

# THE CHURCH'S BEST-KEPT SECRET

A Primer on  
Catholic Social Teaching

  
**New City Press**  
Hyde Park, New York

The social teaching of the Catholic Church shows how universal the faith really is, touching all people regardless of age, social status, or ethnicity. By introducing us to this social teaching Mark Shea has invited all Catholics to deepen their faith in practical ways, and to put aside individualism and tribalism and open their hearts to everyone just because they are fellow human beings.

– **Bishop Thomas Dowd**, auxiliary of Montreal

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In *The Church's Best-Kept Secret*, Mark Shea provides a faithful and spirited overview of Catholic social teaching grounded in Scripture, Vatican II, and papal writings since Leo XIII. He clearly explains the key principles of Catholic social teaching—human dignity, the common good, subsidiarity, and solidarity—and he shows that some Catholics, while rightfully opposing abortion and euthanasia, mistakenly reduce Catholic teachings on capital punishment and the environment to mere “prudential judgments” that can be ignored or opposed.

– **Robert Fastiggi**, Ph.D. Professor of Systematic Theology, Sacred Heart Major Seminary, Detroit, Michigan

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In *The Church's Best-Kept Secret*, Mark Shea has written an accessible and essential primer for anyone interested in learning about Catholic teaching on human dignity and the common good rooted in the Gospel and Sacred Tradition. Transcending politics and ideology, this book provides a comprehensive overview of the Church's Magisterium on social issues, explaining how they are all interconnected, and why our moral decisions and actions have wide-ranging consequences.

– **Mike Lewis**, Managing Editor, *Where Peter Is*

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Mark Shea has a gift for making official Catholic teaching accessible in a manner that displays not only its truth but also its beauty. In *The Church's Best-Kept Secret*, he shows that Catholic social doctrine challenges us to go beyond “liberal” and “conservative” distinctions. I recommend this book for all who seek to understand the fundamental principles behind that doctrine and apply it to their everyday lives, including their spiritual lives.

– **Dawn Eden Goldstein**, S.Th.D., theologian and author of *My Peace I Give You: Healing Sexual Wounds with the Help of the Saints*

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In an increasingly polarized Church and world, we are accustomed to apologies and manifestos, jeremiads and rants. The word “catechesis” means to echo or resound and this resonance must be pastoral, in the voice of the Good Shepherd. Mark Shea captures this catechetical tone and pastoral spirit, eschewing polemics and hyperbole. His book echoes Catholic Social Teaching from our mother and teacher, the Church. It is a resounding success.

– **Samuel D. Rocha**, Associate Professor, University of British Columbia

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To Pope Francis,  
who has preached Good News to the poor.

And to Servant of God Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin  
who saw far, fought hard for the least of these,  
ran the race, and won the crown imperishable.

Ora pro nobis!

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## Introduction

### **The Church's Best-Kept Secret**

*He has showed you, O man, what is good;  
and what does the LORD require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God? – Micah 6:8*

I once spoke about Catholic Social Teaching at a parish. On one side of the room sat the parish's Pro-life group. On the other side sat the parish's Peace and Justice group. Neither saw themselves as having anything in common with the other. Yet the whole point of my talk was that in the mind of the Church, which is the mind of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 2:16), both are part of the same Body, engaged in the same salvific mission to the world.

How did they not see that? Thereby hangs a tale.

### **Thinking Beyond the Categories of the World**

Some think of Catholic moral teaching in terms of the private and personal (and, for the most part, sexual). So for many, the Church should focus on so-called "Non-Negotiable teaching" (first and foremost, abortion and, to a lesser degree, euthanasia). Those with such a perspective tend to place on a lower rung Catholic teaching about more public issues such as taxation, workers' rights, poverty,

immigration, politics, public spending, climate change, technology, health care, war, torture, gun violence, racism, or the death penalty. For them such issues are 1) a distraction from the Non-Negotiables, 2) politically “liberal,” and 3) subject to “prudential judgment,” a term which is commonly understood to mean “doing as we like.”

Conversely, others think the Church should focus on these very public issues affecting billions of people around the globe. To them, the primary mission of the gospel is to create a just society in which the stranger, the orphan, and the widow are cared for and just structures are established to shield the vulnerable from the rich, powerful, and privileged predator. These folks sometimes regard the Church’s teaching on our sex lives as a distraction from these issues.

