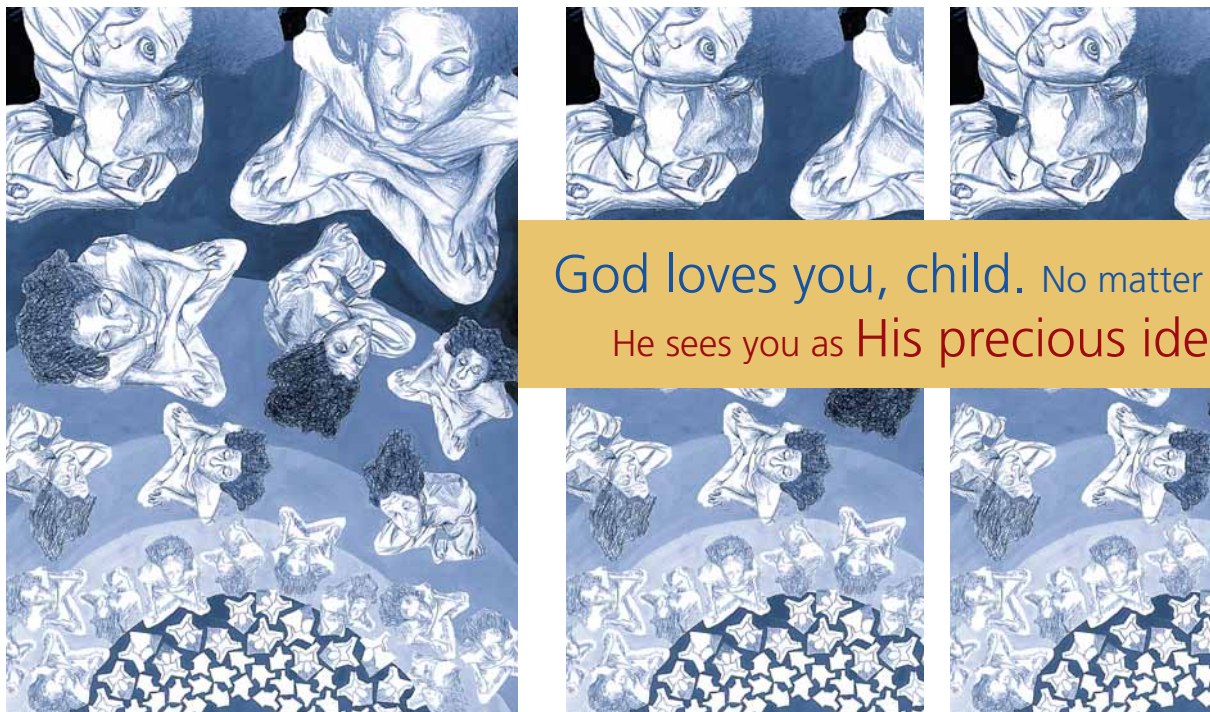
To understand what the popes and bishops mean, just think about all the ways the person you are today has been shaped, in good and bad ways, by the people in your life (not to mention by God and the natural environ-

ment around you). The experience of loneliness is a powerful reminder of how much we need to share ourselves with others.

The Christian tradition places special importance on participation in the family. The family is society's most basic building block; it is the place where people are meant to care for and love one another most intimately, and ideally, it is the place where people are able to realize all that God calls them to be. Catholic social teaching emphasizes the need for society to support families so that all people have an opportunity to participate in a family.

At the other end of the spectrum, participation at the international level means that all nations—whether they are rich or poor, weak or powerful—are able to share in making decisions for the global community.

Two aspects of participation—the common good and subsidiarity—are often listed as separate themes of Catholic social teaching. They are important enough to touch on here.



God loves you, child. No matter what,  
He sees you as His precious idea.

*Student art: "Double Space." Pencil and tempera; Dani Maniscalco, Sacred Heart High School, Kingston, Massachusetts*

## The common good

It is possible, of course, to participate in society in a negative way. But according to Catholic social teaching, people are called to participate in society positively, in ways that will contribute to the common good. The **common good** is the social condition that allows *all* the people in a community to reach their full human potential and fulfill their human dignity. The common good is *not* “the most good for the most people,” which would suggest that some people might be left out or might have to live under unjust conditions for the good of the majority. Working for the common good implies paying special attention to groups and individuals that are excluded from the benefits experienced by the rest of society. **L**



The common good is met only when all people can thrive.

## Subsidiarity

The way society is organized affects how well people are able to participate in it. Catholic social teaching says that large organizations or governments should not take over social responsibilities and decisions that can be carried out by individuals and small local organizations. But larger organizations or gov-

ernments have a responsibility to coordinate and regulate society when individuals and smaller organizations do not or cannot carry out responsibilities necessary for the common good. This concept, known as **subsidiarity**, could also be explained by saying that governments and large organizations exist only to serve the good of human beings, families, and communities, which are the center and purpose of social life.

