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Sharing God's Love through Catholic Social Doctrines

Introduction and Defining Terms: CST as an Underutilized Tool for Evangelization

All too often, the social doctrines of the Catholic faith are referred to as the “best kept secret” of the Church.¹ Given the long history of this collection of teachings, the beautiful way they illustrate God's love for humanity, and the emphasis recent popes have placed on them, there is no excuse for continuing widespread unawareness of what is commonly referred to as the Catholic social tradition. For the purposes of this paper, the abbreviation “CST” will be used as an umbrella term encompassing the closely related concepts of the Catholic social *tradition*, Catholic social *teaching*, Catholic social *thought*, and the social *doctrines* of the Catholic Church.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) conceives of CST as “a rich treasure of wisdom about building a just society and living lives of holiness amidst the challenges of modern society.”² It is often categorized as a branch of Catholic moral theology, and its content describes the Christian orientation toward charity and justice, or the ways we attempt to alleviate human suffering as part of the Church's “mission of service to the Gospel and the world.”³ CST dreams of a just and loving social order for the world, which “ensures that all people have fair and equitable opportunities to live decent lives free of inordinate burdens and

¹ Thomas Massaro, *Living Justice: Catholic Social Teaching in Action* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 10.

² “Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching,” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, accessed June 6, 2020, <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/seven-themes-of-catholic-social-teaching.cfm>.

³ Massaro, 13.

deprivations.”⁴ These doctrines originate in Christ’s example and teachings, find strength in the sacraments, and hope to actively conform the world more closely to God’s kingdom, even though the stain of sin on the world will always cause it to fall short.⁵ Charity and justice are essential concepts describing the Church’s twofold approach to improving the conditions of society. Thomas Massaro differentiates them thus: “Where charity tends to involve... acting to meet the immediate needs of others, ...the notion of justice suggests that there is an absolute obligation to share the benefits of God’s creation more broadly than is witnessed in the present order,” implying a need for deeper, long-term, structural changes.⁶ The closely connected concepts of charity and justice exhibit thorough unity and complementarity with one another,⁷ and I will continue to reference both of these as expressions of CST.

Throughout this essay, I intend to explore the ways in which CST introduces us to the heart of the Christian faith as an indispensable method of evangelization, and I will accomplish this by utilizing a handful of CST-related texts that further illuminate the connection between CST and core truths of God’s revelation. Along the way, I will argue for the validity of the use of CST in evangelization, explore the ancient roots and modern developments of CST, and identify some of the fruits of CST in embodied actions and spirituality. Thus, I will establish that CST is essentially (a) an instrument of evangelization that potently communicates God’s love for humanity, (b) an effective introduction to the Christian faith, and (c) a promising site of encounter with Jesus Christ.

Establishing the Legitimacy of the Use of CST in Evangelization

⁴ Massaro, 2.

⁵ Massaro, 15.

⁶ Massaro, 13.

⁷ Massaro, 14.

One's relationship with Christ is decisive for the way one participates in all dimensions of life; nothing is left untouched by this encounter. The social doctrines of the Catholic Church are founded on this notion, noting that our moral and even our political lives are rooted in the person of Jesus Christ. As a point of multiple shared values with many in the secular world, CST serves as an excellent opportunity and site for an introduction to the Christian faith. Pope John Paul II fittingly asserted in his encyclical *Centesimus Annus* that “the Church's social teaching is itself a valid instrument of evangelization. As such, it proclaims God and his mystery of salvation in Christ to every human being.”⁸ Furthermore, CST flows not only from the kerygma but also from the sacraments, for every authentically Christian action of charity and justice finds its inspiration and sustenance in sacramental grace. Therefore, CST is a relevant dimension of the most authentically Christian beliefs and actions, making it an excellent tool for welcoming people into the faith of the Church.

It is no mistake that in the Second Vatican Council documents, when the council fathers move from addressing only Christians to “the whole of humanity” in *Gaudium et Spes*,⁹ they capitalize on this prime opportunity for evangelization by first empathizing with the social circumstances of the world and acknowledging the context in which the world finds itself. They analyze the “signs of the times” in order to find a shared starting place before they introduce the Christian faith to those unfamiliar. Meeting readers where they are, they share these words at the opening of the document:

The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of

⁸ John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, encyclical letter, Vatican website, May 1, 1991, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html, sec. 54.

