

# PRINCIPLES, VALUES, VIRTUES AND SINS OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT

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## 1. Introduction

The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*<sup>1</sup> sets out a comprehensive framework for participation by Catholics in the life of the world, both as individuals and as the Church, based on the Gospels and other sources. This includes voting and political participation as well as broader participation in civic life.

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<sup>1</sup> Published by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace; available through Novalis, Amazon, and other sources, also free online at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/justpeace/documents/](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/www.CatholicConscience.org)  
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An over-riding concept is proper stewardship, which Christ taught us to practice both as individuals and as societies.<sup>2</sup> His parable of the talents and comments on the judgment of nations are fundamental.

Our Catechism, the Popes and their teachings, and our Bishops also provide guidance.

Within the over-riding contexts of wisdom, charity, prudence and proper stewardship, the *Compendium* sets out four permanent principles and four fundamental values for social life. Both tradition and the *Compendium* supplement these principles and values with broader Christian virtues and the concept of social sin.

As members of Catholic Conscience, we should be familiar with each of these concepts, and strive constantly to put them into practice in our personal and civic lives. This means that we should always consider at least the following issues while making voting choices and other public decisions.

## 2. The Permanent Principles of Catholic Social Teaching

The *Compendium* speaks in terms of four permanent principles and four fundamental values. The **permanent principles** are:

- The Life & Dignity of the Human Person
- The Common Good
- Subsidiarity
- Solidarity

### a. The Life & Dignity of the Human Person

The dignity of the human individual derives from the source and nature of this life, and our primary universal mission within it: to seek truth, which for Catholics is God, and to grow more like God by attempting to grow closer to Him.

If this is our life's work, and if it is everyone else's life work also, then it follows that we can neither take part nor acquiesce, in any action which might hinder it, either as individuals or society.

Ergo, the dignity of the human person intimately involves questions of:

- The sanctity of human life, from conception to natural death - God made us, God still owns us. It is not for us to decide when we, or others, will die.
- Human rights & duties arise immediately from the dignity God has granted every human being. We are all made in His likeness. "The ultimate source of human rights is not found in the mere will of human beings, in the reality of the State, in public powers, but in man himself and in God his Creator." *Compendium* [153] With rights come corresponding

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Matthew 25:14-46

duties: to love God, and to love one another as God has loved us.

- Dignity of work: it requires effort for human beings to survive on this planet. It is incumbent on each of us to do what we can, first to care for ourselves, and then to help others who are in need. In doing so we grow closer to God: we increase our dignity. *Compendium* [270]

It is incumbent on society to ensure that all are encouraged to practice good stewardship and charity by working, and that opportunities for adequately-compensated, rewarding work are available to individuals who are willing to work.

#### **b. The Common Good**

The “common good” means “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily.” *Compendium* [164] “...These demands concern above all the commitment to peace, the organization of the State's powers, a sound juridical system, the protection of the environment, and the provision of essential services to all, some of which are at the same time human rights: food, housing, work, education and access to culture, transportation, basic health care, the freedom of communication and expression, and the protection of religious freedom. Nor must one forget the contribution that every nation is required in duty to make towards a true worldwide cooperation for the common good of the whole of humanity and for future generations also. *Compendium* [166]

“The common good of society is not an end in itself; it has value only in reference to attaining the ultimate ends of the person and the universal common good of the whole of creation. God is the ultimate end of his creatures and for no reason may the common good be deprived of its transcendent dimension, which moves beyond the historical dimension while at the same time fulfilling it. *Compendium* [170].

Fulfilment results from growing closer to God. Society must do nothing to interfere with the ability of individuals to seek God.

