

Article

The principles of Catholic social teaching: A guide for decision making from daily clinical encounters to national policy- making

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Catholic social teaching (CST), a branch of moral theology, addresses contemporary issues within the political, economic, and cultural structures of society. The threefold cornerstone of CST contains the principles of human dignity, solidarity, and subsidiarity. It is the foundation on which to form our conscience in order to evaluate the framework of society and is the Catholic criteria for prudential judgment and direction in developing current policy-making. With knowledge of these social principles, in combination with our faith, we will be more armed and informed as to articulate the Catholic vision of reality, the truthful nature of the human person and society, to apply and integrate the social teachings in our everyday administrative and clinical encounters, and through the virtue of charity take action within the social, political, and economic spheres in which we have influence.

Summary: The Church's social encyclicals are a reflection upon the issues of the day using the light of faith and reason. They offer commentary on the ways to evaluate and address particular social problems—also using natural law principles—in the areas of politics, economics, and culture. Quotes were selected from the encyclicals that define and expand upon the primary principles for the purpose of representing them for study, reflection, and use in everyday personal and business encounters and decision making for healthcare professionals.

Keywords: Catholic social teaching, Principles, Human dignity, Solidarity, Subsidiarity, Common good, Charity, Justice

INTRODUCTION

Catholic social teaching (CST) has a long and rich story. It is both old, in that it presents timeless values within the Church's two thousand years of history, and new, as it constantly reflects on the world around us—as it is.

The Church has done much reflection on macro social issues, i.e., what form of government and economic system is best for promoting human freedom; why must

faith be part of the public square; what are the pathologies destroying our culture and how to address them; how should business provide for the dignity of work; what are the dangers of a “welfare state”; among many other vexing issues facing modern societies.

In administrative, clinical, or research roles, the Church calls us, as Catholics, to apply the social teachings to the extensive and complex issues within all the levels of the healthcare system, such as financing

and delivery of health care through public and/or private institutions, where to focus research dollars, conscience rights, type of care offered, patient rights, and the issues of healthcare mandates.

A Catholic framework

With knowledge of these social principles, in combination with our faith, we can offer a Catholic vision of reality as the foundation and criteria for decision making in confronting the issues, for, we, as the laity, are called into the public square. Moreover in integrating our professional and personal lives, our faith becomes fully alive in helping to bring the Kingdom of God here and now, though not yet, through utilizing these principles in our spheres of influence.

Pope Saint John Paul II saw a great need for lay leaders to know and form their consciences on the tenets of the Church's social doctrine principles (CAPP n.d.). He created, in 1993, Fondazione Centesimus Annus Pro Pontifice (CAPP), a foundation for such study.¹ In a moving letter presented to the members of the foundation just four months before his death, he stated that the Church's social doctrine seems to be "more often cited than understood". He lamented what he called its "instrumental" use by groups promoting their own agenda and called for CST to be presented in a "precise, clear and comprehensive way" (John Paul II 2004).

It is by this standard that this article was prepared from the encyclicals and other materials collected over the years by the USA members of CAPP, for personal study and for sharing with other business professionals.

issues within the social structures of society: political, economic, and cultural. It proposes a set of principles on which to form one's conscience in order to evaluate the framework of society and as the criteria for prudential judgment in decision making.

It offers a structural way of reflecting and discerning, rooted in the Gospel and natural law. "Catholic social teaching seeks to apply the essence of Christian moral principles to life in society. It is not an economic or political programme," Cardinal Nichols writes, "but it offers a powerful way of thinking about what the common good requires, and how structures in society can promote or undermine human well-being and the requirements of justice" (Nichols 2014).

CST "is a service to the truth that sets us free. Open to the truth from whichever branch of knowledge it comes, the Church's social doctrine receives it," Pope Benedict writes, "assembles into a unity the fragments in which it is often found and mediates it within the constantly changing life patterns of the society of peoples and nations" (Benedict XVI 2009, no. 9). It addresses the political, economic, and cultural issues of the day through the light of the gospel, its aim "is simply to help purify reason and to contribute, here and now, to the acknowledgement and attainment of what is just" (Benedict XVI 2005b, no. 28).

