



# A ClearC

## Catholic Social Teaching and Our Times

By Emily Stimpson Chapman

**A**s the divide between left and right grows deeper and wider by the day, politics are fracturing the nation. Violence between those who disagree now threatens to become the new norm, and even most Facebook conversations have lost what little civility they once possessed. Catholics, unfortunately, aren't immune to the political currents, and the same politics that divide our country divide the Catholic faithful. But it doesn't have to be that way.

Thanks to a 2,000-year tradition of Catholic social teaching, Catholics have what most in the culture lack: a strong guide and a clear compass that can help us navigate the most confusing and turbulent questions facing our nation.

Recently, *Franciscan Magazine* spoke to three alumni whose scholarship and work have taken them deep into the principles of Catholic social teaching: Dr. Steven Brust MA '97, professor of political science at Eastern New Mexico University; Dr. Michel Therrien MA '96, director of Evangelization and president of the Institute for Pastoral Leadership in the Diocese of Pittsburgh; and Jayd Henricks '91, executive director of the Government Relations Congressional Relations Staff for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

We asked each alumnus how Catholics can better utilize Catholic social teaching to escape some of the more problematic pitfalls of today's political and cultural environment. Here's what they recommend.

**“Catholic social teaching is . . . a moral vision for society.”**



# Compass

## 1. Set aside your presuppositions.

Most people read and interpret the news through the lens of their preferred political party. When we approach Catholic social teaching, however, we need to be careful not to do the same.

“People tend to read Catholic social teaching through other prior philosophical commitments,” says Therrien. “If you’re more conservative, you tend to read it through a capitalist lens. If you’re more left leaning, you tend to read it through a more socialist lens.

“But,” he continued, “as St. John Paul II said, Catholic social teaching is not ‘a third way’ between socialism and capitalism. Rather, it’s a moral vision for society. It’s her proclamation of the Gospel to all the nations.”

As such, Catholic social teaching isn’t any one pope’s or bishops’ conference’s private musings about politics. It’s not an afterthought or an add-on to the Gospel. It is the Gospel. It is how the Church calls the faithful to live the Good News in time and live personal morality within a social context. For that reason, the Church asks Catholics to not only take Catholic social teaching more seriously than political platforms but also to consider it prior to political platforms, letting it—not our personal voting history—shape how we see the issues of the day.

## 2. See the big picture.

Politics is about the concerns of the moment. Catholic social teaching, however, takes a wider view, looking at temporal struggles regarding human dignity and the common good in light of eternity.

“Catholic social teaching is concerned about temporal goods—about securing justice and meeting material

needs,” says Henricks. “But Catholic social teaching doesn’t stop there, because the temporal goods are ordered to our final good: God.”

In other words, Catholic social teaching is concerned about the whole person, body and soul. It cares about physical and spiritual needs, and it recognizes that spiritual ills are often at the root of material problems.

Accordingly, in calling people to live Catholic social teaching, the Church is not so much calling Catholics to advocate for particular pieces of legislation as she is calling them to see the world with Catholic eyes, to have a complete social vision formed by the Gospel.

“Ultimately, with Catholic social teaching, the Church is calling us to a deeper conversion,” adds Therrien. “She’s calling us to have an authentically Christian view of all of life.”





### 3. Don't just focus on institutions.

Catholic social teaching offers wisdom to governments. But it doesn't exist merely for governments. It exists primarily for individuals. Its most fundamental aim is to help people, not institutions, live the Gospel, which means it offers guidance that is applicable outside the voting booth.

"Catholic social teaching addresses issues like economics and government and war," says Brust. "But it also encompasses family life and the virtues. It directs us in a way of life that's meant to both promote a more just and good society and help us to attain our eternal salvation. To just focus on how it applies to governments is to miss the fullness and richness of Catholic teachings in these areas.

"For example," he continues, "consider the economy. Catholic teaching on the economy isn't just about what the government can and cannot do. It's about what principles and ethos a healthy economic system should have, as well as how that ethos should permeate companies and individuals.

"It aims to help us think about what people are doing—what they're choosing to buy and sell, how they're choosing to buy and sell, how companies are structured, what advertising looks like, and the economic choices people make daily, based upon what is just and charitable. It speaks to each of us about our household economies and daily spending habits, not just to corporations and governments."