Examples of issues touching the common good include:

- Care for the environment & environmental sustainability – to unjustly interfere with the rights of others, now living or in future generations, to use and benefit from nature’s bounty, necessarily hinders their right to make choices in seeking the Creator. Carried far enough, such behavior threatens the survival of others. We must work to ensure that we leave others the same opportunities that were given to us.
- Economic justice & sustainability – “God destined the earth and all it contains for all men and all peoples so that all created things would be shared fairly by all mankind under the guidance of justice tempered by charity... the original source of all that is good is the very act of God, who created both the earth and man, and who gave the earth to man so that he might have dominion over it by his work and enjoy its fruits. God gave the earth to the

whole human race for the sustenance of all its members, without excluding or favoring anyone.” *Compendium* [171]

- Commitment to peace – war, violence, and aggression interfere with the rights of people to seek God in their own way. We must encourage each other, individually and through our governments, to emphasize peacekeeping, peace building, the peaceful resolution of conflict, safety, and defense, rather than aggression and violence.

“A war of aggression is intrinsically immoral... To be licit, the use of force must correspond to certain strict conditions: the damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or community of nations must be lasting, grave and certain; all other means of putting an end to it must have been shown to be impractical or ineffective; there must be serious prospects of success; the use of arms must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated. The power of modern means of destruction weighs very heavily in evaluating this condition... If this responsibility justifies the possession of sufficient means to exercise this right to defense, States still have the obligation to do everything possible “to ensure that the conditions of peace exist, not only within their own territory but throughout the world.” *Compendium* [500]

- Citizenship and participation in society - It is up to each of God’s children to use the gifts God has given us, including our social nature, to enhance our dignity by seeking to grow closer to God. To those living in democracies or other forms of participative society this carries a duty to use our voices not solely to benefit ourselves, but with due consideration of the needs and the good of others.

“Participation in community life is not only one of the greatest aspirations of the citizen, called to exercise freely and responsibly his civic role with and for others, but is also one of the pillars of all democratic orders and one of the major guarantees of the permanence of the democratic system. Democratic government, in fact, is defined first of all by the assignment of powers and functions on the part of the people, exercised in their name, in their regard and on their behalf. It is therefore clearly evident that every democracy must be participative. This means that the different subjects of civil community at every level must be informed, listened to and involved in the exercise of the carried-out functions.” *Compendium* [190]

- c. Subsidiarity: Things should be done, and decided, in such ways as to ensure that individuals are empowered to make their own decisions, wherever possible**

“It is impossible to promote the dignity of the person without showing concern for the family, groups, associations, local territorial realities; in short, for that aggregate of economic, social, cultural, sports-oriented, recreational, professional and political expressions to which people spontaneously give life and which make it possible for them to achieve effective social growth.”

“Subsidiarity is among the most constant and characteristic directives of the Church's social doctrine and has been present since the first great social encyclical.” *Compendium* [185]

Corporations, governments, and other organizations should not be larger than is necessary to accomplish their legitimate purpose; and decisions should be pushed as far down to lower levels as possible, so as to enable individuals and small groups to apply their gifts to the search for God.

- International organizations should not make decisions that can responsibly be left to national governments.
- National governments should not make decisions that can responsibly be left to provincial or local governments.
- Governments should not take on work that can be responsibly done by private individuals and organizations – this deprives individuals and organizations of opportunities to practice charity and the dignity of work.
- Governments should not decide things for individuals or organizations that can responsibly be left to decide them for themselves.

#### **d. Solidarity: Interdependence between peoples and societies**

Solidarity consists in acknowledgement that all humans are interdependent: we are dependent upon one another. We are all unique members of the one body of Christ.

Solidarity is an authentic moral virtue, not a “feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is 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.” *Compendium* [193]

“Solidarity must be seen above all in its value as a moral virtue that determines the order of institutions. On the basis of this principle the “structures of sin” [i.e., social sins – see below] that dominate relationships between individuals and peoples must be overcome. They must be purified and transformed into structures of solidarity through the creation or appropriate modification of laws, market regulations, and juridical systems.” *Compendium* [193]

- Migration

“The problem of refugees [and other migrants] must be confronted at its roots, that is, at the level of the very causes of exile. The first point of reference should not be the interests of the State, or national security but the human person, so that the need to live in community, a basic requirement of the very nature of human beings, will be safeguarded.