For example, the concept of subsidiarity would say that it is wrong for the government to take over the responsibilities a family has for its children. But if the family neglects or abuses its children, then the government has a responsibility to intervene for the good of the children. On a larger scale, subsidiarity would suggest that the United Nations should not take over the responsibilities that national governments have for their people. On the other hand, the United Nations has a responsibility to coordinate efforts for global peace and human development that no single nation could accomplish alone.

## Rights and Responsibilities

I started living on the streets of Bogotá, Colombia, when I was only seven years old. I left home to live in the gutters because my family couldn't afford to feed me. Over three years, I learned all about poverty and I saw firsthand the cruelty of Bogotá society.

People hated us. At night, a drunk taxi driver would get angry and shoot at us. If a gang didn't like you, they would kill you.



**L** In your local newspaper, find an article about a government, business, or organization doing something that affects society. Write a paragraph or two about whether or not it is promoting the common good, and why. Be prepared to discuss your example in class.



Human dignity is truly respected only when basic human rights—such as the right to safety, food, and shelter—are fulfilled. But even the basic rights of millions of children around the world are often violated.

The police used to beat me and my friends frequently, just because we were living on the streets and begging for money. . . .

I was ten years old when the Fundación Niños de los Andes took me off the streets and gave me the chance to study and a place to sleep. Now it [has been] six years. I want to finish my studies, go to the university, and get money to help my family. I have three small brothers, and I don't want them ever to live on the streets. Now that I have a future, I want to work with street children who don't yet know they have a future. (*Stand Up for Your Rights*, page 63)

Tens of thousands of street children around the world live as seventeen-year-old Alberto Granada once did: denied basic human rights such as the right to live in safety, the right to adequate food and shelter, the right to education, and the right to equal protection under the law. **Rights** are those conditions or things that any person needs in order to be fully what God created him or her to be.

### Survival and thrival

As we discussed earlier, the most basic right is the right to life, because it is impossible to have other rights without it. The rights that are necessary for people to be able to live are known as **survival rights**; these include the right to food, shelter, and basic health care.

But as we see in the Book of Genesis, God does not want creation merely to sur-

vive, but to thrive and flourish. So beyond survival rights, Catholic social teaching insists that all human beings also have a right to those things necessary for them to fully realize their God-given dignity. These **thrival rights** include such things as education, employment, a safe environment, and enough material goods to support a family. They also include the right to live by one's conscience and religion, to immigrate, and to live without discrimination.

Human rights that are officially recognized (if not always respected) by most nations in the world are listed in a 1948 United Nations document that the Catholic Church has strongly supported as a tool for promoting justice, the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**.

### Responsibilities: Limits on rights

Though Catholic social teaching affirms the importance of rights, it also says that rights are not unlimited. An individual's rights are limited by his or her **responsibilities** for the good of others, as well as for the



Rights are balanced by responsibilities, such as the responsibility to care for God's creation.

common good of the whole society. Out of responsibility for the common good, governments must regulate rights in particular instances.

For example, all people have the right to own property (land, cars, money, clothes, and so on). But Catholic social teaching says that everything in the world is a gift given by God for the good of *all* people, both now and in the future. So people have a responsibility to care for their property, and to use it to promote their own human dignity as well as the dignity of their families and all members of society. When some people have more property than they really need, while others do not have enough to maintain a dignified life, then those with more have a responsibility to fulfill their neighbors' right to the necessities of a good life. **M**



9. Define the following terms: *human dignity*, *common good*, *subsidiarity*.
10. Define *participation*. What does participation mean for families and nations?
11. Define *rights*. What general responsibility do people have that limits their rights?



12. For each of the following themes, provide your own example (either real or made up) showing the theme or its absence: *life and dignity of the human person*, *participation*, *rights and responsibilities*. For example: "A family that decides to serve as a foster family for babies with AIDS is promoting the babies' lives and dignity."

Everything in the world is a gift given by God  
for the good of *all* people, both now and in the future.

**M** Make a list of the rights you think belong to all people. After each right, list the responsibilities that limit it.



# Themes of Catholic Social Teaching, 4–7



## The Option for the Poor and Vulnerable

The number 10 bus lurched to a stop at the County Institutions grounds. The driver yelled at some noisy boys in the back to settle down—other students who, like fourteen-year-old Frank Daily, were coming home from a Catholic high school in Milwaukee.

A very pregnant woman hung onto the handrail and slowly pulled herself onto the bus.

“Where are your shoes, lady?” the bus driver asked her, seeing that she only had stockings on her feet. “It ain’t more than 10 degrees out there.”

