

DIGNITAS HUMANA

a publication by the

Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace
of the Diocese of Christchurch

The Principles of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church - A Summary

Part I: Human Dignity, the Common Good, Solidarity, Subsidiarity and the Preferential Option for the Poor.

Introduction

The Catholic Church's Social Doctrine is a treasury of wisdom, or a body of teaching, that has been distilled from Catholic Church's careful Magisterial reflection. It is also an expression of the Church's constant commitment in fidelity to the grace of salvation wrought in Christ and in loving concern for humanity's destination¹. In general, the principles of Catholic Social Teaching echo elements of Jewish Law and the prophetic books of the Old Testament, but more importantly, they recall the teachings of Jesus Christ, such as His declaration: "in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me"².

The permanent principles of the Church's social doctrine constitute the very heart of the Catholic Social Teaching³. An in depth elucidation of the principles can be found in the "Compendium of the Social Teaching of the Catholic Church" which was published in 2004.

In this issue of Dignitas Humana, we summarise **five** of some of the foundational principles of Catholic Social Teaching, and more will be summarised in the future issues.

Human Dignity - The Sacredness of Human Life

It has always been the constant teaching of the Church that every human life is sacred and each and every life has an intrinsic value or worth. The human person is the only creature created in the image of God, and possesses a spiritual nature that is free, intellectual and capable of making free moral choices. Of all the material creatures, the human person alone possesses a spiritual nature that is free, intellectual and capable of free and knowledgeable moral action.

The Second Vatican Council affirmed this dignity on the basis of the human person's possession of a conscience



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¹ C.f. Para 8 Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church

² New Jerusalem Bible: Matthew 25:40

³ Compendium of the Social Teaching of the Catholic Church - Para 160

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and on the ability to respond to it: “Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, tells him inwardly at the right moment: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God. His dignity lies in observing this law, and by it he will be judged”⁴.

“... Whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where men are treated as mere

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tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others of their like are infamies indeed. They poison human society, but

they do more harm to those who practice them than those who suffer from the injury”⁵.

Therefore in “every perspective on economic life that is human, moral, and Christian must be shaped by three questions: What does the economy do for people? What does it do to people? And how do people participate in it?”⁶.

The Common Good

While the dignity of the human person must always be affirmed, individuals live in common with others and the rights of individuals must be balanced with the wider common good of all. The rights and needs of others must be always respected.

“The principle of the common good, to which every aspect of social life must be related if it is to attain its fullest meaning, stems from the dignity, unity and equality of all people. According to its primary and broadly accepted sense, the common good indicates the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily.

The common good does not consist in the simple sum of the particular goods of each subject of a social entity. Belonging to everyone and to each person, it is and remains “common”, because it is indivisible and because only together is it possible to attain it, increase it and safeguard its effectiveness, with regard also to the future. Just as the moral actions of an individual are accomplished in doing what is good, so too the actions of a society attain their full stature when they bring about the common good. The common good, in fact, can be understood as the social and community dimension of the moral good.

A society that wishes and intends to remain at the service of the human being at every level is a society that has the common good — the good of all people and of the whole person — as its primary goal. The human person cannot find fulfilment in himself, that is, apart from the fact that he exists “with” others and “for” others. This truth does not simply require that he live with others at various levels of social life, but that he seek unceasingly — in actual practice and not merely at the level of ideas — the good, that is, the meaning and truth, found in existing forms of social life. No expression of social life — from the family to intermediate social groups, associations, enterprises of an economic nature, cities, regions, States, up to the community of peoples and nations — can escape the issue of its own common good, in that this is a constitutive element of its significance and the authentic reason for its very existence”⁷.

Solidarity

The principle of Solidarity recognizes that each person is connected to and dependent on all humanity, collectively and individually. We are one human family, irrespective our national, racial, ethnic, economic or ideological background. It brings to the fore the global dimension of the commandment to “love our neighbour as ourselves”. Solidarity, in its truest sense, is not a feeling of vague compassion or a shallow distress at the misfortune of others, but a “firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good”⁸. It is in solidarity that

⁴ Gaudium et Spes Paragraph 16.

⁵ Gaudium et Spes, Paragraph 27

⁶ Economic Justice for All, Paragraph 1

⁷ Paragraph 164-165, Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church

people are enabled to devote themselves “to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all”.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church likens Solidarity to “social charity”⁹. Solidarity, takes the notion of our interdependence on each other to another level, shaping the response we should have to our inter-dependence, by evoking within us a desire to build the bonds of common life.

