

Social Encyclical Primer

Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* was signed and released in June 2009. This encyclical, or teaching document, is the latest in a series of social encyclicals written by our popes over the last 120 years, as the Church sought to apply its moral principles and social teaching to emerging economic and social problems.

Jesus Christ is both divine and human. In his person, he embodies what it is to live a fully human life. He is the model of how we are called to live. His teaching has both personal and social implications. These social encyclicals shine the light of the Gospel of Christ and the Church's moral teaching on changing social circumstances, to provide guidance and support to Christians as we seek to live our faith in the world. In this way, the teaching is both very traditional and ever new. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI in *Caritas in Veritate*:

The Church's social doctrine illuminates with an unchanging light the new problems that are constantly emerging. This safeguards the permanent and historical character of the doctrinal "patrimony" which, with its specific characteristics, is part and parcel of the Church's ever-living Tradition. Social doctrine is built on the foundation handed on by the Apostles to the Fathers of the Church, and then received and further explored by the great Christian doctors. This doctrine points definitively to the New Man, to the "last Adam [who] became a life-giving spirit" (1 Cor 15:45), the principle of the charity that "never ends" (1 Cor 13:8). It is attested by the saints and by those who gave their lives for Christ our Savior in the field of justice and peace. It is an expression of the prophetic task of the Supreme Pontiffs to give apostolic guidance to the Church of Christ and to discern the new demands of evangelization (12).

Here are highlights from some of the encyclicals that are part of the Church's modern body of social teaching:

Rerum Novarum (*On the Condition of Labor*) 1891, Pope Leo XIII – Essentially the beginning of modern Catholic social teaching, truly groundbreaking, and a foundational document for many subsequent encyclicals (see below). This encyclical addresses the plight of workers in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, touching on issues that include socialism, unbridled capitalism, a living wage, workers' rights, support for unions, and a rejection of class struggle. Pope Leo first articulated the principles that

underlie the preferential option for the poor.

Quadragesimo Anno (*On the Reconstruction of the Social Order*) 1931, Pope Pius XI – Commemorating the 40th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, this encyclical offers an update on the state of labor and industrialization, and strong critiques of communism, unrestrained capitalism, class conflict, and inequalities. Pope Pius denounces the concentration of wealth and economic power, and calls for the reconstruction of the social order based on subsidiarity.

Mater et Magistra (*Christianity and Social Progress*) 1961, Pope John XXIII – Issued 70 years after *Rerum Novarum*, this encyclical looks to the Church as the "Mother and Teacher," calling the world to salvation and better social relationships. It looks at science and technology, noting their power to improve the human condition, but also to limit human freedoms, and calling on governments to safeguard human rights. Pope John expressed concerns for the growing gap between rich and poor

nations, for the plight of farmers and rural areas, and for the arms race. The encyclical calls on wealthier nations to help poorer ones.

Pacem in Terris (Peace on Earth) 1963, Pope John XXIII – Issued only two months before the pope's death, this encyclical is the first to be directed to "all men of good will," instead of just to Catholics. In a response to the Cold War, the encyclical outlines necessary conditions for lasting world peace, looking at respect for human rights and disarmament. Pope John calls for the development of a world authority to protect the universal common good, condemns the arms race, and supports efforts to build peace.

Populorum Progressio (On the Development of Peoples) 1967, Pope Paul VI – This encyclical, which Pope Benedict's new encyclical commemorates, examines the economy on a global level, and addresses the rights of workers to decent work, just wages, decent working conditions, and to form and join unions. Pope Paul VI calls development the new name for peace, criticizes unjust economic structures that lead to inequality, and supports new international and social relationships.

Laborem Exercens (On Human Work) 1981, Pope John Paul II – Issued to mark the 90th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, this encyclical once again emphasizes the dignity of work and the rights of workers, and the priority of labor over capital. Pope John Paul also addresses disabled workers, emigration, materialism, and the spirituality of work.

Sollicitudo Rei Socialis (On Social Concern) 1987, Pope John Paul II – This encyclical honored *Populorum Progressio* on its 20th anniversary, offering solidarity as a central requirement of our faith and times. Pope John Paul critiques East-West blocs and other "structures of sin" that compromise the progress of poor nations, and calls for solidarity between rich and poor nations.

Centesimus Annus (The Hundredth Year) 1991, Pope John Paul II – On the 100th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, John Paul II reflected on the current state of issues that Leo XIII had addressed in his day. It focuses on the moral dimensions of economic life, the advantages and limitations of the market, the role of business, and the responsibilities and limitations of government.

Evangelium Vitae (The Gospel of Life) 1995, Pope John Paul II – An affirmation of the gift of human life and the need to protect it, this encyclical explored many threats to human life, including the evils of abortion, euthanasia, and the use of the death penalty. It called the Church to be "a people of life and for life."

Deus Caritas Est (God is Love) 2005, Pope Benedict XVI – Benedict's first encyclical emphasized the connections between love of God and love of neighbor. Pope Benedict said the Church could no more neglect charity than it could Scripture or the sacraments. He located love of the poor at the center of Catholic life.

Caritas In Veritate (Charity in Truth) 2009, Pope Benedict XVI – Anticipated since 2007, this encyclical follows up on the themes of Pope Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio*, calling it the *Rerum Novarum* of the present age. It deals with the ethics of contemporary economics; poverty and development; global solidarity; charity, justice and the common good; rights and duties; and care for creation, among other topics.

