Ten Building Blocks Of Catholic Social Teaching

By William J. Byron

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PRINCIPLES, ONCE INTERNALIZED, lead to something. They prompt activity, impel motion, direct choices. A principled person always has a place to stand, knows where he or she is coming from and likely to end up. Principles always lead the person who possesses them somewhere, for some purpose, to do something, or choose not to.

In June, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops issued Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions--Reflections of the U.S. Catholic Bishops, a document intended to call the attention of all U.S. Catholics to the existence of Catholic social principles--a body of doctrine with which, the bishops say, "far too many Catholics are not familiar." In fact, they add, "many Catholics do not adequately understand that the social teaching of the Church is an essential part of Catholic faith." Strong words.

A companion document, "Summary Report of the Task Force on Catholic Social Teaching and Catholic Education," is included in the same booklet that contains the bishops' reflections on this "serious challenge for all Catholics." Along with about 30 others--educators from all levels, scholars, publishers, social ministry professionals--I served on the task force that produced the report.

The task force was convened in 1995 by Archbishop John R. Roach, the retired archbishop of St. Paul-Minneapolis. Often during our periodic meetings over the course of two years, it occurred to me that one (admittedly only one) reason why the body of Catholic social teaching is underappreciated, undercommunicated and not sufficiently understood is that the principles on which the doctrine is based are not clearly articulated and conveniently condensed. They are not "packaged" for catechetical purposes like the Ten Commandments and the seven sacraments. While many Catholics can come up with the eight Beatitudes and some would be willing to take a stab at listing the four cardinal virtues, few, if any, have a ready reply to the catechetical question the bishops want to raise: What are those Catholic social principles that are to be accepted as an essential part of the faith? The next question, of course, looks to how they can best be personally appropriated--internalized--so that they can lead to action.

On the 10th anniversary of their 1986 pastoral letter "Economic Justice for All," the bishops issued a 10-point summary of their teaching on the applicability of Catholic social principles to the economy. We on the task force had that summary in mind as we considered the broader issue of the applicability of Catholic social thought to a range of issues that go beyond the economic to include family, religious, social, political,
technological, recreational and cultural considerations. It would be a mistake, of course, to confine Catholic social teaching to the economic sphere.

How many Catholic social principles are there? Combing through the documents mentioned above, I have come up with 10. They are not listed by number in these documents. In one instance, I have split into two principles a single theme articulated by the bishops. There is nothing at all official about my count. Some future Catechism of the Catholic Church may list more or fewer than these 10, if compilers of that future teaching aid find that Catholic social teaching is suitable for framing in such a fashion. In any case, I offer my list of 10 for three reasons: (1) Some reasonably complete list is needed if the ignorance cited by the bishops is going to be addressed; (2) any list can serve to invite the hand of both editors and teachers to smooth out the sentences for clarity and ease of memorization; and (3) any widely circulated list will stimulate further thought on the part of scholars and activists as to what belongs in a set of principles that can serve as a table of contents for the larger body of Catholic social teaching.

So, using these documents as my source, I here present 10 principles of Catholic social teaching, which should not be seen as a rewriting of the documents, but just editing and reformatting.

1. The Principle of Human Dignity.

"Every human being is created in the image of God and redeemed by Jesus Christ, and therefore is invaluable and worthy of respect as a member of the human family" (Reflections, p. 1).

This is the bedrock principle of Catholic social teaching. Every person--regardless of race, sex, age, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, employment or economic status, health, intelligence, achievement or any other differentiating characteristic--is worthy of respect. It is not what you do or what you have that gives you a claim on respect; it is simply being human that establishes your dignity. Given that dignity, the human person is, in the Catholic view, never a means, always an end.

The body of Catholic social teaching opens with the human person, but it does not close there. Individuals have dignity; individualism has no place in Catholic social thought. The principle of human dignity gives the human person a claim on membership in a community, the human family.

2. The Principle of Respect for Human Life.

"Every person, from the moment of conception to natural death, has inherent dignity and a right to life consistent with that dignity" (Reflections, pp. 1-2).

Human life at every stage of development and decline is precious and therefore worthy of protection and respect. It is always wrong directly to attack innocent human life. The
Catholic tradition sees the sacredness of human life as part of any moral vision for a just and good society.


"[O]ur tradition proclaims that the person is not only sacred but also social. How we organize our society--in economics and politics, in law and policy--directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community" (Reflections, p. 4).

The centerpiece of society is the family; family stability must always be protected and never undermined. By association with others--in families and in other social institutions that foster growth, protect dignity and promote the common good--human persons achieve their fulfillment.

4. The Principle of Participation.

"We believe people have a right and a duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable" (Reflections, p. 5).

Without participation, the benefits available to an individual through any social institution cannot be realized. The human person has a right not to be shut out from participating in those institutions that are necessary for human fulfillment.

This principle applies in a special way to conditions associated with work. "Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God's creation. If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected--the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to organize and join unions, to private property, and to economic initiative" (Reflections, p. 5).

5. The Principle of Preferential Protection for the Poor and Vulnerable.

"In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, our tradition recalls the story of the last judgment (Mt. 25:31-46) and instructs us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first" (Reflections, p. 5).

Why is this so? Because the common good--the good of society as a whole--requires it. The opposite of rich and powerful is poor and powerless. If the good of all, the common good, is to prevail, preferential protection must move toward those affected adversely by the absence of power and the presence of privation. Otherwise the balance needed to keep society in one piece will be broken to the detriment of the whole.

6. The Principle of Solidarity.

"Catholic social teaching proclaims that we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they live. We are one human family.... Learning to practice the virtue of
solidarity means learning that 'loving our neighbor' has global dimensions in an interdependent world” (*Reflections*, p. 5).