⁹ Second Vatican Council, “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, December 7, 1965,” in *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1996), sec. 2 (hereafter cited as *Gaudium et Spes*).

Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community of people united in Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit in their pilgrimage towards the Father's kingdom, bearers of a message of salvation for all of humanity. That is why they cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history.¹⁰

The evangelization work embedded within the Council's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* offers a lens that places it within the canon of major CST texts.¹¹ As a realm of common values between the Church and much of the larger society, CST brings the Church into conversation with women and men outside of its bounds. Writing soon after this ecumenical council, Joseph Ratzinger crafted his own supplemental response to the questions facing the modern world and published the book *Introduction to Christianity*. As he acquaints his audience with Christianity, his focus on the person of Christ throughout this text provides a point of connection between his act of introducing and the evangelizing purpose of CST.

The section of *Introduction* entitled "Jesus the Christ: The Basic Form of the Christological Profession of Faith" starts by discussing modern theology's tendencies to misinterpret Jesus; these bring about a reduced Christology that either focuses solely on the historical Jesus or limits study to the purely ahistorical Christ of faith. Ratzinger explains how the Creed remedies this issue by presenting Jesus Christ as one unified person, where "Christ" is the office or definition of the person of Jesus, who is himself his word, thus making "Jesus" and "Christ" indivisible. The recognition of this begins at the Cross, where Jesus is labeled as the Messiah, the King of the Jews, the Christ. "His crucifixion is his coronation; his kingship is his surrender of himself."¹² In person and in message, Jesus Christ is sustaining love, and his words always point to his personal identity. Love is thus the content of faith, as Ratzinger sees reflected

¹⁰ *Gaudium et Spes*, sec. 1.

¹¹ *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, ed. David O'Brien and Thomas Shannon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 171.

¹² Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1968), 206.

in Matthew 25, which presents the challenge of an active, incarnate love as the challenge of faith in Jesus Christ. This section improves our understanding of Jesus through the connections it makes between Jesus' person, his salvific function, and the actions to which his followers are thus called. As Ratzinger notes, there can be no dividing Jesus Christ in himself or from the real-life consequences of believing in him. The concrete, actionable implications of this content merit reflection, especially in a world where Christians are rightly criticized for their displays of hypocrisy and failure to love. In order to understand what it means to be Christian, we must look at Jesus Christ, who cannot be properly believed in without a conversion of heart that is lived in one's relationships. This includes our relationships with those our society might rather ignore—the homeless, the hungry, immigrants and refugees, victims of racism—as well as those we consider our enemies.

Ratzinger's discussion in Part Three of the topics of holiness and the resurrection of the body more generally addresses the "togetherness" or unity inherent to who we are (human—body and soul), who we are called to be (increasingly holy), and our fate (to be joined to Christ as a community in the resurrection). In his treatment of holiness, Ratzinger describes the concept as entailing a close mingling with sinners out of love and thus "bearing with one another" as a Church.¹³ As for the resurrection, Ratzinger notes the "communal character of human immortality" and the fitting importance of fellowship to the human person comprised of body and soul and saved by Christ.¹⁴ His theme of mingling with sinners resonates with both the timeless and the modern Christian imagination, resembling Francis' image of the Church as a field hospital as well as the notion of Christ as the divine physician. By delving into our human condition and social relationships, this topic, like the one previously described, has practical

¹³ Ratzinger, 343.

¹⁴ Ratzinger, 351-352.

implications for how we live as Christians; rather than running from any sign of someone's needing help, we run to those centers of mess and sin, and we bring Christ to them.

