# The Greatest Kept Secret of the Catholic Church: Catholic Social Teaching

*From Deacon Len Collings, Diocese of Middlesbrough*

**Introduction**

Most of us have our own views on, and concerns about the social injustice we see in our society today. But how many of us realise that such concerns have been at the heart of the thinking of the Catholic Church for over a 120 years? Actually in reality they have been at the heart of thinking from the beginning of time for anyone professing the belief that Jesus is Lord. In his example we see the cry of the poor being heard, the marginalised being cared for.

And whilst from the early church Christians have been following this example, a significant event in European history in the late 19th century led to the Church, or more specifically the Pope himself taking the lead in laying out clearly the Church’s teaching on social justice.

The event was the Industrial Revolution and that first document in a chain of documents on Catholic social teaching was Rerum Novarum (Of New Things) an encyclical written by Pope Leo XIII, addressing the exploitation of the masses by the rich few but defending, interestingly, the right to own property and rejecting communism. The real significance of this document is that it was the first time in the history of the Catholic Church that the Pope himself had taken the lead on such issues. A lead followed by subsequent Bishops of Rome, Pius X, John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI and, of course, our current Pope Francis who has reignited the flame of social justice in nearly everything he says and does.

So how do we define Catholic social teaching? Well, basically it is:

• authoritative Church teaching on social, political and economic issues  
• informed by Gospel values and the lived experience of Christian reflection  
• analysing that experience from different historical, political and social contexts  
• providing principles for reflection, criteria for judgment and guidelines for action  
• enabling us in our struggle to live our faith in justice and peace

Just as important is to remember what it most definitely is not.

It is not a third way, if you like, between Communism and Capitalism

It is not an ideal, but more a gathering of thoughts based on social experience

It is not a model, There is no blueprint for Catholic social teaching, just a set of principles based on Gospel Values

So what are those Principles? Here is a brief overview of some of the principles (as summarised by Catholic Charity, [Million Minutes](http://www.milionminutes.org), and used in the Parish programme, [‘Love in Action’](http://www.stepforwardinlove.org)).

**Principles of Catholic Social Teaching**

**THE DIGNITY AND EQUALITY OF EACH HUMAN PERSON**: Every human being is seen as equal. They are lovingly and beautifully made in God’s image and likeness. The other principles flow from this.

**THE CALL TO PARTICIPATION AND COMMUNITY:** Human beings exist in relation to one another. John Donne’s words, No Man is an Island, echo in our ears. We’re called to live with others, be aware of others, communicating, sharing, experiencing moments of joy and being there together in times of sadness. All of us are called to participate, to join in, and to work alongside others for the common good of all.

**A PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR**: Caring for those living in poverty, both in our local neighbourhoods and throughout the world, is a fundamental duty of us all. In the Gospels, time and again, Jesus shows a preferential option for the poor – putting them first, giving them special importance, thinking of their needs and enabling them to have their rightful place in the world. It is not enough simply to think of those living in poverty and try to help them. The voice of people living in poverty needs to be heard. We must enable them to be a full part of the decision making process. We must enable those living in poverty to play a full, active role in society.

**THE DIGNITY AND RIGHTS OF WORKERS: T**he right to work, to have a job, to earn money and so support your family are all connected to the dignity of each individual. Catholic social teaching affirms that human beings are not merely a commodity, a tool as part of a process to make things. Human beings are greater than any thing. They deserve a fair wage and proper working conditions.

**SOLIDARITY AMONG PEOPLES AND THE PROMOTION OF PEACE:** We seek the good of one another, aware of our dependence on one another. Pope John Paul II said, “[Solidarity] is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good” (The social concern of the Church, 38). Peace flows from this. We are called to live honestly with one another, working together in love for the good of all. This is what will lead to true peace.

**CARE FOR CREATION:** God created the earth. Often, the way we treat creation leads to the harm both of it, and of those living it. Our destruction of the earth for quick gain has repercussions for animals, for ourselves now, and for generations to come. We need to treat the earth with respect.

This principles can be downloaded as a handout from <http://millionminutes.org/s/CST_web.pdf>

**A method for implementing Catholic Social Teaching (CST)**

Catholic Social Teaching is not an ideal, it’ is meant to be a basis for action, Faith in Action or following Jesus’ New Commandment to us all to ‘Love one another as I have loved you. Catholic Social Teaching could be described as Love in Action.

Catholic Social Teaching is all about action. If we just sit and listen about it or discuss its relevance to our society today we are missing the point. Catholic Social Teaching demands we follow the process outlined by John XXIII: we see, we judge and we act.

We see – we examine the concrete situation – a situation perhaps in our own town.

