

## What is Social Justice

Some may have heard the term “social justice” used derisively by TV pundits. In the Catholic Church, however, social justice is a vital component to Catholic Social Teaching. Since at least 1891, Catholic popes have reiterated the moral obligation all Catholics share to put their faith into practice. This is what Catholics mean when we discuss “social justice.” It is not about subscribing to any particular political viewpoint, it is about practicing what we preach.

So what do we preach? First and foremost, the Catholic Church teaches us to recognize that we are all brothers and sisters, created in God’s image, and we must love one another. Putting this into practice goes far beyond merely being nice to our neighbor. Within Catholic Social Teaching, we are called upon to take responsibility for each other and our world, working for systemic changes in public policies so that economic, governmental, and other systems and institutions are more responsive to human needs and protect the common good on a global level.

Catholic Social Teaching addresses several key elements:

1. **Dignity of the Human Person.** We believe in the inherent dignity of all human beings and the sanctity of human life. As part of our basic dignity, we must also have ready access to all that is necessary for life, including food, drinkable water, clothing, housing, health care, education, etc.
2. **Participation, Common Good and Community.** We are social creatures with both the right to participate in society and the obligation to do so in a manner that promotes the common good. While Catholic Social Teaching supports the right of individuals to own property, it also requires that property owners use their property in a manner that promotes the common good (i.e., no dumping toxic waste into common waterways).
3. **Option for the Poor.** “The moral test of a society is how it treats its most vulnerable members” (Office for Social Justice). From the Beatitudes throughout the teachings of Jesus, God reminds us that our first priority must be the poor. Economic progress, private and public policies, and personal decisions must be gauged by how each affects the poor in our local communities and in our worldwide community.
4. **Rights and Responsibilities.** All people have a fundamental right to life and those things required to live a life with dignity (food, water, clothing, shelter, health care, education). We are also responsible for exercising our rights appropriately, protecting the rights of others, and promoting justice where human rights are ignored or otherwise not provided.
5. **Role of Government and Subsidiarity.** Government is an instrument to protect and promote rights, dignity, and the common good. This should be accomplished at the level of government closest to the people and the people have a right to participate in government. If the goals cannot be achieved at the lower level, then higher levels of government must intervene.
6. **Rights of Workers.** The economy exists for people, not the other way around. We all have a right to productive work and to working conditions that respect human life and dignity, including a living wage and safe conditions. Workers also have a right to an equal voice at the bargaining table. Catholic Social Teaching is NOT about redistributing wealth through the state.

It does hold, however, that the accumulation of wealth while others lack basic necessities is unjust and an unfettered free market cannot satisfy all needs.

7. **Stewardship of God's Creation.** We are responsible for the gifts God has given us and must use the world's goods responsibly and as trustees for future generations.
8. **Global Solidarity.** We are one family, responsible for one another.

Clearly the themes are not exclusive. As we review any one personal decision or public policy, several themes may apply. As Catholics, the key is that we are using the themes to evaluate our decisions and the decisions of leaders here and abroad.

More in depth reviews of the themes as related to current events or issues may be available at [www.dioslc.org](http://www.dioslc.org) or at [www.usccb.org](http://www.usccb.org).