Father Bill Ryan, SJ, offered a useful definition of CST which we have slightly modified. CST contains a set of *principles* on which to *form our conscience* in order to *evaluate* the framework of society and provide criteria for prudential judgment and direction for current policy-making and *action* (Ryan 2000).

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

Catholic social teaching is a branch of moral theology addressing contemporary

THE THREEFOLD CORNERSTONE

Of the three fundamental principles, the greatest, the Church insists, is human

dignity, the prime principle. Pope John Paul II proclaimed: “Her moral vision in this area ‘rests on *the threefold cornerstone of human dignity, solidarity and subsidiarity*’... which aims to encourage governments, institutions and private organizations to shape a future consonant with the dignity of every person” (John Paul 1999, no. 55).

In examining the interrelationships between the threefold cornerstone principle of CST and the principle of the common good, Pope Benedict offers us a concise and clear definition of each when he stated:

- “*Human dignity* is the intrinsic value of a person created in the image and likeness of God and redeemed by Christ”
- “*Solidarity* refers to the virtue enabling the human family to share fully the treasure of material and spiritual goods”
- “*Subsidiarity* is the coordination of society’s activities in a way that supports the internal life of the local communities”
- The *common good* is “the totality of social conditions allowing persons to achieve their communal and individual fulfillment” (Benedict XVI 2008).

THE GUIDING PRINCIPLE

In *Centesimus annus*, Pope John Paul II declared,

The guiding principle of Pope Leo’s encyclical, and of all of the Church’s social doctrine, is a correct view of the human person and of his unique value, inasmuch as ‘man ... is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself. God has imprinted his own image and likeness on man (cf. Gen 1:26), conferring upon him an incomparable dignity. (John Paul II 1991, no. 11)

THE PRIME PRINCIPLE: HUMAN DIGNITY

“As one created in the image of God, each individual human being has the dignity of

a person; he or she is not just something but someone, free, self-giving and entering into communion with others,” Pope Benedict writes (Benedict XVI 2006c, no. 2).

The Incarnation reveals to us, with intense light and in a surprising way, that every human life has a very lofty and incomparable dignity. In comparison with all the other living beings that populate the earth, man has an unmistakable originality (Benedict XVI 2010b).

Every level of the American juridical system, be it the states’ court systems or federal court system, which is called to interpret and apply the laws, must recognize human dignity first and foremost as the most fundamental right for justice to be served. Benedict stated, “The recognition of human dignity as an inalienable right is founded primarily on this law, which is not written by a human hand but is engraved in human hearts by God the Creator” (Benedict XVI 2010a). Moreover,

This dignity, understood as a capacity to transcend one’s own materiality and to seek truth, must be acknowledged as a universal *good*, indispensable for the building of a society directed to human fulfillment. Respect for essential elements of human dignity ... is a condition for the moral legitimacy of every social and legal norm. (Benedict XVI 2010c, no. 2)

He also stated, “The value of human dignity...takes precedence over all political decision making” (Benedict XVI 2006a). And,

Every juridical order is required to recognize this law as inviolable and every individual is called to respect and promote it ... Without the founding principle of human dignity the search for a source for the rights of the person would be arduous, and it would be impossible to reach an ethical judgment on the scientific breakthroughs that intervene directly in human life. (Benedict XVI 2010a)

Moreover John Paul II writes, “No one can take away this human right...the right to discharge freely one’s religious duties” which not even the majority of a democratic political body can take away, because this dignity does not arise from the state or the will of the governed (John Paul II 1991, no. 9). This concept is the core of CST going back to its earliest articulation by Pope Leo XIII in 1891 when he wrote, in *Rerum novarum*, that the State is bound to protect natural rights, not to destroy them (Leo XIII 1891).

