

Catholic Social Teaching and the Christian Responsibility to the Poor

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Description: This paper examines the development of the Catholic Church's understanding of the Christian responsibility to people who are poor through papal and conciliar documents, Scripture, and the writings of patristic authors.

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Catholic Social Teaching (CST) has deep roots. A call to examine and engage with the modern world, the documents of CST are both Scripturally inspired, as well as reflect the time and circumstances in which they were written. The harbinger of modern CST, Pope Leo XIII, wrote *Rerum novarum* as a theologically grounded response to the social issues of the late nineteenth century. A radical document that affirmed the rights of workers, this encyclical brought to the fore a discussion among Catholics about the Christian response to people who are poor. Over the next one hundred and twenty-five years, Popes, bishops and the laity grappled with this question. Evolving from emphasizing charity to the needy, to calling for changes in unjust social and economic structures, CST has recommitted the Catholic Church to the early patristic view that all Christians are called to serve the poor and build a just society. In moving from an individualistic, top-down approach in service to the poor, to the affirmation that we are all equally created and called to build a just society, CST fundamentally ties the act of being Christian with a responsibility to the poor.

In 1891 Pope Leo XIII heralded in a new era for the Catholic Church with the release of his encyclical *Rerum novarum*. The first in what has come to be known as the Church's official social teaching, this document, in part, addresses the Christian's responsibility to those who are poor. Responding to the social and economic needs of the time, *Rerum novarum* affirms the Christian duty to give to those in need. Pope Leo XIII writes: "But when necessity has been supplied, and one's position fairly considered, it is a duty to give to the indigent out of that which is left over... It is a duty, not of justice (except in extreme cases), but of Christian

Charity—a duty which is not enforced by human law” (RN 19).¹ The Christian responsibility to women and men who are poor is to give out of one’s own surplus. One’s own needs may be considered first, and take priority, but the ‘indigent’ must not be ignored. Each Catholic is called to prayerfully consider what they need, and then give to the poor out of what is left over. This is, Pope Leo XIII claims, a Christian duty rooted not in law, but in charity. The claim the Church makes on the rich is to call them to offer up and hand over what is excess to them. The appeal is to a sense of charity, a giving to those in need out of one’s individual discernment of what one can spare.

Forty years after *Rerum novarum*, Pope Pius XI reflected on the Catholic Church’s teaching on the Christian responsibility to the poor, and reaffirmed *Rerum novarum*’s stance. In his encyclical *Quadragesimo anno*, written in 1931, Pope Pius XI takes up the issue of superfluous income and outlines how it should be understood. He defines superfluous income as: “...that portion of his income which he does not need in order to live as becomes his station. On the contrary, the grave obligations of charity, beneficence and liberality which rest upon the wealthy are constantly insisted upon in telling words by Holy Scripture and the Fathers of the Church” (QA 50). Like in *Rerum novarum*, Catholics are encouraged to meet their own needs first, “as becomes their station”, and give out of what is left over. Pope Pius XI again appeals to the Christian sense of charity, and strongly calls it an “obligation.” To give to the poor is an obligation for Catholics—once their own needs have been met.

¹ *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage Expanded Edition*. Edited by David J. O’Brien and Thomas A. Shannon. New York: Orbis, 2014. All citations from papal and Council documents will be taken from this book.

It is important to note that while *Quadragesimo anno* invokes Scripture and the Fathers of the Church, it does not cite their work. In the development of CST and the understanding of the Christian responsibility to the poor, this becomes more and more important.

The first significant shift in the CST understanding of the responsibility to the poor came more than seventy years after *Rerum Novarum* was written. In 1962, during a radio broadcast, Pope John XXIII redefined what is meant by 'superfluous' income: "The obligation of every man, the urgent obligation of the Christian man, is to reckon what is superfluous by the measure of the needs of others, and to see to it that the administration and the distribution of created goods serve the common good" (PT footnote 147, pg 249). No longer is what a Christian expected to share defined by what she or he deems they want to give. 'Superfluous' is no longer dependent on what the wealthy feel they can give once their own needs are met. It is determined by the needs of the poor. Those with means are obligated to recognize the needs of others and serve the common good by meeting those needs.

This is a fundamental shift in approach to CST. No longer are the needs of the rich at the center of decision making. The obligation and responsibility to the poor is determined by the poor's own needs. It is not about what the rich decide they can give, but about determining what others need to survive and thrive, and offering enough to make that happen.

