

# What is the social doctrine of the Church?

On the path of the salvation of each person, the Church is concerned about the entire human family and its needs, even in the material and social sphere. For this reason, it develops a guide, a social doctrine that forms consciences and helps the faithful live according to the Gospel and human nature itself.

09/24/2022

## Summary

1. What is the social doctrine of the Church?
2. How did it develop over time?
3. Is the Church's social doctrine political or ideological?
4. Why does the Church express an opinion on social issues?
5. What are the principles of the social doctrine of the Church?

"With her social doctrine the Church does not attempt to structure or organize society, but to appeal to, guide and form consciences" (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 81).

"The Church (...) has a mission of truth to fulfill in every time and circumstance in favor of a society that is in keeping with man, his

dignity and his vocation" (*Caritas in veritate*, 9).

---

## **1. What is the social doctrine of the Church?**

Social doctrine is the proclamation of faith made by the Magisterium in the face of social realities. Gathered in a compendium, this defence is translated into indications, counsels and exhortations by which the Church encourages her faithful to be responsible citizens.

In fact, "there is no unanimity about the reality designated as 'Social Doctrine of the Church.' John Paul II — in what is the most precise definition ever given by the Magisterium — says that it is 'the accurate formulation of the results of a careful reflection on the complex realities of human existence, in

society and in the international order, in the light of faith and of the Church's tradition' (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 41)." [1]

With her social doctrine, the Church aims "at helping man on the path of salvation" (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 69). This is her only mission and also the reason why the Church has the right and duty to develop a social doctrine that forms men's consciences and helps them to live according to the Gospel and human nature itself. A coherent Christian directs all aspects of his life towards God, living according to his saving plan. The Church accompanies Christians in this task.

This includes dimensions of human life and culture such as economics, work, communication, and politics, and issues like the international community and relations between cultures and peoples.

Charity is a "force capable of inspiring new ways of approaching the problems of today's world, of profoundly renewing structures, social organizations, legal systems from within. In this perspective love takes on the characteristic style of social and political charity: 'Social charity makes us love the common good,' it makes us effectively seek the good of all people, considered not only as individuals or private persons but also in the social dimension that unites them" (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 207).

---

## 2. How did it develop over time?

The Church's social doctrine was born in 1891 with *Rerum Novarum*, a document by Pope Leo XIII. This pope was very concerned about the

so-called "workers' question:" the situation of many poor workers from the countryside who were living miserably in the cities.

From that moment on, the social teachings which had existed since the beginning of Christianity began to be ordered systematically. The social encyclicals of pontiffs after Pope Leo XIII use *Rerum Novarum* as a reference. Among many others, the social encyclicals of St. John Paul II stand out: *Laborem Exercens* (90 years after *Rerum Novarum*), *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, and *Centesimus Annus* (100 years after *Rerum Novarum*). Recently, Pope Francis has written two encyclicals with social themes: *Laudato si'* (2015) and *Fratelli Tutti* (2020).

In order to facilitate a thematic search for the content of the Church's social doctrine, the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* was

recently published. It serves as a point of reference.

---

### **3. Is the Church's social doctrine political or ideological?**

No. The Church's competence does not extend to technical questions, nor does it propose systems of social organization, which do not belong to its mission: the Church's mission is limited to the moral and evangelical sphere. Moreover, it does not carry out this function on the basis of coercive power (proper to the State), nor by making use of the "secular arm" (that is, by using civil institutions that act according to its dictates, thus exerting its influence on society); it exercises it through a power of conviction, which respects the secularity of public life. Consequently, the social teaching of

the Magisterium does not hinder the autonomy of earthly realities. Rather, it interprets them in order to examine their suitability to the spirit of the Gospel and to guide Christian conduct.

"It is only right, however, that at all times and in all places, the Church should have true freedom to preach the faith, to teach her social doctrine, to exercise her role freely among men, and also to pass moral judgment in those matters which regard public order when the fundamental rights of a person or the salvation of souls require it. In this, she should make use of all the means —but only those—which accord with the Gospel and which correspond to the general good according to the diversity of times and circumstances" (*Gaudium et spes*, 76).

