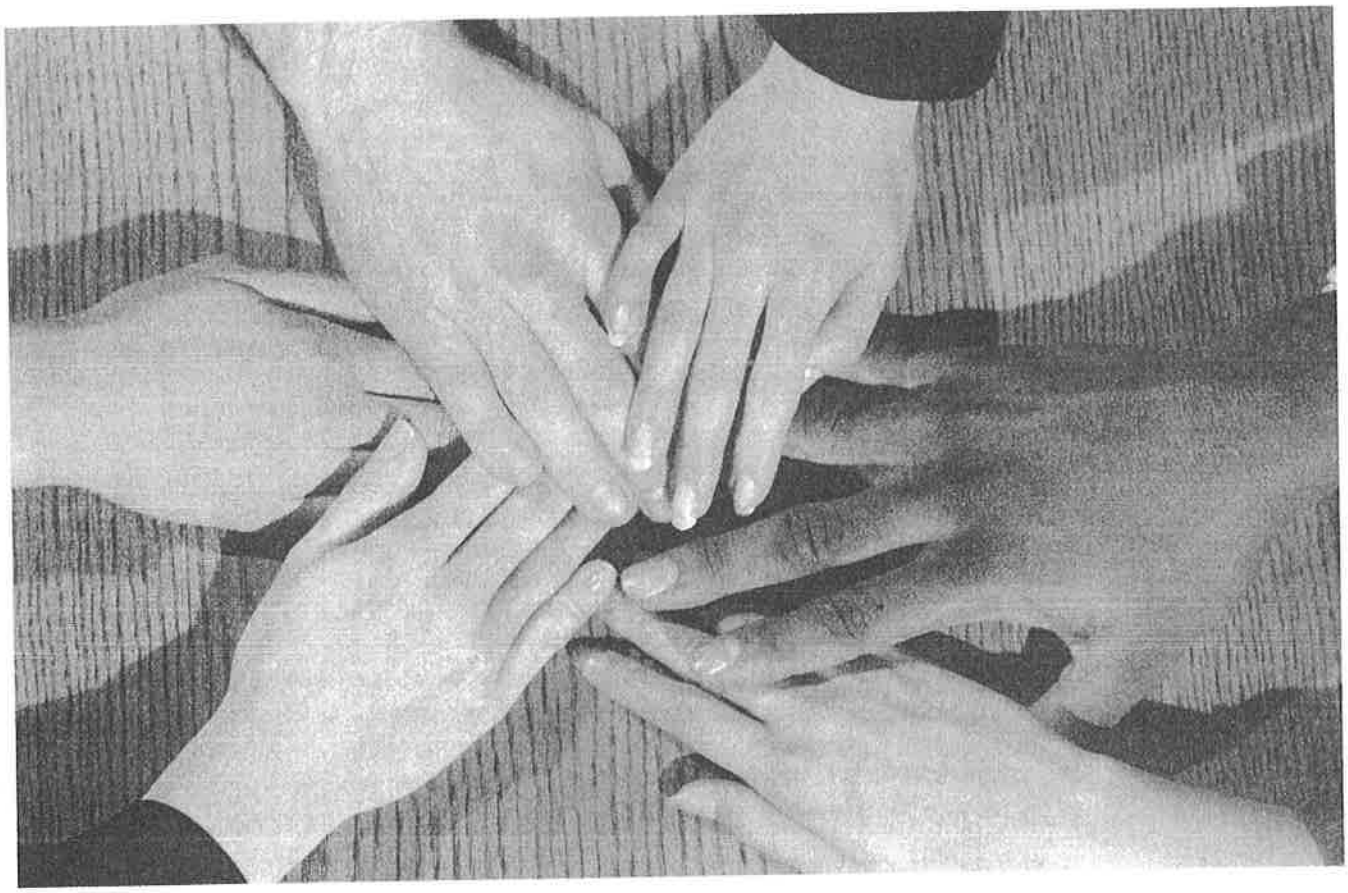
Essays
and Handouts on



Catholic Social Teaching

Essay

Life and Dignity of the Human Person

Human life is sacred and human dignity is the foundation of a moral vision of society. . . . The Catholic Church proclaims that human life is sacred, that it is a gift from God, and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. Our belief in the sanctity of human life and inherent dignity of the human person is the bedrock of Catholic social teaching. In our society, human life is under direct attack from abortion and assisted suicide. The value of human life is being threatened by increasing use of the death penalty. Forty-three thousand people die of hunger and its consequences every day. We believe that every person is precious, that people are more important than things, and that the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person. (Excerpt from the video *In the Footsteps of Jesus: Catholic Social Teaching at Work Today* [Washington, DC: USCCB, 2003])

The story of creation teaches us that the human person is created in the image and likeness of God (see Gn 1:22-27). Scripture urges us to "choose life" by the way that we live (see Dt 30:19). It is significant that the admonition of Deuteronomy appears in a book that outlines many social laws that govern the justice of the ancient Hebrew nation. God's way of life is both a personal call to integrity and a social call to fashion a society that respects human life and dignity. The Psalmist reminds us of the glory of human dignity: "What are humans that you are mindful of them, / mere mortals that you care for them? / Yet you have made them little less than a god, / crowned them with glory and honor" (Ps 8:5-6).

The Good News of the Gospel is that in Christ God has taken on our humanity and offered every person salvation. In Jesus of Nazareth the eternal Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us (see Jn 1:14). He came "that [we] might have life and have it more abundantly" (Jn 10:10). Jesus assures us, "And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself" (Jn 12:32).

Human worth is intrinsic; it is built into the fabric of human life by God. We believe that every human life is precious from conception through natural death. Our basic human dignity comes from God, not from any human quality or accomplishment. All our social structures and practices are meant to serve human dignity. Every social decision and institution must be judged in light of whether it protects or undermines the life and dignity of the human person. Every public law and program, every corporate policy and practice, every cultural pattern and social institution are subject to these moral tests: Does it protect or threaten human life? Does it uphold or undermine human dignity?

