THE DAILY BREAD

The Acts of the Apostles



Catholic Social Teaching

A FORMATION BOOK BY

Kendall Peterson

The Everyday Apostle

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Living It Out

Catholic Social Teaching

The Gospel in the Street and the Public Square

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A Daily Bread Formation Book

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INTRODUCTION

When You Leave the Church

On Sunday a man goes to Mass, prays, receives the Eucharist, and is formed in his faith. Then he leaves the church, and steps back into the world: his job, his neighborhood, the marketplace, the voting booth, the whole public life of a citizen and a worker and a member of society. And a question follows him out the door, whether he notices it or not: does the faith he just professed inside the church have anything to say about the world he has just walked back into? Or is it a private matter, sealed off in the sanctuary, with no bearing on how he works, how he treats the people around him, how he engages the great questions of the society he lives in?

The Catholic answer is emphatic. A faith that stays inside the church walls on Sunday and has nothing to say about Monday through Saturday is not yet fully Catholic. The Gospel is not a private spirituality with no public consequences; it is a truth about the human person and human society that bears directly on how a man lives in the world, how he works, how he treats his neighbor, how he engages the public questions of his time. And the Church has developed, over the centuries, a rich body of teaching on exactly this, on the social dimension of the Gospel, on how faith applies to work and economics and politics and the whole of public life. It is called Catholic Social Teaching, and it is one of the great treasures of the faith, and one of the most neglected.

You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. — Matthew 5:13-14

Salt and light are not private. Salt works by permeating what it touches; light works by shining out into the darkness around it. Christ tells his followers they are salt and light for the world, which means the faith is meant to permeate and illuminate the world, not to stay sealed inside the believer. Catholic Social Teaching is the Church's sustained reflection on what this means, on how the light of the Gospel is meant to shine into the workplace, the neighborhood, the marketplace, and the public square, transforming not only individual souls but the structures and relationships of human society.

This book is a guide to that teaching. We will see what Catholic Social Teaching is and why it is not optional. We will explore its foundation in the dignity of the human person, and the great principles that flow from it. We will look at its vision of work, which touches the largest part of most men's waking lives. We will address, carefully, the crucial point that Catholic Social Teaching is not a political program and belongs to no party, but stands above and challenges them all. And we will consider how a man actually lives it, in

his job, his neighborhood, his voting, and his engagement with the culture. This book belongs in the living-it-out section of this library, because Catholic Social Teaching is precisely the faith lived out, in the world, beyond the church door.

It is worth saying at the outset that Catholic Social Teaching, though it was developed into a formal body of doctrine mainly in the modern era, is not a modern innovation but the drawing out of something present in Scripture from the beginning. The law of Israel was shot through with concern for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger, with provisions for the forgiveness of debts and the protection of the vulnerable and the just treatment of workers. The prophets thundered against those who trampled the poor and perverted justice, insisting that the worship God desired was inseparable from justice toward the neighbor. And Christ himself proclaimed good news to the poor, identified himself with the hungry and the imprisoned and the stranger, and made love of neighbor the inseparable companion of love of God. The Church's social teaching is the systematic development of this ancient biblical concern for justice and the dignity of the person, brought to bear on the conditions of the modern world. When a man takes up Catholic Social Teaching, he is not adopting a recent enthusiasm but entering into a stream that runs through the whole of Scripture, the constant insistence of the God of Israel and of Jesus Christ that faith and justice cannot be separated, and that how a people treats its poor and its workers and its vulnerable is a matter on which God has spoken plainly and often.

The aim is that you carry the Gospel out the church door and into the world, engaging your work and your neighborhood and your public life with a formed Catholic conscience, so that the faith you profess on Sunday becomes salt and light in the world the other six days of the week.

CHAPTER ONE

What Catholic Social Teaching Is

The Social Dimension of the Gospel

Begin with what Catholic Social Teaching actually is, because it is widely misunderstood, dismissed by some as mere politics dressed in religious language and by others as an optional interest for the socially minded. It is neither.

