

Foreword

Catholics in the Public Square, rev. 4th ed.

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Catholic social teaching gives us a vision of the world as it could be and as it should be. The world as God created it to be.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the most radical doctrine in the history of ideas. If the world believed what Jesus proclaimed — that God is our Father and we are all brothers and sisters created in his image with God-given dignity and a transcendent destiny — every society could be transformed over night.

Of course, always what stands in the way of God’s beautiful plan for creation is human sin and weakness. Every structure of social injustice starts in the hearts of individuals. Societies do not sin, people do. So for Catholics, social reform means more than raising consciousness, expanding opportunities and building new programs. Those things are necessary. But true justice and lasting peace require the conversion of hearts and the renewal of minds.

The Catholic vision is spiritual not political. Catholics belong first of all the “city of God.” But we have a duty to build up the “city of man,” to correct injustices and seek a world that reflects God’s desires for his children — what Jesus called the Kingdom of God and the apostles called the new heavens and new earth.

The Church does not draft legislation or propose technical solutions to social problems. Instead, the Church articulates universal principles that are rooted in the laws of nature and that reflect the wisdom the universal Church has gained in more than 2,000 years of serving people under many different nations, cultural realities, government systems and economic orders.

The motive and measure in everything we do is our concern to promote the flourishing of the human person. Our principles drive us to work for justice and the common good, to protect the vulnerable and lift up the weak, to promote freedom and human dignity, and to prefer remedies that are personal, local and small-scale.

In 21st century America, the Church confronts a highly secularized and ethnically diversified society, shaped by the economic forces of globalization, a technocratic mentality and a consumerist lifestyle. Our society is centered on the individual self — with an often exaggerated preoccupation for individuals’ unlimited rights and their freedoms for self-definition and self-invention. Happiness and meaning in American life are defined increasingly according to individualistic concerns for material pleasure and

comfort. And we see many signs that, as a people, we are becoming more withdrawn from our communities and from the duties of our common life. More and more we seem less able to have empathy for those we don't know.

Pope Francis speaks of the “globalization of indifference” to suffering and cruelty in the world. And he is on to something.

In America and abroad, the people of our globalized society seem to tolerate a growing list of injustices and indignities. To name just a few: widespread abortion; the “quiet” euthanasia of the old and sick; birth control policies targeting the poor and “unfit”; racial discrimination; a widening gap between poor and rich; pollution of the environment, especially in poor and minority communities; pornography and drug addiction; the death penalty and scandalous conditions in our prisons; the erosion of religious liberty; a broken immigration system that breaks up families and leaves a permanent underclass living in the shadows of our prosperity.

The Church's social teaching “speaks” to all of these issues. *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, an essential resource, is nearly 500 pages long. But in the face of so many daily injustices that cry out to heaven, we can feel tempted to compartmentalize our compassion, to draw up lines of division about who and what we will care about.

For decades now, we have accepted a basic “fault-line” in the Church's social witness — between self-described “pro-life” Catholics and those who consider themselves “peace and justice” Catholics. This is a false divide and one that is a scandal to Christ and the Church's faithful witness in society.

God does not see the world through the limitations of our political categories of “left” and “right,” “liberal” and “conservative.” He is our Father and he sees only his children. When one of God's children is suffering injustice he calls the rest of us to love and compassion and to “make things right.” Our concern for human dignity and life can never be partial or a half-measure. How can we justify defending the dignity of some and not others or protecting God's creation while neglecting some of his most vulnerable creatures?

In some Church circles today we are seeing a return to the vision of a “seamless garment” or “consistent ethic of life.” Advocates have noble intentions — they want to bring the Church's moral wisdom and passion for justice to bear on a broad range of urgent issues. They recognize that the Church's social witness must be founded on our common responsibility to defend the gift of human life at every stage and in every condition.

In practice, however, this line of thinking can lead to a kind of moral relativism that renders serious social issues as more or less equivalent. Setting priorities and frameworks for decision-making becomes an arbitrary, sometimes partisan exercise in political calculation.

A broad desire to promote the integral development of the human person leads to obvious and crucial agenda items — abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, global poverty and the related issues of migrants and refugees, climate change. Each of these realities of our world represents an affront to human dignity and threatens the sustainability of social order.

But the hard truth is that not all injustices in the world are “equal.” We can understand this perhaps better about issues in the past than we can with issues in the present. For instance, we would never want to describe slavery as just one of several problems in 18th and 19th-century American life. There are indeed “lesser” evils. But that means there are also “greater” evils — evils that are more serious than others and even some evils that are so grave that Christians are called to address them as a primary duty.

Among the evils and injustices in American life in 2016, abortion and euthanasia are different and stand alone. Each is a direct, personal attack on innocent and vulnerable human life. Abortion and euthanasia function in our society as what the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* calls “structures of sin” or “social sins.”

