



## The Society of St Vincent de Paul and Catholic Social Teaching

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is a body of doctrine developed by the Catholic Church which guides our actions in the society in which we live. It is rooted in Scripture and the teachings of the Church, and it provides an ethical framework to assist Catholics in dealing with economic, and political issues in the modern world.

Its foundational principle is the dignity of the human person. CST emphasizes that this dignity is the basis of a just society and that human life is sacred. It advocates for systems that respect human rights and promote the well-being of everyone..

While the Rule of the St Vincent de Paul Society (SSVP) does not make specific reference to Catholic Social Teaching [CST], many of the values it describes are reflective of it: the dignity of the human person, participation, and common good, amongst others. It is also pertinent to note that today the SSVP has a volunteer Social Justice Coordinator whose role is to highlight CST within the organisation, and to encourage members to look at the causes of poverty and disadvantage.

There are several themes of CST which merit closer attention regarding the work of the SSVP.

### **Option for the Poor**

The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church states that:

*The principle of the universal destination of goods requires that the poor, the marginalised, and in all cases those whose living conditions interfere with their proper growth should be the focus of particular concern. To this end, the preferential option for the poor should be reaffirmed in all its force. <sup>1</sup> [Para. 182]*

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<sup>1</sup> The 'universal destination of goods' is a concept by which the Catholic Church tells us that the goods of creation are destined for humankind as a whole, but also recognizes the individual right to private property.

In examining the basic principles of CST, one sees that it teaches that every human being has a right to those things in life which sustain and nurture him or her and contribute to each individual's integral human development: food, shelter, employment, a dignified and respected place in society. The 'Preferential Option for the Poor' recognises these claims, but while fully cognisant that long-term solutions are important and desirable, it also acknowledges that there are people who are presently without the necessities of life and that their needs are urgent. A conscious attempt must be made to try to ameliorate their situation; they are in special need and that they have a special claim on Christians.

The correlation with the SSVP is obvious. Helping the poor is the Society's basic aim. The Society provides material aid and spiritual and personal comfort in times of need.

## **Solidarity**

Another related principle which is common within SSVP work is that of solidarity. CST states that as humans we are one family, whatever our national, racial, economic, or other differences. See for example "[Sollicitudo Rei Socialis](#)" from Pope John Paul II in 1987. This common humanity necessitates the recognition of our mutual interdependence, not just as a necessary fact of life but also as a positive value in our lives. We cannot realise our full potential unless we share our existence with others, striving to build a community that is mutually beneficial, working together towards the common good. This commitment is often described as solidarity. However, solidarity involves working not just on behalf of the poor but with the poor, listening to concerns and priorities. The work of the SSVP recognises this clearly:

*The distinctive approach of Vincentians to issues of social justice is to see them from the perspective of those we visit who suffer from injustice....The Society helps the poor and disadvantaged speak for themselves. When they cannot, the Society must speak on behalf of those who are ignored. [Manual: 7.4, 7.5]*

Further, while recognising the necessity for the immediate alleviation of need, there is the need for justice and charity; this has been a core concern since the formation of the organisation. Section 7 of the Society's Rule states:

*The Society is concerned not only with alleviating need but also with identifying the unjust structures that cause it' [7.1] ; 'Where injustice, inequality, poverty, or exclusion are due to unjust economic, political, or social structures or to inadequate or unjust legislation, the Society should speak out clearly against the situation' [7.6].*

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## **Subsidiarity**

The SSVP puts into practice another CST core principle: subsidiarity. In *Caritas in Veritate*, Benedict XVI defines subsidiarity as:

*Subsidiarity is first and foremost a form of assistance to the human person via the autonomy of intermediate bodies. Such assistance is offered when individuals or groups are unable to accomplish something on their own, and it is always designed to achieve their emancipation, because it fosters freedom and participation through assumption of responsibility.*

In other words, decisions should be made at the most appropriate level in a society or organisation; larger or higher forms of community—such as the state or the government—should not take to themselves the tasks and functions that smaller forms of community can perform. This is based on the view that persons or institutions closest to the situation are best able to act on it and should have the authority and resources to do so. Subsidiarity thus encourages participation and supports grassroots forms of social development and the various groups within Society, for example, churches, unions, and voluntary organisations such as the SSVP.

The organisation of the Society into Conferences to serve local needs is a particularly good example of this principle at work:

*Decisions are made as close as possible to the area of activity to ensure that the local environment and circumstances [cultural, social, political, etc] are taken into consideration. In this way, the Society promotes local initiatives within its spirit. This freedom of action of Conferences and Councils, which has been kept faithfully since the origins of the Society, enables them to help the poor spontaneously and more effectively, free from excessive bureaucracy. [Rule Section 3.9]*

## **Integral Human Development (IHD)**

There is a widespread view that the most important dimension of human development is material and economic. In contrast, IHD takes a holistic approach to human development, emphasising the development of the whole individual in all his/her many facets—personal, social, political, and spiritual – which combined together make for true human flourishing.

The SSVP also recognises that poverty takes many forms: personal, financial, material, and social. The Rule states that:

*No work of charity is foreign to the Society. It includes any form of help that alleviates suffering or deprivation and promotes human dignity and personal integrity in all their dimensions. [Rule 1.3]*

*Faithful to the spirit of its founders, the Society constantly strives for renewal, adapting to changing world conditions. It seeks to be ever aware of the changes that occur in human society and the new types of poverty that may be identified or anticipated. [Rule 1.5]*

For example, an SSVP Conference may visit an elderly person whose poverty is not financial but is a lack of human contact, and whose integral human development is thereby hindered. This may be a new type of poverty, but it is one to which the SSVP responds. This is in line with Pope Francis's teaching on Integral Human Development [IHD]. He considered it an important part of the church's social teaching and set up the Dicastery for integral Human Development in 2016.

Thus it can be seen the SSVP follows CST very well. Indeed, Frederic Ozanam's own writings display an awareness of CST before the term itself was coined!