Subsidiarity

Subsidiarity is the principle that recognizes that society is based on organizations or communities of people ranging from small groups or families, right through to national and international institutions. This principle affirms that political and social action ought not to be usurped by a higher authority when a lower level of competence would suffice.

“Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do. For every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the body”¹⁰.

Preferential Option for the Poor

The moral test of a society is how it treats its most vulnerable members – especially its poor. The poor have the most urgent moral claim on the conscience of the nation. We are called to look at public policy decisions in terms of how they affect the poor. The “Preferential option for the poor,” is not an adversarial slogan that pits one group or class against another. Rather it states that the deprivation and powerlessness of the poor wounds the whole community.

This principle is an essential part of society's effort to achieve the common good. A healthy community can be achieved only if its members give special attention to those with special needs, to those who are poor and on the margins of society.

“This is an option, or a special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity, to which the whole tradition of the Church bears witness. It affects the life of each Christian inasmuch as he or she seeks to imitate the life of Christ, but it applies equally to our social responsibilities and hence to our manner of living, and to the logical decisions to be made concerning the ownership and use of goods. Today, furthermore, given the worldwide dimension which the social question has assumed, this love of preference for the poor, and the decisions which it inspires in us, cannot but embrace multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without health care and, above all, those without hope for a better future”¹¹.

⁸ Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, Paragraph 38

⁹ Catechism of the Catholic Church Para. 1939

¹⁰ Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, para 186, quoting from Pius XI's Quadragesimo Anno

¹¹ Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, para. 182

The Social Assistance (Future Focus) Bill

- Is it Social Assistance or is it Social Hindrance?

'There is a dangerous tendency to project blame on to the needy as though they are the authors of their own misfortune. The truth for most is that they are unwilling victims of systems and policies which overlook their needs. In its choice of policies and by its direct support of the needy, Government should act out the collective will that no citizen of our land experience a life deprived of life's essentials'¹.

Recent headlines in the Christchurch Press read;

- 12000 jobs lost in a year (April 21).
- 1500 jobs to be axed in the Public Service (April 23).

Amongst the organisations that are affected include: Lane Walker Rudkin, General Cable, Canterbury University, Firestone, Deane Apparel, Lincoln University, and Telecom. The list of jobs of all description lost or exported from New Zealand goes on. From Academia to manual labourers, male and female, young and old, all have experienced the pain of losing their livelihood, the feeling of exclusion, the deep concern for their families, their sense of betrayal after perhaps a life time of service to an industry, or to a company. A rise in

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unemployment was a predictable and not unexpected consequence of the global economic crisis and, in most cases, beyond the control of individuals. The increase in the unemployment figures is largely due to this event and those of us who have been spared the impact of a job loss should extend a generous compassion towards those unfortunate to have done so.

Given the hard economic times we are currently experiencing one would assume that the government would be doing all it was able to support and strengthen the people unfortunate to experience a dramatic fall in income and personal esteem. That paying of entitlement benefits would be designed to be paid in a dignified and easily accessible manner. The hardship suffered could at least be slightly ameliorated by an absence of any derogatory remarks, or a stigmatisation of those unfortunate to have suddenly found themselves without employment. This unfortunately, in some

instances has not been the case and in fact many of the responses have been quite demeaning in tone, and insulting in language. For example, an overarching punitive tone is evident in phrases that have been used by the Minister of Social Welfare and indeed the Prime Minister himself. Condescending remarks such as, 'the dream is over', or 'that some beneficiaries need a kick in the pants', are deeply insulting to those who have been unfortunate to lose their livelihood through no fault of their own. Given that the current National Unemployment is in excess of 6% (June 2010) it is understandable that many families are reduced to relying on welfare benefits to live from day to day.

Because work is an obligation, it is also a source of rights on the part of the worker.²

“Work is, as has been said, an obligation, that is to say, a duty, on the part of man. This is true in all the many meanings of the word. Man must work, both because the Creator has commanded it and because of his own humanity, which requires work in order to be maintained and developed. Man must work out of regard for others, especially his own family, but also for the society he belongs to, the country of which he is a child, and the whole human family of which he is a member, since he is the heir to the work of generations and at the same time a sharer in building the future of those who will come after him in the succession of history. All this constitutes the moral obligation of work, understood in its wide sense. When we have to consider the moral rights, corresponding to this obligation, of every person with regard to work, we must always keep before our eyes the whole vast range of points of reference in which the labour of every working subject is manifested”³.

