

Catholic Teaching on Social Justice: a brief compendium

The imperative to pursue social justice is not an optional extra for Christians. For Vincentians, called to bear witness to the presence of Christ in the flesh of the marginalised, it is at the core of who we are and what we do. Here follows a brief selection of Catholic teachings on social justice. These teachings form the basis not only of our work with Australia's poor; they also inform our advocacy on their behalf.

Old Testament

Listen to the sound of your brother's blood, crying out to me from the earth.
(**Gen 4:10**)

"He executes justice for [Ex 22:22-24; Ps 68:5; 146:9] the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing." **Deuteronomy 10:18**

"Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land of the LORD your God is giving you." **Deuteronomy 16:20**

Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves. Protect the rights of those who are helpless. Speak out and pronounce a sentence of justice, defend the cause of the wretched and the poor. **Proverbs 31:8-9**

"The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern."
Proverbs 29:7

Woe betide those who enact unjust laws and draft oppressive legislation, depriving the poor of justice, robbing the weakest of my people of their rights, plundering the widow and despoiling the fatherless! **Isaiah 10:1-3**

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me
Because he has anointed me;
He has sent me to announce good news to the poor'
To bind up the broken-hearted;
To proclaim liberty to captives,
Release to those in prison. **Isaiah 61:1**

"But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" **Amos 5:24**

"I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice." **Ezekiel 34:16**

"You have already been told what is right and what Yahweh wants of you. Only this, to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God." **Micah 6:8**

New Testament

Matthew 12:20

A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory.

Matthew 25:40

The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.'

1 John 3: 17

If a man was rich enough in this world's good
Saw that one of his brothers was in need,
But closed hi heart to him,
How could the love of God be living in him?

Fathers of the Church

"You are not making a gift of what is yours to the poor man, but you are giving him back what is his. You have been appropriating things that are meant to be for the common use of everyone. The earth belongs to everyone, not to the rich." **St Ambrose**

Frederic Ozanam

The question agitating the world today is...a social question. It is the struggle between those who have nothing and those who have too much, it is a clash between wealth and poverty, which is shaking the ground at our feet. **1836**

I ask... that we should take responsibility for the people who have too many needs and not enough rights... **1848**

You must not be content with tiding the poor over the poverty crisis. You must study the injustices which brought about such poverty, with the aim of a long term improvement.

It is time to seek the abolition of poverty.

Justice demands a consecration of each one for the welfare of all and especially for the protection of the weak.

It is time to plead the cause of workers, to lift up the suffering poor and to pursue the abolition of poverty.

Let us turn to democracy, to the mass of people to whom we are unknown and appeal to them not by sermons, but by benefits. Help them not with alms which humiliate, but by creating social conditions which will free them and life them up out of their repressive situations.

It is time to demonstrate that the proletarian cause can be pleaded, the uplifting of the suffering poor be engaged in, and the abolition of pauperism pursued, without identifying oneself with the wild appeals which provoked the June upheaval, and which still cast a gloom over the future.

Justice is the last moral refuge, the last sanctuary of modern society.

Pius XI

"... if the class struggle abstains from enmities and mutual hatred, it gradually changes into an honest discussion of differences founded on a desire for justice". *Quadragesimo anno*

Leo XIII

Rerum Novarum asserted the State's responsibility to intervene in favour of the needy, preventing the big fish from continuing to eat the little ones.

Vatican II

God intended the earth and everything in it for the use of all human beings and peoples. Thus, under the leadership of justice and in the company of charity, created goods should flow fairly to all. *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965

Pope Paul VI

All other rights, whatever they may be, including the rights of property and free trade, are to be subordinated to this principle.... Redirecting these rights back to their original purpose must be regarded as an important and urgent social duty.' *Populorum Progressio*, 1967

Populorum Progressio fundamentally rejected "material gain as the key motive for economic progress, or competition as the supreme law of economics."

Pope John Paul II

But with special attention, in a true "preferential option", she [the Church] turns to those who are *in situations of greater weakness*, and therefore in greater need. "The poor", in varied states of affliction, are the oppressed, those on the margin of society, the elderly, the sick, the young, any and all who are considered and treated as "the least". *Vita consecrate* 1996

... the human inadequacies of capitalism and the resulting domination of things over people are far from disappearing. In fact, for the poor, to the lack of material goods has been added a lack of knowledge and training which prevents them from escaping their state of humiliating subjection. *Centesimus annus* 1991

... there are collective and qualitative needs which cannot be satisfied by market mechanisms. There are important human needs which escape its logic. There are goods which by their very nature cannot and must not be bought or sold. *Centesimus annus* 1991

The needs of the poor take priority over the desires of the rich, the rights of workers over the maximization of profits... **Toronto 1984**

...we must first of all recall a principle that has always been taught by the Church: *the principle of the priority of labour over capital*. This principle directly concerns the process of production: in this process labour is always a primary *efficient cause*, while capital, the whole collection of means of production, remains a mere *instrument* or instrumental cause. This principle is an evident truth that emerges from the whole of man's historical experience. *Laborum excercens* **1981**

...it has always understood this right within the broader context of the right common to all to use the goods of the whole of creation: *the right to private property is subordinated to the right to common use*, to the fact that goods are meant for everyone. *Laborum excercens* property is acquired first of all through work in order that it may serve work. This concerns in a special way ownership of the means of production. Isolating these means as a separate property in order to set it up in the form of "capital" in opposition to "labour"-and even to practise exploitation of labour-is contrary to the very nature of these means and their possession. They cannot be *possessed against labour*, they cannot even be *possessed for possession's sake*, because the only legitimate title to their possession- whether in the form of private ownership or in the form of public or collective ownership-is *that they should serve labour*, and thus, by serving labour, that they should make possible the achievement of the first principle of this order, namely, the universal destination of goods and the right to common use of them. From this point of view, therefore, in consideration of human labour and of common access to the goods meant for man, one cannot exclude the *socialization*, in suitable conditions, of certain means of production. *Laborum excercens* **1981**