

Guidance for a Troubled World

100 Years of Catholic Social Teachings



By **Kenneth R. Overberg, S.J.**

May 15, 1991, is a very special birthday. On that day, the Church celebrates the 100th birthday of modern Catholic social teachings. Exactly one century earlier, Pope Leo XIII issued *The Condition of Labor* (also known by its Latin title *Rerum Novarum*), generally recognized as the first of the collection of documents called the social teachings.

Throughout these 100 years the statements of the popes, Vatican II and conferences of bishops have addressed urgent national and international issues such as human rights, labor problems, economic depression and development, political participation, war and peace.

"These are questions," Pope Paul VI writes in *A Call to Action* (#7), "that because of their urgency, extent and complexity must in the years to come take first place among the preoccupations of Christians." Have these questions really taken first place in our thinking? Probably not. Few of us rush to make the social teachings our top priority. Instead, they seem to remain a well-kept secret. We shy away from

social issues perhaps because they seem so large and overwhelming. And issues like sex or drugs grab our attention much more easily.

Yet critical social problems continue to plague our world. Some, such as nuclear war, are a threat to our very existence. The Church has provided careful guidance regarding many of these complex problems. To celebrate the 100th birthday of *The Condition of Labor*, this *Update* will explore major themes of the social teachings and offer some practical applications for today.

Human dignity: Is this our starting point?

At the heart of the social teachings is an emphasis on the value of the human being. We are created in God's image and redeemed by Jesus. We are precious and unique, and our value is rooted fundamentally in *who we are* and not in *what we do*.

All the social teachings begin with and build on this foundation of human dignity. It provides a basis for helping us judge right and wrong. Situations which undermine or limit human dignity cry out for change; those that

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Jack Wintz, O.F.M.
Designed by
Julie Lonneman

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truly promote such dignity need to be fostered. The theme of human dignity is discussed in detail in two documents: (1) John XXIII's *Peace on Earth*, which presents the more philosophical view, and (2) Vatican II's *The Church in the Modern World*, which sets forth the more scriptural view.

Pope John XXIII develops at length his conviction that human nature provides the key both for individual rights and duties and for the international cooperation

necessary for peace. *The Church in the Modern World* incorporates much of John's thought, but emphasizes how the Bible shows the meaning of human dignity. "For sacred Scripture teaches that humans were created 'to the image of God,' are capable of knowing and loving their Creator" (#12), and are created for interpersonal communion. Although human beings are sinners, in Jesus Christ sin is overcome and each person's full dignity and destiny are revealed.

Applications for today. But what does this emphasis on human dignity mean for us? At least three things:

1. *See human dignity as a starting point for moral decision-making.* Our growing appreciation of what truly enriches human dignity—and what truly injures it—provides a solid basis for our morality. As suggested by the U.S. bishops in their pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All*, we must always ask what our decisions and actions are doing for and to people.

2. *Believe in your own worth.* The social teachings remind us that we too are precious and unique. So we can reject the messages of advertising that tell us that our value depends on the clothes we wear or the cars we drive.

3. *Treat others with great respect.* Too easily we get trapped in thinking of others according to some stereotype, especially those who are different from us. We need to skip the racist joke and the sexist comment.

Work: Does it make us more human?

Labor—or better, the *laborer*—has been a central theme of the social teachings. In 1891, Leo XIII wrote *The Condition of Labor* in response to the massive problems caused by the Industrial Revolution: exploitation of the worker, terrible working conditions, unjust wages. In order to defend people from such abuse, Leo stresses the basic right of human beings to work, to receive a just wage, to form unions, to possess private property.

Concern for the worker is expressed throughout the social teachings, and is developed in detail in a contemporary way in John Paul II's *On Human Work*. In this very reflective statement, the Pope again affirms the rights of workers and unions. "In order to achieve social justice in the various parts of the world," he says, "there is need for ever new movements of solidarity of the workers and with the workers" (#8). This is especially urgent, he adds, in situations where workers are suffering from "exploitation" or from increasing "poverty and hunger."

