

is at once earthly and transcendent; its aim is thus to guide Christian behavior. It therefore belongs to the field, not of ideology, but of theology and particularly of moral theology. (*On Social Concern*, 44)

Thus Catholic social teaching looks to gospel teaching to form the moral foundation for the Catholic approach to questions of social justice. It assists the disciple in the ongoing task of reflecting on the challenge of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and in discerning what it means in a consumer, technological, and globalized society to be poor in spirit and to embrace the sorrowing and the lowly. The whole body of social teaching moves forward from the conviction that every aspect of human endeavor, although having distinct and unique operative principles, is accountable to moral scrutiny. The call of the gospel is constant, and it demands continuous rethinking and reassessment of what the dignity of the human person means in the complex and ever-changing organizational structures of our society.

Although texts of papal encyclicals and of the Second Vatican Council are important for the development of the body of literature now known as the social teaching of the Church, there are many other contributions to this broad and diverse body of literature. There are documents from bishops. In this regard, the Latin American bishops (called CELAM for *Conferencia del Episcopado Latinoamericano*) took the lead, beginning with their conferences at Medellin (1960) and Puebla (1979). There are two important documents from the North American National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB, now called the United States Catholic Conference or USCC): *The Challenge of Peace* (1983) and *Economic Justice for All* (1986). These documents manifest an ongoing learning process. They are largely the result of a broad dialogue among bishops and specialists

in social ethics and the social sciences, as well as other well-informed observers from among the people of God. There has been broad participation. This is in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council that all Christians are called to "the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel" (*Gaudium et Spes* 4).

Broad participation in the social mission of the Church is imperative. Pope Paul VI (d. 1978) made concrete this directive to observe and examine the signs of the times:

It is up to the Christian communities to analyze with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country, to shed on it the light of the gospel's unalterable words . . . and in dialogue with other Christian brethren and all men of good will, to discern options and commitments which are called for in order to bring about the social, political and economic changes seen in many cases to be urgently needed. (*Octogesima Adveniens* 4)

Thus the body of social teaching develops within broad Catholic experience in order to present an organic and ongoing discernment of gospel teaching. This discernment has given rise to three basic steps: observe the situation, reflect on the gospel, and act out of love on behalf of the oppressed.

Eight Principles for Social Justice

In a 1998 document, *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching*, the U.S. Catholic bishops highlighted a number of principles that flow out of their understanding of Catholic social teaching. What follows is based on their insights but has been developed further to accentuate several current issues important in the Church's mission of concern for the human person and the future of the human race. These can be helpful for the discernment of today's follower of Jesus.