Later that decade, the bishops at the Second Vatican Council made the second fundamental change in the CST understanding of the Christian responsibility to the poor. In 1965, with the release of *Gaudium et spes*, Church leaders defined this responsibility as more than giving of one's goods, but of a need to change in the system. *Gaudium et spes* states:

"...men are obliged to come to the relief of the poor, and to do so not merely out of their superfluous goods. If a person is in extreme necessity, he has the right to take

from the riches of others what he himself needs. Since there are so many people in this world afflicted with hunger, this sacred Council urges all, both individual and governments to remember the saying of the Fathers: 'Feed the man dying of hunger, because if you have not fed him you have killed him.' According to their ability, let all individuals and governments undertake a genuine sharing of their goods. Let them use these goods especially to provide individuals and nations with the means for helping and developing themselves" (GS 69).

The bishops begin by affirming the obligation of Christians to come to the aid of those in need.

The document then takes a direct turn away from the earliest understanding of CST, in documents such as *Quadragesimo anno*, in articulating that this relief for the poor does not come solely from superfluous goods. In citing the early Patristic writers, the bishops tell us to feed the starving person, or we have killed them. So too, if we allow systems of oppression and exploitation to continue unaddressed and without protest, we have participated in the oppression and exploitation of people who are poor. The document also broadens the call beyond the individual person by naming poverty as a concern of both individuals and governments. This concern is both personal and systematic. The call *Gaudium et spes* makes is for a radical new approach to the Christian responsibility to the poor. It is not just about giving to the poor—not just about charity. It is about allowing for those who are poor to have the agency to help and develop themselves.

Gaudium et spes addresses both the rich and the poor. While those with means have a responsibility to women and men who do not, the Council leaders make it clear that the poor have rights. Indeed, they may take from the 'riches of others', from the excess, what they need to survive. Finding its inspiration and roots in Scripture and the early Christian writers, points that will be developed further, this affirms both the dignity of the poor and their right to provide for themselves out of the abundance of creation.

In addition to addressing the need for both individual and governmental involvement in relieving the burdens of poverty, *Gaudium et spes* introduces a new tone to the CST conversation. Whereas in many of the previous encyclicals, the primary audience is the rich and others with material means, in writing *Gaudium et spes*, the bishops sought to directly address people who are living in poverty and affirm their right to life and dignity. Those who are poor have the right to act on their own behalf—to take what they need from the surplus of others to survive. They have the right to participate in developing themselves and their own communities. This shift in tone is important. It recognizes the humanity of all people and brings those living in poverty into the conversation. The Christian responsibility to the poor is two pronged: it includes the need for distributing equitably the riches of creation, while also establishing just economic and political systems. It is about affirming and honoring the dignity of all people.

This affirmation of the agency and dignity of women and men who are poor, while calling for a change in oppressive systems, is further developed in the encyclical *Populorum progressio*. In 1967 Pope Paul VI outlined the Catholic understanding of the responsibility to those in poverty and to unjust economic systems:

“It is not just a matter of eliminating hunger, or even of reducing poverty. The struggle against destitution, though urgent and necessary, is not enough. It is a question, rather, of building a world where every man, no matter what his race, religion, or nationality, can live a fully human life, freed from servitude imposed on him by other men or by natural forces over which he has not sufficient control...” (PP 47).

The system itself must be changed so that all may live with dignity. CST has developed its understanding of responsibility to the poor from one rooted in charity and personal giving, to one rooted in just economic systems. Reducing poverty is a piece of the work that needs to be

done, but so too is transforming the world. Pope Paul VI articulates that honoring the human dignity of all people is independent of their race, religion or nationality. He goes on to write: “We must repeat once more that the superfluous wealth of rich countries should be placed at the service of poor nations” (PP 49). It is no longer a matter of a Christian responsibility to the poor, as individual people, but of a Christian responsibility to change institutions that create poverty. The Christian response to poverty is not just a matter of individual wealth, but needs to exist also on the national and international stage. Christians are called to support systems of government and power that contribute to the world wide equitable distribution of the abundance of creation.

Four years later, Pope Paul VI continued to develop his new vision for a Christian response to poverty in his encyclical *Octogesima adveniens*. Published on the eightieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, this document further establishes the expectation that Christians are called to create just economic and political systems in the world. Pope Paul VI writes:

“In many cases legislation does not keep up with real situations. Legislation is necessary, but it is not sufficient for setting up true relationships of justice and equality. In teaching us charity, the Gospel instructs us in the preferential respect due to the poor and the special situation they have in society: the more fortunate should renounce some of their rights so as to place their goods more generously at the service of others” (OA 23).