“Progress in the capacity to live together within the universal human family is closely linked to the growth of a mentality of hospitality. Any person in danger who appears at a frontier

has a right to protection. In order to make it easier to determine why such people have abandoned their country, as well as to adopt lasting solutions, a renewed commitment is needed to produce internationally acceptable norms for territorial asylum.”<sup>3</sup>

- Divisiveness
- Oppression and economic exploitation; slavery and human trafficking
- Citizenship and participation in society

### 3. The Fundamental Values of Catholic Social Teaching

The *Compendium* speaks in terms of four permanent principles and four fundamental values. The **fundamental values** are:

- Truth
- Freedom
- Justice
- Love (Charity)

#### a. Truth

“Men and women have the specific duty to move always towards the truth, to respect it and bear responsible witness to it. Living in the truth has special significance in social relationships. In fact, when the coexistence of human beings within a community is founded on truth, it is ordered and fruitful, and it corresponds to their dignity as persons.” *Compendium* [198]

“Modern times call for an intensive educational effort and a corresponding commitment on the part of all so that the quest for truth cannot be ascribed to the sum of different opinions, nor to one or another of these opinions.” *Compendium* [198]

#### b. Freedom

“Freedom is the highest sign in man of his being made in the divine image and, consequently, is a sign of the sublime dignity of every human person... Every human person, created in the image of God, has the natural right to be recognized as a free and responsible being. All owe to each other this duty of respect. The right to the exercise of freedom, especially in moral and religious matters, is an inalienable requirement of the dignity of the human person.” *Compendium* [199]

#### c. Justice

“According to its most classic formulation, justice consists in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbor... The Church's social Magisterium constantly calls for the most classical

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<sup>3</sup> Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, “Refugees: A Challenge to Solidarity.”

forms of justice to be respected: commutative, distributive and legal justice. Ever greater importance has been given to social justice, which represents a real development in general justice, the justice that regulates social relationships according to the criterion of observance of the law.” *Compendium* [201]

#### **d. Love**

“Among the virtues... there exists a deep bond that must be ever more fully recognized. Love, often restricted to relationships of physical closeness or limited to merely subjective aspects of action on behalf of others, must be reconsidered in its authentic value as the highest and universal criterion of the whole of social ethics... It is from the inner wellspring of love that the values of truth, freedom and justice are born and grow. Human life in society is ordered, bears fruits of goodness and responds to human dignity when it is founded on truth; when it is lived in justice, that is, in the effective respect of rights and in the faithful carrying out of corresponding duties; when it is animated by selflessness, which makes the needs and requirements of others seem as one's own and intensifies the communion of spiritual values and the concern for material necessities; when it is brought about in the freedom that befits the dignity of men and women, prompted by their rational nature to accept responsibility for their actions. These values constitute the pillars which give strength and consistency to the edifice of life and deeds: they are values that determine the quality of every social action and institution.” *Compendium* [204, 205]

Love presupposes and transcends justice, which “must find its fulfilment in charity.” *Compendium* [206]

## **4. Christian Social Virtues**

The social doctrine of the Church is informed by tradition and the Gospels, which provide virtues that apply to social as well as personal actions. These virtues include:

- Prudence
- Proper Stewardship
- Humility
- Wisdom

#### **a. Prudence**

Prudence enables discernment of the true good in every circumstance, and selection of the right means for achieving it. “We can identify three distinct moments as prudence is exercised to clarify and evaluate situations, to inspire decisions and to prompt action. The first moment is seen in the reflection and consultation by which the question is studied and the necessary opinions sought. The second moment is that of evaluation, as the reality is analyzed and judged in the light of God's plan. The third moment, that of decision, is based on the preceding steps and makes it possible to choose between the different actions that may be taken.” *Compendium* [547]

