NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

The future of Catholic social teaching

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When I addressed the plenary session of the Dignity USA national conference, held this year July 4-7 in Minneapolis, I was invited to discuss the ?social teaching of the church.?

Preparing that talk got me thinking: Where does that social teaching go from here? If I were advising Pope Francis, what would I suggest as new topics ? or new approaches to old topics ? to move the justice and peace conversation forward?

As I re-read documents like the *Gaudium et Spes* (*The Church in the Modern World*) from Vatican II, or papal encyclicals *Pacem in Terris* or *Populorum Progressio*, I became newly aware that they describe a world divided by communism and capitalism ? a world that no longer exists.

That analysis clearly needs to be updated, as do the recommended solutions.

How about an encyclical describing predatory capitalism and economic inequality in the world, and calling people of faith to do something about this situation? Both of these topics are addressed to some extent in older documents, but a new analysis and a fresh approach would surely catch global attention.

In addition, in the 1960s (when many of these documents were written) climate change was not the hotly debated topic it has become in recent decades. But given the perils that face our planet, a major encyclical on climate change ? with lots of fanfare ? is sorely needed.

Most of the documents include positive statements on fostering ecumenism and good interfaith relations. But the time may have come for the Vatican to *live* what it preaches and approach other world religious leaders to issue a *joint* statement or letter on fostering good interfaith relations as a basis for world peace.

And of course, the social teaching of the church is replete with statements about human equality, non-discrimination on all kinds of bases and the importance of conscience. When *Gaudium et Spes #29 [1]*, for example, says that ?every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, color, social condition, language or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God?s intent,? there is no escape clause, no exemption.

And the 1971 Synod of Bishops, in *Justitia in Mundo [2]*, explicitly said:

?While the church is bound to give witness to justice, she recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes. Hence we must undertake an examination of the modes of acting and of the possessions and lifestyle found within the Church herself.? (Chapter 3, paragraph 40)

So how then is discrimination against women as priests justifiable? Sounds like a contradiction to me.

It?s past time for the church?s social teachings already on the books to be applied to the church itself. It?s time for some ?development? in church teaching, especially on the roles of women and the rights of LGBT people.

The press releases from Rome announcing these developments could begin with, ?As we?ve always said down through the ages ??

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[1] http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html
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