



A Catholic Campaign Against Global Poverty



Excerpt from *A Place at the Table* by the U.S. Catholic Bishops (2002) on our

Tradition

The Biblical Vision

Our faith calls us to look at economic life in terms of its moral and human dimensions. Concern for the poor echoes through the Scriptures—in the passion of the prophets, the words and witness of Jesus, and the example of the early Church. The Church has lived out this concern in every age and every land. Our commitment to those who are in greatest need is rooted in the biblical vision of the sacredness of all human life. In the Old Testament, the Book of Genesis teaches us that every person is made in God's image and likeness¹³ and endowed with inalienable dignity, regardless of who we are, where we are born, or what we accomplish. As believers, we are called to treat all people—especially those who are suffering—with respect, compassion, and justice.

Genesis also teaches us that all of creation was made by God and ultimately belongs to God.¹⁴ The goods of creation must be used to advance the reign of God and the well-being of all. Private ownership is important to ensure freedom and dignity and to help people to meet basic needs, but the goods of creation are not to be controlled by some at the cost of injustice to others.¹⁵

Throughout the Old Testament, God calls his people to care for those on the margins of society.¹⁶ The God of Israel is a God of justice who protects and defends the poor.¹⁷ The prophets clearly reminded the people of Israel that a test of their faithfulness was the way they treated their poor and vulnerable—the widows, the orphans, and the aliens.¹⁸

In the New Testament, we learn how Jesus shared his love in a special way with those who were poor or vulnerable. In the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus and in the Parable of the Rich Young Man, Jesus urged us not to ignore those who are suffering in our midst and warned that attachment to riches can be a barrier to discipleship.¹⁹

Although Jesus reminded us that in a world marred by sin, the poor would always be with us,²⁰ he also challenged us to see him in those who are hungry or thirsty, in strangers, in the naked and imprisoned. In Christ's description of the Last Judgment, we learn that when we ignore the poor, we ignore Christ himself.²¹ As John Paul II has declared, "This Gospel text is not a simple invitation to charity. . . . By these words, no less than by the orthodoxy of her doctrine, the Church measures her fidelity."²²

Catholic Social Teaching

Applying the Scriptures to human history has been the task of saints, church leaders, and ordinary believers through the centuries. The social doctrine of the Church provides principles for reflection, criteria for judgment, and guidelines for the choices we make every day.²³

In the early years of the Church, Christian communities cared for their weakest members by sharing what they had.²⁴ According to St. Ambrose, "You are not making a gift of your possessions to the poor person. You are handing over to him what is his. For what has been given in common for the use of all, you have arrogated to yourself. The world is given to all, and not only to the rich."²⁵

Catholic teaching about human dignity and economic justice has been a special focus of many papal encyclicals and statements of our bishops' conference, offering key themes and principles and applying them to the issues of the day. (See "[A Catholic Framework for Economic Life](#).")

Pope John Paul II insists that the unequivocal words of the Gospel remind us that there is a special presence of Christ in the poor. This presence requires the Church to make a preferential option for those who are poor and vulnerable.²⁶ The principle of solidarity reminds us that as members of one human family, we see every "other" as our neighbor, who must share in the "banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God."²⁷ Solidarity calls us to care for our neighbors in need who are nearby and for those who are far away and to see all those who suffer as sisters and brothers.²⁸

Catholic teaching affirms that all persons, even those on the margins of society, have basic human rights: the right to life and to those things that are necessary to the proper development of life, including faith and family, work and education, housing and health care. Work is the key to the social question (cf. Pope John Paul II, *On Human Work*). Work should not leave people poor but should provide wages sufficient to achieve a standard of living that is in keeping with human dignity.²⁹ Workers have both an obligation and a right to work,³⁰ as well as a right to participation, association, and economic initiative. This includes the right to choose to join a union and to bargain collectively.

In the Catholic tradition, concern for the poor is advanced by individual and common action, works of charity, efforts to achieve a more just social order, the practice of virtue, and the pursuit of justice in our own lives. It requires action to confront structures of injustice that leave people poor. Individual believers are called to be generous in sharing what we have with those in need and to promote justice through the choices we make in our families, schools, and workplaces, and through our participation in social and economic life.³¹

Our social doctrine is expressed and enriched by the Church's broad experience. Across the globe, our Church puts faith into action by feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, educating the young, caring for the sick, welcoming the stranger, providing access for persons with disabilities, and working for greater justice and peace. The Catholic Church is the largest non-governmental provider of education, health care, and human services in our nation. We are helping families and communities to combat hunger and homelessness, overcome poverty and dependency, build housing, resist crime, and seek greater justice. Catholic schools are among the best anti-poverty programs, offering first-rate education, moral truth, and discipline in communities across our nation. We welcome and resettle many refugees fleeing conflict and repression. We offer relief and development in more than eighty countries. (See "[National Catholic Efforts to Overcome Poverty](#).")

Our Church's commitment to find a place at the table for all God's children is expressed in every part of our country and in the poorest places on earth. All across the globe, the Church carries this forward because of who we are and what we believe about God and the human person. Our faith gives us the strength, identity, and principles we need to sustain this work.

Endnotes:

¹³ See Gn 1:26-27.

¹⁴ See Gn 1:26-30, 5:18.

¹⁵ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000), nos. 2402-2407.

¹⁶ See Lv 19:9-15.

¹⁷ See Ps 113:7, 140:13.

¹⁸ See Is 10:1-5; Jer 22:3; Ez 22:29-31.

¹⁹ See Lk 16:19-31.

²⁰ See Mt 26:11.

²¹ See Mt 25:44-45.

²² Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, no. 49.

²³ See CCC, no. 2423.

²⁴ See Acts 4:32-34.

²⁵ De Nabuthe, c. 12, n. 53; (PL 14, 747). Cf. J. R. Palanque, *Saint Ambrose et l'empire romain* (Paris: de

Boccard, 1933), 336ff.

²⁶ See *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, no. 49.

²⁷ Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (*On Social Concern*) (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1988), no. 39.

²⁸ See Bl. Pope John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra* (*On Christianity and Social Progress*), no. 157.

²⁹ See Bl. Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* (*Peace on Earth*) (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1963), no. 20.

³⁰ See Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (*On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum*) (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1991), no. 43.

³¹ See Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* (*On the Condition of Workers*), nos. 35-36.

For the full statement, see "Resources" at www.usccb.org/globalpoverty or www.catholicrelief.org/globalpoverty.