

# Catholic Social Teaching

*A User's Guide*

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# Introduction

“How do you say it in your language?” How often we ask this when visiting a new country. But learning a new language is not just about words or translating literally. We learn a language as we learn a game; little by little its rules or grammar become “second nature.” Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is a bit like a language, or perhaps better, like the grammar of a language we learn. We speak of familiar things but in a new way, as when Pope Francis urges us to care for “our common home” in the poetry of his namesake, Saint Francis of Assisi.<sup>1</sup> And just as Saint Francis’s canticle has inspired believer and nonbeliever alike, so the church’s teaching is *Catholic* inasmuch as it is spoken in a particular religious tradition, but also *catholic* (the original Greek means “universal, intended for all”).

Yet all too often the church’s social teaching remains its “best kept secret.”<sup>2</sup> Many scholarly books and articles, to be sure, have explored the origins and development of the church’s social teaching. The official *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* serves as a topical reference; and the principal decrees, encyclicals, and pastoral letters of episcopal conferences have been analyzed in detail. Popular introductions also abound, as do critical commentaries on a wide array of issues. To all of these I am greatly indebted. But there is still work to be done.

For many, church doctrine remains remote from the political currents of our religiously pluralist, secular milieu. In relying on magisterial authority, the *Compendium's* appeal is largely intramural, while more popular teaching typically distills doctrine in a list of rules or principles that may seem unrelated, or even opposed. How, for instance, can *equal* dignity justify a *preferential* option for the poor, or Pope Benedict XVI's appeal to integral *humanism* be reconciled with Pope Francis's emphasis upon integral *ecology*?

Now rules are critical, but neither scripture nor the church's tradition gives us a simple recipe for living. Rules apply "top down," but we *live* "bottom up." Just as the rules of grammar vanish into speech, so Catholic teaching must be embodied in a way of life. The aim, then, in this little book is modest. I've subtitled it "A User's Guide" because my hope is to show how Catholic *teaching* is not a rule book, but rather a grammar we learn in "our struggle for justice, love, and peace" (*Laudato Si'*, no. 246).

In Part One (Chapters 1–6) I offer a brief introduction to the history, sources, and key themes of the tradition. Part Two (Chapters 7–14) addresses the implications of the church's teaching for such pressing issues as the priority of labor over capital; poverty, racial, and gender bias; the ethics of war and peace; forced migration; and social reconciliation. I conclude with a brief review and an appendix addressing the question of *intrinsic evil*—an often misunderstood term that can be divisive in church politics.

*Notes*

<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, nos. 1–2.

<sup>2</sup> See Edward P. DeBerri, James E. Hug, Peter J. Henriot, and Michael J. Schultheis, *Catholic Social Teaching: Our Best Kept Secret*, 4th ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003).