We judge – we evaluate the situation with respect to the principles of CST

We act – we decide what should be done in the circumstances and act on it

**History and Overview**

Let us briefly go through the main documents which form the basis of Catholic Social Teaching to gain some idea of the issues the Church addressed and of just how important social justice is to the Catholic Church.

**1891**[**Rerum Novarum**](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/leo_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum_en.html) **– “Of New Things” – Leo XIII**

*Summary*: Pope Leo XIII highlights the principles necessary to bring about a just society introducing the ‘just wage theory’. These principles include protecting the rights of workers, free association being defended by the state and private property defended but limited.

*Backstory*: Rerum Novarum was the first of the modern wave of social encyclicals. Pope Leo Xlll was acutely aware of the poverty of many workers and of the growth in power of socialist movements.

**1931   [Quadragesimo Anno](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19310515_quadragesimo-anno_en.html" \t "_blank" \o "Quadragesimo Anno - On the Fortieth Year) – “On the Fortieth Year” – Pius X**

*Summary*: Dictatorship is condemned as the dangers of fascism and communism are exposed – such as increasing child and female labour.

*Backstory*: This, mid depression, provoked new thinking as opposed to the previous preoccupation with World War I. The growth of systematic atheism had increased, the modernist crisis arose and there were huge developments in thought. Germany was economically devastated and Russia allowed many of its own people to die – justified as necessary for the good of the state.

**1961**[**Mater et Magistra**](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_15051961_mater_en.html) **- “Mother & Teacher” – John XXIII**

*Summary*: It states the need for a balance between excessive intervention of the state against the need for state intervention to curb injustices and assist socialisation. It also goes on to advocate worker participation and ownership, and marks the beginning of a focus on international poverty rather than its previous concentration on industrialised countries.

*Backstory*: Communism was still viewed as being a major threat and, since World War II, there was an increasing concern for poorer nations and international inequalities.

**1963   [Pacem in Terris](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem_en.html" \t "_blank" \o "Pacem in Terris - Peace on Earth) - “Peace on Earth” – John XXIII**

*Summary:* First addressed to ‘all people of goodwill’ and underlines the rights and responsibilities of individuals. This document also condemns the arms race and racism, and advocates resources to be shared in the common endeavour for development.

*Backstory:* The terrifying threat of nuclear war had become heightened with the building of the Berlin Wall and the Cuban Missile Crisis. In addition, the civil rights movement in the US had also exposed divisions of race.

**1965   [Gaudium et Spes](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html" \t "_blank" \o "Gaudium et Spes - The Joys and Hopes) - “The Joys and Hopes” Vatican II**

A document of the Second Vatican Council (1962 – 1965), promulgated by Pope Paul VI

*Summary:* This document underlined the need for the church to be completely immersed in human affairs and for the church to share the joys and hopes of people.

*Backstory:* Demonstrates that the church needs to ‘interpret the signs of the times’. Although this was a document by the Second Vatican Council rather than an encyclical, it was none the less significant. The Vatican II was a pastoral council which firmly showed the significance of the church in the world rather than it being of spiritual concern only. This was a ‘constitution’ of Vatican II – voted for by a majority of the bishops and was therefore hugely important for Catholic social teaching.

**1967   [Populorum Progressio](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum_en.html" \t "_blank" \o "Populorum Progressio - The Development of Peoples) – “The Development of Peoples” Paul VI**

*Summary:* Pope Paul VI most famously stated that ‘development is the new name for peace’ and he goes onto express the dangers of conflict if inequalities grew. The whole area of human development is examined from an integral and holistic viewpoint rather than development just being based on economic factors.

*Backstory:* This was the concern for the signs of the times (in practical terms) as the Second Vatican Council had not fleshed out its ideas for development. Paul VI had also travelled widely and now international communications were bringing issues such as global poverty into closer proximity due to newer technologies such as television.

**1971    [Octogesima Adveniens](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_19710514_octogesima-adveniens_en.html" \t "_blank" \o "Octogesima Adveniens - On the Eightieth Year) – “On the Eightieth Year” – Paul VI**

*Summary:* This is strictly an ‘apostolic letter’ rather than an encyclical. Further reference is made in this letter to ‘The Condition of Labour’. Paul VI lists approximately fifteen key issues presenting problems. Paul VI expresses that a variety of responses should be offered as the Christian solution. He also states that Christians should be called to action to involve themselves in building a just world by analysing their own realities and devising responses in light of the Gospel.

*Backstory:* The South American bishops had met at Medellin, Columbia, three years earlier and their themes of structural injustice, the option for the poor, conscientisation and liberation permeate the thinking in this document.

**1971**[**Justicia in Mundo**](http://www.osjspm.org/majordoc_justicia_in_mundo_offical_test.aspx) **- “Justice in the World” – Synod of Bishops**

‘Justice is a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel…’ The Church must examine its conscience about its lifestyle and so witness to the Gospel. The importance of Education for Justice.

