

Pursuing Justice

Catholic Social Teaching and Issues
in Contemporary Society



The New York State Catholic Conference is an office of the eight diocesan bishops of the Empire State responsible for translating Catholic teachings into action in the public policy arena. In his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est* (God is Love), Pope Benedict XVI reminded us that, "The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument and she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper."

The Catholic Conference often speaks about issues that have both moral and political dimensions. Yet it directs its attention to the issues, not to political parties or candidates. The Bishops do not instruct people how they should vote, nor seek to form a religious voting bloc, nor support or oppose political candidates.

We invite and encourage Catholics across the state to become more aware, concerned and active in efforts to shape public policies for the betterment of all society, by joining the Catholic Action Network (www.nyscatholic.org) and raising our voices on behalf of the voiceless.



Introduction

Why is the Catholic Church opposed to capital punishment?

What does the Church think of stem cell research?

Why does the Church pursue tuition tax credits for parents?

Do the Bishops endorse candidates for elective office?

Where do the Church's public policy positions come from?

Questions like these are asked every day by legislators and government officials, citizens of all faiths, even by members of the clergy. The answers can be found through an examination of the principles of Catholic social teaching, which form the moral framework for the Church's public policy decision-making.

Catholic social teaching is a central and essential element of our faith. Its roots are in the Hebrew prophets who announced God's special love for the poor and called God's people to a covenant of love and justice. It is a teaching founded on the life and words of Jesus Christ, who came "to bring glad tidings to the poor...liberty to captives...recovery of sight to the blind" (Lk 4:18-19), and who identified himself with "these least ones," the hungry and the stranger (Mt 25:45). Catholic social teaching has been articulated in papal encyclicals and in pastoral statements by national Bishops' conferences. These documents, which began with Pope Leo XIII's defense of labor unions in 1891 (*Rerum Novarum*), contain the Church's call for Christians to use Gospel values to work for social justice and peace. Every believer is called to be an informed, active and responsible participant in the political process.

There are two ways we are called to respond, often referred to as the "two feet of social justice." One is through individual acts of service and charity, donating our time, talent and resources to those in need. The other is through the legislative process, helping to shape laws and regulations which promote respect for life, justice and compassion. Every believer is called to be an informed, active and responsible participant in the political process.

The seven principles of Catholic social teaching outlined in this booklet are derived from the November 1990 pastoral message of the U.S. Catholic Bishops, *A Century of Social Teaching: A Common Heritage, A Continuing Challenge*, and from their 2011 statement, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*.

The Life and Dignity of the Human Person

The Catholic Church proclaims that human life is sacred, made in the image and likeness of God. Our belief in the sanctity of human life and the inherent dignity of the human person is the foundation for all of the principles of our social teaching. We believe that every person is precious, from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death; that people are more important than things; and that the measure of every institution or policy is whether it enhances the life and dignity of the human person.

It is this firm foundation that solidifies the Church's opposition to abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide and other direct attacks on human life. It is the reason we work toward the abolition of capital punishment. It is the impetus behind our advocacy for adequate health care for poor mothers, children, people with HIV/AIDS and the elderly. And it is why we reject embryonic stem cell research and human cloning, procedures that destroy developing human lives and reduce the creation of human life to the manufacture of a product in service to others. As Christians, we have an obligation to defend and support the dignity of human life in all stages and in every condition.

We urge Catholics and others to promote laws and social policies that protect human life and promote human dignity to the maximum degree possible. While insufficient, even incremental advances, such as a ban on certain types of abortion, are important steps toward this goal.

The sacredness and dignity of human life is shared by all, regardless of sex, race, ethnicity, religious belief, disability, economic status, age or sexual orientation. Thus respect for human life lies at the heart of the Church's opposition to racism, discrimination and violence of all kinds. It is likewise the basis for our support for adequate food, shelter and clothing for the poor, just wages with decent working conditions, and health care and education for immigrants.

In addition to rejecting unjust policies that threaten human life, the Church works proactively to enhance human life by supporting alternatives to abortion, such as subsidized prenatal care and adoption; alternatives to assisted suicide, such as palliative care and hospice options for the terminally ill; moral alternatives to embryo research, such as cord blood and adult stem cell therapies; and measures to reduce bullying, prevent drug abuse and rehabilitate prisoners.

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The Call to Family, Community and

The Catholic tradition proclaims that the person is not only sacred but also social. The God-given institutions of marriage and the family are the basic cells of society. As central social institutions they must be supported and strengthened rather than undermined, as New York State has done by presuming to redefine marriage in the law. While American society often exalts individualism, the Catholic tradition teaches that human beings grow and achieve fulfillment in relationships with others. We believe people have a right and a duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable.

There is perhaps no area where the responsibility of the family is greater than the education of children. This teaching fortifies our belief that parents, as primary educators, should have the opportunity to exercise their fundamental right to choose the education best suited to the needs of their children, whether it be a government, private or religious school, or home schooling. Denying parents that choice can have a devastating impact on the poor and a corrosive effect on the family. We believe that government has an obligation to empower and assist all parents in exercising their rights and responsibilities in the education of their children, both in the home and in the school of their choice. This is why the Church supports programs, such as tuition tax credits or vouchers, to enable parents, regardless of income, to choose their child's school.



