

Ten Foundational Principles in the Social Teaching of the Church

by Robert P. Maloney, C.M.

Let me begin this article with an exam, a very easy one in fact. How many readers can name:

- the ten commandments?
- the eight beatitudes?
- the four cardinal virtues?
- the three theological virtues?
- the seven sacraments?
- the seven corporal works of mercy?
- the seven capital sins?

Just about everybody, at least with a little prodding of the memory. How many can name ten social principles that are “an essential part of Catholic faith”? Nobody?

Strangely, this question receives the same befuddled response in almost any group of Catholics. Yet the Church has been proclaiming her social doctrine eloquently and repeatedly over the last hundred years. Six years ago, in expressing my hopes for the Congregation of the Mission, I raised a question: “Do (those) whom we train come to sense that Vincentians are ‘experts’ in the social teaching of the Church?” Even more recently, on January 1, 1999, I offered this challenge to the Daughters of Charity: “I encourage you to make the social teaching of the Church an integral part of the formation of the members of the Company.”

But the truth is, as one bishops’ conference recently stated, “Far too many Catholics are not familiar” with the social teaching of the Church. The bishops added: “Many Catholics do not adequately understand that the social teaching of the Church is an essential part of Catholic faith.”

Why is this essential part of our faith so little known? One reason is that the Catholic social doctrine has not been conveniently condensed for consumption; it has not been “packaged” for catechetical purposes like the Ten Commandments or the seven sacraments.

How can we help the Church proclaim this relatively unknown, yet essential, part of our faith? In some ways the answer is simple, but also very challenging: we must first know the teaching ourselves and then, secondly, communicate it to others.

Ten principles in the social teaching of the Church

Here are ten building-blocks upon which the Church’s entire social teaching rests.

1. The principle of the Dignity of the Human Person.

“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.”

This is the bedrock principle of Catholic social teaching. 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; it is simply *being* human that establishes your dignity. Given that dignity, the human person is, in the Catholic view, never a means, always an end.

The body of Catholic social teaching begins with the human person, but it does not end there. Individuals have dignity; but individualism has no place in Catholic social thought. The principle of human dignity gives the human person a claim on membership in a community, the human family.

2. The principle of Respect for Human Life.

“Every person, from the moment of conception to natural death, has inherent dignity and a right to life consistent with that dignity.”

Human life at every stage of development and decline is precious and therefore worthy of protection and respect. It is always wrong directly to attack innocent human life. The Catholic tradition sees the sacredness of human life as part of any moral vision for a just and good society.

3. The Principle of Association.

“Our tradition proclaims that the person is not only sacred but also social. How we organize our society— in economics and politics, in law and policy— directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community.”

The centerpiece of society is the family; family stability must always be protected and never undermined. By association with others— in families and in other social institutions that foster growth, protect dignity and promote the common good— human persons achieve their fulfillment.

4. The Principle of Participation.

“We believe people have a right and a duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable.”

Without participation, the benefits available to an individual through any social institution cannot be realized. The human person has a right not to be shut out from participating in those institutions that are necessary for human fulfillment.

This principle applies in a special way to conditions associated with work. “Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God’s creation. If the dignity of work is to be protected, then due basic rights of workers must be respected— the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to organize and join unions, to private property, and to economic initiative.”

5. The Principle of Preferential Protection for the Poor and Vulnerable.

We believe that we touch Christ when we touch the needy. The story of the last judgment plays a very important role in the Catholic Faith tradition. From its earliest days, the Church has taught that we will be judged by what we choose to do or not to do in regard to the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the homeless, the prisoner. Today the Church expresses this teaching in terms of “the preferential option for the poor.”

Why a preferential love for the poor? Why put the needs of the poor first? Because the common good— the good of society as a whole— requires it. The opposite of rich and powerful is poor and powerless. If the good of all, the common good, is to prevail, preferential protection must move toward those affected adversely by the absence of power and the presence of privation. Otherwise the balance needed to keep society in one piece will be broken to the detriment of the whole.

6. The Principle of Solidarity.

“Catholic social teaching proclaims that we are our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers, wherever they live. We are one human family... Learning to practice the virtue of solidarity means learning that ‘loving our neighbor’ has global dimensions in an interdependent world.”

The principle of solidarity leads to choices that will promote and protect the common good.

Solidarity calls us to respond not simply to personal, individual misfortunes; there are societal issues that cry out for more just social structures. For this reason the Church often calls us today not only to engage in charitable works but also to work towards social justice.

7. The Principle of Stewardship.

“The Catholic tradition insists that we show our respect for the Creator by our stewardship of creation.”

The steward is a manager, not an owner. In an era of rising consciousness about our physical environment, our tradition is calling us to a sense of moral responsibility for the protection of the environment— croplands, grasslands, woodlands, air, water, minerals and other natural deposits. Stewardship responsibilities also look toward our use of our personal talents, our attention to personal health and our use of personal property.

8. The Principle of Subsidiarity.

This Principle deals chiefly with “the responsibilities and limits of government, and the essential roles of voluntary associations.”

