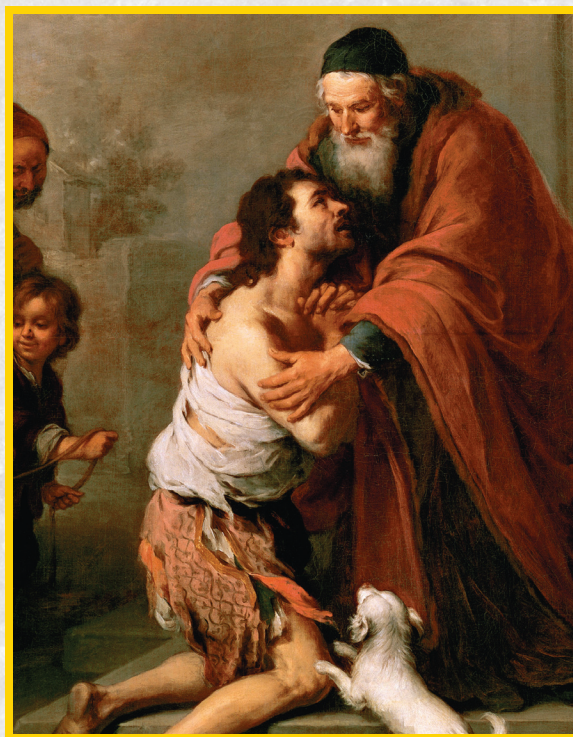


The Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church



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The Good Shepherd by Plockhorst.

Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church

INTRODUCTION

Our Social Nature



Charity is at the heart of the Church's social doctrine. Every responsibility and every commitment spelt out by that doctrine is derived from charity which, according to the teaching of Jesus, is the synthesis of the entire Law (cf. Mt 22: 36-40). It gives real substance to the personal relationship with God and with neighbor; it is the principle not only of micro-relationships (with friends, with family members or within small groups) but also of macro-relationships (social, economic and political ones). For the Church, instructed by the Gospel, charity is everything because... "God is love" (*Deus Caritas Est*): everything has its origin in God's love, everything is shaped by it, everything is directed towards it. Love is God's greatest gift to humanity, it is his promise and our hope.

—Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 2

IN THIS CHAPTER, WE WILL ADDRESS SEVERAL QUESTIONS:

- ❖ What does it mean to be social?
- ❖ What does the Genesis creation story teach us about human relationships?
- ❖ What does Scripture teach us about living in society?
- ❖ How does the Old Testament's social teaching relate to the New Testament's?
- ❖ What does the Church say about living in society?
- ❖ What is the subject of this book?

BECAUSE WE ARE SOCIAL BEINGS, WE NEED ONE ANOTHER

Our human nature makes us social. From birth, we come to understand the world around us as we share life with others. From other people, we gain knowledge and learn life skills. In the company of others we laugh, share our experiences, and forget our sorrows. They confirm us in what we believe and help us to correct our misconceptions. These interactions help us to grow and sharpen our minds. In short, they form us.

Many of the greatest pleasures in life come from human interaction. For most people, family life is a primary source of happiness and security; and genuine friendship, which requires at least two people, is a source of great joy—and it is healthiest when those two people together seek a widening circle of friends.



The People of God gather together to worship in St. Peter's Square.

Catholic social doctrine has the power to change the world for the better, but the change must take place first and fundamentally in the most ordinary human encounters and exchanges.

As human persons, we live not just for our next meal. We live for company and conversation. In fact, we enjoy the next meal much more if it is an occasion for company and conversation with friends and family.

To be human is to live in relationships. As the poet John Donne observed long ago, “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent.” We can exist apart from relationships with family and friends, but we will not be fulfilled. This is why loneliness, isolation, and rejection are painful to us. They go against our nature, which is social and communal. At the extreme end of isolation, prisoners who have undergone long-term solitary confinement testify that it is more painful than any physical torment they ever had to endure.

Even pursuits that seem asocial or anti-social require social cooperation on a large scale. For example, playing a video game by oneself is only possible because of vast social structures: Someone designed the game, a company paid many other people to manufacture it, and then it was distributed to stores, which are staffed by clerks, managers, and checkout personnel.