**1975       [Evangelii Nuntiandi](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html" \t "_blank" \o "Evangelii Nuntiandi)- “Evangelisation in the Modern World”- Paul VI**

Profound links between evangelisation and development and liberation. Only the kingdom is absolute; everything else is relative. All levels of society are to be transformed by the power of the good news.

**1981** [**Laborem Exercens**](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens_en.html) **- “On Human Work” – John Paul II**

*Summary:* Work is the central issue of this document; do women and men participate in God’s creativity and share in its productivity or are they merely cogs? This poses the idea that work should increase human dignity as the economy is made for labour and man is the subject of work. New concepts of solidarity and ‘indirect employer’ emerge strongly in this encyclical.

*Backstory:* Both capitalism and Marxism are criticised. John Paul had lived through the worst excesses of two regimes (Russian Communism and Nazism) which saw the worker as an expendable resource in the interests of the state. He was highly aware that the exploitation of workers continued, especially in poor areas of the world.

**1987** [**Sollicitudo Rei Socialis**](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis_en.html) **- “The Social Concern of the Church” - John Paul II**

*Summary:* John Paul who had now been Pope for over fifteen years writes this very thoughtful letter in which the terms ‘structures of sin’ and ‘option for the poor’ strongly emerge (from liberation theology). He goes onto condemn the gap between the rich and poor which can be partially linked to the arms trade.

*Backstory:* The increase in refugees is a major concern and a result of confrontation. This was written during the continuation of the Cold War with the Berlin Wall collapsing later in 1989. This time also saw the severe recession of the mid 1980’s and gaps between the rich and poor widening with ‘turbo capitalism’.

**1991       [Centesimus Annus](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus_en.html" \t "_blank" \o "Centesimus Annus - The One Hundredth Year) – “The One Hundredth Year” – John Paul II**

*Summary:* To affirm democracy the excesses of capitalism must be condemned, as well as the ‘idolatry of the market’ and the ‘insanity of the arms race’. Private property is deemed acceptable but for the first time the world’s goods (including intellectual property) are stated as having a ‘universal destination’.

*Backstory:* The Berlin Wall had just collapsed; arms expenditure globally hovered at around $1,000 billion (one trillion) and there was also the emergence of the super-rich individual.

**1995** [**EvangeliumVitae**](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae_en.html)**– “The Gospel of Life” - John Paul II**

*Summary:* Powerful underscoring of the dignity and value of life; John Paul II condemns the ‘culture of death’ where individual freedom is placed before the rights of others to life -hence the condemnation of the death penalty, abortion and euthanasia. With very moving words to women who have undergone abortion; ‘do not give in to discouragement and do not lose hope’. This presents positive images of the promotion of a ‘culture of life’ where human freedom finds its authentic meaning and a culture of the family is the ‘sanctuary of life’.

*Backstory:* John Paul II is clearly anxious about the development of individualism and its assertion of rights, especially in advanced societies.

**2009** [**Caritas in Veritate**](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate_en.html) **- “Charity in Truth” – Benedict XVI**

*Summary:* Benedict’s message is directed at a variety of concerns including global poverty, injustice and the arms race. It looks at individuals and organisations through the lens of charity and truth. The individual motivation for charity and the concern for authentic human development are frequent concerns. There are also strong environmental concerns and the concept of ‘intergenerational justice’ is made.

*Backstory:* This now marked forty years since [***Populorum Progressio***](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum_en.html) – “The Progress of Peoples” (1967). The global economic and banking crisis of 2008 had a major disproportionate effect on the poor of the world, and the issue of the environment had moved up the agenda as better evidence of degradation was consolidated.

**2013 Evangelium Gaudium - The Joy of the Gospel**

Pope Francis

*Summary:* While not a papal encyclical, Evangelii Gaudium gives particular attention to the ‘social dimension of Evangelisation’. The first section, setting the context for sharing the Joy of the Gospel talks of a huge amount of social problems, characterised by Pope Francis as the ‘crisis of communal commitment’ and touches on the markets, the economy of exclusion, inner city life, spiritual worldliness and consumerism, among other things.

*Backstory:* Pope Francis wrote this document upon the invitation of the fathers of the Synod of Bishops, and published it in commemoration of the end of the Year of Faith.

**2015 Laudato Si - On Care for Our Common Home**

Pope Francis

*Summary*: Laudato Si’ is a passionate call to all people of the world to take “swift and unified global action”, particularly in relation to the destruction of the environment. Pope Francis writes that while humanity has made incredible progress in science and technology, this has not been matched with moral, ethical and spiritual growth. This imbalance is causing our relationships with creation and with God to break down and our hearts to become hardened to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor. We become arrogant and neglect creation and everyone that is part of it; forgetting what God has entrusted to our care.

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