

How Catholic social teaching helps us to understand our duties and responsibilities

Bishop Timothy L. Doherty

September 20, 2020

As I was collecting my thoughts on this topic, I received a jury summons for a civil case and I showed up on time at the Tippecanoe County Courthouse. After my group received its orientation in our assigned courtroom, the bailiff announced a case settlement and we were dismissed. I responded to another summons about fifteen years ago. In that instance, I was voted the foreman of a coroner's jury, and we discharged our responsibility in a couple of hours.

Living in our country where a person has a right to a jury trial, the law outlines an obligation for others to serve as jurors. This reflects our church and moral law that also pairs any right with an obligation or a duty. If we come upon the word 'right' in a Catholic teaching or law, it is paired with one or more duties. When we look at some of the polarization in our public discourse today, it is because one party or another wants to claim a right without a related responsibility.

It is interesting to note that the Church's teaching promotes social participation that betters the condition of individuals and society through democratic structures where everyone can be involved, everyone contributes. Where there is a right to participation, there is an obligation to participate. This is part of the exercise of solidarity mentioned below.

Pope Saint John Paul II (reign 1978-2005) left us quite a legacy both with his collection and his authorship of church social teaching. While most Catholics are aware of the monumental 1994 edition of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), fewer are conversant with the 2004 Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church. Each of these, by the way, is in print as well as online at USCCB.org

Archbishop William Lori of Baltimore recently noted in America Magazine, September 2020, "Catholic social teaching is not an addendum to the Gospel but a living part of the Church's proclamation of our salvation in Christ Jesus." He details four aspects that are central to the Catholic worldview: the dignity of the human person, the common good, subsidiarity, and solidarity. While these elements are well known to many of us, it is better that all of us know that these values exist. They shape one's personal faith as well as practical relations between individuals, societies and governments.

In today's climate, we should be aware that Catholic social teaching treats various elements of justice. For example, justice is one of the four cardinal virtues along with prudence, temperance, and fortitude. There is judicial justice that pertains to legitimate governmental applications. It is when people talk about social justice that things get bumpy due to the fact that those paired words don't mean the same thing to everyone. Knowing something about the range of our church teaching helps with clearer thinking and more productive discussions.

A century ago in 1919, the National Catholic War Council, a predecessor to today's U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, published its Program on Social Reconstruction as our troops were still traveling home from the war in Europe. In its introductory paragraphs, it outlined traditional guiding values as they applied to social and industrial conditions. During the war, the cost of living had gone up seventy-five percent, and wages suffered. At that time here, women had not yet won the right to vote, and not all U.S. states had outlawed child labor. Then as now, rights and responsibilities were being measured, and

imbalances being named in order to be addressed. The bishops who authored that program concluded by quoting Pope Leo XIII (reign 1878 to 1903) and his appeal to the values of Christian faith that frame solutions in terms of human lives and livelihoods, not only by statistics or unregulated markets.

Today the dignity of the human being from conception to natural death remains our central value (CCC 2258-2283). It is required in our evaluations of actions and structures. There are points along that life-arc where dignity is attacked because human beings themselves are attacked, not protected, or simply ignored. Our social teaching offers constructive ideas so that some injustices can be lessened or eliminated. And it offers hope because voicing our values can help prevent other injustices from erupting.