

A Season of Catholic Social Teaching

St. Vincent de Paul Church, Baltimore

February 2021: Rights and Responsibilities

The teachings of the church regarding rights and responsibilities are weaved throughout most of the documents of the church. Essentially our rights stem from our basic dignity, the dignity that comes from being a child of God. The church teaches us that we all have that dignity equally.

In his encyclical [*Pacem in Terris*](#) [11] Pope John XXIII elucidates the most basic human right:

Man has the right to live. He has the right to bodily integrity and to the means necessary for the proper development of life, particularly food, clothing, shelter, medical care, rest, and, finally, the necessary social services. In consequence, he has the right to be looked after in the event of ill health; disability stemming from his work; widowhood; old age; enforced unemployment; or whenever through no fault of his own he is deprived of the means of livelihood.

He elaborates on those rights further to include: the right to be respected, the right to an education, the right to worship according to his conscience, the right to choose his state of life, the right to work according to his abilities, the right of private ownership, the right to socialize and integrate into the communities he chooses. He also has the right to emigrate if he feels it necessary for his social well-being and he has the right to participate in the political process of his country.

While we have individual rights, we are social beings and belong to many groups, starting with our nuclear families. Our belief in a Triune God gives us the example of how our lives are lived in relationship. Because of that, we need to abide by rules that are meant to protect the rights of all in the community.

[The USCCB website](#) includes a message regarding the importance of Catholic Social Teaching and emphasizes the importance of both rights and responsibilities. And in James' letter we hear:

So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

[James 4:17](#)

The right thing to do is to protect the rights of everyone. For each of the rights elucidated above, we have a corresponding responsibility to ensure that everyone can exercise those rights. In *Pacem in Terris* [44], we also hear:

The possession of rights involves the duty of implementing those rights, for they are the expression of a human being's personal dignity. And the possession of rights also involves their recognition and respect by other people.

In Pope Francis' encyclical, [*Fratelli Tutti*](#), the story of the good Samaritan is prominent as a theme for considering who is our neighbor, and for whom we are responsible. He goes further than individuals in talking about the responsibilities of our society to everyone. In paragraph 109 he talks about the fact that, while people born into economically stable families grow up with all the resources they need to claim their freedom, the same cannot be said for the disabled and the poor. He states:

If a society is governed primarily by the criteria of market freedom and efficiency, there is no place for such persons, and fraternity will remain just another vague ideal.

Earlier, in 1986, the USCCB wrote a pastoral letter called [*Equal Justice for All*](#), which deals with Catholic Social Teaching and the US economy. Pope Benedict also addressed this issue in his encyclical [*Caritas in Veritate*](#), where he states in section 36:

The Church has always held that economic action is not to be regarded as something opposed to society. In and of itself, the market is not, and must not become, the place where the strong subdue the weak.

When we talk about rights and responsibilities, we cannot fail to consider the way in which our country has violated the rights of the Black community, most notoriously during the years of slavery. Recent events in this country have demonstrated that we have not yet admitted to our racism, even though we may have denounced slavery. Pope Francis has said, "*We cannot tolerate or turn a blind eye to racism and exclusion in any form and yet claim to defend the sacredness of every human life.*"

The Church in the United States has responded by making public statements about some events (such as George Floyd's murder), by establishing an Ad Hoc Committee to Combat Racism, and offering many resources for teaching, acting and praying on issues of racism. All of these can be found on the [USCCB website](#).

Many (arch)dioceses, including Baltimore, have also established an office dedicated to racial justice. More resources regarding the work of racial justice can be found on the [Archdiocese of Baltimore website](#).

Because we believe that life is the most basic right, we are taught as Catholics that life begins at conception and ends at natural death. Therefore, we are taught that not only are abortion and the death penalty wrong, but so is it wrong to withhold the resources necessary for life to be sustained.

The intersection of rights and responsibilities is complicated, and we must take the time to consider all the church's teaching in this area. And we must remember Pope Francis' exhortation that we not become "one issue voters".

Pat Ball