The value of human life leads to a commitment to peace. Nations must protect human life by avoiding war and by promoting justice and peace.

The theme of human life and dignity affirms an important American perspective: the value we place on the individual. But this principle also challenges our society. How will we protect in law the right to life of all, especially at life's vulnerable beginning and end? What will we do to root out the vestiges of prejudice, racism, and sexism in our social institutions? How will we expand social and economic opportunities to all racial and ethnic groups, including Blacks, Native Americans, and Hispanics? How will we extend the American dream to all persons regardless of their social status, including refugees and immigrants, the poor, and the powerless? These and other questions arise from a commitment to human life and dignity.

Essay

Call to Family, Community, and Participation

Human beings are social beings. Our participation in our families, our communities, and in society is a reflection of our faith. . . . 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. We believe the family is the central social institution that must be supported and strengthened. We also believe people have a right and a duty to participate in social, economic, and political life. (Excerpt from the video *In the Footsteps of Jesus: Catholic Social Teaching at Work Today* [Washington, DC: USCCB, 2003])

The second theme of Catholic social teaching is intimately related to the first. Human dignity can be realized and protected only in community. We are social beings. Human life and dignity do not exist in isolation from the society in which we live. This truth about the social nature of human beings is woven throughout the Bible and Catholic teaching.

The Scriptures present a thoroughly social vision of humanity. God does not call us merely as individuals without relationships and mutual responsibilities. In the Scriptures God called the ancient Israelites as a people—a community, a nation, God's own people. God's covenant was not made with individuals apart from the community in which they lived. Moses ratified the covenant with blood in an assembly of the people (see Ex 24:3-8) and proscribed that God's covenant be renewed periodically "in the presence of all Israel" (Dt 31:11).