The principle of solidarity functions as a moral category that leads to choices that will promote and protect the common good.

**7. The Principle of Stewardship.**

"The Catholic tradition insists that we show our respect for the Creator by our stewardship of creation" (*Reflections*, p. 6).

The steward is a manager, not an owner. In an era of rising consciousness about our physical environment, our tradition is calling us to a sense of moral responsibility for the protection of the environment—croplands, grasslands, woodlands, air, water, minerals and other natural deposits. Stewardship responsibilities also look toward our use of our personal talents, our attention to personal health and our use of personal property.

**8. The Principle of Subsidiarity.**

This principle deals chiefly with "the responsibilities and limits of government, and the essential roles of voluntary associations" (*Reflections*, p. 6).

The principle of subsidiarity puts a proper limit on government by insisting that no higher level of organization should perform any function that can be handled efficiently and effectively at a lower level of organization by human persons who, individually or in groups, are closer to the problems and closer to the ground. Oppressive governments are always in violation of the principle of subsidiarity; overactive governments frequently violate this principle.

All eight of these principles were culled from the relatively brief "Reflections of the U.S. Catholic Bishops," as the second subtitle of *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching* describes this published product of the N.C.C.B. As I read on through the summary of the task force report, I found an articulation of two additional principles, which follow.

**9. The Principle of Human Equality.**

"Equality of all persons comes from their essential dignity.... While differences in talents are a part of God's plan, social and cultural discrimination in fundamental rights... are not compatible with God's design" ("Summary," pp. 23-4).

Treating equals equally is one way of defining justice, also understood classically as rendering to each person his or her due. Underlying the notion of equality is the simple principle of fairness; one of the earliest ethical stirrings felt in the developing human person is a sense of what is "fair" and what is not.

**10. The Principle of the Common Good.**
"The common good is understood as the social conditions that allow people to reach their full human potential and to realize their human dignity" ("Summary," p. 25).

The social conditions the bishops have in mind presuppose "respect for the person," "the social well-being and development of the group" and the maintenance by public authority of "peace and security." Today, "in an age of global interdependence," the principle of the common good points to the "need for international structures that can promote the just development of the human family across regional and national lines."

What constitutes the common good is always going to be a matter for debate. The absence of any concern for or sensitivity to the common good is a sure sign of a society in need of help. As a sense of community is eroded, concern for the common good declines. A proper communitarian concern is the antidote to unbridled individualism, which, like unrestrained selfishness in personal relations, can destroy balance, harmony and peace within and among groups, neighborhoods, regions and nations.

It would not be inconsistent with either the Reflections or the "Summary" to articulate a separate principle of justice and another principle that affirms both the right to private property and what the "Summary" calls the "universal destination of goods," by which is meant that the goods of this world are intended by God for the benefit of everyone. But these principles are implied in those already listed; I think I'll stop counting at 10. The door remains wide open for additional themes, theses or what I have been calling simply "principles."

I am often asked what the difference is between a value and a principle. The terms are frequently used interchangeably. I like the "leads-to-something" implication of principle, while acknowledging that values, once internalized, will prompt people to act consistently with what they cherish and consider to be valuable--i.e., with what they judge to be worth their time, treasure and talent. Neither principles nor values lead anywhere if they remain abstract, embalmed in print, or are not internalized by human persons and carried in human hearts. Encouraging internalization of these principles is a pedagogical challenge that could be the subject of another article.

By including Catholic social teaching among the essentials of the faith, the bishops are affirming the existence of credenda (things to be believed) that become, in the believer, a basis for the agenda (things to be done) the believer must follow. Thus Catholic social action flows from Catholic social doctrine. How to bring the social portion of the doctrine of the faith to the attention of believers is the challenge the bishops have now put once again before Catholic pastors and educators at every level.

By the arrangement I've attempted here, this agenda rests on 10 building blocks:

Human Person
Human Life
Association
Participation
Preference for the Poor  
Solidarity  
Stewardship  
Subsidiarity  
Equality  
Common Good

People who enjoy coming up with acronyms could rearrange the order to construct an easily remembered set of capital letters. Whatever the order and regardless of the labels, this set of principles might constitute topics for an adult education lecture series, segments for a semester-long course, chapters in a textbook, offices or sections in a research center or simply 10 "bins" for gathering the collected wisdom drawn from Scripture; patristic literature; Scholastic, conciliar and papal teaching; church history; systematic, moral and pastoral theology, and the ever-developing body of social reflection coming from episcopal conferences and other sources.

Not to be overlooked is the possibility of 10 biographical essays focusing on persons who embodied one or more of these principles in a significant way--Dorothy Day, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, Mother Teresa, for instance. Also possible would be a collection of excerpts, organized under these 10 headings, from Chrysostom, Ambrose, Aquinas and other great social voices from the Catholic past. If they are to be taught, the principles need a human face; the lessons have to be conveyed in words and images that move the heart.

These 10 organizational categories can accommodate every conceivable social issue; they can provide any social problem with an analytical home. Analysis and reflection targeted on this material can become the base for moral instruction and formation of conscience. And that, of course, is the whole point of bringing Catholic education and Catholic social teaching together into the new working partnership hoped for by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Meanwhile, the interested inquirer can find references for further reading in the back of the N.C.C.B. booklet, or one could simply consult the index in the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* for leads to fuller explanations of Catholic social teaching. And if anyone wonders why the Catholic bishops reflect and write occasionally about war, peace, nuclear weapons, the economy, abortion, euthanasia, health insurance and a wide range of other topics that have a clear social and moral dimension, these principles provide the necessary interpretative framework for understanding the significance of the bishops' pastoral letters. They cannot be dismissed out of hand as political tracts; they must be held in respect as important instruments for teaching the Catholic faith.