John Paul stresses that work expresses and increases human dignity and helps build a better world. He emphasizes the primacy of people over things and promotes systems (joint ownership, shareholding by labor, etc.) that build unity between owners and workers. Consistent with other social teachings, *On Human Work* criticizes Marxism with its emphasis on state ownership and its rejection of private property; it also criticizes capitalism for its neglect of the common good and for its focus on productivity and profit rather than people.

John Paul concludes: The Church "sees it as her particular duty to form a spirituality of work which will help all people to come closer through work to God, the

An overview of the social teachings

1891 Leo XIII, *The Condition of Labor* (*Rerum Novarum*): addresses the pressing problems of industrialization and the oppression of workers; stresses the right to work, to receive a just wage, to form unions, to possess private property.

1931 Pius XI, *The Reconstruction of the Social Order* (*Quadragesimo Anno*): responds to the impact of the economic depression: affirms just wages and unions; condemns unequal distribution of wealth; opposes both unrestricted capitalism and Marxism.

1961 John XXIII, *Christianity and Social Progress* (*Mater et Magistra*): turns to global interdependence and the vast differences between rich and poor nations; suggests worker participation and collective bargaining as aid for the industrial worker.

1963 John XXIII, *Peace on Earth* (*Pacem in Terris*): presents a detailed analysis of human dignity and rights, which are the only sure foundation for a just and peaceful world; stresses the universal common good; affirms democracy and the rights of press, speech and religion.

1965 Vatican II, *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (*Gaudium et Spes*): emphasizes the scriptural views of the human person rather than the more philosophical natural law tradition; addresses critical issues of marriage, culture, economics, politics, war and peace.

1967 Paul VI, *The Development of Peoples* (*Populorum Progressio*): explores the deeper meaning of development—cultural, social, religious needs, along with economic ones; urges fair trade relations and other forms of international cooperation.

1971 Paul VI, *A Call to Action* (*Octogesima Adveniens*): focuses on political power; discusses urbanization, discrimination, the role of women, the environment.

1971 Synod of Bishops, *Justice in the World*: calls justice a constitutive element of the Gospel and of the Church's mission; stresses the preferential option for the poor and the reform of society so that all persons are able to participate actively in the economic, political and cultural life of their society.

1981 John Paul II, *On Human Work* (*Laborem Exercens*): supports the rights of workers and unions; emphasizes the primacy of people over things; criticizes both Marxism and capitalism; develops a spirituality of work.

1987 John Paul II, *On Social Concern* (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*): sees the massive economic gap between North and South (in terms of global hemispheres) rooted in the ideological differences between East and West; urges collaboration for peace and redirection of resources from producing arms to alleviating misery of impoverished peoples.

These documents, while certainly most significant, are not the only examples of the Church's social teaching. Other examples include the Christmas messages of Pius XII, Vatican II's *Declaration on Religious Liberty*, Paul VI's *Evangelization in the Modern World*, John Paul II's *The Redeemer of Humankind*, the pastoral letters on peace and on the economy by the U.S. bishops and documents of other conferences of bishops.

creator and redeemer” (#24).

Applications for today. The social teachings prompt the following suggestions:

1. *Take a fresh look at your work.* Most of us work, but how many of us put “spirituality” together with work? Do we really find our work creative and fulfilling, or does it more often become numbing drudgery?

2. *Be attentive to questions of justice at your work-place.* In the United States, working conditions and the power of unions have changed drastically in the 100 years since *The Condition of Labor*. Yet all is not rosy on the labor scene. In the last decade, for example, anti-union trends have emerged. Our view of the relationship between workers and owners probably depends much more on our profession and economic bracket than on the social teachings. These teachings challenge us to look beyond the “accepted wisdom” of particular economic theories and structures—and beyond what a given union leader may say or what the company policy dictates and to evaluate them in terms of dignity and justice.

