

Immaculate Conception

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A Rough Guide to Catholic Social Teaching

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Slide 1 Pope Francis – who has advanced CST constantly within the modern Church.

Slide 2 Let me begin with a story. In 2013, I was in Cambodia doing some research into an early programme of Caritas Australia, using Catholic Social Teaching as a basis for its development work with communities of desperately poor and vulnerable people in rural areas of the country. I had trained the Caritas Australia folk in teasing out the elements of CST which showed them how to enrich their development initiatives from a faith perspective. They then trained their Caritas colleagues in country – all of them Buddhist – and then they trained the community-based organisations (CBOs) who implemented the programmes at the grassroots. I was in one of the local offices and saw a long list in Khmer on the wall and the only word I could read was CST in Roman lettering. They said that was their form of development and that the list named all of the principles of CST (solidarity, subsidiarity, option for the poor etc.) and everybody called it the ‘CST Approach’ but did not spell out the letters CST in case they thought we were proselytizing. This Buddhist community had embraced the values because they saw them mirroring their own values of compassion but put into a working framework that transformed people’s lives.

Slide 3 Many Catholics will say that the social teaching of the Church began in 1891 with the encyclical of Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*. It was the first social encyclical of the modern era but the teaching goes back to our Jewish roots in the Old Testament, strengthened by the teachings of Jesus in the New and expanded by Tradition leading us to the modern era.

Because of time restraints, I can only touch on these sources but it will illustrate that CST is not a modern construct of lefties but central to the faith established by Jesus.

Slide 4 Origins and Evolution of the Tradition

There are, according to the American Jesuit theologian, Thomas Massaro, four major sources of inspiration for CST – revelation (“the ways God shows God’s self to people”), reason (knowledge gained through human reason), tradition (the Church’s theological thinking about

social issues throughout history), and experience (in a specific CST sense, human thinking and witness to the first three sources in the working of the world).

We will look at all these sources but I'll stress the origins in Sacred Scripture.

Scripture, as with CST itself, is not a blueprint for either society or our own moral behaviour, but, in Massaro's words, "shapes a community to be a locus of social concern and forms people to be disciples with an innate sense of social justice" – which is what Mary and I are trying to assist you in doing here in Immaculate Conception.

Slide 5 Old Testament

The Old Testament is a collection of law, myth, history, prophesy and poetry which also contains the seeds of the coming of the Christ in the New Testament. Despite the many ambiguities in the texts of the Old Testament, more recent scholarship, especially by liberation theologians, has discovered a unity behind the textual chaos which takes into account the economic, social and political forces which shaped the theology and ideas of the time. It is a theological unity, perceived through a social scientific lens, which points to elements of what we now call Catholic Social Teaching, emphasising the necessity of creating a just society and people of empathy, especially towards the poor and those on the margins of society.

Slide 6 Among the CST elements which can be identified in the Old Testament in general are: the preferential option for the poor; the central role of justice and mercy; seeing in the suffering of the people of Israel the dehumanizing poverty of billions of people in the 21st century; the living in right relationship with God, neighbour and all Creation, meaning that justice is also relational in addition to being part and parcel of a human being cast in the divine image; obeying the commands of the Covenant and castigating those who go against it by being, for example, unjust to their neighbour. The God of the Prophet Amos says, "Let me have no more of the din of your chanting, no more of your strumming on harps. But let justice flow like water and integrity like an unfailing stream" (Amos 5: 22-24) in a complaint that God's people are putting too much weight on worship rather than righteousness (which is to be equated with justice).

Slide 7 New Testament

The most important proclamations which further prefigure the content of CST are the Beatitudes (Mt. 5:3-12) and the Last Judgment (Mt. 25).

The Beatitudes reflect how we should act and to whom if we are to be fully human. We should be thirsty for justice, compassionate, peace-loving and in solidarity with the poor. By acting in this way, we should not expect to be treated well by society and elites, and we are reminded that the Prophets of the Old Testament were vilified when they proclaimed such values which were integral to God's Law for humankind.

Slide 8 The Kingdom (or *Reign*) of God was not just a spiritual way of describing Jesus' mission but a concrete framework for bringing justice to individuals and societies on Earth and ridding it of oppression. Oppression was not merely keeping people in poverty or about exploitation. It covered not just the oppression from the Roman occupation of Palestine but the oppression meted out by religious authorities to, for example, those who could not read the Torah, the Law, and who were "the rabble [who] knows nothing of the Law – they are damned" (Jn7: 49). Such marginalisation of people was widespread. It affected many categories of people who were treated as Other and were despised by the so-called 'righteous', and had their divinely-gifted dignity as human beings undermined. Jesus, however, consorted with them, listened to them, shared food with them, healed them and loved them, restoring not only their lives but their dignity.

The CST signs of the Reign of God involve transforming the unjust economic and social practices of the time to ones which had *shalom*, peace with justice, at its heart. This understanding of the Kingdom embellishing on its more spiritual meaning became more prevalent after the Second Vatican Council and especially with the liberationist readings of Basic Ecclesial Communities in Latin America.