The Gospel Applied to Society

Catholic Social Teaching is the body of teaching the Church has developed on the social, economic, and political dimensions of the Gospel, the application of the faith to the structures and relationships of human society. It is not a separate subject bolted onto the faith but the drawing out of what the Gospel itself implies about how human beings should live together, how work and wealth should be ordered, how the vulnerable should be treated, how society should be arranged to serve the dignity of the human person. Rooted in Scripture and in the Church's long reflection, and developed especially through the modern social teaching of the popes over the past century and more, it is the Church's answer to the question of what the Gospel means for the public and social life of humanity. It is the Gospel applied to society, and as such it is not optional or peripheral but a genuine part of the Church's proclamation of the truth about the human person.

He has told you, O man, what is good; to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. — Micah 6:8

Not Optional

Many Catholics treat the social teaching as an optional add-on, a matter for the socially concerned, while the real faith is about personal salvation and private morality. This is a serious misunderstanding. The Church teaches that the social dimension of the Gospel is integral to the faith, not an optional extension of it, because the same God who calls a man to personal holiness calls him to justice and love in his social relationships, and the two cannot be separated. A faith that attends carefully to private morality while ignoring the demands of justice in the workplace, the treatment of the poor, and the ordering of society is a truncated faith, missing a dimension the Gospel plainly includes. The prophets thundered against social injustice; Christ identified himself with the hungry, the stranger, the prisoner; the whole of Scripture insists that love of God is inseparable from love of neighbor, including the neighbor one will never meet, affected by the structures of society. Catholic Social Teaching is not optional because the social dimension of the Gospel is not optional; it is part of what it means to follow Christ.

A Vision of the Human Person

At its root, Catholic Social Teaching is not a set of policy positions but a vision of the human person and human society, flowing from the truth about who man is. Because man is made in the image of God, possessed of an inviolable dignity, made for communion with others, called to an eternal destiny, certain things follow about how he should be treated and how society should be arranged. Catholic Social Teaching draws out these implications, building on the truth about the human person a vision of a just and humane society ordered to the flourishing of every person. This is why it is not

merely politics: it does not begin with policy or partisanship but with the truth about man, and reasons from that truth to the requirements of a society worthy of the human person. Understanding this is essential, because it means the social teaching is anchored in something deeper and more stable than any political program, in the very truth about who the human person is, from which its whole vision of society flows.

Why It Feels Like Politics

A man may still feel a resistance here, a suspicion that for all these fine words, Catholic Social Teaching is really just politics with incense, a way of smuggling a political agenda into the faith. This suspicion deserves an honest answer, because it is understandable and it is mistaken. It is understandable because the social teaching does touch the same questions that politics touches, questions of economics, justice, the poor, the common life, and so it can look, from a distance, like just another political position. But it is mistaken because the social teaching approaches these questions from an entirely different starting point than politics does. Politics begins from interests, ideologies, and the contest for power; Catholic Social Teaching begins from the truth about the human person and reasons to the requirements of justice, standing above the political contest rather than entering it as one more competitor. The proof of the difference is exactly what the later chapters will show: that the social teaching fits no political party and challenges them all, which no mere political agenda ever does. A political program serves its side; Catholic Social Teaching judges every side by the dignity of the person. The resistance a man feels is worth naming and then setting aside, for the social teaching is not politics dressed in religious language but something deeper and prior to politics, the truth about the human person and the just society, from which it judges all the political programs that men construct.

CHAPTER TWO

The Foundation

The Dignity of the Human Person

Everything in Catholic Social Teaching rests on a single foundation, and if a man grasps this foundation, the rest follows from it with a certain logic. The foundation is the dignity of the human person.

