



Major Catholic Social Teaching texts

A review by Adjunct Professor Dr Michael Costigan

In 2004 the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace published a comprehensive *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. It draws on a large number of Biblical and Magisterial sources, including the following fifteen major papal and conciliar documents:

- Pope Leo XIII's Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891): the foundational Catholic Social Teaching text, reflecting on capital and labour in the light of the Industrial Revolution.
- Pope Pius XI's Encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931): a reflection after forty years on the response by the Church and the world to *Rerum Novarum* and on the reconstruction of the social order, at a time when totalitarian governments were making their presence felt in Europe and elsewhere.
- Pope John XXIII's Encyclical *Mater et Magistra* (1961): on Christianity and social progress, proposing methodologies for the application of Catholic teaching to concrete issues.
- Pope John XXIII's Encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (1963): addressed to the whole world, it reflects on peace and human rights at the height of the “Cold War”. Received with acclamation as a great Pope's testament.
- Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes* (1965): the Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.
- Vatican II's *Dignitatis Humanae* (1965): the Council's Declaration on Religious Freedom, reversing previous teaching on Church and State and on religious tolerance.
- Pope Paul VI's Encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (1967): on the social and economic development of peoples, calling on the rich nations to assist the poor. Seen as a charter for Church aid and development agencies like Caritas.
- The World Synod of Bishops' Report *Justitia in Mundo* (1971): includes the much quoted declaration that “work for social justice is a constituent element of preaching the Gospel”.
- Pope Paul VI's Apostolic Letter *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971): marking the eightieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, it is a call to action, reflecting on the Church in the City.
- Pope Paul VI's Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975): links social justice with evangelisation in the modern world.
- Pope John Paul II's Encyclical *Laborem Exercens* (1981): a reflection on the theology of work and on “Christ the Worker”, reiterating and developing Pope Leo XIII's teaching, with clear implications for industrial relations.
- Pope John Paul II's Encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987): writing on social concerns in a radical way, the Pope discusses Solidarity's role in Catholic Social Teaching and the continuity and constant renewal of that teaching.

- Pope John Paul II's Encyclical *Centesimus Annus* (1991): commemorating the centenary of *Rerum Novarum*, the Polish Pope reflects on the changed world after Communism's 1989 demise in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, develops the teaching on Subsidiarity and considers the benefits and limits of market economies in a way that some interpreted as tempering the approach of the previous Social Encyclical.
- Pope John Paul II's Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (1995): reflects on the value of human life at every stage from conception to death. Advances the Church's teaching opposing capital punishment.
- Pope Benedict XVI's Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (2006): an eloquent essay on Christian love, with important and far-reaching reflections on the relationship between charity and justice and on the role of the Church in politics.

Many other published texts on the Church's social teaching exist. Some are listed in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, while references to many can be found on the internet by using Google to access "Catholic Social Teaching".

Some topics have yet to become the main theme of specific Papal Encyclicals or major documents - for example, Justice for Women, Ecology and Racism. The Euro-centric character of much of the teaching has also been noted. This may be expected to change with the growing role and influence of the global Church.

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