

## *Principles Behind Catholic Social Teaching*

### **The Importance of the Human Person**

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) provides guidance on economic and social matters with a view to ensuring the common good. In this way, the Church strives to inspire right attitudes with regard to earthly goods and our relationships with one another.

CST often talks about the idea of the “dignity of the human person”. By taking a look at the Church’s understanding of the human person, we can quickly recognise why it is such an important part of the Church’s teaching on how we are to relate to other people.

In the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, we see that “the Church sees in men and women, in every person, the living image of God himself” (No.105). Given an immortal soul, the human person is *destined* for eternal happiness with God. Each and every one of us is called to conduct our lives in such a way as to be worthy of this lofty vocation. In Genesis, we read that “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27). God places the human person “at the centre and summit” of creation (Compendium, No 108), thus providing each person with a “built-in” relationship with God. Therefore, Genesis shows that only the human person has “a capacity for God” and at the same time relates how man and woman were created together, thus demonstrating the importance of communion with other persons.

Today many people see the human person as a completely autonomous being. However, this is a hopeless quest of ascribing the infinite to a finite being, a being which is subject to many limitations and obvious frailty. This is to lose sight of the unity between body and soul, a mistake that can lead to either a spiritualism that despises the body, or a materialism that closes

the eyes to the spirit (Compendium Nos 125-129).

### **What does this mean for Society?**

The Church teaches that we can only have a truly just society when it is based on the respect of the dignity of the human person. In this way, we are called to accept the equal dignity of all people, whether they are male or female, young or old, people with disabilities or those still growing inside their Mother’s womb.

Another upshot of the Church’s vision of the human person is that we should recognise that the social nature of all humans means that we live our vocation in life in relation to others. As a result of pride and selfishness, people can be inclined to close themselves within their own individuality and try to dominate their neighbours. However, every society worthy of the name can be sure that it stands in the truth when all of its members, thanks to their ability to know what is good, are able to pursue it for themselves *and for others* (Compendium, Nos. 149-51). In simple terms, we can call this ‘the gift of self’.

In this way, we are neither absolutely autonomous nor mere cogs in the wider mechanics of society; rather we must ‘tune’ ourselves to the voice of God which urges us to do what is good and avoid evil. This law makes itself heard in conscience and is fulfilled in the love of God and of neighbour (Catechism, para 1706). As Pope Paul VI once said, that in the Church, each one of us finds our “twofold destiny – personal and social – incomparably harmonised... [t]his destiny constitutes our call to perfection, demanding and always moving forward in time, so as to be one day, the day of eternity, a call to fullness and joy in the Lord.”

# *The Abortion Situation in New Zealand*

The abortion tragedy is unfortunately continuing and is increasingly being accepted as part of our culture. In 2006, 17,930 abortions were performed and we had the second highest rate of abortion in the OECD countries (Statistics NZ). The teaching of the Church is clear and consistent in speaking up on behalf of our unborn citizens. "Human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception. From the first moment of his existence, a human being must be recognised as having the rights of a person – among which is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, Para 2270).

Since the first century the Church has affirmed the moral evil of every procured abortion. This teaching has not changed and remains unchangeable. Direct abortion, that is to say, abortion willed as either an end or a means, is gravely contrary to moral law. The inalienable right to life of every innocent human individual is a constitutive element of a civil society and its legislation. The inalienable rights of the person must be recognised and respected by civil society and the political authority.

These human rights depend neither on single individuals nor on parents; nor do they represent a concession made by society or the state; they belong to human nature and are inherent in the person by virtue of the creative act from which the person took his origin. Among such fundamental rights in this regard is every human being's right to life and physical integrity from the moment of conception until death (Catechism, Para 2273). Some components of civil society and some people of influence lack the formation of conscience to make a stand on behalf of our unborn children. The recent position taken by Amnesty International supporting the decriminalization of abortion is such an example. The principle that we are not permitted to do evil that good may result seems to have been forgotten.

Pope John Paul II in his "Gospel of Life" (Evangelium Vitae, 58) writing about

abortion states: "But today, in many people's consciences, the perception of its gravity has become progressively obscured. The acceptance of abortion in the popular mind; in behaviour and even in law itself; is a telling sign of an extremely dangerous crisis of the moral sense, which is becoming more and more incapable of distinguishing between good and evil, even when the fundamental right to life is at stake.

Given such a grave situation, we need now more than ever the courage to look truth in the eye and to call things by their proper name, without yielding to convenient compromises or to the temptation to self-deception. In this regard the reproach of the Prophet is extremely straightforward: 'Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness' (Is 5: 20). Especially in the case of abortion there is widespread use of ambiguous terminology such as "interruption of pregnancy" which tends to hide abortion's true nature and to attenuate its seriousness in public opinion. Perhaps this linguistic phenomenon is itself a symptom of an uneasiness of conscience. But no word has the power to change the reality of things; procured abortion is the deliberate and direct killing of a human being in the initial phase of his or her existence, extending from conception to birth."

Steps are being made to help build a culture of life. Recently an organization has started in Christchurch called Adoption Option ([www.adoptionoption.org.nz](http://www.adoptionoption.org.nz)) which seeks to promote adoption as a positive option for women considering an abortion. Another positive local development has been the opening of the John Paul II Centre for Life in Bryndwr, Christchurch, which seeks to promote life, faith and family and offers help for women throughout pregnancy and beyond. We would do well to encourage these, and other like-minded agencies with our meaningful support.