Made in the Image of God

The starting point of all Catholic Social Teaching is that every human being possesses an inviolable dignity, because every human being is made in the image and likeness of God. This is not a dignity earned by achievement or granted by society or dependent on usefulness; it is intrinsic, belonging to every person simply by virtue of being human, made in God′s image, from conception to natural death, regardless of any quality or circumstance. This dignity is the non-negotiable starting point of the entire social teaching, the foundation on which everything else is built. Because every person bears the image of God, every person must be treated with a reverence due to that image, never used as a mere means, never discarded as worthless, never valued only for utility. The whole of Catholic Social Teaching is, in a sense, the drawing out of the implications of this one truth: that every human being, without exception, possesses an inviolable dignity as an image of God, and that society must be arranged to honor that dignity in every person.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him. — Genesis 1:27

The Consequences of Dignity

From this foundation, enormous consequences follow. If every human being possesses an inviolable dignity, then every human life must be protected and reverenced, from conception to natural death, and whatever attacks innocent human life attacks the very foundation of a just society. If every person bears God′s image, then no one may be treated as a mere means, exploited, enslaved, degraded, or discarded, and a society that treats any class of persons as disposable violates their dignity. If human dignity is intrinsic and universal, then it belongs equally to the poor and the rich, the powerful and the weak, the useful and the burdensome, the born and the unborn, the citizen and the stranger, and a just society must honor it in all of them without exception. The dignity of the human person is thus not an abstract principle but a demanding standard against which every structure and practice of society must be measured: does it honor, or does it violate, the inviolable dignity of the persons it affects? This single question, flowing from the foundational truth of human dignity, is the root from which the whole of Catholic Social Teaching grows.

Why This Is the Root

It is worth seeing why human dignity must be the root and not merely one principle among several. If the dignity of the person were not the foundation, the social teaching would float free, a set of policy preferences with no deeper anchor, and it could be bent to any purpose. Anchored in human dignity, it has a fixed and non-negotiable center: the

person, every person, made in God′s image, whose dignity society exists to serve. This keeps the whole teaching oriented rightly, measuring everything by whether it serves or violates the dignity of the human person, and it prevents the social teaching from being reduced to any partial program that would honor some persons′ dignity while ignoring others′. The consistent defense of the dignity of every human person, without exception, from conception to natural death, is the thread that runs through the entire social teaching and holds it together, and it is why human dignity, and not any policy or principle, is the true foundation on which everything else is built.

CHAPTER THREE

The Guiding Principles

How Dignity Becomes a Social Vision

From the foundation of human dignity, Catholic Social Teaching develops a set of guiding principles that translate the dignity of the person into a vision of society. Several of these are foundational, and understanding them gives a man the framework of the whole teaching.

The Great Principles

These principles work together, each drawing out an aspect of what the dignity of the person requires in the ordering of society. Here are several of the most important.

The Common Good, *Society must be ordered to the good of all its members, the conditions that allow every person and group to flourish, not merely the good of the powerful or the majority.*

Solidarity, *We are one human family, responsible for one another; the good of each is bound up with the good of all, across every division of nation, class, and race.*

Subsidiarity, *Problems should be addressed at the most local level capable of handling them; higher authorities should assist and empower, not absorb, the smaller communities closest to people.*

The Option for the Poor, *A society is judged by how it treats its most vulnerable members; the needs of the poor and marginalized have a particular claim on our attention and action.*

These principles hold together in a way that resists easy political categorization. Solidarity insists on our responsibility for one another and for the vulnerable;

subsidiarity insists that this responsibility be exercised as locally and personally as possible, not swallowed into distant bureaucracy; the common good insists that society serve all its members; the option for the poor insists that the vulnerable have a particular claim. Held together, these principles form a coherent vision, and it is a vision that challenges every partial political program, as we will see, because no political camp holds all of them together as the Church does.