In *Centesimus annus*, Pope John Paul II writes “Among the most important of these rights, mention must be made of:

- the right to life, an integral part of which is the right of the child to develop in the mother’s womb from the moment of conception;
- the right to live in a united family and in a moral environment conducive to the growth of the child’s personality;
- the right to develop one’s intelligence and freedom in seeking and knowing the truth;
- the right to share in the work which makes wise use of the earth’s material resources, and to derive from that work the means to support oneself and one’s dependents; and
- the right freely to establish a family, to have and to rear children through the responsible exercise of one’s sexuality.

In a certain sense, the source and synthesis of these rights is religious freedom, understood as the right to live in the truth of one’s faith and in conformity with one’s transcendent dignity as a person” (John Paul II 1991, 47).

A PROFOUND HUMAN CRISIS

We should be under no illusion, for there exist today two, irreconcilable mindsets Pope Benedict preached: one “maintains

that human life is in human hands, whereas the other recognizes that it is in God’s hands” (Benedict XVI 2006b).

In *Evangelii gaudium*, Pope Francis writes on the financial crisis, stating that it originated from a “profound human crisis: the denial of the primacy of the human person!” (Francis 2013c, no. 55). In speaking about its effect on food prices, he stated,

This crisis will not be completely over until situations and living conditions are examined in terms of the human person and human dignity...Our duty is to continue to insist...that the human person and human dignity are not simply catchwords, but pillars for creating shared rules and structures. (Francis 2013a, 2)

Today, we live in a culture where atheistic ideology is rampant. The full effects are yet to be seen. As Benedict wrote, “without a Creator there can be no creature” (Benedict XVI 2006b). Without God, we are in line to lose our very identity. He stated, The weakening of the primacy of the human being brings existential bewilderment and a loss of the meaning of life. For a vision of the human person and of things without a reference to transcendence uproots man from the earth and fundamentally impoverishes his very identity (Benedict XVI 2011).

PRIMACY OF THE HUMAN PERSON IN HEALTH CARE

While it is up to all the lay faithful to demonstrate concretely the fundamental principles of the social doctrine of the Church, the nature of a vocation in health care calls one in a more direct way in confronting the duty to protect life and promote human dignity, and to reform and form our culture toward a civilization of love.

From patient care issues as diverse as end-of-life care, genetic testing, use of

embryonic stem cells, coordination of care, waste in healthcare spending, the healthcare professional is the closest to these issues to inform others of the principles of CST as it relates to life and health.

The issue of conscience rights falls under religious freedom and is a basic human right which serves one's inalienable dignity, and it needs to be protected. Yet without such protection, providers will not be as effective in addressing patient care issues.

THE PRINCIPLE OF SOLIDARITY

Solidarity is fundamental to the Christian view of social and political organizations, and is the fabric for all authentic relationships. Pope St. John Paul II wrote,

This principle is frequently stated by Pope Leo XIII, who uses the term "*friendship*", a concept already found in Greek philosophy. Pope Pius XI refers to it with the equally meaningful term "*social charity*". Pope Paul VI, expanding the concept to cover the many modern aspects of the social question, speaks of a "*civilization of love*." (John Paul II 1991, no. 10)

The practice of solidarity is a necessary component of our faith. As Pope Benedict writes, "Love of neighbor...consists in the very fact that, in God and with God, I love even the person whom I do not like or even know. This can only take place on the basis of an intimate encounter with God, an encounter which has become a communion of will, even affecting my feelings" and "that closing our eyes to our neighbour also blinds us to God." (Benedict XVI 2005b, nos. 18, 16).

"Seeing with the eyes of Christ, I can give to others much more than their outward necessities; I can give them the look of love which they crave," Benedict continues,

Only my readiness to encounter my neighbour and to show him love makes

me sensitive to God as well...Love is "divine" because it comes from God and unites us to God; through this unifying process it makes us a "we" which transcends our divisions and makes us one, until in the end God is "all in all" (1 Cor 15:28). (Benedict XVI 2005b, no. 18)

Solidarity and the common good

In *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, Pope John Paul II wrote that solidarity is not "a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of others. It is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good" (John Paul II 1987, no. 38). It implies a dedication to the poor and disadvantaged through individual actions and collective initiatives to make social, political, and economic structures more just and fraternal.