Slide 9 These Basic Christian or Ecclesial Communities allowed the poor for the first time to discuss their lives, their poverty and the unjust situations in which they lived through a reading of the Bible that spoke justice for and to the poor, leading to awareness, knowledge and hope for a better life and turning theory to action. In the way Jesus talks of the Kingdom of God, it is clear that the Kingdom is not just a future event but it is revealed whenever justice or compassion or healing are practised. It is Jesus' interpretation of how the world was meant

to be. The answer in all cases was to love your neighbour as yourself and, by doing so, you love God and follow God's law.

Slide 10 The Patristic Era

Patristics is a branch of theology concerning the writings of the Early Fathers of the Church (second to seventh centuries), where can be glimpsed the emergence of a justice and peace tradition which in future centuries was to morph into Catholic Social Teaching. You can see the emergence of a system of CST in the patristic era with their insistence of the Early Fathers and some Mothers on justice for the poor in the economic and social spheres, and on condemning the exploitation of the poor by the rich.

In the fourth century, St Ambrose of Milan connects the idea of justice to the doctrine of creation: all have a right to a share of God's gifts. He wrote,

God has ordered all things to be produced so that there should be food in common for all, and that the earth should be the common possession of all. Nature, therefore, has produced a common right for all, but greed has made it a right for a few.

The Early Fathers can be credited with a number of elements that form CST today. They connected in a closer way their faith with society and economics. They promoted the teaching that the common good comes before individualism. The equality of all human beings was encouraged and, even if there were no calls to end the slave trade, treating slaves well was essential. Institutions were set up to organise charity. Detachment from possessions was urged. The universal destination of the Earth's goods to satisfy everyone's need has its origins in the discourses of the Early Fathers. Lastly, justice and charity in almsgiving were emerging as twins in Catholic thought.

We then enter the medieval period and the scholastics

Slide 11 Scholasticism

Scholasticism, similar in secular terms to the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, was a cultural movement where new ideas and methodologies of reasoning flourished within the Christian faith, from the beginning of the twelfth century to the sixteenth century. To represent the scholastics, I am just going to say a word about the teaching of St Thomas Aquinas, the great Dominican theologian.

Aquinas believed that all Creation was suffused with God which also meant that God's imprint was on our deep nature as human beings (cf. Rom 2: 14-16). This reasoning resulted in the insistence that there is an 'eternal law' governed by God, a law which is capable of being understood by human beings through their reason. This 'natural law' - 'natural' in the sense of being rooted in human nature as well as being fathomable through human reason - is one which all human beings share and which connects them to God, and that it is the way in which God steers the world. This natural law, based on Scripture, is governed by God's justice. Human beings exercise justice towards others to realign the order in Creation that God desires.

Slide 12 From this comes the CST theme of the common good in which an individual will seek the good of the whole community and find his/her own fulfilment in the good of all. Aquinas acknowledges the situation of the poorest by declaring that they had the moral right to take what they needed to survive. He called for just wages for workers, seeing this as part of recognising the God-given dignity of the human person. His "theologically based humanism" provides the "ground for a critique of any [political or societal] system which perpetuates exclusion and marginalisation".

Through such thinking, Aquinas inspired his religious Order, the Dominicans, to take up human rights as a central part of their mission to protect the dignity of the human person. The fifteenth-century Spanish friar, Francisco de Vitorio (1483-1546), is regarded as the 'Founding Father' of international law and human rights because of his writings on the indigenous people of the Americas suffering under the imperialism of the Spanish state. The lay Thomist philosopher, Jacques Maritain, was a collaborator in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Dominicans to this day specialise in human rights at their office in Geneva where they participate as an NGO at the meetings of the Human Rights Council.

Aquinas and other scholastics gave a theological underpinning to what became Catholic Social Teaching, taking the clay of Scriptural writings on the three theological virtues of faith, hope and charity and moulding them into spheres of action that are necessary to undertake for us to act as fully human persons. The greatest of the three virtues, as St Paul reminds us (1 Cor.

13:13), is *caritas* (charity, love), and one of the fruits of charity is peace, peace within oneself and peace within the community. Justice, friendship, doing good for the neighbour and working for reconciliation and peace are all grounded in the love of God yet look outward to humanity.

Slide 13 Scholasticism managed to combine revelation, tradition and reason in its theological world, showing ultimately that Catholic Social Teaching consisted of “universal truths illuminated and grasped by the natural power of the human mind”. Pope Francis reminds us that doing random acts of kindness is okay but it is even better when you change your mindset to be kind, Christian and follow CST principles to transform yourself and society into sites of peace with justice. These truths were then passed on to the modern era which produced the first social encyclical upon which all following social encyclicals by Popes have been built and this brings us back nicely to 1891 and Pope Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* and the modern era of CST.

Slide 14 A summary of our faith from Pope Francis. I hope I have at least given you some ammunition, to use a wholly inappropriate word, to show that Catholic Social Teaching is central to our faith not a voluntary addition.

Slide 15 As you have seen, it is not the Labour Party at prayer, or a political manifesto but covers one of the three central tenets of the faith – *diakonia*, the ministry of serving society, human dignity and human rights. This last picture is of my former Burmese refugee students on the Thai-Burma border. All three of them work for NGOs and risk their lives to serve their own people within Burma which is now governed by the military. They have taken *diakonia* seriously as we should do as I think we see from the determination on their faces.

I look forward to exploring with you and Mary more aspects of what used to be called the Church’s Best Kept Secret and is now regarded as one aspect of the Church which should be trumpeted for the sake of humanity and the planet.