Whatever you did for one of the least of these my brothers, you did for me. — Matthew 25:40

The Common Good and Solidarity

The common good and solidarity together express the truth that man is not an isolated individual but a member of a community, made for others, responsible for others. The common good names the goal: a society ordered so that all its members can flourish, the conditions of social life that allow every person and every group to reach their fulfillment. It is opposed both to a selfish individualism that recognizes no responsibility beyond the self and to a collectivism that swallows the person into the mass; it holds that society exists to serve the flourishing of all its members, each in his dignity. Solidarity names the corresponding virtue: the firm commitment to the good of all, the recognition that we are one human family and that the good of each is bound up with the good of all, so that a man cannot be indifferent to the suffering of others, near or far, but is responsible, in solidarity, for his brothers. Together, the common good and solidarity insist that a man's faith makes him responsible for others and for the whole society, not only for himself and his own.

Subsidiarity and the Option for the Poor

Subsidiarity and the option for the poor complete the framework, and each guards against a distortion. Subsidiarity holds that the responsibilities of social life should be exercised at the most local and personal level capable of handling them, that higher and larger authorities should support and empower the smaller communities, the family, the neighborhood, the local association, rather than absorbing or replacing them. It guards against the distortion that would turn all responsibility over to the distant state, insisting instead that the person and the local community be empowered and not swallowed. The option for the poor holds that a society is measured above all by how it treats its most vulnerable members, and that the poor, the weak, and the marginalized have a particular claim on the attention and action of those who follow Christ, who identified himself with the least. It guards against the distortion that would let concern for the vulnerable be crowded out by the interests of the powerful, insisting that the poor come first. Together

with the common good and solidarity, these principles form the framework by which the dignity of the person becomes a vision for the ordering of society.

The Further Themes

Beyond these guiding principles, the Church's social teaching is often summarized in a set of major themes that fill out the vision, and a few more deserve mention. There is the call to family, community, and participation: the person is not made to be isolated but to live in community, beginning with the family, which is the first and fundamental cell of society, and extending to the wider communities in which a person participates; a just society protects the family and enables every person to participate in social life rather than being excluded from it. There is the theme of rights and responsibilities: every person has fundamental rights that flow from his dignity, beginning with the right to life and extending to those things necessary for a decent human life, and corresponding to these rights are responsibilities, to one another, to family, to the wider society, for rights and duties go together. And there is the care for creation: because the world is God's gift, entrusted to human stewardship, man is responsible to care for the created world rather than to exploit or ruin it, exercising a responsible stewardship over the creation God has placed in human hands. These themes, together with the guiding principles, fill out the Church's rich vision of the human person in society, each drawing out a further aspect of what the dignity of the person requires in the ordering of our common life.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Dignity of Work

Faith and the Largest Part of Your Life

Among the themes of Catholic Social Teaching, one deserves its own chapter because it touches the largest part of most men's waking lives: work. The Church has a rich teaching on the dignity of work and the rights of workers, and it transforms how a man understands the labor that fills his days.

Work as Participation in Creation

The Church teaches that work is not a curse or a mere necessity but a genuine good, a participation in the ongoing creative work of God. When a man works, building, making, serving, cultivating, providing, he shares in God's own work of creating and sustaining the world, continuing and developing the creation God entrusted to human hands. This gives work a dignity most men never suspect: that their labor, however ordinary, is a

sharing in the work of God, a genuine cooperation in his creative and providential care for the world. Work is not merely how a man earns his living; it is one of the primary ways he participates in God′s own work and exercises the stewardship of creation God gave to man. This transforms the meaning of a man′s daily labor, which is not secular drudgery but, offered to God, a genuine participation in his creative work and a real avenue of holiness, as the books on the ordinary life and the workplace in this library develop.

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden to work it and keep it. — Genesis 2:15

The Priority of the Worker

From the dignity of work follows a crucial principle: the priority of the worker over the products and profits of work, of labor over capital, of the human person over the economic system. Because the worker is a person made in God′s image, and the products and profits of work are things, the person must always take priority; the economy exists to serve the human person, not the person to serve the economy. This has real consequences: workers have genuine rights that must be respected, to just wages that can support a family, to safe and humane conditions, to rest, to the dignity proper to a person and not merely a unit of production. A society or an economy that treats workers as mere instruments, to be used and discarded for the sake of profit, violates the dignity of the person and the priority of labor over capital that the Church insists on. The dignity of work means the dignity of the worker, and a just economy is one that honors the worker as a person, respecting his rights and ordering the economy to serve him, rather than reducing him to a mere factor of production.

