

Catholicism: Catholic Social Thought

Exploring the Jesuit and Catholic dimensions of the university's mission

One of the best resources for exploring Catholic social thought is the web site of the [Office of Social Justice of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis](#). It lists the major documents from popes, Vatican offices, and the American Catholic bishops' conference and provides links to the text of most of them (in Spanish as well) along with notable quotations, a concordance, and a bibliography for each. It digests ten major themes or principles in Catholic social thought and provides one-page and two-page summaries of each. It offers reading lists and a toolbox for teachers. Here is a sample of the web site's accessible style, which also nicely introduces the whole topic:

There is a broad and a narrow understanding to the expression Catholic social teaching. Viewed one way, Catholic social teaching (hereafter CST) encompasses all the ideas and theories that have developed over the entire history of the Church on matters of social life. More commonly, as the term has come to be understood, CST refers to a limited body of literature written in the modern era that is a response of papal and episcopal teachers to the various political, economic and social issues of our time. Even this more narrow understanding, however, is not neatly defined.

No official list of documents exists; it is more a matter of general consensus which documents fall into the category of CST. Some documents, for example *Rerum Novarum* (an encyclical letter by Leo XIII) are on everyone's list while the Christmas radio addresses of Pius XII are cited by some but not all as part of the heritage. Most people, when referring to CST, use Leo's 1891 encyclical as a benchmark for the beginning of the tradition of social teaching. Yet not only did Leo write important encyclicals on politics before *Rerum Novarum* but a number of his predecessors promulgated significant statements on a variety of social matters. Thus, it can be argued that since the modern papal practice of issuing encyclicals began with Benedict XIV (1740-1758) many of these pre-Leonine letters should be considered part of CST. (Michael Schuck's book *That They Be One* is a fine overview of the entire body of social teaching found in the papal encyclicals.)

Clearly, the expression CST is elastic, sometimes designating an expansive body of material and at other times used in a more constricted sense to identify a limited number of papal and episcopal writings dating from the papacy of Leo XIII. Perhaps we can understand the term *Catholic social teaching* as an effort by the pastoral teachers of the church to articulate what the broader social tradition means in the era of modern economics, politics and culture.

With such an excellent resource why go further? Well, some may want a single volume that can be easily marked up and carried from armchair to class. Several can be recommended:

- *Catholic Social Teaching: Our Best Kept Secret*, by Michael Schulteis, S.J., Edward DeBerri, S.J., and Peter Henriot, S.J. (Center of Concern, 1985).
- *Faith doing Justice: An Introduction to Catholic Social Thought*, by Fred Kammer, S.J. (Paulist Press, 1991).
- *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, ed. David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon (Orbis Books, 1992).
- *What Does the Lord Require? A Bibliographical Essay on the Bible and Social Justice*, John R. Donahue, S.J. (Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2000).
- *Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, ed. Kenneth R. Himes, O.F.M., and Lisa Sowle Cahill, Charles E. Curran, David Hollenbach, S.J., and Thomas Shannon (Georgetown University Press, 2005).

Further Resources on Catholic Social Thought

- *U. S. Catholic Magazine's* web site contains brief summaries of the major documents in Catholic social thought, "[The Busy Christian's Guide to Catholic Social Teaching](#)".
- The Romero Catholic Worker House in Oklahoma City publishes a web site (<http://justpeace.org/>) that is frank about its shortcomings ("the Justpeace web site is not well organized") but nonetheless offers a huge array of sometimes surprising resources and links to documents and web sites that might be said to comprise a view of justice and peace "from below," many not likely to find their way onto more official lists.
- The Vatican's Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace maintains a web site, The Social Agenda (<http://www.thesocialagenda.org/>), which contains a comprehensive summary of Catholic social thought under dozens of headings (published in 2000). The mode of presentation is unfortunately deductive and ahistorical so the content floats in a timeless now but it is undeniably a comprehensive presentation of the ideas.