As Pope Francis declared in several of his messages, "We cannot believe in God the Father without seeing a brother or sister in every person, and we cannot follow Jesus without giving our lives for those for whom he died on the cross" (Francis 2015b). "I distrust a charity that costs nothing and does not hurt" (Francis 2013e, no. 2). "This word *solidarity* runs the risk of being deleted from the dictionary because it is a word that bothers us. It bothers us, why? Because it requires you to look at another and give yourself to another with love" (Francis 2013b, no. 1).

The true measure of our humanity

In *Spe salvi* Benedict wrote, "The true measure of humanity is essentially determined in relationship to suffering and to the sufferer...Truth and justice must stand above my comfort and physical well-being or else my life itself becomes a lie" (Benedict 2007, no. 38).

To suffer with the other and for others; to suffer for the sake of truth and justice; to suffer out of love and in order to become a person who truly loves—these are fundamental elements of humanity, and to abandon them would destroy man himself. (Benedict XVI 2007, no. 39)

“What is needed is the willingness to ‘lose ourselves’ for the sake of others,” Pope Francis said of solidarity (Francis 2013d, no. 4). It must be personal for, “Without faces and stories, human lives become statistics, and we run the risk of bureaucratizing the sufferings of others. Bureaucracies shuffle papers; compassion (not pity, but com-*passion*, suffering with) deals with people” and must focus on “real people who are suffering and starving” (Francis 2016).

Thus the practice of solidarity “entails weaving a fabric of fraternal relationships marked by reciprocity, forgiveness and complete self-giving, according to the breadth and the depth of the love of God offered to humanity in the One who, crucified and risen, draws all to himself” (Francis 2013d, no. 10).

“True solidarity—though it begins with an acknowledgment of the equal worth of the other—comes to fulfillment only when I willingly place my life at the service of others,” Benedict stated (Benedict XVI, 2008).

SOLIDARITY WITHIN HEALTH CARE

At the most basic level, solidarity identifies how each person and patient should be encountered: each is deserving of particular attention and consideration, Francis wrote that it “requires you to look at another and to give yourself to another with love” (Francis 2013b). Benedict tells us we are to encounter even those “whom I do not like or even know” (Benedict XVI 2005b, no. 18).

Understanding the Church’s view of solidarity helps us transcend cultural,

political, social, and geographic differences to embrace the other as thyself. Every decision we make, from the initial clinical encounter to the administrative policy-making, is an opportunity to practice the virtue of solidarity in our call to holiness.

THE PRINCIPLE OF SUBSIDIARITY

Subsidiarity is a prescriptive principle in that it informs us how decision making should be delegated among social groups—in order to allow for authentic freedom and human dignity. This principle lies at the heart of a stable social order by fostering the personal responsibility that naturally accompanies individual liberty—ensuring that personal interest is not placed in opposition to societal interests—and by seeking to bring individual desires and the demands of the common good into fruitful harmony.

Pope Pius XI wrote that subsidiarity is a

most weighty principle, which cannot be set aside or changed, remains fixed and unshaken in social philosophy: 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. (Pius XI 1931, no. 79)

Responsibility, freedom, and dignity

Pope Benedict writes, “Subsidiarity is always designed to achieve...emancipation because it fosters freedom and participation through assumption of responsibility” (Benedict XVI 2009, no. 57).

Pope Francis declared, “in full respect for that freedom, civil society is called to help each person and social organization

to take up its specific role and thus contribute to the common good” and it is “in the family, we find the basic values of love, fraternity and mutual respect, which translate into essential values for society as a whole: gratuitousness, solidarity and subsidiarity” (Francis 2015a).

Pope Benedict writes, subsidiarity even

manifests a ‘vertical’ dimension pointing towards the Creator of the social order. A society that honors the principle of subsidiarity liberates people...granting them the freedom to engage with one another in the spheres of commerce, politics and culture...they leave space for individual responsibility and initiative, but most importantly, they leave space for love.

“Undoubtedly,” he adds, “the principle of subsidiarity [is] an expression of inalienable human freedom. Subsidiarity is first and foremost a form of assistance to the human person” and “respects personal dignity by recognizing in the person a subject who is always capable of giving something to others” (Benedict XVI 2009, no. 57).

