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Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions

Reflections of the U.S. Catholic Bishops

**Also Includes The Summary Report of the
Task Force on Catholic Social Teaching and Catholic Education
U.S. Catholic Conference
Washington, DC**

*This publication contains two documents—the bishops' statement *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions* and the *Summary Report of the Task Force on Catholic Social Teaching and Catholic Education*. The bishops' statement was developed by the Committee on Education, the Committee on Domestic Policy, and the Committee on International Policy, and it was approved by the bishops on June 19, 1998. It is a response to the report of the Task Force on Catholic Social Teaching and Catholic Education, which was created in 1995 by these three committees. The task force's summary report is included as an appendix to this publication. The bishops' statement reflects the action of the bishops, and the summary report is the work of the task force. These two documents are approved for publication by the undersigned.*

*Monsignor Dennis M. Schnurr
General Secretary
NCCB/USCC*

[Quotation] There are many innovative efforts by Catholic educators to communicate the social doctrine of the Church. At the same time, however, it is clear that in some educational programs Catholic social teaching is not really shared or not sufficiently integral and explicit. As a result, far too many Catholics are not familiar with the basic content of Catholic social teaching. More fundamentally, many Catholics do not adequately understand that the social teaching of the Church is an essential part of Catholic faith. This poses a serious challenge for all Catholics, since it weakens our capacity to be a Church that is true to the demands of the Gospel.

Introduction

Our community of faith is blessed with many gifts. Two of the most vital are our remarkable commitment to Catholic education and catechesis in all its forms and our rich tradition of Catholic social teaching. As we look to a new millennium, there is an urgent need to bring these two gifts together in a strengthened commitment to sharing our social teaching at every level of Catholic education and faith formation.

Catholic social teaching is a central and essential element of our faith. Its roots are in the Hebrew prophets who announced God's special love for the poor and called God's people to a covenant of love and justice. It is a teaching founded on the life and words of Jesus Christ, who came "to bring glad tidings to the poor . . . liberty to captives . . . recovery of sight to the blind"(Lk 4:18-19), and who identified himself with "the least of these," the hungry and the stranger (cf. Mt 25:45). Catholic social teaching is built on a commitment to the poor. This commitment arises from our experiences of Christ in the eucharist.

As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains, "To receive in truth the Body and Blood of Christ given up for us, we must recognize Christ in the poorest, his brethren" (no. 1397).

Catholic social teaching emerges from the truth of what God has revealed to us about himself. We believe in the triune God whose very nature is communal and social. God the Father sends his only Son Jesus Christ and shares the Holy Spirit as his gift of love. God reveals himself to us as one who is not alone, but rather as one who is relational, one who is Trinity. Therefore, we who are made in God's image share this communal, social nature. We are called to reach out and to build relationships of love and justice.

Catholic social teaching is based on and inseparable from our understanding of human life and human dignity. Every human being is created in the image of God and redeemed by Jesus Christ, and therefore is invaluable and worthy of respect as a member of the human family. Every person, from the moment of conception to natural death, has inherent dignity and a right to life consistent with that dignity. Human dignity comes from God, not from any human quality or accomplishment.

Our commitment to the Catholic social mission must be rooted in and strengthened by our spiritual lives. In our relationship with God we experience the conversion of heart that is necessary to truly love one another as God has loved us.

A Time to Act

Because this commitment to social justice is at the heart of who we are and what we believe, it must be shared more effectively. We offer these reflections to address the pressing need to educate all Catholics on the Church's social teaching and to share the social demands of the Gospel and Catholic tradition more clearly. If Catholic education and formation fail to communicate our social tradition, they are not fully Catholic.

This statement is addressed in a particular way to those engaged in Catholic education, catechesis, and social ministry. As pastors and as teachers of the faith, we ask Catholic educators and catechists to join with us in facing the urgent challenge of communicating Catholic social teaching more fully to all the members of our family of faith.

This is a call to action, an appeal especially to pastors, educators, and catechists to teach the Catholic social tradition in its fullness. These reflections are not a comprehensive summary of its rich heritage and content. Our social tradition has been developed and expressed through a variety of major documents, including papal encyclicals, conciliar documents, and episcopal statements. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* summarizes the essence of this social teaching and roots it in faith and liturgical life, presenting it as an essential part of the moral teaching of the Church. In addition, the Vatican has developed *Guidelines for the Study and Teaching of the Church's Social Doctrine in the Formation of Priests*. Our own conference of bishops has outlined this heritage in *A Century of Social Teaching*. Catholic social teaching can be understood best through a thorough study of papal teaching and ecclesial documents.