Participation

We believe people have a right and a duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable.

Because the coming together of a man and a woman in marriage is the basic unit of our society, the Church supports policies to help families stay together and to reward responsibility and sacrifice for children. Thus, the Church seeks to help children at risk of abuse; persons addicted to alcohol, drugs or compulsive behaviors; family caregivers in need of respite; and victims of domestic violence. It is the reason we assist low-income families in realizing their potential through productive work and advocate supports such as adequate child care, access to life-affirming health care and just wages.

The call to community is the basis for the Church's advocacy for immigrants and refugees, helping them transition into their new world and get to know their new "family." It is the basis for our promotion of alternatives to incarceration to allow non-violent offenders to obtain treatment for addictions, receive training for jobs and reintegrate into society. It is the reason we work to transform the often impersonal and bureaucratic systems of society, for example the criminal justice and health care systems, into caring communities of help for individuals.



We must work to oppose measures that endanger our mission and to safeguard the cherished right of religious freedom in the public policies of New York State.



Human Rights and Responsibilities

As social beings, our relationships are governed by a web of rights and corresponding duties. The Church teaches that every person has a fundamental right to life and a right to those things required for human dignity: food, shelter, health care, education, employment. But corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities – to one another, to our families and to the larger society. While public debate in our nation is often divided between those who focus on personal responsibility and those who focus on social obligations, our tradition insists that both are necessary.

In New York State, the public-private partnership between government and Church agencies has a long and successful history. Catholic organizations provide shining examples of how faith-based community initiatives can work with government to assure that the basic needs of all people are met. All partners involved in such initiatives should recognize and put into practice the principle of subsidiarity. In accordance with this principle, the Church vigorously defends the unique roles of families, churches, community organizations and charitable agencies, and insists that their roles cannot be absorbed by the state. However, when the common good of society is harmed or threatened, government has a responsibility to act to protect human dignity and rights.

Therefore, Catholic charitable institutions work collaboratively with federal, state and local governments to provide housing to the homeless, counseling to the mentally ill, and foster care and adoption assistance for children and families in need. Catholic hospitals, nursing homes, hospice and home care services tend to the sick, the aged, the uninsured and people with disabilities. Catholic schools offer high-quality academic instruction within clean, safe environments that instill strong moral and religious values. Catholic chaplains serve in prisons and hospitals to rehabilitate and renew inmates, patients, family members and state agency personnel.

The belief that the state has a responsibility to ensure the basic human dignity of its citizens compels the Church to support health care that is affordable and accessible to all. To address the crisis of uninsured or underinsured New Yorkers, we support measures to strengthen Medicaid and extend life-affirming health coverage to children, workers, pregnant women and all vulnerable populations. Only when such rights are upheld is human dignity safeguarded.

The Church's commitment to working with government to ensure the protection of human rights is currently threatened by those who seek to remove Catholicism from the public square. For example, the long-recognized right to exercise religious conscience in the provision of publicly funded services is being challenged by proposed requirements that Catholic hospitals provide abortions and that Catholic employers offer coverage for contraception, sterilization and abortion. We must work to oppose measures that endanger our mission and to safeguard the cherished right of religious freedom in the public policies of New York State.

Special Concern for the Poor and Vulnerable

Individuals and families who are poor and vulnerable have a special place in Catholic teaching. Jesus, who identified himself with the least among us, came to preach the Good News to the poor and told us, “Give to the one who asks of you, and do not turn your back on one who wants to borrow.” (MT 5:42) The Church calls on all of us to embrace this special love of the poor and vulnerable, to embody it in our lives, and to work to have it shape public policies and priorities.

We urge...all people of good will to answer the call to defend the poor and the weak by working toward greater economic and social justice in our society.

In today's society, there are many who are vulnerable: the long-term unemployed person, the unborn child at risk of abortion, the poor single mother without child care, the toddler threatened by abuse, the person living with HIV/AIDS. This teaching compels us to work with government to ensure that adequate funding and services are available to these especially vulnerable populations.

The number of Americans living below the poverty line is unacceptably high, resulting in increased demand for services to meet basic human needs. Our special concern for people in need compels the Church to offer emergency food programs, sponsor affordable housing for poor and lower-income families, and help with transportation to enable people to get to their jobs. It also compels us to press for policies that reward work, strengthen family life and preserve a safety net for the truly vulnerable.

Our emphasis on the weak and the powerless also calls us to fight for access to mental health and substance abuse treatment, community residences and resources for people with developmental disabilities, a housing safety net for homeless adolescents, and a multitude of specialized services to reach out to those who live in rural and isolated parts of our state. We urge Catholics and all people of good will to answer the call to defend the poor and the weak by working toward greater economic and social justice in our society.





The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers

In Catholic social teaching, work is more than a way to make a living, it is a way of fulfilling our human potential and a form of continuing participation in God's act of creation. If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers, owners and managers must be respected — the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to organize and bargain collectively, to economic initiative, and to ownership of private property.

