

## 7. Catholic Social Teaching

### What is Catholic Social Teaching?

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is the body of teaching developed by the Catholic Church on matters of social justice, human dignity, and how we are called to live together in community. It is grounded in Scripture and the tradition of the Church, especially the teachings of Jesus.

### Where Does It Come From?

CST draws from Scripture, the writings of the Church Fathers, and the teachings of modern popes and councils—especially since Pope Leo XIII’s 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, which addressed the rights and conditions of workers. Since then, CST has evolved through encyclicals, synods, and the voices of popes and bishops worldwide.

***Rerum Novarum*** — Latin for “**Of New Things**” or “**On the New Conditions**” is considered the **founding document of modern Catholic Social Teaching**.

### What was it about?

*Rerum Novarum* responded to the massive upheavals caused by the Industrial Revolution — especially the suffering of workers, the rise of capitalism and socialism, and the widening gap between rich and poor.

Pope Leo XIII addressed:

- The **dignity of labor**
- The **right of workers** to form unions
- The **right to private property**, but also its **social responsibilities**
- The **need for the state** to protect the vulnerable
- A **rejection of both socialism and unchecked capitalism**
- The idea that the Church has a role in promoting justice in economic life

### Why is it important?

Because it opened the door for the Church to speak **boldly and publicly** about social, economic, and political issues — **not just personal morality**. It became the cornerstone of later CST documents and laid the foundation for principles like:

- The preferential option for the poor
- The dignity of work and the rights of workers
- The importance of solidarity and subsidiarity

### What Does It Mean for Catholics?

Catholics are called to live out CST in daily life. This includes how we vote, how we treat others, how we engage in community, and how we respond to injustice. CST helps us apply the Gospel to modern issues like poverty, immigration, environmental care, and more.

### Is It Doctrine or Dogma?

While CST is not formal dogma or infallible doctrine, it is not optional. It reflects the Church's moral vision and demands thoughtful engagement. We are not free to simply "take it or leave it." CST unites us in heart, mind, and action around the values of the Gospel.

### **Why It Matters Today**

CST is the Church's response to the question: "How do we live the Gospel today, in a world filled with competing voices?" It offers a compass. It may not answer every question perfectly, and we are still learning and growing, but CST points us in the direction of God's justice, mercy, and peace.

### **Can It Be Debated?**

Yes, CST can and should be discussed, reflected on, and even challenged. However, those conversations must move us closer to the Gospel, not further from it. Debate is healthy when it seeks deeper fidelity to Christ, not just to defend personal or political ideologies.

### **Example: Capital Punishment**

The Church now teaches that capital punishment is inadmissible. Pope Francis has clarified that it is a sin and contrary to the Gospel. Yet some Catholics still advocate for it. These arguments don't move us closer to the heart of Christ—they pull us away.

Our unity lies in seeking Gospel-rooted justice, even when it's uncomfortable.

## **The Seven Key Themes of Catholic Social Teaching**

These seven themes form the foundation of Catholic Social Teaching. They are interrelated and grounded in Scripture and tradition, offering us a blueprint for living out the Gospel in our relationships, decisions, and society.

### **1. Life and Dignity of the Human Person**

Every person is sacred, made in the image of God. Human life must be protected from conception to natural death, and human dignity respected in every stage and condition.

### **2. Call to Family, Community, and Participation**

We are not meant to live in isolation. Society must support marriage and the family, and all people should have the right and responsibility to participate in community and public life.

### **3. Rights and Responsibilities**

Every person has a right to what is needed for a decent life — food, shelter, work, education, health care. But with those rights comes responsibility: to protect the rights of others and promote the common good.

### **4. Option for the Poor and Vulnerable**

A basic moral test of any society is how it treats its most vulnerable members. The Church calls us to put the needs of the poor first — not to exclude others, but to elevate those who are most at risk.

## **5. Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers**

Work is more than a way to make a living — it's a form of participation in God's creation. Workers have rights to fair wages, safe conditions, and the ability to organize and advocate for themselves.

## **6. Solidarity**

We are one human family, whatever our race, ethnicity, or borders. We are called to stand with others — especially the suffering — in pursuit of peace, justice, and mutual care.

## **7. Care for God's Creation**

We are stewards, not owners, of the earth. Respect for God's creation is a moral and spiritual duty. Environmental care is an act of love for our neighbors — especially future generations.

Certainly! Here's a concluding reflection for your Catholic Social Teaching handout, focusing on Pope Leo XIV's choice of name and its significance:

### **Reflecting on Pope Leo XIV's Choice of Name**

In 1891, Pope Leo XIII was leading the Church during a time of monumental social upheaval. The Industrial Revolution had transformed how people lived, worked, and related to one another. The world was changing rapidly — and many didn't even recognize the magnitude of that change because they were living right in the middle of it.

So too, we are living through an era of profound transformation.

Today, we are in the thick of our own revolution — one shaped by artificial intelligence, quantum computing, robotics, digital surveillance, biotechnology, climate disruption, and even commercial space exploration. These developments are shifting the very nature of what it means to be human, to work, to relate, to think — and like those in Leo XIII's time, we may not fully grasp the scale of the changes because we are immersed in them.

Fast forward to 2025: Pope Leo XIV, formerly Cardinal Robert Prevost, chose his papal name to honor Pope Leo XIII. In his inaugural address, he explained that his choice was inspired by Leo XIII's commitment to social issues during a time of significant change. Pope Leo XIV sees parallels between the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century and today's digital age, particularly the rise of artificial intelligence. He believes that, just as the Church addressed the social questions of the past, it must now engage with the ethical challenges posed by modern technological advancements to uphold human dignity, justice, and labor rights.

### **What Does This Mean for Us?**

Pope Leo XIV's choice of name is more than a tribute; it's a call to action. It reminds us that Catholic Social Teaching is not a static set of principles but a living tradition that must respond

to the evolving challenges of each era. As we navigate the complexities of the modern world—be it technological advancements, economic disparities, or social injustices—we are called to apply these teachings actively.

This choice urges us to:

- Engage with contemporary issues through the lens of our faith.
- Advocate for policies and practices that uphold human dignity and the common good.
- Reflect on how our actions contribute to a more just and compassionate society.

By embracing the legacy of Pope Leo XIII and the vision of Pope Leo XIV, we are encouraged to be proactive in living out the Gospel in today's world, ensuring that our faith remains relevant and transformative.