Pope Paul VI recognizes that laws and legislation often do not keep up with the needs of people. We cannot rely solely on legislation to establish a just and equitable society. We also have a part to play. Those who are materially wealthy have an obligation to contribute some of what they have towards the service of others.

In this document, Pope Paul VI introduces a foundational concept to CST: the preferential respect due to the poor, or said another way, the preferential option for the poor. This option for the poor is an intentional movement of the Church, inspired by the Gospel, to preferentially focus social engagement on creating just economic and political systems. In regards to proposals to change social systems, CST calls us to support those policies that will bring the greatest benefit and relief to people with the greatest need. This echoes Pope Paul VI's earlier writing in *Populorum progressio* when he emphasizes building a world in which all people have the means to live with dignity. This is not just about individual choices, but about legislation and policies on a national and international level. The preferential option for the poor demands that Catholics view their engagement with the world as a way to hold up the Gospel values of protecting the most vulnerable among us. It is about both daily, individual acts, as well as addressing structures that lift people out of poverty.

As the shift in CST moved further into a comprehensive understanding of both the individual and governmental role, Pope John Paul II engaged with these issues. One hundred years after *Rerum novarum*, Pope John Paul II took up the call of the Christian responsibility to the poor in his encyclical *Centesimo Annus*. In this document, he moves CST further into a system-wide, economic understanding of this responsibility. Pope John Paul II writes:

“It is not merely a matter of ‘giving from one’s surplus,’ but of helping entire peoples which are presently excluded or marginalized to enter into the sphere of economic and human development. For this to happen, it is not enough to draw on the surplus goods which in fact our world abundantly produces; it requires above all a change of lifestyles, of models of productions and consumption, and of the established structures of power which today govern societies” (CA 58).

Here, Pope John Paul II immediately dismisses the erroneous understanding that the Christian responsibility to those who live in poverty is solely that of giving from one’s excess. Giving,

charity, may be part of what is required to address the needs of the poor, but that cannot be our only approach. While we can understand giving to be a piece of CST, Christians must also examine the economic structures that exclude so many from participation. This is about human agency and the ability to develop oneself and one's own community.

Pope John Paul II also affirms the abundance of creation. There is enough on this earth to support everyone, but the distribution must be more equitable. Catholics are called to examine their relationship to both their personal goods and with their rate of consumption. Our response to poverty must be many-fold. We must address the urgent needs of those in poverty, we must change our own lifestyles, and we must change our economic and political structures to more fully honor the wellbeing of all people.

Today, Pope Francis has also addressed the Christian responsibility to the poor in his own writings. In his encyclical *Evangelii gaudium*, Pope Francis balances both structural change and personal acts: "...it means working to eliminate the structural causes of poverty and to promote the integral development of the poor, as well as small daily acts of solidarity in meeting the real needs which we encounter" (EG 188). Pope Francis, engaging with more than a century of CST, is continuing the emphasis introduced during the Second Vatican Council and developed in Catholic social thought over the last fifty years. Catholics are called to actively work to change structural causes of poverty and oppression, while simultaneously meeting the needs of those they encounter with compassion and solidarity. This is the both/and approach to the Christian responsibility to people living in poverty. It is comprehensive and calls Christians to a more intentional life of engagement, both on the governmental level and on a personal level with those in their communities.

While a Christian responsibility to the poor is a relatively new emphasis within magisterial documents from the last century, the tradition is rooted in both Scripture and the writings of the earliest Christian leaders. To understand the teachings of the Popes and Bishops over the last one hundred and twenty-five years, returning to the original sources can be illuminating. From Pope Leo XIII to Pope Francis, the teachings that are espoused in papal and conciliar encyclicals draw from sacred, ancient texts. To fully grasp the CST understanding of the Christian responsibility to the poor, a reflection on both Scripture and patristic authors is needed. Returning thus to the earliest Christian documents, CST grounds itself firmly in a tradition which proclaims equality among all creation, love and care for all people, and the responsibility of the rich towards those who are poor.