Subsidiarity and the State

“Subsidiarity” as Pope John Paul II wrote, “insists on necessary limits to the State’s intervention...inasmuch as the individual, the family and society are prior to the State and inasmuch as the State exists in order to protect their rights and not stifle them” (John Paul II 1991, no. 11). On the international level, Pope Benedict warns us, “In order not to produce a dangerous universal power of a tyrannical nature, *the governance of globalization must be marked by subsidiarity*” (Benedict XVI 2009, 57).

Any activity that can be performed by a more decentralized entity – should be. On the other hand, the State should undertake only those tasks, which are beyond the capacity of individuals or private groups,

those acting independently of the State. Nor should subsidiarity be viewed simply as a limit on the State.

Subsidiarity, properly understood, both justifies and sets limits on the activities of the State. It is by recognizing *subsidiarity* that the State is, itself, justified, as Pope Pius XI explained, and “will more freely, powerfully, and effectively do all those things that belong to it alone because it alone can do them” (Pius XI 1931, no. 80). Pope Benedict writes,

We do not need a State which regulates and controls everything, but a State which, in accordance with the principles of subsidiarity, generously acknowledges and supports initiatives arising from different social forces and combines spontaneity with closeness to those in need. (Benedict XVI 2005b, 28)

Pope Francis emphasized in his address that “no actual or established power has the right to deprive peoples of the full exercise of their sovereignty” (Francis 2015c, no. 3.2).

When depriving society of its responsibility

“By intervening directly and depriving society of its responsibility” Pope John Paul II wrote,

the Social Assistance State leads to a loss of human energies and an inordinate increase in public agencies which are dominated more by bureaucratic ways of thinking than by concern for serving their clients, and which are accompanied by an enormous increase in spending. In fact, it would appear that needs are best understood and satisfied by people who are closest to them and who act as neighbors to those in need. (John Paul II 1991, no. 48)

In *Mater et magistra*, Pope John XIII wrote, “experience has shown that where

personal initiative is lacking, political tyranny ensues and, in addition, economic stagnation” (John XXIII 1961, no. 57).

The need to link subsidiarity and solidarity

Pope Benedict writes, “The principles of solidarity and subsidiarity...have the potential to place men and women on the path to discovering their supernatural destiny” (Benedict XVI 2008).

The principle of subsidiarity must remain closely linked to the principle of solidarity and vice versa, since the former without the latter gives way to social privatism, while the latter without the former gives way to paternalist social assistance that is demeaning to those in need. (Benedict XVI 2009, no. 58)

Subsidiarity and the common good

Moreover, Benedict continues,

It is true that the pursuit of justice must be a fundamental norm of the State and that the aim of a just social order is to guarantee to each person, according to the principle of subsidiarity, his share of the community’s goods. (Benedict XVI 2005b, no. 26)

On the same subject, Pope Francis declared that individuals and groups have the right to go their own way. He stated, “In full respect for that freedom, civil society is called to help each person and social organization to take up its specific role and thus contribute to the common good” (Francis 2015a).

Benedict wrote,

[a] fruitful dialogue between faith and reason cannot but render the work of charity more effective within society, and it constitutes the most appropriate framework for promoting *fraternal collaboration*

between believers and non-believers in their shared commitment to working for justice and the peace of the human family...The duty of believers [is] to unite their efforts with those of all men and women of good will...[This] particular manifestation of Charity and a guiding criterion for fraternal cooperation between believers and non-believers is undoubtedly the principle of subsidiarity, an expression of inalienable human freedom. (Benedict XVI 2009, no. 57)

THE AFFORDABLE CARE ACT: A VIOLATION OF THE PRINCIPLE OF SUBSIDIARITY?

With the ongoing debate in the United States on the Affordable Care Act (ACA), the clinical practice of health care finds itself at the center of having to address the lack of this fundamental Catholic principle. With over two thousand pages, the ACA is complex.