3. *Recognize values and limits in both capitalism and socialism.* Throughout the 100 years, the social teachings criticized both systems. Neither has a corner on good—or evil! The Church’s view urges us not to take an unthinking position, but to recognize different uses of the two systems according to the needs of each country. For many of us this could mean reconsidering knee-jerk rejections of socialism. It also means that the right to private property is limited by greater social needs: In other words, we cannot pile up great wealth when other peoples lack necessities.

The common good: Do we care about all?

Closely related to concern for the workers and international economics is the third major theme: the common good. The common good means all those things necessary for all peoples to live truly human lives. As John XXIII turned from specific problems of the industrialized world to even more complex issues facing the developing world, he recognized increasing interdependence among all the peoples on earth. As Pope John explains in *Peace on Earth*, the universal common good “embraces the sum total of those conditions of social living whereby people are enabled to achieve their own integral perfection more fully and more easily” (#58). Such basic necessities as food, clothing and shelter are, of course, included, but also the right to education, the right to take an active part in public affairs, the right to worship God freely.

John argues that in today’s world the common good of one nation cannot be separated from the common good of the whole human family. Countries must seek the good of all and not just their own self-interest. John encourages economically developed nations to aid those in the process of development, so that every person may live in conditions in keeping with human dignity. John also warns the powerful nations to respect the freedom of the poor nations. In giving economic aid, the wealthy nations must not seek cultural and political domination.

Later popes continue to develop this theme of international development and liberation. John Paul II’s *On*

Social Concern commemorates the 20th anniversary of Paul VI’s *The Development of Peoples*. John Paul judges that the reality of the developing nations has become worse in the intervening 20 years, and so calls for genuine collaboration among peoples as a necessary part of our response.

Applications for today. Especially at this point, we may be tempted to ask: “Well, what can I do? I’m only one individual.” Worldwide political and economic issues are immense and overwhelming. The social teachings, however, stand as a challenge to us, reminding us that it is *our* world and, in some sense, our responsibility.

1. *Develop a global outlook.* In our families, for example, we can discuss and pray over global issues like the African drought or the effects of acid rain or the pain of whole nations torn by strife. News articles or TV programs dealing with such issues could be shared. We could also express our global concerns in the way we vote and by writing those who represent us in Congress. Some may have the opportunity to join the Peace Corps or choose other service-oriented careers. And all of us can support those who have made such choices.

2. *Find ways to promote the common good.* For instance, we North Americans might raise our awareness of how a consumer-oriented lifestyle affects other nations: How does the gobbling up of shrinking supplies of oil and lumber by some nations, for example, deplete the resources and harm the environment of others? This might lead us to personal efforts to conserve the earth’s resources: by recycling, perhaps, or simplifying our lifestyles.

Justice: Is it central to our mission?

Justice—a recognition of the individual’s dignity and rights—is a major theme throughout the social teachings. We have already seen how justice has been discussed in relation to the concerns of labor and in the context of international development. Here we reflect both on the fundamental sense of justice and on several other urgent social justice issues.

In 1971 a worldwide Synod of Bishops met to follow Vatican II’s direction to read the signs of the times. The Synod’s statement *Justice in the World* finds massive divisions in the world between rich and poor, which result in millions of people living marginal lives, being illiterate, ill-fed and poorly-housed, lacking human responsibility and dignity. The bishops state that the gospel demands justice for these people as an essential expression of Christian love. Our relationship with God is closely related



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to our relationship with other persons. To love God is to love our neighbor. This love of neighbor cannot exist without justice.

In a celebrated passage of this statement, the bishops declare: "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the gospel." With equal force they call this action for justice an essential part "of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation" (#6).

In *A Call to Action*, Paul VI addresses other justice concerns including urbanization, discrimination, the role of women, the environment. Concerning women, for example, Paul asserts that "developments in legislation should...be directed to...recognizing her independence as a person, and her equal rights to participate in cultural, economic, social and political life" (#13). Concerning the environment: "Humanity is suddenly becoming aware that by an ill-considered exploitation of nature humans risk destroying it and becoming in turn the victim of this degradation" (#21).