God's covenant with Israel included a whole body of social laws to protect human dignity, including laws protecting migrants, widows, orphans, and debtors; laws ensuring just judgments; laws governing fair commerce and protecting laborers; and laws providing for the needs of poor persons (see Lv 19:9-15, 35-37 and Dt 14:22-29; 15:1-18; 24:10-22).

The ancient Israelites, under the inspiration of God, remembered well their own poverty and oppression in Egypt and worked to fashion a more just society (see Ex 22:20-22). Israel was not always faithful to God's demand for social justice. The Hebrew prophets repeatedly reminded the nation that it would be judged by the measure of its own justice as a society (for example, see Jer 7:1-7).

Jesus understood the social nature of the human person. Jesus preached and inaugurated the Reign of God, a social image and reality. He founded the Church, a community. He didn't write a "self-improvement" book. The early Church carefully structured its communal life to meet the needs of all. It even established the order of deacon to serve the social mission of the Church (see Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35; 6:1-7).

We are indeed social beings. Human dignity and potential are only developed—and the common good is advanced—through social interaction. Our language, thought patterns, and abilities are developed through social immersion. A whole host of social institutions exist to express human dignity and promote human development, including: schools, hospitals, the arts, transportation, businesses, and health clubs. Social laws, structures, and institutions have a profound impact on human development and dignity. A key question is whether or not all persons have access or can participate in the institutions of society that are necessary for human life to grow and prosper. In the Catholic tradition, helping to shape a just society through our participation in political life is a moral obligation.

Among all of these social realities, marriage and the family hold a special place. The family is the basic cell of society, the basic community. These communities of intimacy are the basis for truly human social life. Families come in many shapes and sizes, but they have the same functions: to bring into the world and nurture human life and to enable their members to contribute to the common good of the broader society.

What cannot be accomplished at the most basic levels of society to defend and promote human life and the common

good must be done at higher levels. The Church calls this *socialization*. At the same time, higher levels of social organization must be careful not to weaken or supplant lower levels; their task is to support families and local communities. This is the Church's principle of *subsidiarity*.

In the Catholic social vision, government has a special responsibility to look after the "common good." The common good comprises those social conditions that allow families and other social institutions to function in a healthy way so that persons can achieve their human potential.

The call to family, community, and participation affirms our American emphasis on teamwork, but at the same time this theme challenges our nation. How will we ensure that our public and corporate policies are pro-family and defend the institution of marriage? In a society profoundly skeptical of government, what will we do to help our country to shape the legitimate role of government (local, state, and national) in promoting the common good? How can we help our political, cultural, economic, and social institutions to examine these essential questions: What do they do to people? What do they do for people? How are people given access to them?

Essay

Rights and Responsibilities

Every person not only has a fundamental right to life, but also a right to those things required for human decency. . . . The Catholic tradition teaches that human dignity can be safeguarded and a healthy community achieved only if human rights are protected and responsibilities are met. Every person, therefore, has a fundamental right to life and a right to those things required for human decency. Aligned with these rights are duties and responsibilities—to one another, to our families, and to the larger society. (Excerpt from the video *In the Footsteps of Jesus: Catholic Social Teaching at Work Today* [Washington, DC: USCCB, 2003])

All people have a right to participate in the life of society. Human rights are the minimum conditions for life in community. The Church today champions a range of human rights that flow from the biblical understanding of covenant and Jesus' consistent outreach to those at the margins of society.

The prophet Isaiah decried Israel's unfaithfulness to their covenant with God in these words: "Woe to those who enact unjust statutes / and who write oppressive decrees, / depriving the needy of judgment / and robbing my people's poor of their rights, / making widows their plunder, / and orphans their prey!" (Is 10:12).

Human rights flow from our God-given human dignity. In the modern era, the Church has come to recognize three sets of basic human rights in Catholic social teaching:

1. *The right to life*, which is the foundation for all others and implies the right to food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, and the necessary social services.

2. *Economic rights*, which include rights to education, employment and opportunities for advancement, and the right to security in situations of sickness, old age, disability and unemployment.