The focus of this statement is the urgent task to incorporate Catholic social teaching more fully and explicitly into Catholic educational programs. This must be undertaken in the context of efforts to share the faith in its entirety and to encourage Catholics to experience the gospel call to conversion in all its dimensions. Recognizing the importance of this broader goal of Catholic education and formation, we call for a renewed commitment to integrate Catholic social teaching into the mainstream of all Catholic educational institutions and programs. We are confident that this goal can be advanced, because we know firsthand of the dedication, talent, and deep faith of those involved in the work of education, catechesis, and faith formation. The work done by principals, teachers, catechists, directors and coordinators of religious education, youth ministers, college and seminary professors, adult educators, and social action leaders is vitally important. We thank and commend all those who carry out the holy work of educating others to understand and to act on the truths of our faith. We recognize the commitment and creativity of so many educators and catechists who already share our social tradition in their classrooms and programs.

However, despite these significant and ongoing efforts, our social heritage is unknown by many Catholics. Sadly, our social doctrine is not shared or taught in a consistent and comprehensive way in too many of our schools, seminaries, religious education programs, colleges, and universities. We need to build on the good work already underway to ensure that every Catholic understands how the Gospel and church teaching call us to choose life, to serve the least among us, to hunger and thirst for justice, and to be peacemakers. The sharing of our social tradition is a defining measure of Catholic education and formation.

The Task Force's Mission and Findings

For these reasons, in 1995 our bishops' conference established the Task Force on Catholic Social Teaching and Catholic Education. The task force brought leaders of Catholic education and social ministry together to assess and strengthen current efforts and to develop new directions for the future. As Catholic bishops in the United States we have received and very much welcome the report of the Task Force on Catholic Social Teaching and Catholic Education. We affirm their work and urge action on their report. Our brief reflections here do not take the place of the full report, but we wish to highlight several key themes developed by the task force. After our reflections, you will also find the task force summary report.

In its overall assessment, the task force found much good will and many innovative efforts by Catholic educators to communicate the social doctrine of the Church. At the same time, however, it is clear that in some educational programs Catholic social teaching is not really shared or not sufficiently integral and explicit. As a result, far too many Catholics are not familiar with the basic content of Catholic social teaching. More fundamentally, many Catholics do not adequately understand that the social teaching of the Church is an essential part of Catholic faith. This poses a serious challenge for all Catholics, since it weakens our capacity to be a Church that is true to the demands of the Gospel. We need to do more to share the social mission and message of our Church.

Our Catholic social teaching is proclaimed whenever we gather for worship. The homily presents an excellent opportunity for sharing Catholic social teaching. The word of God announces God's reign of justice and peace. Our preaching of the just word continues the preaching of Jesus and the prophets.

Central to our identity as Catholics is that we are called to be leaven for transforming the world, agents for bringing about a kingdom of love and justice. When we pray, "Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," we are praying for God's kingdom of justice and peace and committing ourselves to breaking down the barriers that obstruct God's kingdom of justice and peace and to working to bring about a world more respectful of human life and dignity.

Catholic Social Teaching: Major Themes

The Church's social teaching is a rich treasure of wisdom about building a just society and living lives of holiness amidst the challenges of modern society. It offers moral principles and coherent values that are badly needed in our time. In this time of widespread violence and diminished respect for human life and dignity in our country and around the world, the Gospel of life and the biblical call to justice need to be proclaimed and shared with new clarity, urgency, and energy.

Modern Catholic social teaching has been articulated through a tradition of papal, conciliar, and episcopal documents that explore and express the social demands of our faith. The depth and richness of this tradition can be understood best through a direct reading of these documents, many of which are cited in the Report of the Content Subgroup (pp. xx-xx). In these brief reflections, we wish to highlight several of the key themes that are at the heart of our Catholic social tradition. We hope they will serve as a starting point for those interested in exploring the Catholic social tradition more fully.

Life and Dignity of the Human Person

In a world warped by materialism and declining respect for human life, the Catholic Church proclaims that human life is sacred 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 the inherent dignity of the human person is the foundation of all the principles of our 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. The

dignity of life is undermined when the creation of human life is reduced to the manufacture of a product, as in human cloning or proposals for genetic engineering to create "perfect" human beings. 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.

Call to Family, Community, and Participation

In a global culture driven by excessive individualism, our tradition proclaims that 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. The family is the central social institution that must be supported and strengthened, not undermined. While our society often exalts individualism, the Catholic tradition teaches that human beings grow and achieve fulfillment in community. We believe people have a right and a duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable. Our Church teaches that the role of government and other institutions is to protect human life and human dignity and promote the common good.