Lack of subsidiarity in the ACA has had an impact on clinical practice – replacing individual clinical assessment and judgment with centrally dictated “procedures” based on remuneration and efficiency schemes. Such leads to “industrializing” the practice of health care. In its seemingly all-encompassing breadth, the ACA is an example of a violation of the principle of subsidiarity, whose repeal would be well called for.

THE COMMON GOOD

The Church identifies the common good as the sum total of social conditions, which allow people to reach their fulfillment. At times, this may require preferential treatment for individuals and groups. It must always be ordered to a correct balance of interests, never

abrogating human dignity or the inalienable rights of the human person. The common good is most completely realized in and through the political sphere.

The role of civil society

“Civil society exists for the common good, and hence is concerned with the interests of all in general, albeit with individual interests also in their due place and degree,” Pope Leo wrote; this is still relevant today (Leo XIII 1891, no. 51).

In *Pacem in terris*, Pope John XXIII addressed the role of civil society:

We must add, therefore, that it is in the nature of the common good that every single citizen has the right to share in it —although in different ways, depending on his tasks, merits and circumstances. Hence every civil authority must strive to promote the common good in the interest of all, without favoring any individual citizen or category of citizen ... Considerations of justice and equity can at times demand that those in power pay more attention to the weaker members of society, since these are at a disadvantage when it comes to defending their own rights and asserting their legitimate interests. (John XXIII 1963, no. 56)

Ordering a just society

“The direct duty to work for a just ordering of society on the other hand,” Benedict writes in *Deus Caritas Est*,

is proper to the lay faithful. As citizens of the State, they are called to take part in public life in a personal capacity. So they cannot relinquish their participation in the many different economic, social, legislative, administrative and cultural areas, which are intended to promote organically and institutionally the *common good*. (Benedict XVI 2005b, no. 29)

In *Caritas in veritate*, Pope Benedict writes:

To love someone is to desire that person’s good and to take effective steps to secure it. Besides the good of the individual, there is a good that is linked to living in society: the common good... To desire the *common good* and strive towards it is a *requirement of justice and charity*... When animated by charity, commitment to the common good has greater worth than a merely secular and political stand would have... Man’s earthly activity, when inspired and sustained by charity, contributes to the building of the universal *city of God*, which is the goal of the history of the human family (Benedict XVI 2009, no. 7).

Political path of charity

“To take a stand for the common good” Benedict writes,

is on the one hand to be solicitous for, and on the other hand to avail oneself of, that complex of institutions that give structure to the life of society, juridically, civilly, politically and culturally, making it the *pólis*, or ‘city’... Every Christian is called to practise this charity, in a manner corresponding to his vocation and according to the degree of influence he wields in the *pólis*. This is the institutional path — we might also call it the political path — of charity, no less excellent and effective than the kind of charity which encounters the neighbour directly, outside the institutional mediation of the *pólis*. (Benedict XVI 2009, no. 7)

Charity and justice

Furthermore, Benedict writes,

Charity goes beyond justice... but it never lacks justice... I cannot ‘give’ what is mine to the other, without first giving him what pertains to him in justice... Not only is justice not extraneous to charity, not only is it not an alternative or parallel

path to charity: justice is inseparable from charity, and intrinsic to it. Justice is the primary way of charity. (Benedict XVI 2009, no. 6)

Defending truth

We are called to bring charity, through objective truth, into the public square, in addition to bringing it into our everyday human encounters. Benedict writes in his introduction,

Charity in Truth, to which Jesus Christ bore witness by his earthly life and especially by his death and resurrection, is the principal driving force behind the authentic development of every person and of all humanity...To defend the truth, to articulate it with humility and conviction, and to bear witness to it in our life are therefore exacting and indispensable forms of charity. (Benedict XVI 2009, no. 1)

“Only in *charity, illuminated by the light of reason and faith*, is it possible to pursue development goals that possess a more humane and humanizing value” (Benedict XVI 2009, 9). “In addition to their necessary professional training...workers need a ‘formation of the heart’: they need to be led to that encounter with God in Christ which awakens their love... Christian charitable activity must be independent of parties and ideologies.” (Benedict XVI 2005b, no. 31)