This teaching bears directly on the man who has authority over the work of others, the employer, the manager, the business owner, the supervisor, and it lays real obligations on him. If the worker is a person whose dignity and rights must be honored, then the man with authority over workers bears a genuine responsibility toward them: to pay just wages that honor their labor and can support a family, to provide safe and humane conditions, to treat them as persons and not merely as instruments of profit, to exercise his authority as a service to their good rather than as mere power over them. Catholic Social Teaching is not only a comfort to the worker but a summons to the employer, calling every man with authority over others′ labor to exercise it justly, honoring the dignity and rights of those who work for him. And it bears too on a man as a participant in the economy more broadly, as a consumer whose choices affect distant workers, as a citizen whose voice shapes the economic order; in all these roles a man is called to seek an economy that honors the dignity of the worker and serves the human person, rather

than one that treats persons as mere means to profit. Wherever a man stands in the economy, as worker, employer, consumer, or citizen, the teaching calls him to honor the dignity of the person and the priority of labor over capital in the roles he actually occupies.

The Roots of This Teaching

This teaching on work and the rights of workers has deep roots in the Church's modern social teaching, which arose in large part precisely to address the condition of workers in the modern economy. When industrialization created new and often brutal conditions for laborers, the Church responded with a body of teaching defending the dignity and rights of workers against exploitation, insisting on just wages, humane conditions, and the priority of the person over profit, while also defending the legitimate role of private property and warning against ideologies that would swallow the person into the collective. This teaching developed over the following century into a rich body of reflection on work, economics, and the just ordering of the economy, consistently defending the dignity of the worker and the priority of the human person against every system that would violate them. A man who works, which is to say nearly every man, does well to know this teaching, which dignifies his labor, defends his rights, and calls him to honor the same dignity in those who work for and around him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Neither Left Nor Right

Why It Belongs to No Party

Here we must address, carefully and directly, the most misunderstood point about Catholic Social Teaching: its relationship to politics. Because the teaching touches political questions, it is constantly mistaken for a political program, claimed by one side or another, reduced to partisanship. This is a serious error, and clearing it away is essential to receiving the teaching rightly.

It Challenges Every Camp

Catholic Social Teaching does not fit neatly into any political category, and it belongs to no party of the left or the right. This is not a weakness or a vagueness in the teaching but a consequence of its depth: because it flows from the whole truth about the human person rather than from any partial ideology, it holds together principles that the political camps have divided between them, and so it challenges every camp. It insists on

the protection of human life in a way that unsettles some; it insists on care for the poor and the stranger in a way that unsettles others. It defends the family and the local community against the overreach of the state, and it insists on solidarity and the common good against a selfish individualism. It holds together, from the single foundation of human dignity, commitments that our politics has split apart and distributed between opposing sides, and so no political program contains the whole of it, and every political program is challenged by some part of it. The man who receives the full teaching will find himself uncomfortable with every partisan camp, because the teaching is larger and more coherent than any of them, measuring them all by the dignity of the person rather than being captured by any.

The Temptation to Cherry-Pick

There is a particular temptation that follows from the teaching's failure to fit any party, and a man must guard against it: the temptation to cherry-pick, to embrace the parts of the social teaching that align with his existing political commitments and quietly ignore the parts that challenge them. Because the teaching challenges every camp, a man attached to any political side will find some of it congenial and some of it uncomfortable, and the temptation is to loudly champion the congenial parts as proof of his Catholic credentials while conveniently setting aside the uncomfortable ones. This is a subtle betrayal of the teaching, which is a coherent whole flowing from the single foundation of human dignity, not a menu from which a man may select the items that suit his politics. The man committed to the teaching receives all of it, including and especially the parts that challenge his own side, letting it correct his political commitments rather than merely confirm them. The test of whether a man has genuinely received Catholic Social Teaching, rather than using it as a weapon for his side, is precisely whether it makes him uncomfortable, whether he has let it challenge his own political tribe and not only his opponents'. If a man finds that the social teaching conveniently endorses everything his side already believes and challenges only the other side, he has almost certainly not received the whole teaching but has bent it to his politics, which is exactly the error the teaching most warns against.

Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation. — Psalm 146:3

The Two Errors

There are two opposite errors a man can fall into regarding faith and public life, and Catholic Social Teaching avoids both. The first error is to divorce faith from public life entirely, to treat religion as a purely private matter with no bearing on how a man works,

votes, or engages society, sealing the Gospel inside the church and letting the public square be governed by other principles. This is the error the whole of this book argues against, the error of a truncated faith that abandons the world to itself. The second error is the opposite: to reduce the faith to politics, to collapse the Gospel into a partisan program, to treat some political agenda as if it simply were the Christian faith, so that the transcendent Gospel becomes a mere political ideology. This error is subtler and, for the engaged man, more tempting, and it does great damage, for it enlists God in a partisan cause and loses the Gospel's power to stand above and judge all human politics. Catholic Social Teaching avoids both errors: it insists that faith must engage public life, against the first error, and it insists that faith must never be reduced to any political program, against the second. The faith engages politics without being captured by it, bringing to public life the light of the Gospel while remaining always above and beyond every partisan camp.

Prudential Judgment

There is a further crucial point, which preserves both the authority of the teaching and the legitimate freedom of the faithful. The principles of Catholic Social Teaching bind; they are the settled teaching of the Church on the requirements of human dignity in society. But the application of those principles to concrete situations, the prudential judgment about which specific policies best serve them, often admits of legitimate disagreement among faithful Catholics. Two men who both fully accept the principle of the option for the poor may disagree in good faith about which economic policies would actually best help the poor; two men who both defend the dignity of work may disagree about specific labor laws. This is the realm of prudential judgment, where the principles are settled but their concrete application is debatable, and where faithful Catholics may hold differing views without any of them being unfaithful. This distinction is vital: it means the principles are not up for negotiation, but their prudential application often is, and a man must hold both truths, firmly committed to the principles while humble and charitable about the concrete applications on which good people differ. Confusing these levels, treating a prudential policy judgment as if it were a binding principle, or treating a binding principle as if it were merely one policy option among many, is a common and serious error that this distinction guards against.

CHAPTER SIX

Living It in the World

Work, Neighborhood, Ballot Box, Culture

Catholic Social Teaching is meant to be lived, not merely studied, and a man engages it in the concrete arenas of his public life: his work, his neighborhood, his voting, and his engagement with the culture. Here is what living it looks like in each.

In the Workplace

The most immediate arena is a man's work, where he spends the largest part of his waking life and where the social teaching most directly applies. Living Catholic Social Teaching at work means treating everyone he works with, above, beside, and beneath him, with the dignity due to an image of God; it means integrity, honesty, and excellence in his labor as a form of witness; it means, for the man with authority over others, exercising that authority as a service that honors their dignity and their rights rather than as mere power; and it means recognizing his own work, whatever it is, as a participation in God's creative work and an avenue of holiness. The workplace apostolate, developed more fully in the mission-oriented books of this library, is largely the living of Catholic Social Teaching in the place a man works, bringing the dignity of the person, the priority of the worker, and the witness of integrity into the daily reality of his job. This is where most men will live the social teaching most, and it is a genuine field of holiness and witness.