Even the legendary shipwrecked traveler, stranded alone on a desert island, could not survive without the bonds of community, even if they were not presently available. How else would it be possible to overcome the many challenges of survival except by using skills learned from others?

The many relationships in our lives vary in complexity. Some, like family relations, are fairly simple and natural, and the role of each family member is learned by custom both within the unique family structure itself and by society in general. But family is only the beginning, the fundamental building block, of human society. People also, and inevitably, organize themselves into neighborhoods, schools, clubs, teams, corporations, towns, and even nation states; and these gatherings require a great deal of formality and governance. People who live together need to agree upon some common values, and they need to obey some common laws.

As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches:

The human person needs to live in society. Society is not for him an extraneous addition but a requirement of his nature. Through the exchange with others, mutual service and dialogue with his brethren, man develops his potential; he thus responds to his vocation.¹ (CCC 1879)

Because we are social by nature, people need to find ways of living together—of tolerating differences, ensuring justice and fairness, and keeping order. Much of human history is the story of attempts—some successful and some disastrous—to bring order to human relations.

As a result of Original Sin, humans have a fallen nature, and human knowledge (especially self-knowledge) is limited. In fact, without divine guidance, truth itself is subject to dispute and disagreement, and, therefore, attempts to bring order to human relations proceed by trial and error.

Yet, we need not subject our social relations to efforts that are likely to fail morally. God created human nature. God has *revealed* his moral law to humanity and continues to guide human relations through the Catholic Church.

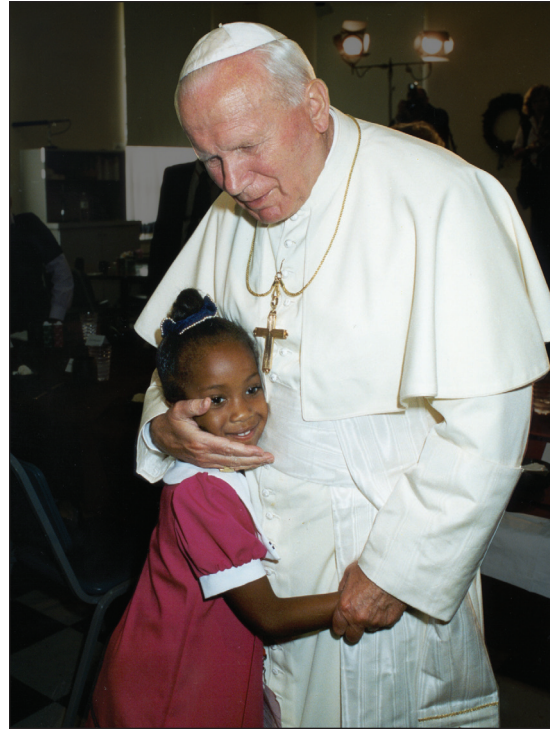
The Church's teaching in regard to human relations is known as *Catholic social doctrine*. It is a rich body of thought that has had a profound influence on the way the world regards love and family, law and justice, war and peace, wealth and poverty, rights and duties, freedom and obligation. The same body of thought also has much to say about matters of such immediate personal relevance as fairness, friendship, dating and courtship, education, work, and career.

The Church's social teaching comprises a body of doctrine, which is articulated as the Church interprets events in the course of history, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, in the light of the whole of what has been revealed by Jesus Christ.² This teaching can be more easily accepted by men of good will, the more the faithful let themselves be guided by it. (CCC 2422)

Catholic social doctrine is the subject of this book. We will begin by considering the theological foundations of the teaching. Like all Christian doctrine, Catholic social teaching proceeds from a proper understanding of God. We will then define key terminology and study what saints and scholars have had to say about basic concepts such as justice and rights. Thus equipped, we will be ready to look at how Catholic social thought has developed throughout history, but especially in the centuries since the Industrial Revolution, when social circumstances underwent radical transformation. The Popes and bishops responded to these societal changes with a remarkable series of documents, which we will encounter in an overview. Afterward, we will study the principles of Catholic social teaching and their application in our world and its cultures, nations, and economies, but more particularly in our lives, homes, neighborhoods, and workplaces. As Pope Bl. John Paul II wrote in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, an encyclical about the Church's concern for the social order:

The teaching and spreading of her social doctrine are part of the Church's evangelizing mission. And since it is a doctrine aimed at guiding people's behavior, it consequently gives rise to a "commitment to justice," according to each individual's role, vocation and circumstances. (SRS 41)

Catholic social doctrine has the power to change the world for the better, but the change must take place *first and fundamentally* in the most ordinary human encounters and exchanges.