¹ New Zealand Church Leaders, Social Justice 1993

² C.f Pope John Paul II; Laborem Exercens 16:1

³ Pope John Paul II; Laborem Exercens 16:2

Social Assistance (Future Focus), the recent Government Bill introduced to Parliament by the Hon. Paula Bennett, has as its opening statement makes clear ‘the objective of the changes is to ensure a fairer system of social assistance with an unrelenting focus on work.’ There is nothing wrong with the principle of making the system fairer and getting people back into the workforce, although one would have thought that these principles had always been in operation. However, although making the system ‘fairer’ is laudable, it’s the unrelenting focus on work that appears in the small print that requires close scrutiny. In the bill the term “suitable work” is open to interpretation. Who decides what work is “suitable”? Do we consider work that forces mothers to leave young children in unsuitable childcare facilities ‘suitable’? Do we expect Maori to leave their *papakāinga* because a region’s economic development has been neglected? Similarly, forcing disabled people into menial work could hardly be considered ‘suitable’ or decent work. We should apply the principles of Catholic Social Teaching to judge what work is ‘suitable’ or decent. Perhaps this is best captured by Pope Benedict’s recent encyclical;

“What is meant by the word ‘decent’ in regard to work? It means work that expresses the essential dignity of every man and woman in their particular society: work that is freely chosen, effectively associating workers both men and women, with the development of their community; work that enables the worker to be respected and free from any form of discrimination; work that makes it possible to meet their needs and provide schooling for their children, without the children themselves being forced into labour; work that permits the workers to organise freely, and to make their voices heard; work that leaves enough room for rediscovering one’s roots at a personal, familial and spiritual level; work that guarantees those who have retired a decent standard of living”⁴.

There is no question that proper full time and suitable part time job positions are hard

to come by. People want to be employed and support their families. Today, all too frequently employment is not available or discriminates against family life. In short, it is critical that the proposed Bill be developed with some public consultation. The Bill needs to take into account many other factors, including how it affects family life, human rights concerns, and the treatment of women on the DPB and those on the widow’s benefit. Ostensibly the Bill purports to address the issue of long term beneficiaries but without addressing some of the critical points that are raised here, it may in fact end up targeting unjustly those now considered to be ‘work ready’. The question is, what does “work-ready” really mean?



“Families have the right to economic conditions which assure them a standard of living appropriate to their dignity and full development”

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“Families have a right to a social and economic order in which the organisation of work permits the members to live together, and does not hinder the unity, well-being, health and stability of the family, while offering also the possibility of wholesome recreation.....a) it should be such that mothers will not be obliged to work outside the home to the detriment of family life and especially of the education of the children”⁶.

In conclusion, the Social Assistance (Future Focus) Bill is full of shortcomings because of its lack of consideration of many social issues and public consultation. What is proposed may in fact lead to the opposite effect of what the title of the Bill suggests: it has the potential of turning into a social hindrance rather than an assistance to those who are unemployed through no fault of their own.

⁴ Pope Benedict XVI: Caritas in Veritate, para 63

⁵ Article 9 Charter of the Rights of the Family. Holy See to United Nations

⁶ Article 10 Charter of the Rights of the Family. Holy See to the United Nations

Review of Special Education

In January 2010 the New Zealand Ministry of Education released a Discussion Document following its Review of Special Education conducted from August 2009. It is the purpose of this article to examine the Review in more detail and to examine a set of its recommendations in the context of the principles of Catholic Social Teaching.

Special Education concerns the educational needs of students with 'a physical impairment, a learning disability, hearing or vision difficulties', or those students who 'struggle with learning, communication or getting along with others'¹. The Review concentrates on students between the ages of 5 and 21 who are considered to have high or very high special educational needs.

One critical consideration of the Review is the model of schooling for students with special educational needs. As a result, four options of school structure are outlined in the Discussion Document. These are now briefly summarised.

- Option A is the current system, which allows students with special needs to be enrolled either in a regular school or, with Ministry of Education approval, in a special school. Students who are assessed to have "highest level needs" receive Ongoing and Reviewable Resourcing Schemes (ORRS) funding, which allows for the provision of a teacher aide. In regular schools this aide is dedicated to the student for a specified number of hours per week, based on the perceived level of need. In the case of special schools, a teacher aide might be shared amongst two or three students for the duration of the school day. Of note is that teacher to student ratios are significantly lower at special schools. Also, interaction between the two school models is not uncommon; special schools often run satellite classes at regular schools and regular schools may offer special units.
- The two proposals referred to as options B and C in the Discussion Document essentially see the elimination of special schools in their present state. Option B removes special schools completely, with the intention of redirecting the resources and expertise of these schools to special units of the regular schools. Option C regards special schools as offsite

resource centres for providing expert assistance to regular schools. Under both of these options there would be no students enrolled in special schools or their satellites. The removal of special schools would obviously present considerable challenges for the three thousand students currently attending New Zealand's special schools, as well as their families, caregivers and other interested parties.