"In the moral order the Church bears a mission distinct from that of

political authorities: the Church is concerned with the temporal aspects of the common good because they are ordered to the sovereign Good, our ultimate end. She strives to inspire right attitudes with respect to earthly goods and in socio-economic relationships" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2420).

## **Meditate with St. Josemaría**

- "This brings with it a deeper awareness of the Church as a community made up of all the faithful, where all share in one and the same mission, which each should fulfill according to his personal circumstances. Lay people, moved by the Holy Spirit, are becoming ever more conscious of the fact that they are the Church, that they have a specific and sublime mission to which they feel committed because they have been called

to it by God himself. And they know that this mission comes from the very fact of their being Christians and not necessarily from a mandate from the hierarchy; although obviously they ought to fulfill it in a spirit of union with the hierarchy following the teaching authority of the Church. If they are not in union with the bishops and with their head, the Pope, they cannot, if they are Catholics, be united to

Christ." (*Conversations*, 59)

- "I have never asked anyone who has come to me about his politics. I am just not interested! My attitude here demonstrates a fundamental fact about Opus Dei, to which by the grace and mercy of God I have dedicated myself completely, in order to serve our holy Church. I am not interested in the subject because, as Christians, you

enjoy the fullest freedom, with the consequent personal responsibility, to take part as you see fit in political, social or cultural affairs, with no restrictions other than those set by the Church's Magisterium." (*Friends of God*, 11)

- "I never speak of politics. I do not think of the task of Christians on earth as the sprouting of a politico-religious current - that would be madness - not even if it has the good purpose of infusing the spirit of Christ in all the activities of men. What must be put into God is the heart of each one, whoever he may be. Let us try to speak for every Christian, so that wherever he is - in circumstances that do not depend only on his position in the Church or in civil life, but on the result of changing

historical situations - he may know how to bear witness, by example and word, to the faith he professes." (*Christ is Passing By*, 183)

---

#### **4. Why does the Church express an opinion on social issues?**

The salvation brought about by Christ and, consequently, the mission of the Church, covers man in his totality, including the social sphere. Christianity cannot be restricted to mere devotions: it is first and foremost a way of living in society.

Pope Benedict XVI affirms that the Church's social doctrine responds to the dynamic of charity received and offered and summarizes its function as the "proclamation of the truth of Christ's love in society" (*Caritas in veritate*, 5).

Pope Francis explains the reason why the Church expresses her views on matters affecting the world community (Address of the Holy Father to the Diplomatic Corps, January 7, 2019), saying that it is the spiritual mission that Jesus Christ addressed to St. Peter and his successors that impels the Pontiff and the Holy See "to be concerned for the whole human family and its needs, and clarifies that "the Holy See does not seek to interfere in the life of states," but observes "the problems that affect humanity" in order to "place itself at the service of the good of every human being" and "work to promote the building of peaceful and reconciled societies."

---

## **5. What are the principles of the social doctrine of the Church?**

This concern of the Church is concretized in values that serve as a basis for social action. All of them have an evangelical basis and are in accord with human nature, which the Church assumes and defends, seeking to bring it to its fullness through the Redemption brought about by Christ. These values are:

**The dignity of the human person:** human life is sacred and its dignity inviolable, regardless of age, state of health, wealth or social condition. Every person has the right to life from conception to natural death. In addition, a dignified life entails peace, which is often threatened by war and violence.

**Family and community:** man is a social being and has the right to grow in a community. Marriage and the family are the basis of society (from the very beginnings of the Church, the family has been considered the

"domestic church;" the term that was recovered in the Second Vatican Council and used extensively by St. John Paul II). All persons have the right to participate in society.

**Rights and duties:** all persons have rights to assert and duties to fulfill, at the individual, family and social levels. Concretely, considering workers, the economy must be at the service of people, not the other way around. Workers have the right to decent, secure and well-paid work.

