

## The Sources and Principles of Catholic Social Teaching

by Christopher Loetscher

Catholic social teaching has many sources. These sources include the Scriptures, the life and ministry of Jesus, the witness of Catholic justice seekers and peacemakers, the works of great teachers like St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, papal encyclicals, the documents of Vatican II, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and the pastoral messages of Catholic bishops.

Complementary principles that balance and condition each other are evident throughout Catholic social teaching. For example, Catholic social teaching upholds:

- the dignity of the human **person** and **community** life;
- personal **rights** and **responsibilities**;
- giving **particular attention to the poor** and seeking the **common good**;
- responsible action in local communities (**subsidiarity**) and cooperation among communities (**solidarity**);
- the just exercise of due **authority** and broad-based **participation**;
- **private property** and the **common destination of created goods**;
- the **right to use** created goods and **right use** or stewardship of these goods;
- legitimate **defense against aggression** and **non-violence**;
- dignified **work** and **leisure**.

People on opposite ends of the political spectrum tend to give greater weight to certain principles of Catholic social teaching, and to downplay their complements. Catholic social teaching seeks to balance complementary principles. For this reason, authentic Catholic social teaching defies “conservative” and “liberal” labels.

There are many controversial socio-political issues, for example: abortion, agriculture, biotechnology, civil rights, crime & punishment, the death penalty, drug abuse, education, the economy, environmental protection, euthanasia, health care, housing, hunger, immigration, international trade and development, poverty, racism, taxation, war, welfare, work. When you analyze these issues in light of Catholic social teaching, you won't find quick or easy solutions to problems, and you won't feel completely at home in any political camp. You will, however, begin to discover a path (sometimes a lonely one) through the wilderness of competing voices, opinions and claims.

Here is a thumbnail sketch of Catholic social teaching:

*We are created in God's image to be sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters to one another in Christ, and temples of the Holy Spirit. We have personal dignity. We are called to participation in community life and to seek the common good. We have rights and responsibilities in community. The goods of creation are meant for all, that all might flourish. We are called to be good and just stewards of creation. Through our work, we are called to continuing participation in God's creation. Those who are weak, sick or poor are entitled to particular attention.*