Each group tends to like *some* aspects of the gospel, but each also tends to think there are areas where the Church should mind her own business. And (mark this) each therefore tends to evaluate the Church’s social teaching in light of their political and cultural priorities rather than evaluating their political and cultural priorities in light of the Church’s teaching. Consequently, they wind up on opposite sides of the room, darting suspicious glances at each other. Worse, they dart suspicious glances at the riches of the Tradition itself.

The trouble, very simply, is that a gaggle of warring voices in our culture assails us, urging us to think not with the mind of Jesus Christ, but with our favorite news vendor, or political party, or TV show, or pundit, or folk hero, or social media mini-pope, or circle of peers. The result is



that actual Catholic teaching on how to order our common life remains the Church's best-kept secret.

That's not because the Church hides it. It is there in plain view in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*<sup>1</sup>—and more especially in the words of Jesus Christ himself. Rather, it is nearly invisible because the gospel is eternally at cross purposes with all those voices in our culture that are so much louder than the Church. So we are taught by our culture to ask, “Is it political, progressive, conservative, spiritual, left, right, modern, ancient?” but not “Is it in accord with what Jesus taught?” It is rather like when Jesus asked his apostles, “Who do people say that I am?” and got a wide diversity of opinions and guesses in response (see Matthew 16:13-14). The Church's moral teaching is regarded with tremendous confusion, not because it is confusing but because we are confused.

## Thinking with the Mind of Christ

So who is right? Should we care more about private, personal “pelvic” morality or primarily focus on what is popularly called “social justice” issues like poverty, racism, crime, and so forth? The answer of the Christian tradition is “Yes.”

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1. Hereafter referred to as *Compendium* and available on-line at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/just-peace/documents/rc\\_pc\\_justpeace\\_doc\\_20060526\\_compendio-dott-soc\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/just-peace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html) as of September 25, 2019.

C.S. Lewis describes the Christian moral life this way:

There are two ways in which the human machine goes wrong. One is when human individuals drift apart from one another, or else collide with one another and do one another damage, by cheating or bullying. The other is when things go wrong inside the individual—when the different parts of him (his different faculties and desires and so on) either drift apart or interfere with one another. You can get the idea plain if you think of us as a fleet of ships sailing in formation. The voyage will be a success only, in the first place, if the ships do not collide and get in one another's way; and, secondly, if each ship is seaworthy and has her engines in good order. As a matter of fact, you cannot have either of these two things without the other. If the ships keep on having collisions they will not remain seaworthy very long. On the other hand, if their steering gears are out of order they will not be able to avoid collisions. Or, if you like, think of humanity as a band playing a tune. To get a good result, you need two things. Each player's individual instrument must be in tune and also each must come in at the right moment so as to combine with all the others.

But there is one thing we have not yet taken into account. We have not asked where the fleet is trying to get to, or what piece of music the band is trying to play. The instruments might

be all in tune and might all come in at the right moment, but even so the performance would not be a success if they had been engaged to provide dance music and actually played nothing but Dead Marches. And however well the fleet sailed, its voyage would be a failure if it were meant to reach New York and actually arrived at Calcutta.

Morality, then, seems to be concerned with three things. Firstly, with fair play and harmony between individuals. Secondly, with what might be called tidying up or harmonising the things inside each individual. Thirdly, with the general purpose of human life as a whole: what man was made for: what course the whole fleet ought to be on: what tune the conductor of the band wants it to play.<sup>2</sup>

The Catholic Tradition makes the startling claim that Jesus has revealed the way to this tripartite gift of healing for ourselves, love and justice among all people, and the ultimate and eternal happiness that we all seek. To find it though, we must “have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5) since God reminds us “My thoughts are not your thoughts,/neither are your ways my ways, says the LORD” (Isaiah 55:8).

