

Catholic Social Teaching in 15 minutes or less

(2) In the beginning ... God is.

(3) Within our Catholic tradition, we understand God to be a community of Three Persons, and that those Persons are comprised entirely of Love – Love as an activity, not just a feeling. St. Bonaventure, the medieval theologian, describes the origin of all things (the explanation of Creation) in this way: God the Three Persons of the Trinity, was so filled with Love that God decided that the only way to celebrate that Love, to celebrate God's Self/God's being – was to have a great Love Feast, a Banquet of Love. Everything was just fantastic, except that there was just an embarrassment of riches – too much Love to go around.

(4) So, like many of us when we are thinking of celebrating, God decided to invite others to the party. But, in the beginning, there was only God –

(5) and so God created

(6) all things so that God's love could be shared and experienced by others. When God created human persons, God decided that persons should be like God – made in God's own image and likeness. We understand God to have created human persons in this way so that we could have the capacity to choose to love, for love to be a real choice in all that we do. And so, God made the human person in God's own image.

(7) This meant several fundamental things: persons were created with dignity, and therefore each life, each person is precious, precisely because they **are** – as long as we exist, we are the recipients of God's love – we are the images of God, we are temples of the Holy Spirit, we are walking tabernacles. This leads to the first principle of Catholic Social Teaching: the dignity of the human person – it is not something that can be taken from us, or even given away. We can damage our dignity, we can cover it up, we can refuse to recognize it, but it cannot be lost nor can it be “given” to us by others. It **is** because we **are**. God creates us with dignity, and God desires for us to be fully alive.

(8) Another way of thinking about this is that God created us as we are, out of Love, because God thought that we would like it.

(9) One of the other aspects of being created in God's image is that we are created for and in community, and we are called to participate in community (in our family in our local community, in our church, in our global community). Our gifts are not given to us solely to benefit ourselves; our needs are often not things that can be met on our own. As Thomas Merton said, “Love is our true destiny. We do not find the meaning of life by ourselves alone – we find it with one another.” We cannot really get to know ourselves outside of the context of community. (How else can I learn if I have a sense of humor? How can I know if I'm good at teaching?)

(10) How would I know if I'm annoying? What virtues do I possess? What ones need work? I find these things out inside of community and I cannot really fully know myself in any other way.)

(11) I need the community, and the community needs me. Sometimes, the most important gift I can give to my community is to let them know what I need, in part because others might have this same need and so feel free to share that. Another way in which my need may be a gift to the community is that there may be someone else with a gift that can meet my need. (If I need to be healed, a doctor can be called to use their knowledge and skill, if I need to learn, someone else can teach me, etc.)

(12) If I am (or we are) capable of meeting these needs on my own, then I/we have the right to do so without unreasonable intervention. In our Catholic tradition, we call this subsidiarity. If on the other hand, I/we cannot meet these needs in a reasonable manner on our own, then it is the responsibility of the larger community to provide opportunities for those needs to be met. A simple example of this is children learning to move around under their own power. Toddlers will never learn to walk if their parents carry them everywhere, so it is reasonable to allow them to move around on their own as long as they are not in danger of great harm (not near stairs, etc.) By the same token, it is not reasonable to expect a toddler to get out of a room with a closed door on his or her own; it is beyond their ability. In a moral sense: OUGHT implies CAN.

(13) Another way in which we are like God is that we are called to be co-creators – we have gifts that need to be used, and we are called to be productive in whatever way we can. Within Catholic tradition, we express this as the dignity of work – the idea that I come to understand the meaning of my life and to develop my gifts by the use of my time in creating and producing – known as working.

(14) Everyone has some gift to develop, some ability that is needed by others. One reason to work is to develop that gift so that we can express who we are.

(15) Another reason to work is because we must (to pay bills, to contribute to society, to help provide for our families). If I am able to work (at home, in the community) I am obligated to do so. It is also true that I have certain rights regarding work: the right to meaningful work that is compensated such that I can care for myself and my family in a manner that is in keeping with human dignity. There is a right to meaningful work that allows for human development, a right to safety in the work place, the right to organize and associate with others to protect those rights. The Church has been a staunch advocate of the rights of workers for centuries.

(16) Our Catholic Social Teaching recognizes other rights and responsibilities outside of the workplace. These include the rights to

(17) health care;

(18) shelter;

(19) the right to association, to food, to education. We've got the right to express our spiritual life, to develop and express our own thoughts and ideas. Wherever there is a particular right there is a corresponding responsibility. If I can live out those rights, I am called to do so. If I can participate, I should do so. I am also responsible to help those who are less able to meet their own needs within my community.

(20) These rights and responsibilities all fall within the realm of a larger principle: that it is the right and the duty of all persons to act in a way that goes beyond their own needs and concerns to build up the common good. While it is not always easy to determine what is in the common good, it is clear that if at the end we anticipate that those who have disadvantages continue to be equally disadvantaged, it is not in the common good.