# *Interfaith Dialogue*

## *The Inter-Faith Council*

The City of Christchurch has long been the home of adherents of most of the major faiths and its history is one in which this diversity has long been recognised. As far back as the early 1860's, Bishop Harper came to appreciate that Christchurch would not be a place where the Anglican Church would be transplanted but rather a place where different faiths interacted and cooperated in unity. Since that time the city has generally enjoyed a record of good communal relationships and it is only in recent times that the city has experienced racial and other tensions.

The first AGM of the Otautahi Christchurch Inter-Faith Council was held in 2007. The meeting was well attended and chaired by David Coles, the Anglican Bishop of Christchurch. The meeting began with an address by Professor Paul Morris, Professor of Religious Studies at the Victoria University, Wellington. Professor Morris was a key player in the statement on Religious Diversity produced in early 2007 with the assistance of the Human Rights Commission and endorsed by the Anglican/Catholic Bishops' Conference.

In his address, Professor Morris argued that the establishment of the Interfaith Council can help to dissipate tensions in the community. In Indonesia, for example, in areas where interfaith activity have been established, there has been a reduction in communal violence. But, says Professor Morris the real test of Interfaith Councils and groups is in crises, like '9/11' or the advent of suicide bombings. The aim, therefore, should be to build relationships that are robust and honest enough to weather the inevitable flash points and storms that occur. The importance of communities visiting each other's place of worship and attending each other's events cannot be overstated. The pressures generated by increased cultural, ethnic and religious diversity will rise. Interfaith activity is essential to manage this diversity and to

foster mutual supportive relationships. Interfaith Dialogue is never easy, and the difficulties cannot be overestimated. Good will is a good place to start but will never be enough. A willingness to be open to others, a recognition of the different ways of seeing the world and an extension of our own right to a religion precious to us, must be mutually accorded to those of different faiths.

Communities should visit each other's place of worship and attend each other's events. In this way community relationships are strengthened. Developing trust is always easier when the relationship is project driven. A wider community working together is both sensible and positive.

The Church's bond with non-Christian religions is based on the idea that we are a part of a universal human family. In the Catechism of the Catholic Church (para 842) we read that we all share a common destiny, namely God. Therefore, the Catholic Church recognises in other religions that search, among shadows and images, for the God who is unknown yet near since He gives life and breath and all things and wants all men to be saved. Thus, the Church considers all goodness and truth found in these religions as "a preparation for the Gospel and given by him who enlightens all men that they may at length have life."

The saving designs of God, His providence and evident goodness extend to all of mankind (Wis 8:1). The Church therefore, encourages us to enter into discussion with members of other religions but always in prudence and charity; and whilst authentically witnessing to our own faith and way of life we are encouraged to preserve and acknowledge the spiritual and moral truths of non-Christians together with their social life and customs.

# *Good News for Families in Easter Trading Announcement*

The recent announcement by the Minister of Labour that no changes will be made to Easter trading laws following the Department of Labour's recent review has been welcomed by many in the community, including Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand, the Catholic agency for justice, peace and development.

Caritas had previously told the Department of Labour during the review process that "Easter must be maintained as one of the few remaining communal moments of rest in our society." Caritas Director Mr Michael Smith said that while Easter is one of the most sacred days of the year for Christians, it is also one of the few remaining collective days off for most New Zealanders.

The social landscape in New Zealand has changed, and changed rapidly. Many New Zealanders can recall a time when weekends and holidays were set apart for relaxation, leisure, family time and spiritual edification. This lifestyle placed importance on the social and cultural welfare of the people. We have witnessed a relatively speedy descent into a materialistic culture which gives pride of place to rampant commercialism.

Who are the losers in this changing landscape? One example of an affected group is young people. Young people undertake the majority of the work in the service industries. Many of these jobs are conditional upon the applicant's availability to work weekends. In addition to being subjected to unreasonable pressure to accept conditions which may not be in their best

interests, they are put in a vulnerable position at the very beginning of their working lives.

Traditionally, the weekend and especially holiday weekends have been an opportunity for families to gather together and perhaps find time for rest and recreation. However, figures recently released by the International Labour Organisation show that on average, New Zealanders work longer hours than workers in many other comparable developed countries. Within the community at large, sporting bodies struggle to appoint coaches and administrators, at all levels. Voluntary organizations, the life blood of the community, have great difficulty attracting members to continue vital support services. Contrary to what technological progress initially promised, people are now working longer hours than before. Clearly this does not assist the development of healthy family life. Are those who demand 24 hour a day, seven days a week shopping mindful that their freedom to do so is at the expense of those who serve?

In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, we read that the Sabbath "brings everyday work to a halt and provides a respite. It is a day of protest against the servitude of work and the worship of money" (para 2172). The Catechism goes on to say that "in respecting religious liberty and the common good of all, Christians should seek recognition of Sundays and the Church's holy days as legal holidays. They have to give everyone a public example of prayer, respect, and joy and defend their traditions as a precious contribution to the spiritual life of society."

## **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."*

*No 1881, Catechism of the Catholic Church*