Rights and Responsibilities

In a world where some speak mostly of "rights" and others mostly of "responsibilities," the Catholic tradition teaches that human dignity can be protected and a healthy community can be achieved only if human rights are protected and responsibilities are met. Therefore, every person has a fundamental right to life and a right to those things required for human decency. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities—to one another, to our families, and to the larger society. While public debate in our nation is often divided between those who focus on personal responsibility and those who focus on social responsibilities, our tradition insists that both are necessary.

Option for the Poor and Vulnerable

In a world characterized by growing prosperity for some and pervasive poverty for others, Catholic teaching proclaims that a basic moral test is how our most vulnerable members are faring. In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, our tradition recalls the story of the Last Judgment (Mt 25:31-46) and instructs us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first.

The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers

In a marketplace where too often the quarterly bottom line takes precedence over the rights of workers, we believe that the economy must serve people, not the other way around. 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 work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected—the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to organize and join unions, to private property, and to economic initiative. Respecting these rights promotes an economy that protects human life, defends human rights, and advances the well-being of all.

Solidarity

Our culture is tempted to turn inward, becoming indifferent and sometimes isolationist in

the face of international responsibilities. Catholic social teaching proclaims that we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they live. 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. This virtue is described by John Paul II as "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all" (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 38).

Care for God's Creation

On a planet conflicted over environmental issues, the Catholic tradition insists that we show our respect for the Creator by our stewardship of creation. Care for the earth is not just an Earth Day slogan, it is a requirement of our faith. We are called to protect people and the planet, living our faith in relationship with all of God's creation. This environmental challenge has fundamental moral and ethical dimensions that cannot be ignored.

This teaching is a complex and nuanced tradition with many other important elements. Principles like "subsidiarity" and the "common good" outline the advantages and limitations of markets, the responsibilities and limits of government, and the essential roles of voluntary associations. These and other key principles are outlined in greater detail in the Catechism and in the attached Report of the Content Subgroup (see pp. xx-xx). These principles build on the foundation of Catholic social teaching: the dignity of human life. This central Catholic principle requires that we measure every policy, every institution, and every action by whether it protects human life and enhances human dignity, especially for the poor and vulnerable.

These moral values and others outlined in various papal and episcopal documents are part of a systematic moral framework and a precious intellectual heritage that we call Catholic social teaching. The Scriptures say, "Without a vision the people perish" (Prv 29:18). As Catholics, we have an inspiring vision in our social teaching. In a world that hungers for a sense of meaning and moral direction, this teaching offers ethical criteria for action. In a society of rapid change and often confused moral values, this teaching offers consistent moral guidance for the future. For Catholics, this social teaching is a central part of our identity. In the words of John Paul II, it is "genuine doctrine" (*Centesimus Annus*, no. 5).

There will be legitimate differences and debate over how these challenging moral principles are applied in concrete situations. Differing prudential judgments on specifics cannot be allowed, however, to obscure the need for every Catholic to know and apply these principles in family, economic, and community life.

The Educational Challenge

Catholic schools, religious education, adult education, and faith formation programs are vitally important for sharing the substance and values of Catholic social teaching. Just as the social teaching of the Church is integral to Catholic faith, the social justice dimensions of teaching are integral to Catholic education and catechesis. They are an essential part of

Catholic identity and formation.

In offering these reflections, we want to encourage a fuller integration of the Church's social tradition into the mainstream of Catholic education and catechesis. We seek to encourage a more integral sharing of the substance of Catholic social teaching in Catholic education and catechesis at every level. The commitment to human life and dignity, to human rights and solidarity, is a calling all Catholic educators must share with their students. It is not a vocation for a few religion teachers, but a challenge for every Catholic educator and catechist.

The Church has the God-given mission and the unique capacity to call people to live with integrity, compassion, responsibility, and concern for others. Our seminaries, colleges, schools, and catechetical programs are called to share not just abstract principles but a moral framework for everyday action. The Church's social teaching offers a guide for choices as parents, workers, consumers, and citizens.

Therefore, we emphasize that the values of the Church's social teaching must not be treated as tangential or optional. They must be a core part of teaching and formation. Without our social teaching, schools, catechetical programs, and other formation programs would be offering an incomplete presentation of our Catholic tradition. This would fall short of our mission and would be a serious loss for those in our educational and catechetical programs.

Directions for the Future

We strongly support new initiatives to integrate the social teachings of the Church more fully into educational and catechetical programs and institutions. Many catechists and Catholic teachers do this every day by weaving these ideas into curricula and classrooms. They introduce their students to issues of social justice. They encourage service to those in need and reflect on the lessons learned in that service. Yet in too many schools and classrooms, these principles are often vaguely presented; the values are unclear; the lessons are unlearned. We support the task force's clear call for new efforts to teach our social tradition and to link service and action, charity and justice.