3. *Political and cultural rights*, which include the right to personal respect, to immigrate, to have a family, and to freedom of conscience, expression, and assembly.

The Church recognizes that with rights come responsibilities. We each have duties to one another and to our families, to respect the rights of others and to work for the common good of all. We not only have a right to basic education and adequate employment, but we also have a responsibility to pursue them with integrity. By exercising our economic rights, we contribute to the goods and services of our society, enabling us to support our families, to strengthen the common good, and to help society meet its obligations to the poor and the vulnerable.

The Church's emphasis on human rights affirms our nation's emphasis on political rights and freedom of expression and assembly; but it also challenges us to recognize the right to life and economic rights. How will we enable our nation to embrace a consistent ethic of life "from womb to tomb"? What can we do to ensure that all citizens have access to life's basic necessities of food, clothing, housing, and medical care? How can we shape a society where all persons have access to good education and employment opportunities? And what can we do to provide for the economic security of disabled persons, the sick, and the unemployed?

Essay

Option for and with the Poor and Vulnerable

A basic moral test of any society is how our most vulnerable members are faring. . . . In a world marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, our tradition recalls the story of the Last Judgment. There, we are instructed to show special concern for the poor and vulnerable because their needs are the greatest. (Excerpt from the *In the Footsteps of Jesus: Catholic Social Teaching at Work Today* [Washington, DC: USCCB, 2003])

All members of society and society as a whole have a special obligation to poor and vulnerable persons. God's covenant with ancient Israel included a special concern for poor and vulnerable persons. This concern found expression in their communal laws: laws protecting aliens, widows, and orphans; laws protecting debtors; laws promoting just judgments; laws mandating the gleaning of the fields for the benefit of poor persons; and laws providing for the needs of poor persons from a communal tithe.

Israel's own experience of Egyptian oppression left a deep impression on the people. In Deuteronomy, we read, "You shall not defraud a poor and needy hired servant, whether he be one of your own countrymen or one of the aliens who live in your communities. . . . You shall not violate the rights of the alien or of the orphan, nor take the clothing of a widow as a pledge. For, remember, you were once slaves in Egypt, and the Lord, your God, ransomed you from there; that is why I command you to observe this rule" (Dt 24:14, 17-18). When Israel did not live up to the spirit and letter of the law, prophets arose to defend the rights of the poor.

Jesus had a special regard for poor and outcast persons. In the memorable image of the final judgment, the king separates the sheep from the goats based upon their treatment of the poorest and most vulnerable members of the community (see Mt 25:31-46). Jesus understood his own mission in special relationship to poor and outcast persons. At the beginning of his public ministry, he announced, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, / because [God] has anointed me / to bring glad tidings to the poor" (Lk 4:18).

The Church makes a fundamental "option for the poor" in the belief that the measure of the justice of a society is how those who are poor or vulnerable are faring. This option does not pit one socioeconomic group against another. Meeting the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable members of society strengthens the whole community and ensures that all are protected. Poverty destroys human potential and impoverishes the whole community; it breeds despair and violence to the detriment of the whole society.

The Church's option for the poor affirms our American identification with the underdog, but it also challenges many of our prejudices regarding poor persons. We often prefer to think of poor persons as lazy, to look down on them, and to blame them for their poverty.

The option for the poor raises many questions: How can we challenge ourselves to see Christ in the poor and in the vulnerable? What can we do to affirm the dignity of the poor and to give them a hand up? How can we extend our democratic ideals from the political sphere to economic life? What can we do to protect the vulnerable and empower those who are poor and powerless? How can we reduce the growing ranks of working poor families?

Essay

Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers

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 the work is to be protected, then we must respect the basic rights of workers. Workers must have the right to productive labor, to decent and fair wages, to organize and join associations or unions, to private property, and to economic initiative. (Excerpt from video *In the Footsteps of Jesus: Catholic Social Teaching at Work Today* [Washington, DC: USCCB, 2003])

Human dignity is expressed in the dignity of work and the rights of workers. Through work we participate in God's creative activity; we express and shape our human potential.