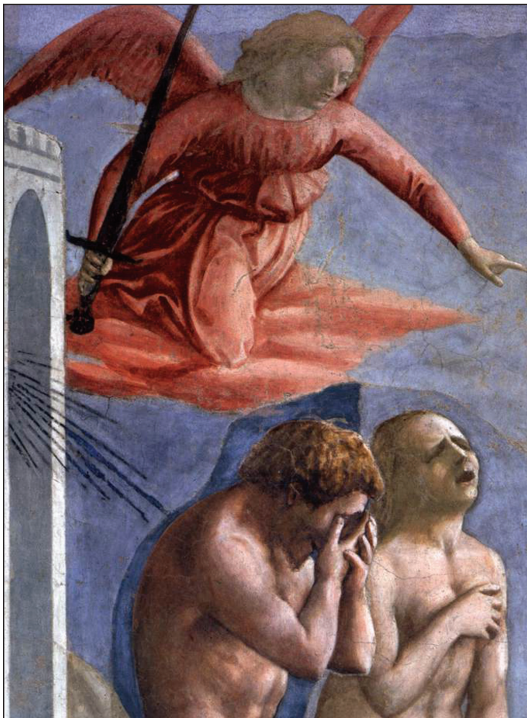
"O God...through the good things which you richly bestow upon all, each human person may be brought to perfection, every division may be removed, and equity and justice may be established."

(Mass "29. For the Progress of Peoples," Collect, *Roman Missal*, Third Edition)

IT IS NOT GOOD TO BE ALONE

The first and foundational account of human nature is found in the story of Creation in the Book of Genesis. In this deeply symbolic story, we learn many basic principles that form our understanding of the social order.

- ❖ We learn that God is the origin of all creation. Through his Word, he spoke the universe and all it contains into existence and saw that it was good. Human beings are not an accidental product of random events but rather the summit of God's Creation.
- ❖ We learn that God has given mankind "dominion" over the world and everything in it—all the animals and "every living thing that moves upon the earth," and every plant and natural resource (Gn 1: 26-29).
- ❖ We learn that God created our first parents in a state of marriage and that man and woman have roles equal in dignity and characterized by complementarity.
- ❖ We learn that the family is the basic structure or cell of human society, and that God instructed our first parents to "multiply" and "fill the earth" (Gn 1: 28).
- ❖ Thus, we learn that God intended that the human creature would not just be *one* person but *many*, and that those many would live not alone in solitude but together in society. The Lord God himself puts this in emphatic terms, saying: "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Gn 2: 18).
- ❖ We learn, moreover, that there are fundamental principles for human society. Human nature is not haphazard, but ordered—governed by divinely appointed laws. God instructed the first humans what they were to do to live in harmony with him, with one another, and with creation.



The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden
(detail) by Masaccio.

Adam and Eve's failure was catastrophic.

The conditions necessary for human fulfillment can only be found in society. For example, family, friendship, companionship, and love cannot be experienced in isolation; they require the participation of more than one person. Within this same society, however, we can also find the preconditions for envy, betrayal, neglect, and even murder. These, too, are possible only when there is more than one person involved. In fact, as the story of the first human family develops in the Book of Genesis, these sins and vices start appearing horribly fast.

In the third chapter of Genesis, we see the demonic serpent invade the Garden of Eden and tempt Eve to sin. God had instructed our first parents not to eat of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. However, they heeded the deceptions of the Devil and disobeyed God.

Adam and Eve's failure was catastrophic. In Christian tradition, the sin of our first parents is known as "Original Sin," and its consequences are individual, social, and universal. Adam and Eve—and all of their descendants, who inherit the stain of Original Sin (excepting Jesus Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary)—were alienated from God and in need of salvation. While humanity had been made stewards of

all creation, the world now rebelled against human dominion, and work became burdensome. The Apostle Paul summarized the situation:

Sin came into the world through one man and death through sin. (Rom 5:12)