**Preferential option for the poor and vulnerable:** Jesus taught us that the most vulnerable in a society have a privileged place in his Kingdom. It is a duty of justice to help everyone to fight against poverty and situations of risk, something that Pope Francis has emphasized since the beginning of his pontificate.

**The common good:** "the set of conditions of social life which make

it possible for associations and each of their members to achieve their own perfection more fully and more easily" (*Gaudium et spes*, 26).

**Solidarity:** the Church promotes peace and justice over and above differences of race, nation, religion, etc. There is only one human family that we are all responsible to care for.

**Subsidiarity:** the State must allow "the lower associations (to resolve) those matters and cares of lesser importance, in which it would otherwise lose much time, and thus accomplish more freely, more firmly and more effectively all that is within its exclusive competence" (*Quadragesimo Anno*, 80).

**Care for creation:** God placed man at the head of earthly realities in order to dominate and care for them, manifesting in respect for other

creatures the respect due to the Creator. The environmental crisis has moral dimensions.

## Meditate with St. Josemaría

- "The Church is, therefore, inseparably human and divine. It is a divine society in origin, and supernatural in its aim and in the means that are directly ordered to this end. But in so far as it is made up of men, it is a human community. It lives and acts in the world, but its goal and strength are not here but in heaven." (*The Supernatural Aim of the Church*, 22)
- "This, and no other, is the aim of the Church: the salvation of souls, one by one." (*The Supernatural Aim of the Church*, 23)
- "If you want to achieve holiness — in spite of your personal

shortcomings and miseries, which will last as long as you live — you must make an effort, with God's grace, to practise charity which is the fullness of the law and the bond of perfection. Charity is not something abstract. It entails a real, complete, self-giving to the service of God and all men; to the service of that God who speaks to us in the silence of prayer and in the hubbub of the world and of those men whose existence is interwoven with our own. By living charity Love — you live all the human and supernatural virtues demanded of a Christian. These virtues form a unity and cannot be reduced to a mere list. You can not have charity without justice, solidarity, family and social responsibility, poverty, joy, chastity,

friendship..." (*Conversations*, 62)

- "There is only one race in the world: the race of the children of God. We should all speak the same language, taught us by our Father in heaven — the language Jesus spoke with his Father. It is the language of heart and mind, which you are using now, in your prayer — the language of contemplation, used by men who are spiritual, because they realize they are children of God. This language is expressed in a thousand motions of our will, in the clear insights of our minds, in the affections of our heart, in our commitment to lead a virtuous life, in goodness, happiness and peace." (*Christ is Passing By*, 13)
- "A university should not form men who will egotistically consume the benefits they have achieved through their studies.

Rather it should prepare students for a life of generous help towards their neighbor, of Christian charity. I myself measure the sincerity of concern for others in terms of works of service, and I know of thousands of cases of students in many countries who have refused to build their own little private worlds. They are giving themselves to others through their professional work, which they try to carry out with human perfection, through educational endeavors, through social and welfare activities, in a spirit of youth and cheerfulness." (*Conversations*, n. 75)

- "It is time for us Christians to shout from the rooftops that work is a gift from God and that it makes no sense to classify men differently, according to their occupation, as if some jobs

were nobler than others. Work, all work, bears witness to the dignity of man, to his dominion over creation. It is an opportunity to develop one's personality. It is a bond of union with others, the way to support one's family, a means of aiding in the improvement of the society in which we live and in the progress of all humanity." (*Christ is Passing By*, 47)

- "A man or a society that does not react to suffering and injustice and makes no effort to alleviate them is still distant from the love of Christ's heart." (*Christ is Passing By*, 167)

---

[1] Arturo Bellocq. Qué es y que no es la DSC. *Scripta Theologica*. Vol. 44. 2012. p. 340 (our translation).

---

pdf | document generated automatically from <https://opusdei.org/en-za/article/what-is-the-social-doctrine-of-the-church/> (01/21/2026)