(21) Because we live in a broken, sinful world, where the dignity of the person is denied, where rights and responsibilities are ignored, where persons are unable to meet their basic needs, the church has teachings that help us to understand how we can live out the image of God more fully. We are called to solidarity.

(22) This means that we are to stand with, align ourselves with, listen to and act with those who are suffering and working to address the causes of the suffering. We should do what we can to make sure that we are living our lives in such a way that we are standing up with others.

(23) Of course, the truth about human existence is that no one gets out of this life without some significant experience of suffering – through loss, deprivation, violence, through choices we make ourselves and through events over which we have no control. It is also true that suffering is experienced in different ways. Given that it is a world that no one passes through without some experience of suffering, how do we decide where we should stand and who we are called to be in solidarity with? The church, following the teachings of scripture, reminds us that God has a preferential option for and with the poor and vulnerable, and God calls us to find God at work in their midst.

(24) We are invited to pay attention first to those who need most, to recognize and respect their dignity, and in a particular way to help those who are most vulnerable to address their own needs. We are called to place their needs first.

(25) We are called to SEE those who are in poverty and to see God's presence with them. Making ourselves present to those who live in material poverty – forming relationships – makes it more likely that we will see God at work in and with them.

(26) Back some years ago, Bishop Ken Untener began a practice in his diocese of Saginaw Michigan of asking at the beginning of each meeting "How does this discussion relate to those who are living in poverty? What will our decisions mean

for those who are on the margins?" The best way to answer those questions is to listen to those about whom it is being asked. How does this relate to children?

(27) To those who are new immigrants or who seek asylum? To those who are incarcerated?

(28) How does this relate to those who have intellectual or other disabilities? To those with mental illness? To those who are elderly? What impact will our decisions have on children who are struggling with their sexual identity? Who else is vulnerable or on the margins in our community? To whom are we not attending?

(29) And, in the midst of all that, just as we recognize that human beings don't exist in a vacuum and need community, we don't exist outside of creation.

(30) We are creatures, made by the One who is the author of all creation, and we are called to recognize that the environment is not a possession to be used and exploited, but rather a gift to be respected, shared and nurtured.

(31) Scholars tell us that the biblical injunction 'to have dominion over' creation does not mean "do what you wish with it" but rather "be responsible stewards of" what God has made.

(32) The Catholic tradition teaches as the Scriptures do that justice is really about being in right relationship. When we are in the right relationships with one another, with creation, with our God, the result is peace. Because we are in a world that is not yet fully aligned to God's will for us, because justice is not fully present in our time, we are called to Promote Peace.

(33) We do this through our work to heal and reconcile relationships – in justice, with forgiveness and compassion. And we are called to do this in a manner that, wherever possible, does not promote or encourage violence.

(34) Catholic Social Teaching is intended to reflect what is true, and as such it is for all people in all settings. Within our teaching, we believe that there are some roles that are appropriate to local communities, to families, to corporations, to non-profit organizations, etc. Within all this, the church has a special role to play in facilitating a more just world.

(35) The Church does this through formation of people of all ages, through support of family life through teaching and sanctifying, through gathering people to pray and worship.

(36) Pope Francis is encouraging us all to rethink how we, as a church, engage in the world. We are called to take our faith out into the world with us, to be in dialogue with others, to allow others to see our faith by its fruits.

(37) The church encourages our activity through individual works of charity and justice as well as through institutional outreach. There are many ways that we are corporately engaged in working to make these teachings real for all, for example through Catholic Charities to attend to the basic unmet needs of our brothers and sisters. Through the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the domestic anti-poverty program of the Bishops of the US, we support local communities in their efforts to attend to their own needs and to speak for themselves. Through Catholic Relief Services, the international development organization of the US Church, we support the life and dignity of our brothers and sisters abroad. There are many ways that we can engage – your parishes have opportunities, local civic organizations provide opportunities. In my current work with the Ignatian Volunteer Corps, I am astounded by the generosity of older adults who place their time and talent at the service of those on the margins by working in local grassroots non-profits that would not otherwise be able to afford those skills or experience. It is remarkable to see how the relationships built by getting involved in this kind of service change lives.

The vehicle that we utilize to participate in making the teaching real in our lives is not what is most important – what matters is that we each/all do something – something that pushes us past the place where we are comfortable, to meet God at the margins. (As Mother Teresa said, “to meet Jesus in disturbing disguises.”)

(38) One of the beautiful things about our Catholic faith is our belief that our God became fully human that all might have life and have it to the full – the Incarnation was not an accident but part of God’s communication of the importance of every moment of our lives. Said differently, Jesus came that we might “have life and have it to the full.” (Jn 10:10) The task of our lives is to become fully human and to make space for one another to become fully alive, to come to experience, as Teilhard de Chardin said, “that the Divine is not distant and inaccessible but in fact we live steeped in its burning layers.”