> *Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men.* — Colossians 3:23

In the Neighborhood and the Ballot Box

Beyond his work, a man lives Catholic Social Teaching in his neighborhood and his civic life. In his neighborhood and local community, he practices solidarity and the common good directly, caring for those around him, engaging the local associations and needs, building up the community closest to him, which is exactly where subsidiarity says much of the real work of society should happen. And in the ballot box, in his participation as a citizen, he brings his formed Catholic conscience to bear, weighing candidates and policies by the principles of the social teaching, seeking to advance the dignity of the person and the common good through his civic participation, while exercising the prudential judgment that this realm requires. Voting as a Catholic does not mean voting a party line, for no party embodies the whole teaching; it means bringing the principles to bear with a formed conscience and prudent judgment, seeking, imperfectly and among imperfect options, to advance the dignity of the person and the common good. This is demanding and often uncomfortable, precisely because the teaching fits no party, but it is what it means to engage civic life as a Catholic rather than merely as a partisan.

In the Culture

Finally, a man lives Catholic Social Teaching in his engagement with the wider culture, bringing the vision of the human person and the just society into the currents of the world he lives in. This means witnessing, in his life and his voice, to the dignity of every person against a culture that often denies it; it means bringing the light of the Gospel's social vision into the conversations, institutions, and currents of the culture; it means being, as Christ said, salt and light, permeating and illuminating the world with the truth about the human person and the just society. This cultural engagement, developed further in the mission-oriented books of this library, is the broadest arena of the social teaching, the bringing of the whole Catholic vision of the person and society into the culture at large, so that the Gospel becomes a leaven in the world. In all these arenas, work, neighborhood, ballot box, and culture, the one task is the same: to carry the light of the Gospel out of the church and into the world, letting it illuminate and transform the public life a man shares with his neighbors.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Formed Conscience

Engaging Public Life as a Catholic

Living Catholic Social Teaching well requires a formed conscience, and a few final counsels help a man engage public life as a faithful Catholic rather than as a mere partisan wearing religious language.

Form Your Conscience in the Teaching

The first requirement is to actually know and internalize the teaching, forming one's conscience in it rather than simply absorbing the positions of a political tribe and baptizing them. Most men's political views are formed by their tribe, their media, their social world, and then, if they are religious, lightly sprinkled with faith; the Catholic is called to the opposite, to form his conscience first and most deeply in the truth about the human person and the principles of the social teaching, and to bring that formed conscience to bear on the political questions, judging his own tribe's positions by the teaching rather than the reverse. This is demanding and countercultural, requiring a man to actually study the social teaching, to let it challenge his existing views, to hold his political commitments accountable to it rather than the other way around. But it is the only way to engage public life as a genuine Catholic rather than as a partisan who has enlisted God in his cause. Form your conscience in the teaching, deeply, and then let that formed conscience, not your tribe, govern your engagement with public life.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind. — Romans 12:2

Hold Principle and Charity Together

The second counsel is to hold firmly to the principles while remaining charitable about the prudential applications on which good people differ, a balance that is difficult but essential. A man formed in the social teaching will hold its principles with conviction, unwilling to compromise on the dignity of the person and the demands of justice. But he will also recognize that the concrete application of those principles often admits of legitimate disagreement, and so he will engage those who differ from him on prudential questions with charity and humility rather than treating every political disagreement as a betrayal of the faith. This combination, firm on principle and charitable on prudential application, is the mark of the mature Catholic in public life, and it is increasingly rare in an age that treats every political difference as a moral absolute. Hold the principles firmly, engage the applications humbly, and treat those who differ on prudential matters as brothers rather than enemies, and you will engage public life as the teaching asks.

Act, Do Not Only Think

Finally, Catholic Social Teaching is meant to issue in action, not merely in correct opinions, and a man lives it by actually doing something, not only by thinking rightly about society. It is easy to hold correct views about the dignity of the person and the demands of justice while doing nothing concrete, and the teaching calls for more: for actual care for the poor in one′s proximity, actual integrity and justice in one′s work, actual engagement in one′s community, actual witness in the culture. A man identifies the specific needs and opportunities in his own proximity, the poor he can actually help, the injustice he can actually address, the community he can actually serve, and he acts, bringing the teaching from the realm of opinion into the realm of concrete deeds. This is where Catholic Social Teaching finally lives, not in a man′s opinions but in his actions, in the concrete engagement with the world that the whole teaching aims at. Do not only think rightly about society; act, in your own proximity, to serve the dignity of the person and the common good, and let the teaching become, in you, the Gospel actually lived out in the world.