“Prudence makes it possible to make decisions that are consistent, and to make them with realism and a sense of responsibility for the consequences of one's action. The rather widespread opinion that equates prudence with shrewdness, with utilitarian calculations, with diffidence or with timidity or indecision, is far from the correct understanding of this virtue. It is a characteristic of practical reason and offers assistance in deciding with wisdom and courage the course of action that should be followed, becoming the measure of the other virtues. Prudence affirms the good as a duty and shows in what manner the person should accomplish it. In the final analysis, it is a virtue that requires the mature exercise of thought and responsibility in an objective understanding of a specific situation and in making decisions according to a correct will.” *Compendium* [548]

“The Church's social doctrine must become an integral part of the ongoing formation of the lay faithful.” *Compendium* [549]

### **b. Proper Stewardship**

Prudence teaches us that our first task in life is to seek the truth of what this life is all about. For Catholics, that leads directly to God, who created us, and to a search for God's intentions for us.

In Chapter 25 of the Gospel of Matthew, Christ explained to us that God, the creator, is still the owner of creation. We are simply his stewards, and are meant to use the many gifts God has entrusted to us for God's purposes. This includes each of the gifts God has given us in common, in addition to the various levels of intelligence, ability, health, longevity, and wealth that have been entrusted to us individually. We are meant to use all of these gifts for God's purposes.

In Chapter 22 of the Gospel of Matthew, Christ taught us that God's expectations are that we will each love God with all our heart, all our mind, and all our soul; and that we will do that best by looking after one another, and enabling each other to put our gifts to work for God.

Finally, in Chapter 25 of Matthew, Christ sternly warned us that we will be judged, as nations, on the basis of the care that we have offered to one another.

Both individually and socially, human beings have a deep duty of proper stewardship.

### **c. Humility**

St. Thomas Aquinas defines humility as “consisting in keeping oneself within one's own bounds, not reaching out to things above one, but submitting to one's superior.” *Summa Contra Gent.*, bk. IV, ch. Lv.

In his message for the 52<sup>nd</sup> World Day of Peace on January 1, 2019, Pope Francis noted that “Jesus tells us that, ‘if anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all’ (Mk 9:35). In the words of Pope Paul VI, ‘to take politics seriously at its different levels – local, regional, national and worldwide – is to affirm the duty of each individual to acknowledge the reality and value of the freedom offered him to work at one and the same time for the good of the city, the nation and all mankind’.”

#### d. Wisdom

The Church proclaims that Christ, the conqueror of death, reigns over the universe that he himself has redeemed. His kingdom includes even the present times and will end only when everything is handed over to the Father and human history is brought to completion in the final judgment. (cf. 1 Cor 15:20-28).

Christ reveals to human authority, always tempted by the desire to dominate, its authentic and complete meaning as service. God is the one Father, and Christ the one Teacher, of all mankind, and all people are brothers and sisters. Sovereignty belongs to God. The Lord, however, “has not willed to reserve to himself all exercise of power. He entrusts to every creature the functions it is capable of performing, according to the capacities of its own nature. This mode of governance ought to be followed in social life.

“The way God acts in governing the world, which bears witness to such great regard for human freedom, should inspire the wisdom of those who govern human communities. They should behave as ministers of divine providence.” *Compendium* [383]

#### e. Beatitudes of the Politician

In his message for the 52<sup>nd</sup> World Day of Peace on January 1, 2019, Pope Francis recalled us to the *Beatitudes of the Politician* proposed by Vietnamese Cardinal Cardinal François-Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuận:

- Blessed be the politician with a lofty sense and deep understanding of his role.
- Blessed be the politician who personally exemplifies credibility.
- Blessed be the politician who works for the common good and not his or her own interest.
- Blessed be the politician who remains consistent.
- Blessed be the politician who works for unity.
- Blessed be the politician who works to accomplish radical change.
- Blessed be the politician who is capable of listening.
- Blessed be the politician who is without fear.