A foundational claim of CST is the equality of all creation. The Christian response to the poor as both a systemic and personal approach to poverty can be seen through the lens that we are all created in God's image. In the first chapter of Genesis, God creates humankind in God's own image: "God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27).² The Divine creator who made the heavens and the earth made humanity, both female and male, in God's image. This is a gift and a responsibility. This is the great equalizer. Whether rich or poor, male or female, we are all created in the image of God. No person is above another in this creation and so no person should live in the misery of poverty, especially when the abundance of creation can be shared. CST interprets this

² *Holy Bible: New American Bible*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. All biblical citations will come from this translation.

declaration of divine creation as a starting point to recognizing we are called to care for each other and uplift one another out of poverty.

The firm understanding that we are all created equally by God leads to the conviction that no person can be valued above another. While the story in Genesis affirms the equality of all creation, the prophet Isaiah calls God's people to actively lift the burdens of poverty:

6 This, rather is the fasting that I wish:
releasing those bound unjustly,
untying the thongs of the yoke;
Setting free the oppressed,
breaking every yoke?
7 Sharing your bread with the hungry,
sheltering the oppressed and the homeless;
Clothing the naked when you see them,
and not turning your back on your own.
8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your wound shall quickly be healed;
Your vindication shall go before you,
and the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.
9 Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer,
you shall cry for help, and he will say: "Here I am!" (Is 58:6-9)

The response to the poor is active and addresses their immediate situation. It provides release to those who are unjustly bound, sets free the oppress, feeds the hungry, shelters the homeless, and clothes the naked. These are the actions God calls us to undertake.

Furthermore, it is a fast, a holy undertaking, to do these things. When we care for the vulnerable in society and meet their needs, it is a form of prayer.

The concrete directives Isaiah gives to relieve the suffering of the poor in the Hebrew Scripture is echoed and expanded upon in the Christian writings. In the Gospel, Christ speaks again and again of love for the poor and the need to care for those who live in poverty. In the book of Matthew, Jesus speaks to his disciples and gives them direct instructions to give food to

the hungry, drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick and to visit the imprisoned (Matt 25:36-41). When followers of Christ do these things for others, they do them for him. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says: “Blessed are you who are the poor, for the kingdom of God is yours” (Luke 6:20). CST takes these proclamations by Jesus and applies them to the world. CST, as lived out in the Christian responsibility towards the poor, is the praxis of Christ’s love and care for the poor. When Scripture says feed the hungry, the Catholic Church teaches that this mandate should be taken literally—go feed the poor. ““Feed the man dying of hunger, because if you have not fed him, you have killed him”” (GS 69). To be a Catholic is not a neutral act in the modern world. Christian’s have a responsibility to the poor that is rooted in the words and teachings of the one we profess as Savior. To follow Christ is to do as he commanded. This responsibility is intrinsically tied to our life and credibility as Christians.

In the same way that CST is grounded in Scripture, it has also been directly influenced by the patristic authors. These writers were the first to interpret Christ’s call to engage with the world and respond to the needs of those around us. Studying what early Christian writers believed about the responsibility to the poor has helped inform what Catholics believe and practice today. The Christian responsibility to the poor is invoked in the *Didache* from the first century: “Never turn away the needy; share all your possessions with your brother, and do not claim that anything is your own. If you and he are joint participators in things immortal, how much more so in things that are mortal?”³ Here the call is to share in all things in this mortal

³ William Walsh S.J., and John P. Langan, “Patristic Social Consciousness—The Church and the Poor,” in *The Faith That Does Justice*, edited by John Haughey (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1977), 114.

life, as we Christians are headed towards a shared future. The possessions of one are to be put to the use of all. Christians with material means are called to share with those who have gone without. The *Didache* calls upon people to recognize our common participation in the Christian life. This life requires us to act in a new way—to distribute what we can with those who need it.

This radical understanding of the sharing in Christian life has been re-awakened in CST of the last century. The call in *Gaudium et spes* and *Populorum progressio* to change the structures and systems which unequally distribute the goods of creation and cause great disparity between the rich and the poor is on a large, societal scale. We must work to set up a system in which the goods of creation are shared among all of God's people. We are all created to partake in this mortal life together, just as we are all headed towards the same God.