“Being a Christian means essentially changing over from being for oneself to being for one another.”¹⁵ CST stems from the same conversion of life brought about by a decisive, all-encompassing encounter with Christ. If CST is to be genuinely Catholic and doctrinally binding, as popes have contended, then this connection to the heart of the faith must be the case; our experience of Christ and God's revealed truths result not only in inward-facing prayer, but also prayer and action oriented toward the good of all. By imitating Christ in offering ourselves and in making sacrifices for our neighbors, we are living out the social doctrines of the Church. This Christological orientation toward the world and its *telos* bears significant weight on prayer, interpersonal encounters (especially with the poor and vulnerable), and engagement with the spheres of politics and social structures, all of which constitute applications of CST that stem from the core truths of the faith. This could further concretize the effect that the Christian profession of faith has on the lives of believers who know God personally, for “to believe as a Christian means understanding our existence as a response” to God's love revealed to us.¹⁶

As Ratzinger reaffirms years later in his papal encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, “being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”¹⁷ Thus, introducing the faith is not just a matter of giving a thick description of elaborate concepts or an argument for reconsidering such an idea; rather, it is an invitation into a dialogue of enacted love.

¹⁵ Ratzinger, 252.

¹⁶ Ratzinger, 73.

¹⁷ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, encyclical letter, Vatican website, December 25, 2005, http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html, sec. 1.

This thorough consonance between CST and the Church’s mission to spread the message of the Gospel was clear to Pope Paul VI, who in 1975 published the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi: Evangelization in the Modern World* explicitly tying the two concepts together. In Paul VI’s eyes, evangelization would be *incomplete* if it ignored the interplay between the Gospel and our personal and social lives.¹⁸ “This is why evangelization involves an explicit message, adapted to the different situations constantly being realized, about the rights and duties of every human being, about family life without which personal growth and development is hardly possible, about life in society, about international life, peace, justice and development.”¹⁹ He does not hesitate to add that this message always centers on the life, person, and saving action of Jesus Christ;²⁰ is enhanced by the holiness of the evangelizer’s life; and finds nourishment in a love for the Eucharist.²¹ In sum, because it so capably conveys the Gospel and is inseparable from Christ himself, CST is a superb tool for evangelization.

Roots and Development of Catholic Social Teaching

Old Testament Foundations. CST is first of all rooted in God and God’s self-revelation, so it naturally finds early expression in the Old Testament. In his book *Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition*, Gary Anderson approaches this topic from the angle of identifying and analyzing the place of almsgiving in Scripture, focusing particularly on how the books of Tobit and Sirach inform Judeo-Christian perspectives on charity. This aspect of CST that features prominently in the Bible—that is, charitable deeds—establishes a special orientation of believers toward God, their neighbors, and strangers. Beyond the Israelites’ requirement to

¹⁸ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, apostolic exhortation, Vatican website, December 8, 1975, http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html, sec. 29.

¹⁹ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, sec. 29.

²⁰ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, sec. 27.

²¹ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, sec. 76.

provide for those without a regular source of income (see Deut. 14:28-29, Lev. 19:9-10, and Ruth 2, for example),²² charity can even be read as an act of worship akin to temple sacrifice, according to Anderson's reading of Sirach.²³ Likewise, if we are to follow in the example of Tobit, then we must give alms because of our fundamental belief in the goodness of God, who values such acts of love and mercy by attaching a heavenly reward to them.²⁴

In multiple places in the Old Testament, we also read about how God decisively takes the side of the poor and oppressed. In Exodus, this positioning recalls God's saving action on behalf of the Israelites and informs the stance they must take in relation to the poor:

You shall not oppress or afflict a resident alien, for you were once aliens residing in the land of Egypt. You shall not wrong any widow or orphan. If you ever wrong them and they cry out to me, I will surely listen to their cry. My wrath will flare up, and I will kill you with the sword; then your own wives will be widows and your children orphans. If you lend money to my people, the poor among you, you must not be like a money lender; you must not demand interest from them. If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, you shall return it to him before sunset; for this is his only covering; it is the cloak for his body. What will he sleep in? If he cries out to me, I will listen; for I am compassionate.²⁵

Once again, in Deuteronomy 24:18, God repeats this command to remember God's deliverance of the Israelites from their own suffering in slavery, thereby reinforcing the Israelites' need to care for those in similar positions. In addition to teaching us about how our God is a God who works on behalf of the downtrodden, passages like these illustrate the fact that God governs social relationships—especially those involving individuals and groups on the margins of a society. The Israelites themselves often resemble a marginalized, oppressed group in much of the Old Testament, and so the memory of such experiences as slavery under the Egyptians provides God's chosen people with an unmatched sense of solidarity with the poor. It

²² Gary Anderson, *Charity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 46.

