

# Introducing Catholic Social Teaching

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## What is it?

Catholic Social Teaching sums up the teachings of the Church on issues of justice between groups in society. It seeks to bring the light of the Gospel to bear on the social justice issues that arise in the complex network of relationships in which we live.

Catholic Social Teaching promotes a vision of a just society that is grounded in biblical revelation, the teachings of the leaders of the early church, and in the wisdom gathered from experience by the Christian community as it has tried to respond to social justice issues through history.

A formal body of international Catholic social justice teachings for the modern era has developed since the nineteenth century.

## Sources

Catholic Social Teaching is part of the discipline of applied moral theology and draws on all four major sources of insight used in Catholic ethics: Scripture; reason; tradition; and experience.

Tradition, which is often passed on through formal teaching documents, has played such a strong role in Catholic life that sometimes people think of Catholic Social Teaching as just a series of Papal documents.

## Elements

The social teachings are made up of three distinct elements: principles for reflection; criteria for judgment; and guidelines for action. Each has a different level of authority.

The key principles for reflection are sometimes called perennial principles because they apply across every time and place. They are highly authoritative, but also rather abstract and general. International Church documents identify just four of these principles: human dignity; the common good; subsidiarity; and solidarity.

The guidelines for action can vary for different times and places. Uniform guidelines for action aren't feasible because societies differ greatly, and they are always changing, creating new situations with different problems and possibilities. Guidelines for action always depend on practical judgments made with the information available at the time. There is

often scope for legitimate differences of opinion among believers on social justice issues.

The criteria or norms for judgment can be thought of as connecting or mediating between the highly authoritative but necessarily general and abstract principles for reflection, and the need for action guidelines in concrete social situations. They are less authoritative than the principles for reflection but more so than the guidelines for action.

## Universal & Particular

Catholic Social Teaching operates at both the international and at the local level. The insights of local Bishops responding to particular issues in their own place help to inform the development of the international teachings, while the international teachings guide the Bishops in teaching on justice issues in their particular places.

## For Discussion

- How do you make decisions on matters of justice in society? Do Scripture, Church teaching, reason and experience play a role?
- How are the principles of human dignity, the common good, subsidiarity and solidarity honoured, or dishonoured in Australia today?

## References

Pontifical Council for Justice & Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, St Paul's, 2004.