The principle of subsidiarity puts a proper limit on government by insisting that no higher level of organization should perform any function that can be handled efficiently and effectively at a lower level of organization by persons or groups that are closer to the problems and closer to the ground. Oppressive governments are always in violation of the principle of subsidiarity; overactive governments also sometimes violate this principle.

On the other hand, individuals often feel helpless in the face of daunting social problems: unemployment, people sleeping in doorways or begging on street corners. Since these problems have societal dimensions, no one person or one group can do much about them. While giving due regard to subsidiarity, the government entity that collects taxes should help individuals, smaller communities, and the national community to “do something” about such social problems. When we pay taxes, therefore, we are contributing to the establishment of social justice.

9. The Principle of Human Equality.

“Equality of all persons comes from their essential dignity... While differences in talents are a part of God’s plan, social and cultural discrimination in fundamental rights... are not compatible with God’s design.”

Treating equals equally is one way of defining justice, also understood classically as rendering to each person his or her due. Underlying the notion of equality is the simple principle of fairness; one of the earliest ethical stirrings felt in the developing human person is a sense of what is “fair” and what is not.

10. The Principle of the Common Good.

“The common good is understood as the social conditions that allow people to reach their full human potential and to realize their human dignity.”

The social conditions the Church has in mind presuppose “respect for the person,” “the social well-being and development of the group” and the public authority’s maintenance of “peace and security.” Today, in an age of global interdependence, the principle of the common good points to the need for international structures that can promote the just development of persons and families across regional and national lines.

What constitutes the common good is always going to be a matter for debate. The absence of sensitivity to the common good is a sure sign of decay in a society. As a sense of community is eroded, concern for the common good declines. A proper communitarian concern is the antidote to unbridled individualism, which, like unrestrained selfishness in personal relations, can destroy balance, harmony and peace within and among groups, neighborhoods, regions and nations.

Those are the ten principles. There is something wonderful about including these principles of Catholic social teaching among the essentials of the faith. By doing so, we affirm that our **beliefs** are the basis for **action**. For the Christian there are not only *credenda* but also *agenda*. Our agenda, then, rests on these ten building blocks:

- Dignity of the Human Person
- Human Life
- Association
- Participation
- Preference for the Poor

- Solidarity
- Stewardship
- Subsidiarity
- Equality
- Common Good

Communicating this teaching

I want to encourage all the members of our Vincentian Family to communicate the Church's social teaching to others. This teaching should be very important for us who live in the Vincentian tradition. The Church's preferential option for the poor flows from it. The poor will surely benefit to the extent that we, and others, are deeply rooted in this "essential part of Catholic faith."

Let me offer a rapid series of concrete suggestions about how we might "use" these principles.

1. They might constitute

- ten topics for an adult education lecture series,
- ten segments for a semester-long course,
- ten chapters in a text book,
- ten projects in a research center,
- ten sections on a web page.

2. For those who keep files, they might be ten "bins" for gathering the collected wisdom drawn from

- scripture,
- patristic literature,
- Church history,
- theological writings,
- conciliar and papal teaching,
- the teachings of various episcopal conferences,
- other sources, like contemporary literature.

3. Those who enjoy coming up with mnemonics or acronyms might rearrange the order to construct an easily remembered set of capital letters.

4. To incarnate the principles, one might compose ten brief biographical essays focusing on persons who embodied one or more of these principles in a significant way; e.g.,

- St. Vincent,
- St. Louise,
- Frederick Ozanam,
- Rosalie Rendu,

- Mother Teresa of Calcutta,
- Dorothy Day,
- Mahatma Gandhi
- Martin Luther King

5. One might search for excerpts from the great social voices of the past and drop them in each of these ten files:

- Ambrose,
- Chrysostom,
- Aquinas, etc.

6. Using these ten principles as a guide, one might study the great social encyclicals and select key passages that express the principles and then drop them in each of the ten files.

7. One might consult the index of the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* to find fuller explanations of the Church's social teaching and to identify sections of the *Catechism* that relate to each of these ten principles.

Principles are important. Once internalized, they lead to something. They direct our choices. They prompt us to act. A principled person has a place to stand. He knows where he is coming from and where he wants to go. Principles give us purpose. Those of us who are teachers yearn, deep in our hearts, to help form principled persons who are ready and willing to act responsibly.

These ten principles can serve as the analytical base for *any* social problem. For example, if anyone wonders *why* Church documents focus so frequently on war, peace, nuclear weapons, the economy, abortion, euthanasia, health care, education, and a wide range of other topics that have a clear social and moral dimension, these principles provide the necessary framework for understanding that teaching.

Looking back over the last hundred years, Pope John Paul II wrote in *Centesimus Annus*: "To teach and to spread her social doctrine pertains to the Church's evangelizing mission and is an essential part of the Christian message. He adds: "The 'new evangelization'... must include among its elements *a proclamation of the Church's social doctrine.*" Those are strong words. It would be hard to put the matter more clearly. The doctrine is an essential part of our faith. We must proclaim it openly in the new evangelization.

Today I encourage the whole Vincentian Family to take up this challenge.