## 5. The Concept of Social Sin

The principles, values, and virtues taught by the Church consist in relatively broad, positive, general exhortations to seek and do good. In keeping with the requirements of subsidiarity, the Church acknowledges and encourages the desirability of public debate concerning the manner in which its teachings should be applied.

The Church also recognizes, however, that even within the confines of proper debate and diversity in application of its principles, there exist limits on what can legitimately be considered proper moral behavior. Accordingly the Church acknowledges the concept of social, or “structural” sin.

“...[W]e can speak of personal and social sin. Every sin is personal under a certain aspect; under another, every sin is social, insofar as and because it also has social consequences... taking into

account the fact that ‘by virtue of human solidarity which is as mysterious and intangible as it is real and concrete, each individual's sin in some way affects others.’” *Compendium* [117]

“It is not, however, legitimate or acceptable to understand social sin... [as cancelling] the personal component by admitting only social guilt and responsibility. At the bottom of every situation of sin there is always the individual who sins.” *Compendium* [117]

The concept of social sin has deep roots in the Gospel. Christ indicated very clearly at Matthew 25:31-46 that nations will be judged on the manner in which they have treated the weakest, poorest, and most abused.

Social sin includes “every sin against the rights of the human person, starting with the right to life, including that of life in the womb, and every sin against the physical integrity of the individual; every sin against the freedom of others, especially against the supreme freedom to believe in God and worship him; and every sin against the dignity and honor of one's neighbor. Every sin against the common good and its demands, in the whole broad area of rights and duties of citizens, is also social sin.” *Compendium* [118]

“Actions and attitudes opposed to the will of God and the good of neighbor, as well as the structures arising from such behavior, appear to fall into two categories today: on the one hand, the all-consuming desire for profit, and on the other, the thirst for power, with the intention of imposing one's will upon others. In order to characterize better each of these attitudes, one can add the expression: ‘at any price.’” *Compendium* [119]

### **Seven Social Sins**

The concept of a grouping of seven social sins, as a complement to the traditional seven deadly sins of the individual, originated in a sermon delivered by Canon Frederick Donaldson of Westminster Abbey in 1925. Canon Donaldson's listing was adapted by Mohandas Gandhi in the struggle for Indian independence.

In 2008, Bishop Gianfranco Girotti, the Apostolic Penitentiary of the Vatican, provided a modified list.

The following listing was created by Catholic Conscience, with reference to the earlier listings of Canon Donaldson and Bishop Girotti, and with special reference to the *Compendium*:

1. Politics of fear, hate, or exclusion:
  - Government by fear, division, or abuse.
  - Derogation of conscience rights.
  - Interference with free, responsible speech.
  - Military or police aggression.
  - Disrespect of future generations through the creation of non-sustainable social, economic, or legal structures.
2. Misuse of Creation:
  - Abuse of the environment.

3. Society without love:
  - Religion of hate, fear, or exclusion
  - Indifference to others
4. Acquisition or retention of unjust wealth:
  - Promoting poverty.
  - Contributing to unjust distribution of social produce; increasing the gap between rich and poor.
  - Accumulation of unnecessary wealth.
5. Commerce or industry without morality:
  - Creation and exploitation of false needs, promotion of unsustainable consumption.
  - Exploitation of workers, or by workers.
  - Interference with dignified work, e.g., unnecessary automation.
6. Science without humanity, e.g.:
  - Interference with life between conception and natural death.
  - Creation, possession, or use of weapons biological weapons, or weapons of aggression or of mass destruction.
7. Exploitation of ignorance; acquiescence in ignorance:
  - Unprincipled education.
  - Promotion of entertainment without conscience, e.g.,
    - i. Substance abuse.
    - ii. Salacious media.
  - Promotion of vanity and self-centeredness.
  - Misuse of news, irresponsible journalism.