

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING AS A ROAD TO EQUITY

Equity is a slippery concept. It is not the same as equality, where two plus two always equals four. It is also not static. It changes according to time and place so that what was once considered equitable may no longer be seen as equitable today. It is difficult to define and sometimes may not be apparent to us until we see it in front of us.



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Yet equity — a kind of provisional and flexible concept of justice — is the foundation of the justice system. It is the state where each has received his or her due, not necessarily in equal measure, but in a way that matches needs and aspirations.

Equity is why sentences are not imposed by computers and why two juries can reach different verdicts on the same crime.

It all depends on who, where and how. Equity is a moving but essential target, and achieving it requires a lot of different tools, many of which are found in Catholic social teaching. Sometimes referred to as “the Church’s best-kept secret,” Catholic social teaching has been underappreciated, but I believe it is gaining traction in the Church as well as in society in general.

It has been invoked in some unlikely places.

As an example, I was surprised to see an article last year in *The Wall Street Journal* titled “Can Catholic Social Teaching Unite a Divided America?” by Francis X. Rocca.¹ In it, Rocca argues that the church’s social teaching is key to bringing divisive sides together in conversation. Centuries in the making, Catholic social teaching coalesced in a series of encyclicals starting in 1891 with Pope Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum*. These documents addressed every major social issue: workers’ rights, war and peace, the economy, racial inequality, democratic capitalism and, most recently, the environment.

These teachings are rich in scriptural language,

but they are not sectarian. They are built on our natural law tradition, our belief that moral knowledge is available through reasoned reflection on human experience. This means any person of good will can read and consider the Church’s arguments. Human dignity and the common good are the linchpins of this tradition, even in cultural milieus like the United States, where the common good — although gaining favor among some — is still highly suspect and often rejected as socialism. These teachings also have wide applicability. They developed in a global context and in political systems that ranged from monarchies to despots to Christian socialism.

In his article, Rocca quotes constitutional law professor Adrian Vermeule, who says Catholic social teaching is “becoming something like an organizing common language for a great deal of American public life.”²

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I’m not quite as optimistic as Vermeule, but I have to admit that when it comes to finding a solution to our fragmentation and polarization, there are not a lot of other comprehensive systems of thought that we can turn to. The principles of Catholic social teaching provide a foundation as we work to build a world with greater equity.

I was surprised again when I saw a second article, this time in *The New York Times*, titled “This

is Why America Needs Catholicism” by Matthew Walther.³ In his piece, Walther echoes many of Rocca’s themes. He stresses the fact that Catholic social teaching not only developed an important body of thought, but also led to important social movements. Catholic sisters, for example, were leaders in the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Walther notes that in 1967, the editors of the conservative Catholic journal *Triumph* even endorsed Black Power, the original editorial going on to explain it as a possible way to “... play a leading role in breaking up the secular behemoth and so restore liberty and human dignity to America.”⁴

Today, we are addressing the COVID-19 pandemic with traditional thinking about justice, equity and the common good. We have polarization, too, but Catholics are being vaccinated at a higher rate than the population in general (Latino Catholics are vaccinated at an even higher rate than Catholics in general).⁵ Despite the weakness of catechesis, especially for adults, something about the common good and solidarity must have gotten through. Pope Francis has been a beacon, encouraging vaccination as an act of love. Who else could speak to the whole world with even a chance of being heard or respected?

During much of the last 15 years I have worked as an ethicist and a formation leader in Catholic health care. I have worked with executives, board members and sponsors, helping them to understand what “Catholic” means and why it is important. Furthermore, I have helped them see that the work we call “the ministry of Catholic health care” doesn’t just mean internal ministry, but “external” ministry, bringing the Gospel to society through our sponsored ministries of health care education and social service. The goal of these ministries is ultimately equity.

When I started this work, the idea of lay formation was new. The notion of lay formation for leadership was even newer. I eventually learned that Catholic social teaching was at the heart of my formation efforts. It is often described as a

set of principles, but many of them (for example, justice and solidarity) are also virtues, acquired qualities of character that are perfected by grace. I thought if I could explain them and get these executives to internalize and cultivate them as virtues, then we could really make a difference.

I believe we are making an impact. I now hear board members and executives use words like justice, solidarity, dignity and even equity as easily as they use words like strategy, days cash on hand, debt service and LIBOR (London Interbank Offered Rate, an interest rate). I know too that our hospital systems required vaccination even when it was unpopular because of their commitment to the common good.

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Solidarity is important both domestically and globally. As we face racism, solidarity helps me see difference and not ignore or suppress it. Solidarity reminds me that despite racial, economic or cultural differences, we are more alike than not. It helps me see immigrants as children of God, remembering that we too were once immigrants in a strange land. And today, it can help us identify with the suffering of the Ukrainian people even if we’ve never been to Central Europe.

In his 2022 address to the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, Eboo Patel, founder and president of Interfaith America (formerly Interfaith Youth Core), set out to remind us of some strengths that we may not always be mindful of. He described how virulent anti-Catholicism forced us to build thousands of schools in the 19th century. That was an accomplishment,

but Patel, who is Muslim, said there is something even more significant. Despite our own history of exclusion, he said, we had “a theology of pluralism” that led us to open our own schools and then give them to others as a gift. He noted that the Church built “institutions that virtually across the board let everybody in.”⁶ This too was all for the sake of equity.

It is also important to remember that we achieved this openness while we were quite obviously Catholic, especially the sisters, who never compromised their own faith. Their openness was part of their faith.

These threads of Catholic social teaching weave the fabric of equity. They are inclusive and respectful of difference, but they also pull us together and shape a common life in which each person and group has a fair share of the goods of the earth, including education and health care.

Let’s embrace this transformative tradition, share it with the world and see what it can really do.

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NOTES

1. Frances X. Rocca, “Can Catholic Social Teaching Unite a Divided America?”, *The Wall Street Journal*, February 5, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/can-catholic-social-teaching-unite-a-divided-america-11612540382>.
 2. Rocca, “Can Catholic Social Teaching Unite a Divided America?”
 3. Matthew Walther, “This Is Why America Needs Catholicism,” *The New York Times*, July 30, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/30/opinion/catholic-church-politics.html>.
 4. “Present Imperfect,” *Triumph 2*, no. 1 (January 1967): 8.
 5. Alejandra Molina, “Latino Catholics Are among the Most Vaccinated Religious Groups. Here’s Why,” *National Catholic Reporter*, October 15, 2021, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/coronavirus/latino-catholics-are-among-most-vaccinated-religious-groups-heres-why>.
 6. “ACCU 2022 Annual Meeting—Plenary 2—Eboo Patel,” YouTube, March 1, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4nu9VEb9HH8&t=910s>.
- Interfaith America is based on the idea that religion should be a bridge of cooperation rather than a barrier of division. Patel is inspired to build this bridge by his identity as an American Muslim navigating a religiously diverse social landscape.

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