“I can’t afford shoes,” the woman replied, pulling her frayed coat collar around her neck. “I got eight kids. They all got shoes. There’s not enough left for me. But it’s okay, the Lord will take care of me. I got on the bus just to get my feet warm.”

Frank looked down at his new Nike basketball shoes, then looked back at the woman with her ripped socks and worn-

out clothing. Up until now, Frank had been pondering the fact that he hadn’t made the basketball team. Making the team would have been a good way for him as a freshman to fit into his new school. Not being chosen for the team made him feel left out, as if he had become invisible.

But here was another “invisible” person. An invisible person—forgotten by society, but for a different reason, he thought. He would probably always be able to afford shoes. She probably never would. Under the seat, he quietly slipped off one shoe, then the other.

When the bus stopped, Frank waited until his friends had gotten off. Then he picked up his basketball shoes and walked down the aisle.

“Here, lady, you need these more than I do,” he said, handing them to the woman. Then he hurried off the bus—managing to step right into an ice-cold puddle.

“Where are your shoes?” one of his friends asked him suddenly. Just then he heard the bus driver calling after him. He turned and saw the woman too.



“Well, Frank, I’ve never seen anything like that in the twenty years I’ve been driving this bus.”

“What’s your name, kid?” the driver asked. Frank told him. “Well, Frank, I’ve never seen anything like that in the twenty years I’ve been driving this bus.”

The woman was crying. “They fit me just perfect—thank you,” she said. She turned to the driver. “See, I told you the Lord would take care of me.” (Adapted from Lewis, *Kids with Courage*, pages 81–85) **N**

Faced with a choice, Frank chose the radical option: he chose the woman’s long-term comfort over his own temporary discomfort.

### Whose needs go first?

The choice Frank made in this true story is the choice the Church advocates when it talks about the option for the poor and vulnerable (also called the *preferential option for the poor*). The **option for the poor and vulnerable** is the choice to put the needs of society’s most poor and vulnerable members first among all social concerns. The term *poor and vulnerable* refers not only to those without money but also to those who are deprived of their basic rights or of equal participation in society.

The idea of the option for the poor and vulnerable was developed as part of Latin American liberation theology (see pages 66–67), and has its roots in the Bible, which repeatedly expresses special concern for the poor and vulnerable.

Why does God call humanity to place the needs of the poor and vulnerable first? Simply put, their need is greater. Choosing to defend poor and vulnerable people does not imply that they are necessarily better or more valuable than others. Nor does it imply that people who are not poor are neglected by God,

whose love does not exclude anyone. Society is called to place the needs of the poor and vulnerable first in the same way parents pay special attention to a sick child. The parents do not necessarily love the sick child more than the other children, but they make the sick child their top priority because of that child’s greater need.

### A call to whole societies

Although the option for the poor and vulnerable can be made by individuals (as in Frank’s case), more often it refers to the choice of an organization, a community, or a society. In their historic 1968 conference in Medellín, Colombia, the Latin American bishops described the option for the poor and vulnerable in this way:

We ought to sharpen the awareness of our duty of solidarity with the poor, to which charity leads us. This solidarity means that we make ours their problems and their struggles, that we know how to speak with them. This has to be concretized in criticism of injustice and oppression, in the struggle against the intolerable situation that the poor person often has to tolerate, in the willingness to dialogue with the groups responsible for that situation in order to make them understand their obligations. (*Document on the Poverty of the Church*, 10)

From the bishops’ words, we can see that the option for the poor and vulnerable has two parts. First, it involves freely choosing to become friends or partners with the poor, and taking on their problems as our problems. This is the choice to think of the poor as part of “us”—part of our community of concern—

**N** In your opinion, what are the limits (if any) to helping poor and vulnerable people? For example, if the woman in this story needed a coat, should Frank have given his to her? Should he have given his money to her? If she and her children had been homeless, should he have invited them to his house? Be prepared to discuss your answers in class.



# Liberation Theology

One of the manifestations of and the influences on modern Catholic social teaching is liberation theology.

Liberation theologies began to emerge in the 1960s when poor and oppressed people around the world began questioning their situation in light of their faith. How, they asked, could a just and loving God allow them to suffer?

The insight that came from the reflection of Catholics in Latin America was that it is not God’s intention for them to suffer. Rather, they realized, God wants them to experience abundant life—not just after death, in heaven where humans become fully alive in God’s love, but also now, in a way that would allow them to fully live out their human dignity. Just as God liberated, or freed, the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt, so too God desires to liberate them from their suffering. As we discussed in chapter 1, God liberates people from suffering by liberating them from sin—including the sin that causes injustice.



Liberation theology calls people to work in solidarity with one another so that all might share in God’s goodness.