

Living our Baptismal Call:
The ABCs of Catholic Social Teaching

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A four-year old said to his dad, “Daddy, when we go to Church, you are no longer my daddy; you are my brother.”

When her brother is struck and injured by a car, a little girl is asked to give blood. After the transfusion, she asks the doctor, “When do I die?” “You’re not going to die,” the surprised doctor replies. “I thought if you gave your blood away, you die,” the brave little voice explains. So why did she let them take her blood? “Well, he’s my brother,” she tells them.

These small children, although they probably can’t articulate it, have a beginning – and deep – understanding of the principles behind the Gospel values and Catholic social teaching.

As they grow, of course, the role of their families, the Church, and their faith formation programs is to continue to develop and nurture that life of service and understanding of the human community (and all of creation) as united and interdependent.

In our parishes and programs today, we are doing a wonderful job of calling children, youth and adults to service and outreach opportunities. At times, though, something is lacking. We need to always connect our actions to the reasons we are doing it.

All of social action and outreach is rooted in Scripture and in Jesus’ ministry. Those stories and passages need to be very alive for all of us.

Throughout the years, especially the last 110 years, the Church has developed a rich and comprehensive treasure of wisdom about building a just society and living lives of holiness amid the challenges of modern society. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us:

The Church’s social teaching comprises a body of doctrine, which is articulated as the Church interprets events in the course of history, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, in the light of the whole of what has been revealed by Jesus Christ. (#2422)

The principles and actions we are called to in Catholic social teaching are not “just a nice thing to do” when we have time; it is not at the periphery of our lives. It is who we are called to be.

Recently the U.S. bishops highlighted several of the key themes that are at the heart of our Catholic social tradition:

- Life and Dignity of the human person
- Call to family, community and participation
- Rights and responsibilities
- Option for the poor and vulnerable
- The dignity of work and the rights of workers
- Solidarity
- Care for God’s creation

To further clarify and more deeply understand the meaning of these key themes, the archdiocese of Detroit has expanded them into ten major themes:

- Respect for the Dignity and Life of the Human Person, from Conception to Natural Death
- Call to Family and Community Life
- The Right and Duty to Participate in Social, Economic and Political Life
- Advancing the Common Good
- Promoting Peace and Social Justice
- Promoting Human Rights and Responsibilities
- Special Care and Concern for the Poor and Vulnerable
- The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers
- Solidarity – Loving our Neighbor Locally and Globally
- Caring for God’s Creation: Stewardship of the Earth

As the domestic church (households of faith), as parish leaders, as catechists, we are called to infuse these principles into our very lives, into all we do. Listed here are some ideas, processes and projects – from A to Z – which can be easily incorporated into parish life, into family life and, hopefully, will trigger even more creative ideas (for children, youth, adults, and families).

ADVOCACY: Catholic Social Teaching calls us to direct service (e.g. working at a soup kitchen, etc.) and to advocacy. Advocacy is working to remove the deeper problem. This is often done through letters, phone calls, problem-solving groups, etc. and requires much dedication and risk-taking. Encourage people to become involved in both works of social justice.

BIBLICAL-BASED: Start with Scripture. What is our tradition? What does Scripture say about justice: service and advocacy? How did Jesus model service ministry? Some passages to reflect upon:

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| ● Ex 22:20-27 | ● Mt. 6:1-4 | ● John 15:13 |
| ● Lv 19:9-18 | ● Mt. 25:31-46 | ● Acts 4:32-35 |
| ● Dt 24:17-22 | ● Mark 2:1-12 | ● I Cor 12:55-6 |
| ● Ps 72 | ● Mark 6:34-44 | ● James 2:14-17 |
| ● Micah 6:8 | ● Luke 10:29-42 | ● 1 Jn 4:19-21 |
| ● Is 61:1-2 | ● Luke 15:11-32 | |
| ● Mt. 5:3-12 | ● John 2:1-12 | |
| ● Mt. 5:38-48 | ● John 13:1-20 | |

CONVOY LEARNING: Pile into vans and go to where the needs are. Meet the people. Get to know people personally. Reach out and become friends.

