

## History of Social Justice in the Catholic Church

Focus:

- From the beginning, the Church has been committed to the welfare of its members and people in society.
- The Church's tradition of teachings on social justice issues developed in response to the Industrial Revolution.
- Since the publication of *Rerum Novarum* – Concerning New Things in 1891 the Church has developed a great body of teachings on many aspects of social justice.
- The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (2004) gives a clear summary of the Church's social teachings.

### Welfare in the Early Church

Christians have always recognised that the Gospel requires them to work for the welfare of people in society. Following the example of Jesus, the Church, from the beginning, promoted *tika*. Saint Paul in his letters reminded Christians to treat each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, regardless of social status:

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28)

“Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.” (Galatians 6:2)

“Each of us must please our neighbour for the good purpose of building up the neighbour.” (Romans 15:2)

The early Christian communities became well-known for their social services to people in need – especially the sick, the hungry, widows and orphans. When, at times, groups of Christians did fail to meet the needs of the poor their behaviour was condemned by their leaders (see James 2:1-9).

### Task Ten

Read the following passages from the New Testament which describe how the early Church cared for the poor and vulnerable:

Acts 6:1-6

Acts 11:27-30

Romans 15:25-27

List all the ways in which the first Christians provided for those among them who were in need.

## An Emerging Tradition of Justice

In the fourth century, after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, the Church had new opportunities to work for social reform. It played a significant role in passing laws that protected widows and orphans, limited slavery, reduced abortions, defended children, and secured more humane treatment for prisoners of war and criminals.

Early Church documents provide evidence of Christians' commitment to peace: Christians were forbidden to carry arms, and soldiers who desired baptism were required to resign from the Roman army.

Later, during the medieval period, the monasteries, as well as providing education, established essential social services including hospitals for the sick, shelter for orphans and widows, food for the poor, ministry to prisoners, and hospitality to travellers. The Church continues to provide many of these services today.

## The Church Responds to the Industrial Revolution

Throughout its history, the Church has continued to deepen its understanding of what is required if true justice is to be established in our world. However, it was in response to the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century that the Church first began to develop an organised body of teachings on social justice issues.

The factories established by the new industries required large workforces. Workers were often poorly paid, badly treated, and forced to live and work in environments that were unsafe and unhealthy. The Church gradually turned its attention to issues such as the provision of fair wages and decent working conditions. In 1891, Pope Leo XIII issued an encyclical letter, *Rerum Novarum* – Concerning New Things, which addressed the problems facing industrial workers. In it he rejected socialism as a solution to workers' problems and stated that co-operation rather than class struggle would change society for the better. *Rerum Novarum* – Concerning New Things also emphasised the rights of the weak, the dignity of the poor, and the obligations of the rich towards them. It affirmed the right of workers to form unions or associations to protect their own interests.