The Scriptures are replete with references to work, labor, workers, and wages. The Scriptures begin with a description of the work of creation. God is pictured as the model laborer. For six days God labors; on the seventh, God rests (see Gn 2:2-3). We are created in the "image" of this "worker God." The second story of creation reinforces the belief that labor is essential to human nature and dignity. The human is placed in the garden "to cultivate and care for it" (Gn 2:15).

The dignity of workers was recognized in Israel's covenant with God. Israel labored in Egypt under harsh circumstances; the memory of this oppression made them sensitive to the demands of justice (see Ex 23:9; Lv 19:33-34; Dt 10:19). The Mosaic law included a number of provisions to protect the rights of workers. Sabbath laws gave laborers a weekly rest (see Ex 20:9; 23:12; 31:15; 34:21; Lv 23:3; Dt 5:13-24). Employers were required to pay just wages at the end of each day (see Lv 19:13; Dt 24:14-15). When Israel was unfaithful to the demands of the covenant, prophets railed against the injustices that arose, including those inflicted on laborers. Jeremiah pronounced, "Woe to him who builds his house on wrong, / his terraces on injustice; / who works his neighbor without pay, / and gives him no wages" (Jer 22:13).

The Christian Scriptures reinforce a concern for workers. Jesus himself worked as a carpenter (see Mk 6:3). His parable of the laborers showed he was familiar with the legal requirement to pay the agreed-upon wage at the end of the day (see Mt 20:1-16). (Of course, God turns out to be an incredibly generous employer.) He defended the Sabbath rest as being made for the benefit of people (see Mk 2:27).

Work has a threefold moral significance in Catholic social teaching. Work is the major arena for self-expression and self-realization. Work is the ordinary way to provide for ourselves and our families. Work is a principal means of contributing to the wider community and the common good. Pope John Paul II declared work the "key" to the social question in his encyclical letter *On Human Work* (*Laborem Exercens*), nos. 10-11.

Catholic social teaching holds that people have rights to decent and productive work, to just wages sufficient to support one's household in a dignified manner, to private property and economic initiative, and to free association with other workers to protect their rights collectively. The Church strongly defends the right of workers to freely choose to form unions and associations to exercise their dignity and protect their rights. The Church also endorses productive partnerships between labor and management and encourages both to move beyond strictly adversarial relationships for the common good. The bottom line for the Church is that the economy exists for people, not people for the economy.

The Church's social teaching on labor affirms our American emphasis on hard work, but it also challenges us. How can we help our society promote the creation of jobs at living wages? What can we do to counter an uncritical anti-union stance taken by many? How can we help bridge the gulf that often exists between owners and workers?

Essay

Solidarity

We are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. Learning to practice the virtue of solidarity means learning that "loving our neighbor" has global dimensions in an interdependent world. (Excerpt from the USCCB video *In the Footsteps of Jesus: Catholic Social Teaching at Work Today* [Washington, DC: USCCB, 2003])

The Scriptures tell us that we are one human family, sons and daughters of a loving God. This insight is a natural consequence of belief that all people are created in the image and likeness of God (see Gn 1:27). The story of the Tower of Babel conveys the religious insight that the divisions of humanity are the result of human pride and sin (see Gn 11:1-9). The history of salvation seeks to reverse these human divisions. For example, God assures Abraham that "all the nations of the earth shall find blessing" through him and his descendents (Gn 22:18). The psalmist sings of a time when God will rule all the nations (see Ps 22:28-29). The prophets paint a vision of a world of prosperity and peace for all the nations. "They shall beat their swords into plowshares / and their spears into pruning hooks; / One nation shall not raise the sword against another, / nor shall they train for war again" (Is 2:4; also see Mi 4:1-5).

