

By Monsignor William Murphy
Guest contributor

In commemoration of the 100th anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, Pope John Paul II in May issued *Centesimus Annus*, an encyclical on Catholic social teaching.

Catholic social teaching did not begin in 1891, however. It flows directly from the teaching of Our Lord and is intrinsic to the life of the earliest Christian communities.

While social teaching and concern for the life and dignity of every man and woman characterize the church

Teachings call for social action

throughout its history, it is true that with Pope Leo XIII a modern era began in Catholic social doctrine.

Definite characteristics distinguish this teaching, which has so enriched the life of the church. First, it can rightly be called doctrine in the sense that it is authoritative teaching from the Holy Father and the bishops. Second, this teaching is both historical and pastoral.

The teaching is historical in the sense that it arises as the church's response to a particular need that demands the church's help. Because it must be applied, social doctrine is ultimately and expressly "pastoral." It intends to bring the church's wisdom to bear in resolving problems for the good of people in community.

In the 100 years that modern Catholic social doctrine has built on this rich heritage and brought it to bear in today's world, certain themes and fundamental issues have emerged. Five central themes run through all the social encyclicals and give an insight into the church's overriding concerns.

The first is the priority of the person, created in God's image, as the summit and the measure of all creation.



John Woods

This year's Respect Life Program focuses on the main themes of Catholic social teachings, which call the church to work for social justice, peace and the dignity of human life.

Every person is endowed with certain inalienable rights that do not come from the state or from any other source, but belong to each one because he or she is a member of this one human family. These rights bring with them certain responsibilities.

Second, the family is the basic cell of society. The state, therefore, has an obligation to recognize and foster the good of the family. The key to a healthy society is the family; when the family is threatened, the good of society is at risk.

Third, men and women should be able to see themselves as cooperators with God in his created universe;

thus the work each one performs must offer a return commensurate with the dignity of the person and his or her family.

Fourth, political society is the place where one guarantees or denies the conditions for personal and social fulfillment. The state has a positive role to play in defending and fostering the rights of every citizen and in advancing the common good of society.

Fifth, the church has a specific role to play in society and in the advancement of those goals that serve the common good.

While these themes have become central to all the social encyclicals, the church has developed a body of principles designed to guarantee that society lives up to the best ideals of social life. These principles are:

- The priority of the person who is free, transcendent and intrinsically social in nature.
- Human rights — the right to life, freedom of conscience and religion, liberty and the pursuit of happiness — and all the rights that are recognized by international law *inhere* to the person, as a person.
- The common good of society is to be pursued. That common good includes personal rights, the good of each person as well as those goods that all hold in common.
- There is a universal purpose of created things. God created this world and all in it for all the members of the human family.
- The principle of the right use of goods is a "right that carries with it a responsibility to use one's goods in a way that is reasonable and that does not deprive others of what they might need."
- Subsidiarity teaches us that responsibility to accomplish something belongs properly with the social organization that can most simply and directly achieve the end in mind. Solidarity, which is linked to that, is the attitude that regards others as linked in a personal, collaborative relationship.
- Freedom, responsibility and participation are three interlocked principles that belong to every citizen and should characterize every community's political life.
- Social justice is an achievable goal of every social institution. Yet, like the common good, it goes beyond the individual to advance the justice of society as a whole.

• Peace is the fruit of relations among states that are characterized by justice, truth, freedom and solidarity.

Today several issues cry out to us to bring these themes and principles of Catholic social teaching to bear. Chief among them in our country is abortion. So many principles of Catholic social teaching are contravened by this fundamental violation that it remains the main threat to human life and to the health of our communities.

No religious tradition has so consistently and coherently addressed social issues from within its own self-understanding of the message of faith it brings to the world. We are called to use the church's social doctrine to bring life to every person and to make our contribution to our societies, so that life might shine brightly in the hearts and lives of everyone.

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Bishop's Office

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My Dear People:

Today marks the 20th celebration of Respect Life Sunday for the U.S. Catholic Church. I note this occasion with hope for several reasons. It represents 20 years in which the People of God have faithfully endeavored to uphold the sacredness of life. Another hopeful sign has been the recent Supreme Court decision that interprets the law so as to safeguard the life of unborn children. We also celebrate 20 years in which the church has worked diligently to provide pastoral care to pregnant women so that they can choose life for their unborn children.

The readings for this Sunday remind us that discipleship can be costly. It demands that as citizens we work — often against the grain of our society's priorities — for a consistent ethic of life. Such issues as protection for the unborn, opportunity for the economically disadvantaged, protection for the frail and elderly, abolition of the death penalty, and the critical moral evaluation of warfare are not very popular, yet they truly represent a consistent defense of life at all stages.

Passionate advocacy and dedicated services for the unborn, for the homeless, for the disabled, for persons with AIDS, for the infirm, for the isolated, for the imprisoned, for those in institutions — for the weakest of the weak and the poorest of the poor — these are instances in which our church community carries out its discipleship. We recognize the worth, dignity and sacredness of every human person at every stage of existence, regardless of race or color, ability or disability, religion or culture.

Our good work has not yet succeeded in diminishing such grave social and moral ills as abortion, euthanasia and racial prejudice. Nonetheless, I am steadfast in my hope — a hope rooted in the Lord of Life who Himself rose from the dead. As I hope, I pray and ask that you join your prayers for the unborn, for those tempted to choose abortion, for those in pain, those who are lonely, for those who fear the future and are tempted to hasten their own deaths.

Your brother in Christ,

Matthew H. Clark
Bishop of Rochester

God's Love Endures Forever