DISCUSS AND DEBATE: Use every opportunity to discuss the challenges of the day, the signs of the times. Don’t shy away from controversial issues. Help to form consciences. Organize a debate on the two sides of social justice issues.

EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE: Whenever you pray this type of prayer, include reflections and questions which stretch and challenge the children beyond their individual lives, their me-and-God relationship. How do they respond to the needs of the poor, the outcasts, those treated unfairly?

FAMILY-FRIENDLY SERVICE OPPORTUNITIES: Invite and encourage families to become involved in projects and opportunities together so that children learn that all Christians serve, not just children because they're in religious education sessions.

GAMES OF SIMULATION: This type of game helps people to simulate or imitate the elements of a real life experience, especially one which usually is not a part of their lives, so that they may experience it, examine it, reflect on it, and hopefully, apply its lessons to their future behavior. Some examples might be: having to use one pencil all year (as children in some countries do), having a supper with each table having different types (and quantities) of food to simulate the food distribution of the world.

HUNGER CRISIS: Organize a world hunger fast. Collect pledges in exchange for a one-day fast. (Smaller children could fast from sweets for a day.) Arrange for speakers to present information on world hunger. Donate the profits to a world hunger agency, such as Bread for the World.

IMAGINE: Dream of what could be. Invite children to visualize of world of peace, a world where life and human dignity reigns. What would it look like? (Things will only happen if they are first imagined. Isn't that what war toys do?)

JOURNAL: Invite people to keep a journal of their experiences of service and advocacy, linking them to Scripture and Catholic social teaching, and composing prayerful reflections of what happened to themselves because of the experience.

KEEP CONNECTED with the people you serve: Collecting food is good, but go and deliver it. Work in a soup kitchen; visit and eat with the people you serve.

LINK SACRAMENTAL THEOLOGY AND CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING: Include the social teaching of the Church in sacramental preparation programs, especially the Eucharist, the sacrament that calls us continually to unity and service.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us "The Eucharist commits us to the poor. To receive in truth the Body and Blood of Christ given up for us, we must recognize Christ in the poorest, his brethren: "You have tasted the Blood of the Lord, yet you do not recognize your brother, ... You dishonor this table when you do not judge worthy of sharing your food someone judged worthy to take part in this meal" - St. John Chrysostom. (#1397)

This means that we cannot receive Jesus without receiving all members, especially the poor. It has been said that as Catholics we do a very good job of recognizing Jesus on the altar, but at times we fail to recognize Jesus around the altar.

MEMORIAL CELEBRATIONS: Take time to remember and prayerfully celebrate the lives of those who have gone before us who have been prophets and witnesses to the social teachings of our Church, e.g. Bishop Oscar Romero, the martyrs in El Salvador, etc.

NOTICE THE NEWS AND THE TELEVISION: Use the newspapers and television programs to help the children/youth analyze the real-life situations of Catholic social teaching. In which activities and events do we see evidence of the principles of the Church's social teachings? Where are the principles of justice, equality and respect ignored?

OBSERVE EARTH DAY: Catholic social teaching calls us to stewardship over God's creation. There are many practical observances and actions that children and families can do every day of the year so that we become a simpler, careful society.

PLACE (INFUSE/INCORPORATE) Catholic social teaching in all subject areas in the school: But also make sure it is a part of the religion sessions. For example, ecology is a part of science class, but it is also a critical part of our faith response. Voting/political responsibility is not just a social studies issue, but is a Christian obligation.

QUIET TIME FOR REFLECTION: The following (and many others) can be used by individuals in their journals and/or for small group reflection and faith sharing.

- “The opposite of love is not hatred; it is indifference.” (Daniel Berrigan, S.J.)
- “In the evening of this life you will be judged according to your love.” (St. John of the Cross)
- “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food they call me a communist.” (Dom Helder Camara)
- “We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community.” (Dorothy Day)
- “If you are preoccupied with people who are talking about the poor, you scarcely have time to talk to the poor.” (Mother Teresa)

RESEARCH: Look into companies with whom your parish/local stores do business. Are they in compliance with labor laws? Do they utilize sweatshops? Request that they conform to fair labor standards.