Jesus of Nazareth came to save all men and women. To the surprise of many he frequently broke the taboos of his day and reached out to persons of other nations: the Samaritan woman at the well (see Jn 4:4-42), the Roman centurion (see Mt 8:5-13), and the Canaanite woman (see Mt 15:21-28). He held up the example of the Good Samaritan (see Lk 10:25-37). The message of these actions was not lost on the early Christian community.

St. Paul taught that in Christ there are no national distinctions—no distinctions between Jew and Greek and none between slave and free (see Rom 10:12; Gal 3:28). The miracle of Pentecost overcomes national divisions. In a reversal of the confusion of Babel, the coming of the Spirit enables people who speak different languages to hear the unifying message of the Gospel (see Acts 2:1-12). United in the Spirit, the early Christian community "had all things in common" and shared them on the basis of "each one's need" (Acts 2:44-45).

The theme of solidarity expresses the Church's concerns for world peace and international development. The Church speaks of a "universal common good" that reaches beyond our nation's borders to the global community. We are one human family regardless of national, racial, ethnic, economic, or ideological boundaries. We are called to share the resources of the earth with the whole human family. Solidarity links our fates to the fates of all nations in a web of interrelationships.

Throughout the Scriptures peace is proclaimed as God's gift to us (see Jn 14:27). Peace is also God's challenge to us. Christ is our peace. We are called to be peacemakers (see Mt 5:9).

In Catholic social teaching, peace and justice are linked; in fact, they are reciprocal. Injustices lead to war; war and other forms of violence lead to poverty and injustice. Peace itself is more than the absence of war. Peace is built not upon stockpiles of weapons, but upon the firm foundation of justice. As significant as the gap is between rich and poor in our own country, it is dwarfed by the gap between developed and developing nations. Pope Paul VI called "development" the new name for "peace" and declared, "If you want peace, work for justice." Church teaching calls for multilateral disarmament and the creation of a world order or authority to mediate international disputes.

The message of solidarity affirms the multi-ethnic makeup of American society, but it also challenges our nation in profound ways. How will our nation turn away from its propensity to resort to violence to resolve problems at home as well as abroad? What can we do to change our status as the largest exporter of arms in the world? And how can we encourage our nation to devote appropriate resources to foreign aid?

Essay
Care for God's Creation

The air we breathe, the water we drink, and the land, which nourishes us, are gifts of God that we are called to respect. . . . Christian responsibility for the environment begins with appreciation of the goodness of all God's creation. When we mistreat the natural world, we diminish our own dignity. We also put at risk the dignity of every person, especially the poor and powerless. (Excerpt from the video *In the Footsteps of Jesus: Catholic Social Teaching at Work Today* [Washington, DC: USCCB, 2003])

The story of creation affirms the beauty and goodness of all creation (see Gn 1:1–2:3). Genesis also makes it clear that we do not own the world: God does. Ultimately, we are stewards charged with managing and caring for God's wondrous creation (see Gn 2:15). Our link to the earth is symbolically expressed in Genesis. Humans are made of the "clay of the ground" (Gn 2:7). We are literally "earthlings," creatures of the earth filled with the breath of God. Humans are part of creation itself. Whatever we do to the earth, we ultimately do to ourselves.

The jubilee tradition of the Hebrew Scripture calls us to "let the land lie fallow." The Scripture also makes it clear that we do not "own" the land. God is the owner; we are merely God's tenants. The land is to be treated with respect and allowed rest, not constantly exploited (see Lv 25).

Our scriptural tradition honors creation and call us to do the same. Psalm 104 praises the beauty of creation and the glory of the Creator: "How varied are your works, LORD! / In wisdom you have wrought them all; / the earth is full of your creatures. / . . . May the glory of the LORD endure forever; / may the LORD be glad in these works!" (Ps 104:24, 31). The heavens and the earth, all their creatures and humanity itself "bless the Lord" and "praise and exalt" God forever (see Dn 3:52-90).

