

Surprise! Catholic social teaching is the church's best-kept secret

Tony Magliano | Apr. 16, 2012 Making a Difference

The Catholic church has a very big secret. It is so powerful, challenging and relevant that if every bishop, priest, deacon, religious and layperson was committed to communicating and implementing this secret, it would turn society upside-down and literally transform the world.

However, revealing its contents and tirelessly urging the full application of its message would surely cause great controversy. The church would come under fierce attack from both conservatives and liberals for being naïve and acting outside acceptable ecclesial boundaries.

Therefore, most Catholics have opted to tread lightly, sadly guaranteeing that Catholic social teaching will remain our best-kept secret.

From time to time, a passing reference is made to Catholic social teaching, but these token efforts are too weak and too infrequent to make much difference for the unborn, poor and war-torn of our world.

What is it about Catholic social teaching that is so threatening to the status quo?

The short answer is that its foundational tenets of justice and love demand that wealth and power are not selfishly hoarded by rich and powerful individuals, corporations and nations, but instead, be placed at the service of all people and all nations.

But because the strong and rich most often insist on remaining in dominant and privileged positions, they perceive such teachings as dangerous.

Our best-kept secret is that the Catholic church is deeply blessed with more than 100 years' worth of outstanding social justice and peace documents authored by popes, Vatican II, world synods of bishops and national conferences of bishops. But sadly, these documents attract more dust than readers.

Out of these Catholic social teaching documents, the church has developed a set of principles designed to help guide us in applying the liberating message of the Gospel to the social, economic and political problems facing modern humanity.

These principles are:

- The protection of all human life and the promotion of human dignity
- The call to participate in family and community life
- The promotion of human rights and responsibilities
- The preferential option for the poor and vulnerable
- The safeguarding of workers' dignity and rights
- The building of global solidarity and the common good
- The care for God's creation

- The universal destination of goods
- The call to be peacemakers

The official compilation of Catholic social teaching can be found in the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace's "[Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church.](#)" [1] And the Center of Concern's "[Catholic Social Teaching: Our best kept secret](#)" [2] (fourth edition) provides an excellent summary.

In one of Catholic social teaching's strongly prophetic documents titled "[The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response,](#)" [3] the U.S. bishops, using encouraging resurrection language, wrote, "Let us have the courage to believe in the bright future and in a God who wills it for us -- not a perfect world, but a better one. The perfect world, we Christians believe, is beyond the horizon in an endless eternity where God will be all in all. But a better world is here for human hands and hearts and minds to make."

Catholic social teaching could become a tremendously effective tool for making that better world -- where justice, peace and love would be the norm -- if we would commit to regularly reading it, praying with it, teaching it, preaching it and living it.

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