²³ Anderson, 21, 105.

²⁴ Anderson, 110.

²⁵ Ex 22:20-26 (New American Bible).

is precisely this vulnerable position, poverty, that opens up doors to relating to God, for God listens closely to the needs of those who are suffering—especially those suffering at the hands of others who commit injustices against them. In a similar vein, our understanding of our own interior poverty gives impetus to our care for the poor around us, all the while providing the reassurance that God hears us in our need.

This small sampling of Old Testament foundations of CST would be incomplete without acknowledging the prophets' calls for justice for the poor. Powerful examples abound in Isaiah, who warns against exploiting the poor,²⁶ implores believers to choose God's desired fast of "setting free the oppressed,"²⁷ and proclaims good news for the afflicted.²⁸ Perhaps we can recognize in our own times those prophetic voices that call our attention back to the people and circumstances that we would rather turn away from; perhaps we can identify those painful situations in whose underlying causes we ourselves are complicit. These convicting invitations to open our eyes to the needs of our sisters and brothers are true blessings that lead us back toward the Lord of our lives, who also wants to be the Lord of our social order. Modern thinkers and practitioners of CST may sometimes sound like Old Testament prophets, and their messages often meet the same level of unwelcome from those who most desperately need to hear them.

When we ignore the essential roles that poverty, justice, and God's saving care play in the earliest writings of our tradition, we erase an indispensable facet of our journey toward God. The way we treat those around us and the attention we give or withhold from the poor are decisive factors for the direction our lives take, swaying us either toward or away from our loving Creator. The Old Testament asks us if we remember our own need for God's daily care

²⁶ Is 10:1-3 (New American Bible).

²⁷ Is 58:6 (New American Bible).

²⁸ Is 61:1-3 (New American Bible).

and deliverance, and it tells us that our answer lies in our actions toward those in need all around us.

New Testament and Patristic Sources. Jesus places himself in direct continuity with those Old Testament teachings about poverty and justice when he reads from Isaiah 61 in the synagogue.²⁹ In fact, the New Testament overflows with passages directing our social relationships and sense of justice; one need only take a look at the Gospel of Luke, where, for instance, the Sermon on the Plain explicitly lists blessings for the poor and woes for the uncaring rich.³⁰ Time and time again throughout the Gospels, Jesus himself draws near to those on the outskirts of society, turning them into shining examples of faith. Anderson points out how seriously and literally believers would have taken passages like Matthew 25:31-46 for much of the Church's history, noting how such an understanding leads one to conclude that "charity to the poor has the power to deliver one from eternal damnation" and that "one actually encountered the presence of God in the poor."³¹ By extension, our treatment of the oppressed and vulnerable as a society will in the end be judged as laudable or condemnable by God, whose very presence is mediated by the poor through Jesus Christ. Christians in all professions and walks of life no longer have the option to turn a blind eye to the suffering of their neighbors once they have encountered God's Word in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, nor can they make judgments about the so-called "undeserving poor" upon reading the Sermon on the Mount. In the Gospels, we find so many of the basic lessons of CST, and in living out CST, we encounter Christ himself.

²⁹ Lk 4:18-19 (New American Bible).

³⁰ Lk 6:20-26 (New American Bible).

³¹ Anderson, 6.

The New Testament's epistles also outline strong lessons in the way we organize the various levels of our societies. St. James uses the most direct and morally demanding language in the epistles when he boldly declares that “pure” religion involves caring for orphans and widows,³² cautions against favoring the rich,³³ and tells of a grim fate for those who live “in luxury and pleasure.”³⁴ His language may seem to stray from stereotypically mild-toned Christian discourse on love, but he speaks in love nonetheless by calling Christ's followers to an authentic Christian self-sacrificing love for those in need, in contrast to the selfish turning in on oneself that he urges his sisters and brothers in Christ to stay far away from.

