

## ***Catholic Social Doctrine - (1) Our Best Kept Secret***

If I were to ask the question: what do you think is the Church's best kept secret? then various responses might be forthcoming. This is a book with that title: 'Our Best kept Secret' and its subtitle gives the answer to the question: **The Rich Heritage of Catholic Social Teaching.** (Schultheis, DeBerri, Henriot, *Cafod* 1988)

The authors begin by remarking on the fact that the Catholic Church has a developed body of teaching on social, economic, political and cultural matters but what that doctrine says seems to have been forgotten, or never known, by a significant proportion - perhaps even the majority - of the Roman Catholic Community.

In the not too distant past courses on the social encyclicals of the Popes were routinely offered in Catholic Sixth Forms, Colleges, and in Seminaries. Popular handbooks explained the significance of the messages to a wide audience. But this has not been the case in recent years. Today it is a rare theology department or even seminary which provides a course dealing specifically with the Church's Social Teaching. More often it seems to be the case that most Catholics have heard very few (if any) homilies in their local parish on the subject of social teachings.

Why is this so? Why are we apparently keeping Catholic social teachings 'secret'? There are probably several reasons:

One is that the official documents can seem to be rather abstract and dry in content - not very attractive to pick up and read. Also they tend to generalise rather than be specific.

Another reason is that the topics can be quite challenging since they deal with social issues - which can be controversial. This means that some readers or hearers find the teaching disturbing or uncomfortable.

And then there is the fact that, these days, authoritative statements whether from the Church - or indeed from government or 'experts' - are less attractive than acts of authentic witness. People are moved more by beneficial deeds than by 'mere words.'

That said, latterly there has been a resurgence of interest in the Social Doctrine of the Church. This reveals a desire on the part of Catholics and others for explanations and guidelines which give us a Christian perspective on contemporary social events and issues that confront our nation and our world.

More and more people are rediscovering - or discovering for the first time - the rich heritage of the Church's social teachings. Many are responding with enthusiasm and even astonishment: 'I didn't know there were so many good things in these documents!'

It is certainly true that easy answers to hard questions cannot be found in Catholic Social Doctrine. We must resist the temptation to look for neat solutions. But what can be found is *social wisdom*.

This is based on biblical insights, the tradition of the early writers of the church, scholastic philosophy, theological reflection, and the contemporary experience of Catholic people struggling to live out their faith works of charity and justice.

Over a number of weeks I propose to outline the main sources and principles of Catholic Social Teaching so as to encourage parishioners to read the documents for themselves - study them, pray over the texts, and maybe join with others in discussion of how we might best bring this teaching to bear upon the many challenging issues of our day.

One thing that must be made clear from the outset is that **the Church does not identify with any one political party or ideology** but seeks to challenge each and all by the light of the Gospel and with the broad experience acquired over two thousand years.

Historically and in our own times, the Church has had to live within a huge range of political, social, and cultural settings. Sometimes - regrettably - it has become embroiled in them; sometimes the Church has suffered severe persecution for the critical stance it has taken. More happily, the Church has often given significant support to - even led - in the development of social structures and provisions which have benefited the human beings be that in their own locality, their country, or around the world.

As Catholics today we are called to be committed to a faith that *does justice*. Especially since the Second Vatican Council, we have come to understand that a *real* faith, a *living* faith, leads directly to *loving and courageous action* for the transformation of human society - for the better, in accordance with the mind and heart of God.

This disposition has its prime source in the teachings of Scripture, and especially that of the prophets and of Jesus himself. In this season of Lent we recall their words:

*Is not this the sort of fast that pleases me - it is the Lord who speaks -  
To break unjust fetters and undo the thongs of the yoke  
To let the oppressed go free...  
To share your bread with the hungry and shelter the homeless poor,  
To clothe the man you see to be naked and not turn from your own kin?  
Then will your light shine like the dawn and your wound be quickly healed over.  
Your integrity will go before you and the glory of the Lord behind you  
Cry, and the LORD will answer; call, and he will say 'I am here'. (Isaiah 58:6-9)*

*The Spirit of the LORD has been given me for he has anointed me...  
He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives,  
and to the blind new sight,  
to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord's year of favour. (Luke 4:17ff)*