Quotes from Caritas in Veritate on Charity, Justice, and the Common Good

“Charity is at the heart of the Church's social doctrine. Every responsibility and every commitment spelt out by that doctrine is derived from charity which, according to the teaching of Jesus, is the synthesis of the entire Law (cf. Mt 22:36- 40). It gives real substance to the personal relationship with God and with neighbour; it is the principle not only of microrelationships (with friends, with family members or within small groups) but also of macrorelationships (social, economic and political ones). For the Church, instructed by the Gospel, charity is everything because, as Saint John teaches (cf. 1 Jn 4:8, 16) and as I recalled in my first Encyclical Letter, “God is love” (*Deus Caritas Est*): *everything has its origin in God's love, everything is shaped by it, everything is directed towards it*. Love is God's greatest gift to humanity, it is his promise and our hope” (2).

“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 the good that is linked to living in society: the common good. It is the good of “all of us”, made up of individuals, families and intermediate groups who together constitute society. It is the good that is sought not for its own sake, but for the people who belong to the social community and who can only really and effectively pursue their good within it. To desire the *common good* and strive towards *it is a requirement of justice and charity*” (7).

“If we love others with charity, then first of all we are just towards them. Not only is justice not extraneous to charity, not only is it not an alternative or parallel path to charity: justice is inseparable from charity¹, and intrinsic to it. Justice is the primary way of charity or, in Paul VI's words, “the minimum measure” of it ², an integral part of the love “in deed and in truth” (1 Jn 3:18), to which Saint John exhorts us. On the one hand, charity demands justice: recognition and respect for the legitimate rights of individuals and peoples. It strives to build the *earthly city* according to law and justice. On the other hand, charity transcends justice and completes it in the logic of giving and forgiving³” (6).

“The [Second Vatican] Council probed more deeply what had always belonged to the truth of the faith, namely that the Church, being at God's service, is at the service of the world in terms of love and truth. Paul VI set out from this vision in order to convey two important truths. ... [T]he *whole Church, in all her being and acting — when she proclaims, when she celebrates, when she performs works of charity — is engaged in promoting integral human development*. She has a public role over and above her charitable and educational activities: all the energy she brings to the advancement of humanity and of universal fraternity is manifested when she is able to operate in a climate of freedom” (11).

“*Feed the hungry* (cf. Mt 25: 35, 37, 42) is an ethical imperative for the universal Church, as she responds to the teachings of her Founder, the Lord Jesus, concerning solidarity and the sharing of goods. Moreover, the elimination of world hunger has also, in the global era, become a requirement for safeguarding the peace and stability of the planet. Hunger is not so much dependent on lack of material things as on shortage of social

resources, the most important of which are institutional. What is missing, in other words, is a network of economic institutions capable of guaranteeing regular access to sufficient food and water for nutritional needs, and also capable of addressing the primary needs and necessities ensuing from genuine food crises, whether due to natural causes or political irresponsibility, nationally and internationally. The problem of food insecurity needs to be addressed within a long-term perspective, eliminating the structural causes that give rise to it and promoting the agricultural development of poorer countries” (27).

“Economic activity cannot solve all social problems through the simple application of commercial logic. This needs to *be directed towards the pursuit of the common good*, for which the political community in particular must also take responsibility. Therefore, it must be borne in mind that grave imbalances are produced when economic action, conceived merely as an engine for wealth creation, is detached from political action, conceived as a means for pursuing justice through redistribution” (36).

“Development is impossible without upright men and women financiers and politicians whose consciences are finely attuned to the requirements of the common good” (71).

“Human beings legitimately exercise a *responsible stewardship over nature*, in order to protect it, to enjoy its fruits and to cultivate it in new ways, with the assistance of advanced technologies, so that it can worthily accommodate and feed the world's population. On this earth there is room for everyone: here the entire human family must find the resources to live with dignity, through the help of nature itself — God's gift to his children — and through hard work and creativity. At the same time we must recognize our grave duty to hand the earth on to future generations in such a condition that they too can worthily inhabit it and continue to cultivate it. This means being committed to making joint decisions ‘after pondering responsibly the road to be taken, decisions aimed at strengthening that *covenant between human beings and the environment*, which should mirror the creative love of God, from whom we come and towards whom we are journeying’⁴” (5).

¹ Cf. Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Populorum Progressio* (26 March 1967), 22: AAS 59 (1967), 268; Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 69.

² *Address for the Day of Development* (23 August 1968): AAS 60 (1968), 626-627.

³ Cf. John Paul II, *Message for the 2002 World Day of Peace*: AAS 94 (2002), 132-140

⁴ Benedict XVI, *Message for the 2008 World Day of Peace*, 7: AAS 100 (2008), 41.

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How is “charity” defined by the Church? How is this different from how society or common culture defines “charity”?

How does “Charity” (Love) as the synthesis of the Law (from Judaic tradition) relate to laws of relations between countries, cultures and peoples today?

How is the common good defined? How does that relate to the making of laws today? What is the basis for the common good?

How do charity and justice relate in terms of faith?

What are the implications of being a Church at the service of the world? How is it different from social service?

How are faith, hope, and love integral to human development?

How are charity/love and food insecurity related?

“charity demands justice...” (recognition and respect for the legitimate rights of individuals and peoples). “...charity transcends justice and completes it (in the logic of giving and forgiving)” How do these statements relate to how we treat others?

“Economic activity ... needs to be directed towards the pursuit of the common good...”
How has our nation’s economic activity measured up in relation to this statement?