The Church's belief in the dignity of work is the reason we seek to encourage responsible private sector job growth and support just wages for workers. It also lies at the core of our advocacy for basic workplace rights of migrant farm workers.

The Church's belief in the rights of workers takes on heightened significance as the education, health care and human services work forces currently suffer from a severe shortage of qualified workers to provide needed services to children, families and vulnerable adults. The Church advocates for a variety of initiatives designed to recruit, train and retain qualified school teachers, nurses, home health aides, and other critical health and human services workers.



Solidarity

In the Catholic tradition, Christians have a moral responsibility to commit ourselves to the common good at all levels: in local communities, in our state and our nation, and in the community of nations. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they may live. As Blessed Pope John Paul II said, "We are all really responsible for all!"

This teaching grounds the Church in her efforts to secure basic health, education and human services for all New Yorkers, regardless of sex, race, ethnicity, religious belief, disability, economic status, age or sexual orientation. It leads us to promote family unification and fair benefits for immigrants, as well as a comprehensive immigration reform that includes a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants who have come to this country for a better life.



It is the basis of our opposition to “English-only” laws and our support for increased access to English literacy and English-as-a-second-language programs.

Since the human family extends across the globe, our responsibility extends to addressing the concerns of our brothers and sisters around the world. Globally, the Church supports foreign aid for development and economic opportunities in poor nations, as well as debt forgiveness for the poorest countries. Internationally, the Church also supports the promotion of religious liberty and other basic human rights, protection for those fleeing persecution, and stable peaceful relations among nations.





Care for God's Creation

The goods of the earth are gifts from God. We have a responsibility to care for these goods as stewards and trustees, not as mere consumers and users. Christians should be guided both by concern for the welfare of others and by respect for the intrinsic worth and beauty of God's environment and all His creatures.

This teaching requires our recognition and concern over the effects of acid rain, the risks of "hydrofracking," the dangers of global warming, the continuing devastation of rain forests and the loss of farmland due to commercial development. It compels the Church to foster environmental justice through the elimination of discriminatory practices, to promote a more equitable sharing of the earth's resources and to seek alternative agricultural and energy sources that rely less on chemical-intensive practices and non-renewable energy resources.

Citizens and elected officials share a moral responsibility to preserve and protect the environment to ensure that the air we breathe, the water we drink and the food we eat are not jeopardized for succeeding generations.

Conclusion

Legitimate differences and debate over how the challenging moral principles of Catholic social teaching are applied in concrete situations is right and proper. The Church recognizes a continuing need for social analyses and prudential judgments on the specifics of many policy issues. Yet the Church will always pursue the common good of society, foster justice and peace, and defend the dignity of the human person.

Every believer is called to faithful citizenship, to become an informed, active and responsible participant in the political process. The U.S. Bishops "...encourage all citizens, particularly Catholics, to embrace their citizenship not merely as a duty and privilege, but as an opportunity to participate in building the culture of life. Every voice matters in the public forum. Every vote counts. Every act of responsible citizenship is an exercise of significant individual power." (*Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics*, 1998)

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As Catholics, we can recommit ourselves to carry the values of the Gospel and Church teaching into the public square. As citizens, we can and must participate in the debates and discussions of the vision for our society, and help choose the leaders who will guide us. This dual calling of faith and citizenship is at the heart of what it means to be a Catholic in the United States today.

The New York State Catholic Conference urges Catholics to become informed and active participants in the legislative process, to use our voices and votes to speak for the voiceless, defend the poor and vulnerable, and advance the common good. You can contact your legislators directly through the New York State Catholic Conference Web site (www.nyscatholic.org)

We also encourage you to become more involved at the diocesan or parish level. Many dioceses provide training in communicating with public officials, and all eight dioceses of the state participate in the annual Catholics at the Capitol day in Albany.

For a full listing of the legislative objectives of the New York State Catholic Conference, see the Legislative Agenda available online at www.nyscatholic.org or call (518) 434-6195.

MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD

The most efficient way to contact your elected representative is through the Catholic Action Network. You can join at www.nyscatholic.org. Simply click “Join the Network” and complete the form. The Network will keep you up to date on legislative issues, provide information on who your representatives are, and enable you to communicate with them easily and efficiently through email. In addition, don’t hesitate to call or drop by your state lawmakers’ local district offices to urge support for our public policy positions. Lawmakers need to hear from their local constituents.

Recommendations for Further Action

- Organize a “Catholic Action Network Sign-Up Weekend” in your parish.
- Invite your lawmakers to visit your parish, school, soup kitchen, or other ministry.
- Begin a dialogue with lawmakers through letters, birthday notes, Christmas cards.
- Sign up to be on your lawmakers’ mailing lists.
- Attend lawmakers’ town hall meetings, open houses, and virtual Q and A sessions.

Persons without access to email can contact their elected officials by phone or through the U.S. mail:

Governor

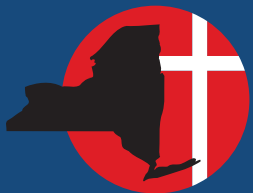
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