A number of Church Fathers picked up on these key New Testament passages and taught early versions of CST within their own contexts, according to Brian Matz in *Patristics and Catholic Social Thought: Hermeneutical Models for Dialogue*. He recognizes the frequently discussed themes of the common good, private property, and the poor in early Christian texts, tracing the Christian origins of these topics to theologians including Thomas Aquinas, Augustine, Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria, and John Chrysostom, among others.³⁵ Matz observes the Christocentric messages of these writings—“for loving the poor meant both loving and mimicking the life of Christ”—as well as the naturally recognized connection between Christ's presence in the poor and in the Eucharist.³⁶ One notable example of a Church Father's preaching of a concept resembling CST can be found in one of Basil the Great's homilies: “The bread you are holding back belongs to the hungry; the coat you keep in your closet belongs to the naked; the shoes moldering in your closet belong to the shoeless; the silver

³² Jas 1:27 (New American Bible).

³³ Jas 2:1-7 (New American Bible).

³⁴ Jas 5:1-6 (New American Bible).

³⁵ Brian Matz, *Patristics and Catholic Social Thought* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 32-55.

³⁶ Matz, 56.

you hide in a safe place belongs to the needy.”³⁷ In a similar vein, St. Ambrose preaches, “You are not making a gift of what is yours to the poor man, but you are giving him back what is his.”³⁸ Both of these quotations display a clear sense of Christian charity and justice with regard to the distribution of resources, as well as speaking to the believer’s orientation toward material goods and poor persons. From the Bible to patristics, the early sources of CST provided substantial foundational material for the modern Church to later expound in more formal teachings.

Modern Developments. Since Pope Leo XIII wrote *Rerum Novarum*, the first social encyclical, in 1891, CST blossomed as it grew into more concrete and official articles of faith that mattered at all levels of the Catholic hierarchy. For centuries, Christians had been living the call of CST on the ground, but the Magisterium lacked official engagement with the important sociopolitical developments in the world. Today, we have reached the point at which every pope since John XXIII (with the exception of Pope John Paul I) has published at least one major encyclical or apostolic exhortation on a topic within the realm of CST, reflecting on how the Gospel inspires us to respond to our current circumstances. It has become a standard expectation for each pontificate to produce a work expanding the canon of major documents in the social tradition of the Church. Most recently, in 2015 Pope Francis issued the encyclical *Laudato Si’*, which focused primarily on the Church’s stance on the care for (and destruction of) our planet. Consistently with each addition, the popes have been responding to “the signs of the times,” addressing what has been ailing individuals, societies, and the world, both materially and spiritually.

³⁷ Joseph Komonchak, “Coats, Cold Words, and Chamberpots,” *Commonweal Magazine*, July 26, 2010, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/coats-cold-words-and-chamberpots>.

³⁸ St. Ambrose, in Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, encyclical letter, Vatican website, March 26, 1967, http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html, sec. 23.

Taking these teachings to a slightly more local level, bishops' conferences have also contributed to the development of CST by assembling documents about the specific struggles of their home countries. In the United States, this has included such documents as *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, a 1979 pastoral letter on racism; *The Challenge of Peace*, a 1983 document on (nuclear) war and peace; *Economic Justice for All*, a 1986 pastoral letter on the U.S. economy; and *Open Wide Our Hearts*, a document opposing the ongoing presence of racism in the U.S.; among others.³⁹ Though not as authoritative or universal as papal writings, these pastoral letters offer helpful guidance to American Catholics trying to faithfully interpret major forces at work in their own country.

Of course, also counted among the indispensable sources of CST are the ongoing daily work, the nonprofits, and the grassroots movements that all strive to conform our world to the kingdom of God, for CST would be lifeless without actions to inspire and result from it. These contributors emerge from the same authoritative texts, biblical teachings, and sacraments that have led to the hierarchy's publications, though on-the-ground efforts typically cannot make the same kinds of authoritative injunctions, despite their bearing enormous import to the Church and world through their lived application of the tradition. As CST continues to evolve through ever-changing times, these modern sources of development—papal documents, bishops' letters, and on-the-ground work—will retain their value as some of the most important and illuminative features of the Catholic faith.