- Representing relatively minor change from the status quo is the framework described as Option D. Under this scenario, parents and caregivers would be entitled to enrol their children directly in a special school, that is, without the approval of the Ministry of Education. A possible implication of this option, however, is that special schools could expand, thereby requiring funding to be reallocated from other areas of the special education programme.

So, how can Catholic Social Teaching guide us in assessing the Church's stance on the Special Education Review and its proposed outcomes? This is the question which is addressed in the remainder of this work.

Christians, together with Jews and Muslims, believe that the human person is created in God's image. This precept then dictates that every human – however talented or impaired - has an inherent dignity and value and has an equal share in God's love and plan for salvation. For Christians, this belief is captured in Sacred Scriptures. St Peter, for example, comprehends this for us in a passage from the New Testament: "Peter began to speak: 'I now realise that it is true that God treats everyone on the same basis.'" (Acts 10:34). Being in God's image and likeness, all humans therefore have capacities for self-knowledge, cognitive function and social interaction². These capacities are developed and fulfilled through education.

¹ New Zealand Government (2010). Review of Special Education 2010 Discussion Document, p 6.

² Catechism of the Catholic Church. (1994). Homebush: St Pauls. Paragraphs 357, 1879.

Of course, it is not only the Church which regards education as a fundamental process in developing the 'whole' person. The Discussion Document notes that the Government is guided by the goal of every child reaching his or her potential through accessible and available education. This is enshrined in law in the Education Act 1989 and referred to in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which was ratified by this country's government in 2008.

It is apparent, then, that both Church and State value the role of education in personal formation and social cohesion, for all young people of all abilities. But Catholic Social Teaching explicitly points to the necessity of catering for those students with special needs.

Pope John Paul II emphasised the dignity of children with special needs and their rights by commenting that the concern for their welfare and respect "becomes all the more urgent the smaller the child is and the more it is in need of everything, when it is sick, suffering or handicapped"³. Students with special educational needs are therefore to be protected and have special consideration shown to them. In the context of this discussion, the ability to attend a special school or receive customised attention at a regular school are examples of the urgency of concern mentioned by Pope John Paul II. With reference to special schools, these can be seen as sanctuaries - environments where harassment and exclusion are likely to be less prevalent than in regular, mainstream schools. This viewpoint has been publicly expressed by students enrolled at special schools in recent submissions to ministerial committees.

More generally, one of the overarching principles of Catholic Social Teaching which speaks to the issue of special education is the principle of the common good. This principle originates from the dignity, unity and equality of all people. The common good indicates the social conditions under

which people, either as individuals or groups, reach their fulfilment more easily and more fully⁴.

Associated with the principle of the common good is the concept of a 'preferential option for the poor'. This option entails an examination of how personal and corporate acts impact upon the 'weakest' members of society. It asserts that the attainment of the common good is possible only if the poor, marginalised and vulnerable are shown particular concern. Surely, then, the provision for parents and caregivers to select special schools accords with this moral standard. This viewpoint is reinforced by the directive from Catholic Social Teaching that adults have the right to select the best available educational opportunities for their children and to cooperate with schools and public agencies to facilitate this outcome.



"...both Church and State value the role of education in personal formation and social cohesion, for all young people of all abilities"

The current year will probably see the beginning of any changes which flow from the Review of Special Education. Obviously the need for fiscal prudence is of significance to the Government, but important tenets of Catholic Social Teaching inform us that reforms to special schools and their services must be assessed very carefully to protect the rights of a group of society's most vulnerable citizens. Of course it is possible that these rights could be preserved and fostered under any of the four options outlined above, but it is imperative that the decision of which model is adopted be guided by pedagogical soundness and the welfare of students with special needs. It is to be hoped that these goals are not subjugated to purely financial considerations.

³ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation Familiaris Consortio, 26:AAS74 (1982), pp 111,112.

⁴ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, (2004). Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church. Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana. Paragraph 164.

⁵ Ibid, paragraphs 182 to 184.

⁶ Ibid, paragraphs 240, 241.

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DIGNITAS HUMANA

The name of the newsletter, which is Latin for the dignity of the person, expresses the cornerstone principle of Catholic Social Teaching: "the human person...is and ought to be the principle, the subject and the end of all social institutions."

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Previous issues of Dignitas Humana are available online:

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