It also speaks to each of us about how we live in relationship with others—with family members, friends, co-workers, and the poor, both locally and globally. It speaks to us about how we conduct the business of our daily lives, recognizing that the health of both a culture and its institutions ultimately depends upon the individuals who make up that culture and form its institutions.

"When the Christian community is really living the Gospel in the public square," says Therrien, "the whole world benefits from it."

### 4. Do your research.

Misunderstandings about Catholic social teaching (and a subset of Catholic social teaching, social justice) abound. That's why Therrien recommends that people do their own research on the subject.



# Serving the Whole Person

“Our faith should have something to say about how we order society and how we participate in it,” he explains. “Privatizing morality is not an option for Christians. We’re called to teach the world how to live the call to justice, peace, and charity, first by our example and then by our words. But we haven’t adequately catechized people on how to do that or what that looks like. Typically, what gets taught about Catholic social teaching is just little pieces.”

For those looking to increase their own knowledge on the subject, Thérien recommends starting with the *Compendium on Catholic Social Teaching*, published by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace in 2005, and then focusing on the social encyclicals of the last three popes: St. John Paul II’s *Laborem Exercens* (1981), *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), *Centesimus Annus* (1991), and *Evangelium Vitae* (1995); Pope Benedict XVI’s *Caritas in Veritate* (2008); and Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si* (2015).

“It’s helpful to learn what the Church teaches from the Church, instead of from the media,” he says.

## 5. Expect disagreement.

The Church’s social teaching is not meant to be a burden. Rather, it’s a gift, intended to help us navigate a world that is anything but simple.

“None of us can fully understand what we need on our own,” says Henricks. “We are social beings, and naturally we’re going to be in some sort of social institutions. How we associate with schools, the economy, the political order—these things all need to be guided by what is proper to

At Franciscan University, students learn about Catholic social teaching in the classroom. Then, they have the opportunity to live that teaching in the streets of Steubenville, the jungles of Ecuador, and even classrooms in Romania.

Over 500 Franciscan University students annually participate in dozens of domestic and international mission trips, and those mission trips, like Catholic social teaching itself, are structured with the whole person in mind.

“When our students go out on mission trips, the primary thing they seek to do is speak to the dignity of the human person,” explains Rhett Young ’94, director of Missionary Outreach at Franciscan.

According to Young, one of the underlying goals of Franciscan’s Missionary Outreach is to help young people approach social justice with a desire to meet both people’s temporal needs and their much greater spiritual needs.

That two-fold goal is often realized in the very structure of the mission trips. For example, the long-standing medical mission to Ecuador places Franciscan alumni who are doctors and nurses in one tent, where they can attend to medical needs, while in a tent immediately next to it, people can receive the sacraments, pray with Franciscan students, and adore the Eucharist.

Other mission trips, such as those conducted in partnership with the Language and Catechetical Institute in Eastern Europe, have a strictly spiritual goal: Franciscan students talk about their own faith journeys and the Theology of the Body to students who have grown up in primarily atheist countries.

“You can go out and just feed the poor,” Young explains. “But what happens when you leave and the food runs out? What have you really left them with? We want to serve people, but we want to serve them in a way that leaves them with a more lasting good. So, we do go out and feed the poor; but we also we give them the most important message: We evangelize and give them the Gospel of Jesus Christ!”

## Missions of Peace



500+ Students • 8 States • 11 Countries

States: Arizona, New York, Illinois, California, New Mexico, North Dakota, Florida, and Ohio

Countries: Nicaragua, Belize, Ecuador, Honduras, Jamaica, France, Sweden, Romania, Slovakia, Hungary, and Albania



the human person. Without that guidance, we tend to veer to the extremes, where the common good is lost.”

At the same time, Catholic social teaching isn't like a straight-forward voting guide, giving detailed instructions on how to think about and approach every problem. Rather, it tends to give overarching principles, then leave it to individuals' prudential judgment to decide how to best implement those principles.

“There are certain fundamental principles that no one and nothing can change,” explains Brust. “The dignity of the human person; the right to life; the nature of marriage as the lifelong union of one man and one woman; the fact that the family is the first and most fundamental cell of society, deserving of protection and promotion; the preferential option for the poor; and our obligation to help those in need. These are fundamental principles.

“But,” he concludes, “how you go about promoting and protecting the family, how you help the poor, how you assist families in educating their children—for questions like these a whole range of options exists and as long as those options don't violate a fundamental principle, people of good faith and good will can disagree about them.” ■

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