

Catholic

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Respect for Life and Human Dignity

Essential Principles of Catholic Social Teaching

FR. WILLIAM J. BYRON, SJ

"You are called to care for life in its initial stage; remind everyone, by word and deed, that this is sacred—at each phase and at every age—that it is always valuable....There is no human life more sacred than another, just as there is no human life qualitatively more significant than another."

—POPE FRANCIS



SHUTTERSTOCK



While many Catholics can come up with the eight Beatitudes and some would be willing to take a stab at listing the four cardinal virtues, few have a ready reply to: What are the Catholic social principles that are to be accepted as an essential part of our faith?

The National Conference of Catholic Bishops (now the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops) saw a need to address this very question, and in the late 1990s created a task force to do so. The release of *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions—Reflections of the U.S. Catholic Bishops* was the result of their discourse. The directive is intended to call attention to the existence of Catholic social principles—a body of doctrine with which, the bishops said, “far too many Catholics are not familiar.” In fact, they added, “many Catholics do not adequately understand that the social teaching of the Church is an essential part of Catholic faith.” Strong words.

One reason why the body of Catholic social teaching is underappreciated, undercommunicated, and not sufficiently understood is that the principles on which the doctrine is based are not clearly articulated and conveniently condensed. They are not packaged for catechetical purposes like the Ten Commandments and the seven sacraments. The next question is: What is the best way to personally appropriate and internalize these principles so they can lead to action?

Principles—specifically, those that arise from the body of Catholic social teaching—once internalized, prompt activity, impel motion, direct choices. *Principle* (ple) and *principal* (pal) are sometimes confused. A principled person always has a place to stand, knows where he or she is coming from and likely to end up. Principles lead the possessor somewhere—to some purpose, to some action, to a choice or lack thereof. Catholic social teachings are based on the truths of humanity, which is given to us in divine revelation. We are interested in principles—internalized convictions in direct correlation with Church teachings that lead to change and reinforce our Christian values. Respect for life and human dignity are two principles woven deeply into the fabric of Catholic social teaching.

First, human dignity. According to the aforementioned report by the USCCB, “Every human being is created in the image of God and redeemed by Jesus Christ, and therefore is invaluable and worthy of respect as a member of the human family.” The bedrock principle of

Catholic social teaching on human dignity can be succinctly summarized by saying: Every person—regardless of race, sex, age, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, employment or economic status, health, intelligence, achievement, or any other differentiating characteristic—is worthy of respect. It is not what you do or what you have that gives you a claim on respect. Human dignity is a gift from God. Simply being human establishes your dignity. Given that, the human person is, in the Catholic view, never a means, always an end.

In reflection of this principle of Catholic social teaching, and indeed of all personal and social ethics, let’s take a moment to think about the state of human dignity in today’s world. Think of world hunger, for example, think of the unemployed, human beings who are mentally or physically ill, the illiterate, the homeless. Think of the condition of human dignity in your own country, state, or city.

Do you ever think of assaults on human dignity or neglect of those in need as sinful? As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains, “To receive in truth the Body and Blood of Christ given up for us, we must recognize Christ in the poorest, his brethren” (CCC 1397). The book *Silence* by Japanese novelist Shūsaku Endō, a renowned twentieth-century Japanese Catholic writer, offers another analysis of sin to consider.

His protagonist is a Jesuit missionary to Japan, Fr. Sebastião Rodrigues. In the story, Rodrigues sits alone in a prison cell listening to guards outside laughing and talking, having no regard for him. Indeed they reminded him of the guards who cast lots for the garments of Jesus before he was taken off to die. The priest speaks to how the passive communication between the guards, even so much as laughing, made him feel as if they were indifferent to the fate of others. The priest further reflected on the situation and feelings it invoked to paint sin with a broader stroke than the stereotypical actions of stealing and lying. He relayed sin as someone trampling on the life of another with complete disregard for the effects of his or her actions.

Examples in today’s society of a blatant disregard for the value of human persons as individuals imbued with human



Bishop Edward J. Weisenburger prays over an inmate during Mass at the Ellsworth Correctional Facility. (CNS photo/Karen Bonar, *The Register*)