SKILLS BUILDING: Help children and youth (and adults) to deepen the skills that are needed for outreach and advocacy:

- listening skills
- skills for conversing as you meet new people
- skills of letter-writing, especially to newspapers and members of state and national legislatures (The 7th graders of St. Genevieve School in Thibodaux, Louisiana wrote a booklet giving helpful guidelines, “Write Makes Might.” To contact them: 504-447-9291.)

TELL THE STORIES: Constantly read, research, reflect on, learn about the stories of service and outreach in our tradition. Search the Scriptures for the prophets, Jesus, and the early Christians. Learn about and report on people from our tradition and human history: St. Vincent dePaul, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Ghandi, Dr. Tom Dooley, Dorothy Day, etc. Who are family members and relatives, Church and community members, people in the news who live a life of service and justice? Invite people from your local parish, your local community who model servant leadership and ministry to speak to your group.

UTILIZE HELPFUL RESOURCES:

- *Learning to Serve, Serving to Learn* by Joseph Moore (Ave Maria Press, 1994).
- *101 Ideas for Volunteer Programs* by Steve McCurley and Sue Vinyard (Downers Grove, IL: Heritage Arts Publishing, 1986).
- *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions* (USCCB Publishing Services, 800-235-8722).
- *A Catholic Call to Justice: An Activity Book for Raising Awareness of Social Issues* (USCCB Publishing Services, 202-541-3000).
- *Communities of Salt and Light: Parish Resource Manual* (USCC Publishing Services, 800-541-3000).
- *A Century of Social Teaching: A Common Heritage, a Continuing Challenge* (USCCB Publishing Services, 800-541-3000).
- *Teaching Your Kids to Care: How to Discover and Develop the Spirit of Charity in your Children* by Deborah Spaide (Citadel, 1995).

- *Ideas for Social Action* by Anthony Campolo (El Cajon, CA: Youth Specialties).
- *Beyond Leaf Raking* by Peter Benson and Eugene Roehlkepartain (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993).
- *Service: The Church's Greatest Vice*. A videotape by Mass Media Ministries, 2116 North Charles Street, Baltimore, Maryland 21218.
- *How to make the World a Better Place – 116 Ways you can make a difference* by Jeffrey Hollender with Linda Catling (New York: Norton, 1995).
- *The Kid's Guide to Service Projects* by Barbara Lewis (Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 1995).
- *Teaching Toward Global Understanding* (Catholic Relief Services, 1986).

VOICE YOUR OPINIONS: Having studied the principles of Catholic social teaching, communicate, communicate: phone calls, letters, e-mails, etc. to TV stations, newspapers, legislators, etc. Even small children can understand and write about many of the issues, such as peace and respect for creation.

WORSHIP: We cannot celebrate liturgy without concern/action for the poor. The guidelines for the presentation of gifts during liturgy call for the presentation of the bread and wine and gifts for the poor (not other symbols of the community). Always encourage the assembly to respond to the poor during the presentation of gifts.

EXPLORE WHY WE ENGAGE IN SERVICE AND ADVOCACY: Always connect the service, outreach, and advocacy projects of your religious education programs (after-school and school), youth ministry, and parish with the Biblical mandates and modeling and the Church's strong tradition of Catholic social teaching.

YOUR WITNESS: Do the children and their families see you as a disciple who knows and lives the Catholic social teachings because of the way you relate to them, because of your involvement in the community?

ZOOM IN ON PARISH/COMMUNITY OPPORTUNITIES: Don't just plan service opportunities for children and youth. (That might tell them that this is something they do only because they're young learners.) Connect the children and young people with the opportunities that are already going on in your parish and/or community so that they are working side-by-side with committed adult Christians who model that this is a forever way of life.

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