The report of the task force includes a series of recommendations for making the Church's social teaching more intentional and explicit in all areas of Catholic education and formation. Without summarizing the full agenda, we call attention to several recommendations which we believe deserve priority attention:

Elementary and Secondary Schools

We strongly urge Catholic educators and administrators to create additional resources and programs that will address the lack of familiarity with Catholic social teaching among many faculty and students. We encourage diocesan and local educators to promote curriculum development in the area of Catholic social thought and would like to see a model developed for faculty interested in this arena.

Religious Education, Youth Ministry, and Adult Faith Formation

We support the proposal that diocesan offices (as well as regional and national organizations that work in the areas of religious education, youth ministry, and adult education) focus on Catholic social teaching in meetings and publications. A clearinghouse of existing resources and effective methodologies should be developed, and new resources should be produced. Leadership formation programs should be developed to enhance the explicit teaching of Catholic social doctrine in these educational ministries.

Higher Education

We support the proposal that the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities and other appropriate national groups explore the creation of a national organization of faculty interested in Catholic social teaching. We support summer seminars for faculty members to examine Catholic teaching and explore ways to incorporate it into classes and programs.

Seminaries and Continuing Formation of Clergy

We also support the recommendation that the United States Catholic Conference (USCC) and the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) produce guidelines to aid seminaries in strengthening their teaching of the Church's social doctrine. These guidelines should offer assistance and direction in achieving the goal of having all seminaries require at least one course that is specifically focused on Catholic social teaching. We encourage the suggestion that a symposium be held for seminary instructors involved or interested in teaching Catholic social thought. We urge that diaconate programs incorporate Catholic social teaching fully and explicitly. We further encourage continuing formation of priests so they can more effectively preach, teach, and share the Church's social tradition and its concrete implications for our time.

Textbooks and Catechetical Materials

We call on publishers of Catholic educational materials to continue and to strengthen efforts to incorporate the principles of Catholic social teaching into all materials and disciplines in addition to providing resources specific to Catholic social thought. A standard of assessment for Catholic social teaching, based on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, papal teaching, and the documents of our conference, should be developed to assist publishers. The work of the task force can serve as a helpful guide. This review should be coordinated with other assessments for which publishers presently submit their materials. A clearinghouse of lesson plans and other resources should be created to help educators share information and ideas easily.

Conclusion

As bishops and pastors, we believe the Church's social teaching is integral to our identity and mission as Catholics. This is why we seek a renewed commitment to integrate and to share the riches of the Church's social teaching in Catholic education and formation at every level. This is one of the most urgent challenges for the new millennium. As John Paul II has said, "A commitment to justice and peace in a world like ours, marked by so many conflicts and intolerable social and economic inequalities, is a necessary condition for the preparation and celebration of the Jubilee" (*Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, no. 51).

Our conference is committed to following through on the task force report. We urge our Committees on Education, Domestic Social Policy, International Policy, and Priestly

Formation and other relevant bodies to continue to bring together more effectively our educational and catechetical ministries and social mission. We encourage other Catholic leaders and educators to read the full report and to develop specific and concrete initiatives flowing from the task force recommendations. We very much welcome the commitment and the initiatives of many national and diocesan organizations to act on these recommendations, developing appropriate structures and programs at the diocesan level, and improving our capacity to teach Catholic social values and make a difference in our world. One promising step at the diocesan level would be bringing together educational and catechetical leaders with those involved in social ministry to form a local task force on this topic to follow through on these recommendations.

The most urgent ecclesial task of our times is the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ. A vital element of this new evangelization is sharing our social tradition with all Catholics so clearly that they may be engaged and challenged, encouraged and empowered to live their faith every day. Witnessing to this tradition by the integrity of our own Catholic institutions and organizations is one of the most effective ways to communicate the Church's social teaching.

The test for our Church is not simply have we "kept the faith," but have we shared the faith. As we approach the jubilee of the Lord's birth, we seek to support and to encourage renewed efforts to make the social dimensions of our faith come alive in caring service, creative education, and principled action throughout the Catholic community. Catholic education is one of the most important forums for sharing and demonstrating our Church's commitment to human dignity and social justice. Catholic educators and catechists can best share this message of hope and challenge for the future. We support and encourage them for this holy work.

This is not a new mission. More than two thousand years ago, Jesus in his hometown synagogue read the words from Isaiah that outlined his work on earth, as well as the Church's mission through the centuries and the special tasks of Catholic educators and catechists today:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring glad tidings to the poor.
. . . liberty to captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free . . ." (Lk 4:18).

Sharing our social tradition more fully and clearly is an essential way to bring good news, liberty, and new sight to a society and world in desperate need of God's justice and peace.

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