A theme that arises again and again in patristic writings is the understanding of ownership and possession. We need to not only examine how we are called to share, but also how we define ownership. These reflections are directed at those who are rich, and calls for a new relationship with wealth. Saint Ambrose, a fourth century bishop, takes up the call to share what we are given, as nothing is given to us alone. He writes: "You are not making a gift of your possessions to the poor person. You are handing over to him what is his."⁴ We are meant to share the goods of creation. Charity is not a gift to those in need, but a restoration to another person of what already belongs to them. God made the world, in all its abundance, for everyone. In this way, charity is not a gift to the poor, but a fulfillment of justice.

⁴ Walsh S.J., "Patristic Social Consciousness," 128.

This theme is also championed by another fourth century Church leader, Archbishop John Chrysostom. He reflects on the relationship the rich must have to their possessions, writing: “The rich are in the possession of the goods of the poor, even if they have acquired them honestly or inherited them legally. ... Do not say ‘I am using what belongs to me.’ You are using what belongs to others. All the wealth of the world belongs to you and to the others in common, as the sun, air, earth, and all the rest.”⁵ In echo of the writings of Saint Ambrose, John Chrysostom makes clear that while one person is rich and another suffers in poverty, the wealthy person is in possession of what belongs to the poor. All of creation, including the “sun, air, earth, and all the rest,” is an abundant gift that has been given to all. Even if one has legally acquired great wealth, this does not make it just or in accord with living a Christian life. Systems must be in place to care for all people, which includes preventing people from living in poverty. For the rich, this may mean giving up a portion of their wealth to ensure all people have a means to provide for themselves and their families. This also points Christians to seek change in economic systems.

Indeed, to fulfill their responsibility to the poor, Christians are called to support just economic systems. The rich, those with the most resources and power, are especially called to task. William Walsh paraphrases the third century theologian Origen, writing: “The rich will be held accountable for the use of their wealth in much the same way as the priest will be required to give an account to God for his use of common Church funds.”⁶ We are responsible for what we have been given, and must use it in a just and Christian way. This means meeting the needs

⁵ Walsh S.J., “Patristic Social Consciousness,” 129.

⁶ Ibid. 137.

of the poor and using our resources to create a system where poverty does not exist. We will be called to answer for our actions, in how we lived out the message of the Gospel and how we treated the poor.

Ultimately, we believe that there is accountability in being a Christian. God's love and grace are gifts, but we are able to choose how we respond to that love and grace. Scripture tells us unequivocally that God loves the poor and we must treat them with respect and meet their needs. We are responsible in our actions towards those who are poor and CST calls us to respond to that responsibility with love and action.

Just as there were prophets in the Hebrew and New Testaments, there are many in the modern world who call Christians into a new relationship with God and with one another. The call for Christians to respond to the needs of the poor was taken up by Archbishop Dom Helder Camara of Recife, Brazil when he reflected on the disconnect between charity and justice: "When I feed the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist." To feed the poor today is to assess what a person needs and give out of one's access. To feed a hungry person today does not address the problem of hunger tomorrow. Dom Helder asks why the poor have no food, he asks people to reflect on what economic and political systems are in place that prevent people from being able to feed themselves and their families. In recognizing that each person is created in the image of God, Dom Helder affirms that each person has the right to eat, and he asks what are the root causes of why they cannot. In responding to Dom Helder's reflection, the Christian engagement with the world must be rooted in both meeting people's immediate needs and in making sure they will be able to meet their own needs in the future.

CST teaches us that all Catholics should be asking why the poor have no food; why the poor cannot afford food; why some throw food away while others starve. To ask these questions is the first step. Next is to meet the needs of the person standing in front of us, to feed the person dying of starvation. But CST does not end there. The third step is to act to change the system. A reframing of Dom Helder Camara's quote in light of CST: "When I feed the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, and then work for a more just distribution of the earth's resources and for economic policies that honor the dignity of all people, they call me a Catholic." Care for the poor, our responsibility to care for the poor, is central to our Catholic identity. It's one thing to talk about helping the poor, or changing unjust social and economic structures that perpetuate systems of poverty, and another thing to take action and support politicians, legislation and programs which promote justice and the dignity of all people. CST tells us that a fundamental component of being Catholic means acknowledging our responsibility to people who are poor and understanding that this responsibility requires action. In writing about the social engagement of Catholics in CST, the Church recommitted itself to championing the dignity and humanity of women and men who live in poverty. In declaring a responsibility to the poor, the Catholic church firmly grounds itself in a tradition rooted in Scripture and the writings of the earliest Christian leaders. Catholics are called to create just economic and social structures where poverty does not exist. This is the Christian responsibility to the poor.

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