

Social Justice

What Is Social Justice?

The first use of the term "social justice" in the Catholic Church is credited to Pius XI in 1931, though as a general concept social justice had already begun to emerge earlier in the late nineteenth century with the 1891 publication of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*. Official papal letters are usually identified by the opening words of the official Latin text. In this case, the title literally means "on new things." The "new things" to which Pope Leo referred were the new social problems resulting from industrialization. After examining the situation of poor people and the workers in recently industrialized countries, he condemned employers who abused workers as "mere instruments for making money." He called for a "just wage." While upholding the right to private property, he insisted the worker receive sufficient means for meeting basic human needs, thereby rejecting radical socialism. He challenged laissez-faire capitalism, believing the economy should not function only according to the laws of the market, without oversight of the state. However, what was truly new about Pope Leo's encyclical is that he applied both the biblical tradition of works of mercy, such as feeding the hungry and clothing the poor, and traditional moral principles, beyond the simple duty of doing charitable works to the daunting task of constructing a just social order.

With this encyclical, according to theologian Richard McBrien and others, Leo XIII laid the foundation for a theology of social justice. The pope made it clear that social justice is not about rejection of wealthy people, but it is about bringing the spirit of the Gospels and the Beatitudes to the manner in which all social structures operate. Fundamentally, the social task is to develop a society in which no human being is deprived of human dignity or of basic human needs that impede the necessary freedom to develop his or

her full human potential. Concern for the poor is not about feelings of compassion. It is about concrete and persevering decisions to change the social, economic, and political structures that marginalize and oppress any human person.

Why "Social"?

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines social justice in the following manner: "The respect for the human person and the rights which flow from human dignity and guarantee it. Society must provide the conditions that allow people to obtain what is their due, according to their nature and vocation" (1930). In this definition, the emphasis is on the responsibility of all members of society to provide positive conditions in society that foster "respect for the human person." Especially after Pius XI's 1931 *Quadragesimo Anno* ("Forty Years Later," i.e., after *Rerum Novarum* [1891]), it became clearer that social justice is about the "common good" of all human persons who make up society, especially in the distribution of benefits and burdens.

All people are bound together as members of one human family and share one planet. Social life is therefore not something "added on" to human life, but it goes to the heart of what it means to live as a human being. Family and community provide the context for human growth, identity, and fulfillment. The family is "the first vital cell of society" and the place where the generations come together, and family has a social role in building up the broader human community. According to the Second Vatican Council, other "reciprocal ties and mutual dependencies increase day by day and give rise to a variety of associations and organizations, both public and private," and "this human interdependence grows more tightly drawn and spreads by degrees over the whole world" (*Gaudium et Spes* 25, 26). Multiple relationships are essential to the human experience, but they must be ordered in a way that fosters the growth and dignity of all persons.