



Our Lady of Good Counsel and All Hallows Parish, Deepdene and Balwyn Social Justice Group Catholic Social Teaching – An Introduction

This document, drawn from Chapter 1 of [Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church](#), provides the briefest introduction to Catholic Social Teaching (CST) which is summarised in the [Companion to the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church](#). Bracketed numbers indicate relevant paragraph of the Compendium.

CST, like all things Christian, begins with the person of Jesus and his message. The Church is a community centred on Christ and His call to ‘do likewise’. Christ highlighted values such as justice, respect for the human person, solidarity and peace. He constantly emphasised that love of God and love of our brothers and sisters are linked. Our brothers and sisters compose our society (community) and both our interaction with society and the structure of society itself are the subject of the Social teaching of the Church.

We are called to contribute to the building up of God’s kingdom by bringing the spirit and values of the Gospel into daily life. As disciples we are challenged to let the Gospel shape the structures of our communities and societies - ‘because we are really responsible for everyone’ (43). Our presence in the world is meant to be a dynamic, engaging presence that contributes to the transformation of the world (55). We inhabit a very broken and uneven world – war, human cruelty and indifference, starvation, poverty, domestic violence, crime and punishment. Realism is an important part of Christian understanding. Christians are not naïve, not utopians. CST is based on reality.

Human sinfulness – greed, indifference, selfishness, hatred – can become enshrined in the very structures of society - ‘structures of sin’ or ‘social sin’. Examples would be the institutions of slavery and apartheid. The laws, customs and structures of societies reflect human choices and priorities. But societal structures and laws can be changed for the better. That is what CST is about.

Major Principles of Catholic Social Teaching

CST comprises a number of Principles, to be applied - not Rules to be obeyed. Fundamental Principles are:

- **The dignity of the human person** is central. The dignity of the human person must be affirmed and promoted in our personal lives and in the economic, social and political spheres. The dignity of the human person is the measuring stick to evaluate and critique the economic, political and legal structures of society.
- **The Common Good** is the goal of the application of that first principle. The Church described the **Common Good** as “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and easily (164). *‘Every person ought to have an awareness that purchasing is always a moral - and not simply an economic - act’.* ([Pope Francis](#))
- **Solidarity**. This Principle acknowledges the relationships of interdependence between individuals and peoples (193). Through the principle of **solidarity**, the church ‘stands with every man and woman’ (60). It strives to create communities that are more human because they are ‘in greater conformity with the Kingdom of God’ (63). In his 2014 address to popular movements, [Pope Francis](#) said, “Solidarity ... is to think and to act in terms of community, of the priority of the life of all over the appropriation of goods by a few. It is also to fight against the structural causes of poverty, inequality, and lack of work, land and housing, the denial of social and labour rights. It is to confront ...all those realities that we are all called to transform”.

Audience to which CST is directed

God endowed us with reason that enables us to grasp the meaning and purpose of life. Through this appeal to reason CST has a 'universal applicability' (75) and appeal. The texts of the Church's social doctrine are addressed to '*men and women of goodwill*' rather than simply to believers (84). The Church engages in interdisciplinary dialogue with the human sciences and other branches of knowledge in her quest to create an ethos in society that is respectful of the human person (76-8).

The Church by its very nature is called to evangelise society. An essential part of this new evangelisation is a 'proclamation of the Church's social doctrine' (523). However, this proclamation must be accompanied by a firm commitment to action (524).

Best-kept secret and hidden treasure

CST provides an 'extraordinary resource for formation ... especially true of lay-persons who have responsibilities in various fields of social and public life' (528). They can be the yeast in society, bringing new life and inspiration into the world of work, politics and economics. However, experience indicates that CST is neither taught nor known sufficiently which explains why it is not suitably expressed in concrete action (528) Accordingly the Compendium recommends that CST receive more attention in catechesis (529) The role of the laity is unique and indispensable because they act 'precisely in the world' (541).

Applying the Principles

In deciding what to do in the concrete situation believers are guided by the virtue of prudence – 'the virtue that makes it possible to discern the true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means for achieving it. Thanks to this virtue moral principles are applied correctly in particular cases' (547). People may in good conscience reach differing conclusions as to the right and prudent action in a particular case. Politicians and business managers can work towards the achievement of *the common good* and the creation of societal structures that are 'more and more consistent with the dignity of the human person' (566). CST accepts the importance of the State but it argues that the State cannot be free of the demands of the moral law. The innate dignity and natural rights of the human person place real limits on the activities of the State (571).

How significant or weighty is Catholic social doctrine?

The creation of societies that more adequately serve and promote the human person is 'an essential part of the Christian message ... This is not a marginal interest or activity, or one that is tacked on to the Church's mission, rather it is at the very heart of the Church's ministry of service' (67). Insofar as it is part of the Church's moral teaching, the Church's social doctrine has the same dignity and authority as her moral teaching. It is authentic Magisterium, which obligates the faithful to adhere to it (80). The purpose CST is to guide 'peoples' behaviour' (73) A distinction must be made between the articulation of fundamental principles and the application of those same principles to complex situations. While adhering to core principles of CST people may disagree on how best these principles are served in a particular situation. Though united in their commitment to *the common good*, people may legitimately disagree on its content and achievement.

CST is not static or complete but is, rather, a dynamic entity that engages with new situations. It draws universal values and principles from its reasoned reflections on the reality of the human condition. These are clarified and confirmed in the message of the Gospel. CST is open to continuous renewal and development as it applies these same principles to new circumstances.