Abundant Fruits of CST for Individual and Social Life and Spirituality

Basic Principles and Themes. All this thought, especially in the last 130 years, has resulted in a set of common themes or principles of CST, the names and numbers of which

³⁹ *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, vi.

depend on the source discussing them. Still, most presentations of these concepts touch on essentially the same constellation of themes that run through the social teachings of the Church. Thomas Massaro presents nine for consideration, which he names thus: (1) the dignity of every person and human rights; (2) solidarity, common good, and participation; (3) family life; (4) subsidiarity and the proper role of government; (5) property ownership in modern society—rights and responsibilities; (6) the dignity of work, rights of workers, and support for labor unions; (7) colonialism and economic development; (8) peace and disarmament; and (9) option for the poor and vulnerable.⁴⁰ For the sake of comparison, the USCCB names seven principles, which may sound more familiar to some: (1) life and dignity of the human person; (2) call to family, community, and participation; (3) rights and responsibilities; (4) the option for the poor and vulnerable; (5) the dignity of work and the rights of workers; (6) solidarity; and (7) care for God’s creation.⁴¹

Whether the most essential theme or starting point is human dignity, the common good, or another concept remains open to varying perspectives, but one theme on which I would like to focus for a moment appeared in both lists as “the option for the poor and vulnerable,” also known to some as “the preferential option for the poor.” Massaro describes this theme as “an abiding commitment, grounded in scripture and tradition, to support social justice by placing oneself firmly on the side of the vulnerable and marginalized.”⁴² Using slightly different terms, the USCCB suggests that this term means “that the deprivation and powerlessness of the poor wounds the whole community. The extent of their suffering is a measure of how far we are from

⁴⁰ Massaro, 83-121.

⁴¹ “Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching.”

⁴² Massaro, 117.

being a true community of persons.”⁴³ In scripture, this theme surfaces every time God places a special emphasis on the needs of the vulnerable over and above the desires or conveniences of those in power. We might think of God’s rescuing the Israelites from Egypt, the parables in Luke 15, or Jesus’ identification with the poor in Matthew 25, to name a few examples. Each of us experiences moments of poverty and vulnerability to varying degrees, and God is not only present to us in those times, but God walked those roads before us through Christ’s Passion. God’s love, like that of a parent, attends to the needs of the suffering children first—and this lesson is just one of the beautiful fruits CST produces in teaching the Catholic faith.

Eucharistic Heart of CST. As briefly noted in the discussion on patristic connections to CST, a robust relationship exists between CST and the sacraments. This holds true especially for the Eucharist, the source and summit of the Catholic faith.⁴⁴ Anderson calls charity a *sacramental* act tied to the Eucharist through mercy,⁴⁵ explaining that for earlier Christians, “the Eucharist and almsgiving were the two privileged means of channeling grace and dealing with the baneful effects of human sin.”⁴⁶ Christ draws near to us through the marginalized, for the incarnation not only placed him in solidarity with the whole of humanity, but it allowed him to identify specifically with the poor.⁴⁷ Pope Benedict XVI weighs in on this topic as well, adding that “‘worship’ itself, Eucharistic communion, includes the reality both of being loved and of loving others in turn. A Eucharist which does not pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented.”⁴⁸ Pope Francis takes this further in *Laudato Si’* by linking the cosmic

⁴³ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All*, pastoral letter, 1986, http://www.usccb.org/upload/economic_justice_for_all.pdf, sec. 88.

⁴⁴ Second Vatican Council, “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, November 21, 1964,” in *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1996), sec. 11.

⁴⁵ Anderson, 7-8.

⁴⁶ Anderson, 8.

⁴⁷ Anderson, 9.

⁴⁸ Benedict XVI, sec. 14.

dimensions of the Eucharist to our concern for creation and for the poor.⁴⁹ In many ways, CST is a fundamentally Eucharistic collection of teachings. This sacramental dimension sheds light on the identity of this God with whom we fall in love as Christians, whom we are called to imitate through grace: Our God draws near to meet us where we are in our corporality through Christ's incarnation and sacraments, and God personally greets us on the margins of society with an abundance of grace. With the Eucharist at the heart of CST, one can reliably find one's way into the open arms of Christ when participating in the social dimensions of the faith.