One of the marks of Jesus’ teaching is that, just as he is the Word made flesh, so he expects us to both speak and

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2. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1960), 71-72.

enflesh his words. For Jesus, faith and obedience to his Father are one just as he and the Father are one. Talking the talk without walking the walk is rejected by him, while living out his words is filled with the assurance of his blessing:

“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you? Every one who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what he is like: he is like a man building a house, who dug deep, and laid the foundation upon rock; and when a flood arose, the stream broke against that house, and could not shake it, because it had been well built. But he who hears and does not do them is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation; against which the stream broke, and immediately it fell, and the ruin of that house was great.” (Luke 6:46-49)

So strongly does he insist on obedience over mere pious words that he even tells a story in which a rebellious-sounding son is the hero, while his pious-sounding brother is the villain:

“What do you think? A man had two sons; and he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ And he answered, ‘I will not’; but afterward he repented and went. And he went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir,’ but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” (Matthew 21:28-31)

Note that the dichotomy is not between one who believed and one who acted. It is between one who shows what he really believes by obeying the Father and one who shows what he really believes by disobeying the Father. For we do not have a choice, in the end, between faith and no faith. We only have a choice between obedient faith in God or disobedient faith in what is not God. Our actions show Who or what our faith is really in. “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matthew 6:21).

So Paul, while insisting that we are saved by God’s grace through faith also tells us that he “received grace and apostleship to bring about the *obedience* of faith” (Romans 1:5 [emphasis mine]). In short, Jesus saves us by grace in order to transform us from disobedient sinners to obedient and eternally happy saints.

That is why Paul also tells us, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:12-13).

And John summarizes this eminently practical theology this way:

If any one says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. (1 John 4:20)

All this is simply a reiteration of what Jesus himself says are the two most fundamental commandments in the entire Bible:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22:37-40)

In other words, if we do not obey the second commandment, we cannot obey the first.

The reason for this is twofold:

1. There is, by the nature of our relationship with God, nothing we can do for him for the very good reason that he is God and we are not. He needs nothing. Our very ability to choose or act or love or even exist at all is pure gift to us from him. So though God commands that we love him above all, the paradox is that he does not do so out of any need. God is perfectly happy from all eternity and overflows with love because he *is* love (see 1 John 4:8). Everything we have and are is pure grace.
2. Therefore, precisely *because* God is love, he wills us into being gratuitously so we can participate in his divine life of love. And since we cannot give him anything, he creates us in such a way that we can “pay it forward” by loving our neighbor with God’s love. In short, to love our neighbor *is* to love God.

So Jesus identifies himself with our neighbor so strongly that what we do (or neglect to do) to our neighbor is what we do (or neglect to do) to Jesus. This is the point of the famous Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (see Matthew 25:31-46).

That parable is about the salvation of those outside the visible communion of the People of God. Note that this does not mean “outside the Church” but simply outside the *visible* Church. When both the Sheep and the Goats meet the King, they are *surprised*. Unlike disciples of Jesus who are aware they serve Jesus in their neighbor, neither the Sheep nor the Goats had the slightest idea Jesus was present in their neighbor. Both ask, “Lord, when did we see *you* hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison?”

Christians know loving our neighbor is loving Jesus and so bear a greater weight of responsibility if we ignore that duty and can rejoice more greatly when we do it since it pleases the Lord we love. But this does not mean that people with no knowledge of Jesus Christ are oblivious to (or exempt from hearing) the cry of the poor, the hungry, and the dispossessed. The Sheep in the parable do the right thing for the same reason a disciple of Jesus does it: *because it is the right thing*. They are not saved by hard work without God’s grace. Rather their good deeds are prompted by the grace of God already at work in their hearts. Because at the end of the day, God is God and is not dependent on the level of our theological education to act by the power of the Holy Spirit. As Paul says:

When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. (Romans 2:14-16)

Conversely, the Goats will not be helped at the Pearly Gates by the excuse, “Hey! I didn’t realize it was *you* I left to starve, Lord! I just thought it was some nobody. If I had known it was you, I totally would have helped.”

That is because there are, in the words of J. Budziszewski, certain things we “can’t not know.”<sup>3</sup> The proof of this is seen in an old Steve Martin routine in which he urges the audience to remember that if you ever find yourself on trial for murder, just tell the judge, “I forgot murder was a crime.” You can’t not know that murder is evil. Conversely, you can’t not know that it is good to do the things the Sheep in the parable did for the least of these.

In short, justice—that is, giving to another what is his or her due—is not some special revelation given only to Christians, but is something all human beings, made in the image and likeness of God, both deserve and are expected by God (and their own consciences) to live toward others.

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3. See J. Budziszewski, *What We Can't Not Know* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2011).



So although Catholics alone are bound to observe certain precepts because they have received special revelation (for example, “Honor the Lord’s Day by attending Mass”), a great body of moral teaching “written on our hearts” applies to all human beings—believer or not—because *every* person is due justice, fair dealing, and so forth. And they are due these things even if they themselves do not know or believe that they are made in the image and likeness of God.