SOCIAL PRINCIPLES AND POLITICS

CST is the practice of charity and justice: we should be neither *left* nor *right* on the political spectrum. In Pope John Paul II’s *Centesimus annus*, we find that there are warnings when these principles are not applied. Individuals of the *right*, he wrote, may latch on to the endorsement of free markets as the only economic principle

that seems to promote affluence² and draw great comfort from that fact—while forgetting about solidarity, the evils of consumerism, improper business activities and the fact that their brothers and sisters are in dire economic straits. Individuals of the *left* might focus on the principle of solidarity and the Church’s endorsement of the “preferential option for the poor.” These individuals have been enamored of government responses to the social problems, ignoring the clear call of CST for free markets and applying subsidiarity.

And, both may fail to implement these teachings through their lives—running the risk of forgetting the key message of gospel. Pope Benedict points out, “It is clear that no economic, social or political project can replace the gift of self to another through which charity is expressed ...He who does not give God gives too little” (Benedict XVI 2005a).

Without objective truth

Anyone who lives and proclaims the faith of the Church is, on many points, out of step with the prevalent way of thinking... Today’s regnant agnosticism has its own dogmas and is extremely intolerant regarding anything that would question it and the criteria it employs. (Benedict XVI 2013)

Indeed, our culture has a problem accepting anything as true. Beset with moral relativism it rejects that there is any such thing as an “objective truth.”

Pope John Paul II warned us,

It must be observed in this regard that if there is no ultimate truth to guide and direct political activity, then ideas and convictions can easily be manipulated for reasons of power. As history demonstrates a democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism. (John Paul II 1991, no. 46)

If nothing is objectively right or wrong, nothing prevents those with more power from inflicting their “truth” on others. Pope Francis commented on today’s secular relativism,

it also needs to be kept in mind that apart from the pursuit of truth, each individual becomes the criterion for measuring himself and his own actions... The way is thus opened to a subjectivistic assertion of rights ... is replaced by an individualistic conception of rights ... [wherein] we no longer have the capacity to build authentic human relationships marked by truth and mutual respect. (Francis 2014)

PRACTICAL APPLICATION FOR PROMOTING MORAL TRUTH

Pope Benedict provided an answer for us when he wrote,

What does it mean, in practical terms, to promote moral truth in the world of politics and diplomacy? It means acting in a responsible way on the basis of an objective and integral knowledge of the facts; it means deconstructing political ideologies which end up supplanting truth and human dignity in order to promote pseudo-values under the pretext of peace, development and human rights; it means fostering an unswerving commitment to base positive law on the principles of the natural law. (Benedict XVI 2010c, no. 12)

Our acting in society first requires belief, acceptance, and the integration of God in all facets of our life; it requires personal conversion. He wrote, “Adhering to the values of Christianity is not merely useful but essential for building a good society and for true integral human development” (Benedict XVI 2009, no. 4).

The human person must work, must involve himself in domestic and

professional concerns, to be sure, but he has need of God before all else, who is the interior light of love and truth. Without love, even the most important activities lose value and do not bring joy. Without a profound meaning, everything we do is reduced to sterile and disordered activism. (Benedict XVI 2013)

Above all else it is our faith in Christ, as the wellspring of our strength, which gives us the courage to defend truth, with love, in the call to holiness in our vocation as healthcare professionals.

AN INVITATION

We hope by adding to your knowledge base you will be better armed to articulate the Catholic vision of the human person and society in applying the social teachings in your everyday administrative and clinical encounters, and to share these foundational principles with colleagues as the criteria for prudential judgment in policy making within the political, economic, and cultural arenas where you have influence.³

NOTES

- 1 Fondazione Centesimus Annus Pro Pontifice, <http://www.centesimusannus.org>.
- 2 See, especially, John Paul II (1991).
- 3 The USA membership of Fondazione Centesimus Annus Pro Pontifice provides an online resource for the study of the social teachings with listings of the encyclicals, papal address, articles, and course information at <https://capp-usa.org/>.

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