A Basis for Lived Faith. St. James famously wrote that "faith without works is dead."⁵⁰ Likewise, Isaiah states that God prefers a fast of caring for the oppressed and vulnerable,⁵¹ and when asked about the greatest commandment, Jesus names the call to love God and neighbor like the Good Samaritan.⁵² But how do we participate in this fast, and what does loving God and neighbor look like? At numerous points in the Bible, we are invited to turn our faith into works, though discerning precisely how that might look often perplexes believers. Luckily, a great number of holy women and men have provided stunning examples of what can happen when a Christian identifies and follows God's call to live out the faith in the world and conform social relationships to Christ.

Brandon Vogt names fourteen of these bold witnesses in his book *Saints and Social Justice: A Guide to Changing the World*. This text shows the heart of CST in action, demonstrating that "the lives of the saints are nothing less than the law of God reduced to

⁴⁹ Francis, *Laudato Si'*, encyclical letter, Vatican website, May 24, 2015, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html, secs. 236-237.

⁵⁰ Jas 2:20 (New American Bible).

⁵¹ Is 58:6-10 (New American Bible).

⁵² Lk 10:27 (New American Bible).

practice.”⁵³ One of these famous examples of heroically lived faith is the American activist Dorothy Day, whose commitment to both charitable poverty relief and justice for workers earned her a reputation as a fierce advocate for the poor and vulnerable.⁵⁴ In a distinct but likewise compelling manner, Mother Teresa, named in Vogt’s section on the life and dignity of the human person, powerfully bore witness to the inviolable dignity of the poorest of the poor in her work in Calcutta as well as in her strong words against abortion. The lives of these individuals and many others, held in high esteem by Catholics and non-Catholics alike, facilitate evangelization by leading people into the heart of the Gospel through their own response to God’s call and vision for the human community. In fact, any person or group’s consistent efforts in such areas constitute effective and necessary methods of evangelizing; the 1971 Synod of Catholic Bishops confidently asserted that “action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel.”⁵⁵ Similarly, Pope Paul VI wrote that this witness “fascinates the world, helps humanity recognize ongoing reasons for hope, and brings many to Christ, regardless of prior levels of familiarity with Christianity. The witness of life has become more than ever an essential condition for real effectiveness in preaching.”⁵⁶ This is exactly how Jesus’ message often lands in people’s hearts, for it is where the Church displays striking consistency between teaching and action.

Conclusion: A Catholic Evangelizing Approach to Current Events

The present moment is bursting with opportunities to introduce the kerygma through CST; as we read the signs of the times with each passing historical moment, we are challenged to

⁵³ Charles Fell, quoted in Brandon Vogt, *Saints and Social Justice: A Guide to Changing the World* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2014), 15.

⁵⁴ Vogt, 106.

⁵⁵ World Synod of Catholic Bishops, “Justice in the World,” in *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, sec. 6.

⁵⁶ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, sec. 76.

engage in the common language of charity and justice to welcome others in and share our message of profound hope. As Christians, we possess the ability to enter into timely questions of our day as our troubled world begs for faithful accompaniment. Many who attend to current events may be asking, *What should the relationship between improving the economy and protecting vulnerable lives look like in a pandemic? Why do we care about either—the economy or the vulnerable—in the first place? How do we make sure our sisters and brothers of every race are safe and cared for in a society that harbors persistently racist attitudes? How and why should we root out injustice and structural sins so that our society reflects the reality that black lives matter?* Our answers to any of these questions rest on a foundational belief in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who knows our human struggles, suffers with us, and transforms our woes.

An introduction of Christianity that lacks context, empathy, and understanding also lacks credibility. CST bridges the space between our core beliefs and the concrete realities surrounding us by putting forth beautiful yet practical teachings that countless women and men of goodwill can agree with and find attractive. Leading people into a relationship with Jesus Christ through the social doctrines of the Church is not just a valid intellectual strategy, but it is a way to allow the Holy Spirit to stir hearts with the tender love of our most lovable God.

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