

The Role of Nature and Natural Law in Catholic Social Teaching

1. The social doctrine of the Church has taken many forms throughout history, from the teachings of Jesus recorded in the Gospels through the patristic, medieval, and modern periods to the present. In the last two centuries, the primary form for proclaiming her social teaching the Church has tended to use papal encyclicals and conciliar documents and to support this teaching by philosophical reasoning as well as by appeals to Sacred Scripture. In these documents it is crucial to distinguish between (1) principles that are valid always and everywhere and (2) the application of these principles by means of prudential judgments about particular practices.

2. Throughout its history Catholic social teaching invariably has three main areas of focus: (a) the political order, (b) the economic order, and (c) the cultural order (especially the family, the sphere of voluntary associations, and the community of a people or nation). These areas of concern are interrelated. When applying the foundational principles of Catholic social teaching to any particular issue in any specific region, there is always need to consider the effects of those applications to the other areas, lest there be unforeseen consequences.

3. The basic principles of Catholic social teaching are best understood in related pairs. Often these pairings reflect the idea that rights comes from duties, and that our duties are known from the natural law as well as from reflection on revelation.

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| – the demands of the common good | – respect for the dignity of individual persons |
| – the obligations of justice
e.g., a living wage, a family wage | – the obligations of charity and mercy |
| – the duty to provide for one’s family
universal destination of goods | – the right of private property
the claims of those in need |
| – the principle of solidarity | – the principle of subsidiarity |
| – the duty to render obedience to
legitimate authority | – the right to freedom of religion, thought,
peaceful expression of ideas |

4. All genuine forms of natural law theory hold for three interlocking tenets: (1) *theological*: there is a God who created human beings and established a law within their very natures that directs them to their end; (2) *anthropological*: there is such a thing as human nature, with an end to which the author of their nature has directed them; this nature pertains not only to their bodies but also to their powers of intellect and will and all the spiritual aspects of their existence; and (3) *epistemological*: our powers of mind are sufficient to discern the natural law that God has placed within us by considering our common human nature. NB: “nature” here refers to the inner principle of a being’s typical structure (body, reason, will), typical patterns of growth and development, and typical operations and activities.

5. The difference between the natural law tradition and the natural rights tradition is crucial. Writers in the natural law tradition often speak about what is “right” and “wrong by nature” in the sense of “it is right by nature that we do this” or “by nature it is wrong to do that.” But this is still to give priority to duty: our duties to God, our duties to our families and those who depend on us, our duties to our community (local, national). The natural rights tradition is historically part of social contract theory, which takes various “rights” (claims by someone to something on some basis) to be basic and prior to the formation of a society. Generally, social contract theorists hold that the free independent adults who bear these rights are those who make a social contract, including the formation of some kind of government, to which they yield some of these basic rights (e.g., the right to punish is handed over to the government) in order to enjoy more securely the possession of other rights. This position tends to be libertarian, and to grant no prior natural law duties.