Against Cynicism and Despair

A final word, because the man who engages public life seriously will be tempted, in our discouraging age, to cynicism and despair, concluding that the problems are too large, the politics too corrupt, the culture too far gone, and that nothing he does can matter. This temptation must be resisted, for it is finally a failure of faith. A man is not

responsible for solving the whole of society's problems or for the outcomes of history, which are in God's hands, but only for his own faithfulness, for bringing the light of the Gospel to bear in his own proximity, doing the good he can where he actually is. The measure of his fidelity is not whether he fixes the world but whether he is salt and light where he stands, and he can be that regardless of the larger trends, regardless of whether the culture is improving or declining. So a man refuses both the naive expectation that he will fix everything and the cynical despair that nothing he does matters, and takes up instead the humble, faithful, hopeful task of doing the good he can in his own sphere, trusting the outcomes to God. This hopeful realism, neither utopian nor despairing, is the right posture for the Catholic in public life, who labors faithfully in his own proximity, does the good he can, and leaves the harvest to God, confident that no faithful act of witness and love is ever wasted, whatever the visible results.

CONCLUSION

Salt and Light

Return to the moment we began with, the man leaving the church on Sunday and stepping back into the world, carrying with him the question of whether his faith has anything to say about the life he is walking back into. This book has been the Catholic answer: that the Gospel is not a private spirituality but salt and light for the world, and that the Church has developed, in Catholic Social Teaching, a rich vision of how faith is meant to permeate and illuminate the workplace, the neighborhood, the public square, and the culture. We have seen that the teaching is not optional but integral to the faith; that it rests on the inviolable dignity of the human person made in God's image; that it develops, through the principles of the common good, solidarity, subsidiarity, and the option for the poor, a coherent vision of a just society; that it dignifies work and defends the worker; that it belongs to no political party but challenges them all; and that it is meant to be lived, with a formed conscience, in the concrete arenas of a man's public life.

What all of this asks of a man is that he refuse the false division between his Sunday faith and his weekday life, and carry the Gospel out the church door into the world. It asks him to see his work as a participation in God's creation and a field of holiness; to treat every person, from the powerful to the least, with the dignity due to an image of God; to care concretely for the poor and vulnerable in his proximity; to engage his community and his civic life with a conscience formed in the truth rather than in the positions of a tribe; and to bring the light of the Gospel's vision of the person and society into the culture he lives

in. It asks him, in short, to be salt and light, permeating and illuminating the world with the truth about the human person and the just society, so that the faith he professes on Sunday becomes visible in the world the other six days of the week.

This is one of the great neglected treasures of the Catholic faith, and one of the most demanding, because it will not let a man rest in a private religion sealed off from the world, but sends him out to engage his work, his neighborhood, his civic life, and his culture with the whole truth of the Gospel. It will make him uncomfortable with every partisan camp, because the teaching is larger than any of them. It will ask him to act and not only to think. But it will also give his public life a meaning and a mission it did not have, making his work a participation in God′s creation, his engagement with others a service to their dignity, his whole public life a field of witness and holiness.

So carry the Gospel out the door. Let it be salt and light in your work, your neighborhood, your voting, your culture. Engage the world with a conscience formed in the dignity of the human person and the principles of the just society, firmly on principle, humbly on prudential application, and always in concrete action rather than mere opinion. And let the faith you profess inside the church become, through you, a leaven in the world outside it, so that the light of Christ shines not only in the sanctuary but in the whole of the public life you share with your neighbors. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Go, and be both.

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Catholic Social Teaching: The Gospel in the Street and the Public Square is part of The Daily Bread Library.