Applications for today. Here are some ways we can help create a more just society.

1. *Get involved in political issues.* Some say the Church should stay out of politics. When, however, people's rights and dignity are attacked or abused by racism, sexism, militarism or any other "ism," then we no longer have simply a political issue. We have a profoundly human, ethical, religious issue. And the Synod's bold declaration that *justice is a central part of our Christian mission* rings unmistakably true—and challenges us to concrete action.

When we see how some government and business leaders make decisions which oppress people and deny human dignity (think of the savings and loan scandal and its affront to innocent citizens and taxpayers), we cannot, as Christians, simply remain silent. We see the importance of voting responsibly and speaking out on such matters. The people we elect are the ones determining policy on a wide range of crucial justice issues, whether it be a matter of financial ethics, aid to El Salvador or resistance to apartheid in South Africa.

2. *Start now in your home and community.* There are plenty of justice questions to tackle in our own backyards. Do we abandon the elderly in nursing homes? Do we scornfully look down on persons living with AIDS or suffering mental illness? Are we prejudiced against persons of a different sex or race or religion? How are our attitudes embodied in our votes on bond issues and school policies or in decisions about volunteering? We don't have to look far to find people and places in need of justice.

Peace: Is this our constant goal?

In a century marked by world wars, the use of atomic bombs and the build-up of arms, the social teachings frequently turn to the topic of war and peace. As we have already seen, John XXIII's *Peace on Earth* emphasizes human dignity, rights and duties as the only possible

foundation for true peace. Vatican II's *Church in the Modern World* links the preparation for war with the problems of development: "The arms race is one of the greatest curses on the human race and the harm it inflicts upon the poor is more than can be endured" (#81). John Paul II states: "Peace is not just the absence of war. It involves mutual respect and confidence between peoples and nations. It involves collaboration and binding agreements. Like a cathedral, peace must be constructed patiently and with unshakable faith" (Homily at Coventry Cathedral, quoted in *The Challenge of Peace*, #200).

One of the most extensive considerations of peace is the U.S. bishops' pastoral letter *The Challenge of Peace*. The bishops, speaking as moral teachers and not technical experts, tackle the complexities of war and peace in order to provide hope for all people and direction toward a world freed from the nuclear threat.

Applications for today. How can we help?

1. *Be a peacemaker in your community.* The bishops conclude their long pastoral letter by urging Christians to accept the cost of discipleship, to be faithful to gospel values. Concretely, this may mean helping to resolve conflicts at work or home or teaching children a message of peace when we see violence on TV.

2. *See the link between war and other human violations.* *The Challenge of Peace* shows connections between preparation for war and all the other issues treated in this *Update*. "When we accept violence, war itself can be taken for granted. Violence has many faces: oppression of the poor, deprivation of basic human rights, economic exploitation, sexual exploitation and pornography, neglect or abuse of the aged and the helpless, and innumerable other acts of inhumanity. Abortion in particular blunts a sense of the sacredness of human life" (#285).

Challenge and hope

This centennial celebration of *The Condition of Labor* recalls our rich heritage of Catholic social teachings. The Church challenges us to use our gifts and imagination in upholding the dignity of people and tackling the social problems of our day as active citizens.

The Church, moreover, proclaims its profound trust that a loving God walks with us. As *Economic Justice for All* puts it, "We cannot be frightened by the magnitude and complexity of these problems. We must not be discouraged. In the midst of this struggle, it is inevitable that we become aware of greed, laziness and envy. No utopia is possible on this earth; but as believers in the redemptive love of God and as those who have experienced God's forgiving mercy, we know that God's providence is not and will not be lacking to us" (#364). ■

Kenneth R. Overberg, S.J., is professor of theology and chairperson of the theology department, Xavier University, Cincinnati. Father Overberg holds a Ph.D. in social ethics from the University of Southern California and is author of several articles and books, including *Roots and Branches* (St. Anthony Messenger Press).

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