Both practices are sanctioned by the law of the land and supported, promoted and even paid for as part of government policy. Abortion has become a part of mainstream health care and one the “freedoms” that Americans presume. Euthanasia or doctor-assisted suicide is fast gaining that same status. Both practices are zealously defended by our society’s elites — those who shape public opinion and civic morality through government, the popular media, and education.

Our society’s elites tell us that abortion and euthanasia are private, deeply personal matters that ultimately should concern only the individuals involved. If that were really true, these issues would not be matters for public policy and subjects of constant advocacy and litigation.

Evils and injustices committed behind closed doors are still evil and unjust and are never only personal but have consequences and implications for our life together. And the Church is called to speak the truth and to confront the idols of the human heart and the idols of society. As Pope Francis has said: “It is not licit to eliminate a human life to solve a problem. ... [It is] a sin against God the Creator: think hard about this.”

This is the great challenge for the Church’s social witness in our society, which seeks to address many of its problems through the elimination of human life — not only through abortion and assisted suicide, but also in the areas of the death penalty, human embryo research and mandated contraception.

It is this broader mentality — what Francis and previous Popes have called a “culture of death” — that the Church must confront. That is why abortion and euthanasia are not just two issues among many or only questions of individual conscience. Abortion and euthanasia raise basic questions of human rights and social justice, questions of what kind of society and what kind of people we want to be. Do we really want to become a people

that responds to human suffering by helping to kill the one who suffers? Do we really want to be a society where the lives of the weak are sacrificed for the comfort and benefit of those who are stronger? That is why any approach that essentially tolerates abortion and euthanasia or puts these issues on a par with others, not only betrays the beautiful vision of the Church's social teaching but also weakens the credibility of the Church's witness in our society.

The Church must continue to insist that the fundamental injustice and violence in our society is the direct killing of those who are not yet born through abortion and those who are sick and at the end of their lives through euthanasia and assisted suicide. In this culture, the Church must insist that abortion and euthanasia are grave and intrinsic evils — evils that are corrosive and corrupting, evils that are at the heart of other social injustices.

Abortion and euthanasia are “fundamental” social issues because if the child in the womb has no right to be born, if the sick and the old have no right to be taken care of, then there is no solid foundation to defend anyone's human rights, and no foundation for peace and justice in society. How can we claim to speak for the marginalized and disenfranchised, if we are allowing millions of innocent children to be killed each year in the womb? If we cannot justify caring for the weakest and most innocent of God's creatures, how can we call our society to resist the excesses of nationalism and militarism or confront global poverty or protect our common home in creation?

In broader terms, the Church faces an unprecedented challenge in the America that is emerging in the 21st century. This is perhaps the most disturbing sign for our nation's future — the increasing hostility and discrimination against Christian institutions and the vilifying of Christian beliefs by the government, the courts, the media and popular culture. More and more in our country we see religious faith marginalized as something that is “personal” and “private.” Catholics and other believers face strong pressures to keep their faith to themselves and to live as if their beliefs should not have any influence on how they live in society or carry out their duties as citizens.

The Church's social witness today — all our works of mercy and charity; all our advocacy for moral principles and human rights — now operates in an atmosphere of widespread confusion about the meaning of human life and the purpose of social institutions at every level.

To evangelize in this culture the Church must articulate a new Christian humanism, a new vision of human flourishing that is rooted in God's beautiful plan of love for creation and for every human life. Our new evangelization must be a new proclamation of the Kingdom — as a city of love and truth where every life is welcomed, cherished and defended, especially those lives that need more care and attention, those lives that can be a burden to others. Our new evangelization must seek a society worthy of the sanctity and dignity the human person, where no one is a stranger and no one is left behind or thrown away.

Our humanism must be more than words. It must be expressed in actions, in works of mercy. Wherever dignity is denied and wherever there is injustice, we are called to defend life. Our society must know that, as long as there are Christians, there should never be a reason for anyone to suffer without hope and help.

The Church needs clear and courageous teaching and witness to confront the idols of a secularized, post-Christian America. For many years now, my friend Bishop Thomas Olmstead of Phoenix has been one of the Church's clearest and most courageous teachers and leaders. In his ministry we see all the essentials of the new Christian humanism that is called for in our times.

I welcome this fourth edition of Bishop Olmstead's widely read and influential *Catholics in the Public Square*. This book is a kind of "question and answer catechism" on some of the deepest issues of faith and public life. Bishop Olmstead is a wise and prudent guide, and over the years, I find I am still learning from him.

As he writes in this new edition: "It is our duty to engage the culture, not run from it. We must place our trust in the Lord and know that by doing his will and speaking the truth in love, God will make all things work for the good. It is also the duty of the Catholic faithful to support courageous people who do this through both our actions and prayers."

Catholics in the Public Square is must-reading for all of us who are trying to engage the culture and to proclaim the Church's beautiful vision for human life and human society. I pray that this book will be widely read and widely lived.

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