

Our response to the coronavirus pandemic reveals who we truly are

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The coronavirus pandemic is an unprecedented health crisis, a growing economic disaster and a fundamental moral test. Our response demonstrates who we are, what we believe and what kind of society we are becoming. Terrible times reveal our true values, priorities and character as individuals and as a society.

Our Catholic faith offers distinctive ways of looking at the challenges and choices we face as individuals, communities and as a nation. In the words of Pope St. John Paul II, Catholic social teaching offers us “principles for reflection, criteria for judgment, guidelines for action” which can guide our individual, institutional and national choices.

In 1891, modern Catholic social teaching began with Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical “Rerum Novarum” (“Of New Things”) as the church faced the challenges of the Industrial Revolution. Now, almost 130 years later, the coronavirus pandemic is our “new thing,” and the principles of Catholic social teaching provide moral direction as we face dangers, restrictions and fears most of us could not imagine a few weeks ago.

Protect Human Life and Dignity

At the center of Catholic social teaching is the protection of human life and dignity. This requires us to help people avoid infection, overcome illness and recover from the virus whenever possible. The loss of life is horrific and growing in our nation and around the world. There is a compelling moral obligation to avoid actions, behaviors and attitudes which permit the virus to spread and threaten the life and health of others. Social distancing, staying in place and avoiding crowds and contact with others are not options, but obligations. Those who ignore or resist such protections are not simply endangering themselves, but others and the larger community. Taking precautions and following directions to avoid spreading this virus is “pro-life” and a moral duty. Calls to reduce necessary protections of human life and dignity in order to help the economy represent a deadly calculation and ethical quicksand.

In our tradition, all life is precious, no matter how young or old, rich or poor, no matter your race, gender, nationality or utility. Human dignity is not something we earn by our good behavior or capacity, but is a gift of God, belonging to all his children. Whether you can get tested or get needed care cannot depend on how much power, wealth or status you might have, whether you are an athlete or politician, how old you are or whether you have a disability, or where you come from and when you got here. Policies that endanger the lives of the old and vulnerable for economic reasons are examples of the “throwaway culture” Pope Francis has warned us against.

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Promote Human Rights and Responsibilities

Because human life is sacred, we have a right to life and to those things that protect life and dignity: health care which sustains life; family and religious life; and decent work, housing and education. The absence of these rights makes every aspect of this pandemic worse. Those without adequate health care will suffer and die. Millions are losing their jobs and the income that supports themselves and their

families. They risk losing their homes. As schools and colleges close, the education of the young is threatened. Racial, economic and social injustice exacerbate suffering in times like this.

Our faith requires us to secure and protect these rights, not only for ourselves and our families, but for all God's children. Pursuing universal health care is not just a policy goal; it is a moral obligation for a decent society. Assisting those who have lost jobs and income in the economic collapse that comes with this crisis is not just part of a stimulus package; it is a moral requirement. Defending the dignity of those who are hungry or homeless, immigrants and refugees, and others on the "peripheries" are biblical mandates. Protecting the lives, dignity and rights of people of color, women, persons with disabilities, the elderly and the most vulnerable is essential since scarcity and fear can intensify injustice. We must resist scapegoating and dismissing those who are old or disabled in these challenging times.

Priority for the Poor and Vulnerable

The Scriptures and Catholic teaching insist those who are poor and vulnerable have a compelling claim on our consciences and choices. The Hebrew prophets and Jesus himself insisted we will be judged by our care for "the least of these" (Mt 25). The moral measure of our response to the coronavirus and its economic consequences is how we treat the poor and vulnerable, those with the greatest need and with the least power.

Pope Francis has said, "the measure of the greatness of a society is found in the way it treats those most in need, those who have nothing apart from their poverty." We should follow Pope Francis' example and look at this crisis from the bottom up and the outside in, especially the needs of those at the bottom of our economy and on the fringes of society. These are not often the priorities of politics and business as usual, where powerful interests and institutions use their access and influence to achieve their own priorities before addressing the claims of the weak and vulnerable. Now more than ever, we should strengthen the safety net that offers lifelines for families in need of food, health care, housing and other essential help.

Preserve Dignity of Work and Rights of Workers

The U.S. and global economies are being severely damaged by the financial and structural costs of this pandemic and efforts to contain it. We see massive losses in the stock market and hear about lost business in major parts of our economy, including travel, hospitality and retail. Behind those visible signs of trouble are millions of workers and their families who are losing jobs, income, health care and a place in our economy.

The Catholic Church has traditionally placed the dignity of work and the rights of workers at the center of its social tradition. Restoring work, rescuing livelihoods and recognizing the needs and rights of workers should also be at the center of any economic recovery plan.

While we worry about those who have lost work, we should recognize and express our gratitude to courageous workers who are providing essential care and services at the risk of their own health: doctors, nurses and medical staff; first responders; workers in groceries and pharmacies; sanitation workers; and others who help the rest of us survive this crisis. Pope Francis calls these people "the saints next door."

Practice Solidarity and Subsidiarity

At a time of enormous fear and loss, there is a temptation to focus only on our own needs and interests, to turn inward and become angry, which is understandable. But this cannot be our primary response. In

tough times we need to rediscover and practice solidarity, remembering that we are sisters and brothers, part of God's one human family. Our faith calls us to work together, to help one another. Beyond reports of hoarding or people ignoring health measures, we see examples of caring for others, sacrificing for others, in neighborhoods and communities across our land. We are in this together and should act like it.

If solidarity is essential in responding to this crisis, subsidiarity is necessary to help structure the response and divide up the work. A crisis this big and dangerous requires all our institutions to work together. There has been considerable debate and disputes about the appropriate roles of the federal government, state and local authorities, and the private and nonprofit sectors. The traditional principle of subsidiarity offers guidance and warnings about how to seek these common goals. Large institutions should not overwhelm or substitute for smaller structures. For example, the federal government should not take over in areas where families, communities and lower levels of government are best equipped to respond effectively and humanely.

At the same time, smaller institutions have the right and duty to call on larger institutions to meet needs or accomplish tasks that they cannot accomplish on their own. This pandemic tests the entire nation. Clearly a crisis this pervasive and overwhelming requires national—even global—action and the collaboration of all sectors of society, dividing responsibilities, resources, capacity, tools and authority to provide leadership and direction to protect life and dignity and to restore the economy. The contest over who gets credit or blame should yield to shared responsibility and common action.

Pursue the Common Good

All these principles point to our duty to pursue the common good in the midst of so much sickness and loss. In our divided nation and polarized politics, we seem to have lost our capacity to set aside our own interests, ideological agendas and partisan differences to work together for the good of the whole society. If we cannot work together as one nation for the good of all in this crisis, we will see more disease, death and social and economic damage, and we will fail a fundamental human and moral test as a people.

Pope Francis early in his papacy said, “I see the church as a field hospital after battle.... You have to heal wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds.” Our nation and our church are very much field hospitals in the middle of a terrible battle with dreadful human casualties.

Our faith gives us hope in the midst of fear, calls us to protect human life and dignity, to practice solidarity and accept responsibility, to care for the weak and vulnerable, to lift up workers, and to pursue the common good. In the words of Pope Francis, “let us respond to the pandemic of the virus with the universality of prayer, of compassion, of tenderness. Let's remain united.”