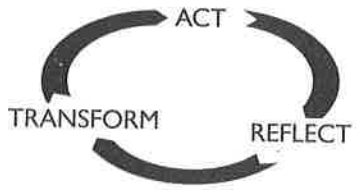
Jesus of Nazareth stands within this Hebrew tradition of respect for God's creation. He frequently sought the solitude of the desert and lonely places in prayer (see Mt 15:23). He used many images of nature in his teaching—the fig tree, the sower, the weeds, the mustard seed, and lost sheep (see Mt 12:33-37; 13:1-9, 24-50; 18:10-14; Mk 4:1-9, 26-34; 13:28-31; Lk 8:4-8; 13:18-19; 15:1-7). Jesus spoke lovingly of the "birds of the air" and the "wild flowers" (see Mt 7:25-34; Lk 12:22-34). He spoke of himself as the vine (see Jn 15:1-17).

In Catholic social teaching, the human person and human society do not exist in a vacuum. Our destiny is bound up with the ecosystems of our planet. The Church has begun only recently to develop an emphasis on ecology and the integrity of creation in its social teaching. This evolution of the teaching is an example of the growth of the "living tradition" of the Church's teaching in response to developments in society. As the impact of humans on the ecology of our planet has become clearer, the Church has sought to shine the light of faith on the emerging issue.

The Church does not focus on ecological issues without reference to the needs of the human community. In fact, the Church is convinced that there is a profound link between how we treat people and how we treat the earth. A concern for ecology is not placed over and against a concern for human welfare. The two go together. A society that finds the earth disposable too often finds people disposable as well. This is why the Church is so concerned about how the poor are affected by the environment. In a sense, "care for God's creation" circles us back to the first theme of Catholic social teaching, the "life and dignity of the human person." One reinforces the other.

The theme of care for God's creation affirms the delight Americans take in our beautiful mountains, plains, lakes, and shores, but it also challenges our consumerism and materialism. We must ask, How can we meet the challenge of establishing a sustainable economy that provides for human needs and protects fragile ecosystems for future generations?

The ART of Catholic Social Teaching



"Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation." (World Synod of Bishops, *Justice in the World* (November 30, 1971), no. 6. In *Vatican Council II: More Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, OP [Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, Inc., 1982], 696.)

ACT *IN CHARITY* TO MEET IMMEDIATE AND URGENT NEEDS

- **Act** to alleviate the symptoms of social problems. Examples: Feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, resettle the refugee, reach out to persons in crisis pregnancies, protect the victims of domestic violence, and recycle paper.
- Come in contact with the issue; it takes on a face.
- Perform the **corporal works of mercy**: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, visit the imprisoned, visit the sick, and bury the dead (see Mt 25 and Tb 2).

Charity

- Focuses on the needs of individuals, families, and creation
- Looks at individual situations of need
- Meets immediate and urgent needs
- Addresses painful individual symptoms of social problems
- Relies on the generosity of donors

REFLECT ON ROOT CAUSES AND CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

- Ask **why**? Why are people hungry, homeless, uprooted, in crisis, battered, or discriminated against? Why is our ecosystem deteriorating?
- **Listen** to those most directly affected—the poor and the marginalized.
- Begin to ask deeper questions that **challenge** the status quo.
- Explore the **underlying causes** of poverty, violence, homelessness, abortion, racism, ecological devastation, and other problems.
- What do the **Scriptures** and **Catholic social teaching** have to say about these social issues and their causes?

TRANSFORM *IN JUSTICE* THE ROOT SOCIAL CAUSES

- **Transform** the social structures that contribute to suffering and injustice.
- To **transform** is to take a different kind of action.
- **Transformative action** gets at the root causes; it does not stop at alleviating the symptoms.
- **Transform** our communities and our world through working with empowered low-income people, advocating for just public policies, creating new social structures (for example, cooperatives and low-income housing), and consuming and investing in socially responsible ways.

Justice

- Focuses on the rights of individuals, families, and creation
- Analyzes social situations or social structures
- Works for long-term social change
- Addresses the underlying social causes of problems
- Relies on just laws and fair social structures