Because justice is the duty of all human beings to uphold, it is also therefore the duty of each of us to give the best we can to the common good. Therefore, it is the duty of Catholics to delve into the riches of our Tradition and share it with our neighbors so that they too can profit from it. That is what this book is about.

## **Four Pillars**

The good news is that Jesus has not left us on our own to try to figure out that Tradition. Rather, he has poured out gifts on his Church to help us both know and do his will for our neighbor in love. As he told the apostles, “He who hears you hears me” (Luke 10:16).

What the Church teaches about how to love our neighbor comes to us through two millennia of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, saints, philosophers, thinkers, and reformers pondering the implications of Jesus’ teaching and, what is more, living it out.

Catholic Social Teaching can be pictured as a throne sitting on four pillars. Just as a throne would tip over if each

leg differed in length, so these pillars are equally important and equally emphasized by the Tradition. Or, if you prefer, they are like four notes forming a single chord. They are:

- The Dignity of the Human Person
- The Common Good
- Subsidiarity
- Solidarity

I propose that, for the duration of this little primer, we set aside all those clamoring voices in our culture, choose to listen to the Church's Tradition, and see how the liberating gospel of Jesus Christ, articulated by the Magisterium—that is, the bishops of the Church in union with the Pope stretching back to the apostles—speaks the truth that sets us free.

## Chapter 1

# The Dignity of the Human Person: Made in the Image and Likeness of God

*Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must finally be paid to such a person.*

– Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*

When a child starves, or a veteran commits suicide after being deported by the country he served, or a poor mother is worked to death by two underpaying jobs, or a lunatic dictator starves his people, all who cry in outrage, "That's not the way it is supposed to be!" have in the back of their minds a notion, however dim, of the way it *is* supposed to be. The name for the "way it is supposed to be" is what the Church calls the *Dignity of the Human Person*. Just as you cannot know you are in the dark if you have never seen light, so you cannot perceive an insult to human dignity without believing human persons have dignity.

We feel and see the Dignity of the Human Person not only in the breach, but in the observance. We honor it when the humble are exalted, when a good man steps in to stop

a bully picking on somebody weaker than himself, when a good woman does a thankless job so that a co-worker can visit her sick mother, when a child comforts her sad little brother. We feel it when George Bailey realizes his worth at the end of *It's a Wonderful Life*. We behold it in the face of a newborn child or a wise old woman.

Persons are due honor not because of their income bracket, looks, skin color, ancestry, intelligence, mental health, physical condition, age, citizenship, religion or lack thereof, sexual orientation, gender, or anything they do or don't do. They possess dignity for one reason only: because they are made—without any exception whatsoever—in the image and likeness of God. And it makes not one ounce of difference if that person believes in God or not: they still retain that dignity because of what they *are*. That is why a Catholic medical missionary in Africa, asked why she was treating Muslims, animists, and atheists in addition to Christian victims of Ebola, replied, “I don't treat people because they are Christian. I treat people because *I* am Christian.”

The essential core of the Church's teaching concerning the Dignity of the Human Person can be sketched in twenty-four seemingly simple words:

Human beings, made in the image and likeness of God, are sacred from conception to natural death and intended for eternal happiness with him.

This statement is founded on two crucial biblical truths. Let's take them one at a time.

## **We are Made in the Image and Likeness of God**

God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27)

Catholic teaching on the Dignity of the Human Person begins with the fact that creation—all of creation, but especially the creature called *Homo Sapiens*—is entirely *gratuitous*. Everything is a gift. Out of sheer love God both creates the universe—including us—and calls us to share in his divine life.

All authentic religious experience takes us toward this reality, which is why the Silver Rule (“Do not do to others what you would not have them do to you”) and Golden Rule (“Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them” (Matthew 7:21))—are universally recognized. Some try to deny this, but they always give away their game because they claim justice for themselves and complain if they are treated unfairly.

This primordial recognition of the moral law—what the Church calls “natural revelation”—is not the replacement for but the root of subsequent supernatural revelation. In the moral life, natural revelation is what your folks taught you about sharing with your sister, telling the truth, not hitting each other, being polite, cleaning up your messes and so forth.

Of course, ultimately even natural revelation comes from God since everything is his gratuitous gift, including those who taught you about common decency and cleaning your room. The Church tells us that these basic aspects of natural law are like the foundation of the