Hello. I am Dr. Anna Floerke Scheid, and I am delighted to welcome you to this course, Catholic Social Thought: Justice in a Global Context. You are about to begin Part I of the course, entitled “Introducing Catholic Social Teaching.” This first part of the course includes three units in which you first will gain a general understanding of what Catholic social teaching is; second, study its sources and methods; and third develop a clear understanding of the relationship between charity and justice.

As you will discover through studying the first unit, Catholic social teaching first emerged in 1891, when Pope Leo XIII released a papal encyclical called Rerum Novarum, on the justice due to workers during the transition from a feudalist to a capitalist economy in Europe. Since then, many Popes, bishops, and even whole Bishops’ conferences have issued documents with the intention of addressing serious social issues. Some works of CST are global in scope, addressing issues like the global financial crisis of 2008, universal human rights, or neo-colonialism and economic justice across the global North/South divide. Others, especially those written by particular bishops or Bishops’ conferences, deal with local concerns such as a particular nation’s struggles with racial justice or ecological degradation.

In the second unit of Part I, you’ll be introduced to the “four sources of Christian ethics”: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Each of the sources come into play in various documents you will be reading throughout the course. For example, most of the documents of CST make use of Scriptural sources to define certain ideas and concepts, such as human dignity and peace. Likewise, the document Rerum Novarum makes use of the method of Natural Law, understood as reason, to explain why human beings have a limited right to private property. Documents like Centesimus Annus appeal intentionally to tradition by harkening back to themes discussed in earlier encyclicals. Moreover, the writers of the African Banjul Charter of Human and Peoples’ Rights bring to bear the experience of colonialism on their declaration that not only individual human beings, but also whole cultures, have rights and dignity that ought to be respected.

Finally, in the third unit of Part I, you will begin to make critical distinctions between charity and justice. In the Catholic social justice tradition, charity and justice are both important for fostering individual human dignity and the common good. Charity works to meet people’s immediate needs for things like shelter or food. Justice, on the other hand, tries to identify and correct the root causes of social problems. For example, charity offers a homeless person shelter for the night. Justice asks, “Why does our community have a problem with homelessness? How can we correct this problem?” The answers to the questions posed by justice will often be more complex than charitable solutions can resolve. To solve the social problem of homelessness, we will need more than just a shelter. We may also, for example, need to create jobs that pay living wages. We may need to train and educate people for those jobs. We may need better support for people with mental illnesses or disabilities. And we may need more affordable housing. Justice thus asks for complex and long-term solutions to social problems. Charity will always be necessary because emergencies – whether fires, floods, sudden illnesses, or urgent disasters – will always be a part of human life. But ideally, justice is trying to create a world where charity is less often necessary.