And the King will answer them, “Truly, I say to you, 
As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it unto me.”
Matthew 25:40

I.) The Church’s Mission to the Poor:
Care for the poor is absolutely necessary for the Christian, and especially for the Catholic Christian. Quite often people fail to assist the poor and underprivileged for a number of reasons: they don’t trust the person/organization who is to dispense their contributions/gift, they assume the poor will use their funds for ulterior purposes (addictions), they feel a sense of entitlement to the money they have earned and feel that it is unjust to donate to those who have not worked to earn it. Often when we give something to the poor, namely money, shelter, clothing, etc, we tend to consider this “charity.” However, the Church teaches, as is articulated by St. Thomas Aquinas, that in reality this is not so much charity but rather basic human justice. It is the virtue of justice in that what we give them is truly not our own possession, as if we were entitled to it somehow, and because they are part of the human family, regardless of race, creed, or religion, they are thus entitled to our care. Under certain circumstances, when we refuse to give to others the practical necessities and assistance that is their due, we commit a sin against the seventh commandment: “Thou shall not steal.” In reality it can become thievery in that we are taking what is morally another’s, regardless of our own sense of entitlement to it. Genuine charity then goes above and beyond the basic sense of justice that is due every human being. In his latest encyclical Caritas in Veritate/Charity in Truth, Pope Benedict XVI underscores this point:

Charity demands justice: recognition and respect for the legitimate rights of individuals and peoples. It strives to build the earthly city [humanity] according to law and justice. On the other hand, charity transcends justice and completes it in the logic of giving and receiving (Introduction, #6)

In her book, entitled Benedict XVI: A Guide for the Perplexed, Tracey Roland, underscores the Holy Father’s impetus with regards to genuine Christian charity:

Ratzinger does not think that Christianity is just about alms giving…Rather he sees Christian charity as intimately connected with personal love and personal encounters with the grace of Christ. This is what gives Christian social service its distinctive character and makes it different from secular forms of humanitarian aid (T&T Clark, 2010, p.91).

All that we have ourselves received has come from God alone, and Our Lord has told us definitively in the Gospels that we are to care for the poor and underprivileged. If we fail
to do this, are apathetic in our attitude towards the poor, or simply adopt an attitude of resentment and cynicism towards them, we should recall that there will be eternal consequences for this that we will be forced to contend with one day. Under the section of “Hell” the Catechism of the Catholic Church accentuates this fact:

Our Lord warns us that we shall be separated from him [hell] if we fail to meet the serious needs of the poor and the little ones who are his brethren (CCC#1033).

Thus, care for the poor and working to alleviate poverty is part-and-parcel to the Christian life. Those who ignore the needs of the poor or dismiss them as simply “someone else’s problem,” place their souls in peril and may possibly forfeit their place in heaven for doing so. An example of this comes from Our Lord himself with the parable of the poor man Lazarus and the rich man:

19 “There was a rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 20 And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus full of sores, 21 who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table; moreover, the dogs came and licked his sores. 22 The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried; 23 and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes, and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus in his bosom. 24 And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy upon me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in anguish in this flame.’ 25 But Abraham said, ‘Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. 26 And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.’ 27 And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house, 28 for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ 29 But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.’ 30 And he said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if some one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ 31 He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead’” (Lk 16:19-31).

The saints and the Tradition of the Church have repeatedly pointed out that “Love for the poor is incompatible with immoderate love of riches or their selfish use” (CCC#2445). While money itself is not evil, the unquenchable thirst for money inevitably corrupts the one who permits it to dominate his life: “For the love of money is the root of all evils; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced their hearts with many pangs” (1 Timothy 6:10). It is important here that we distinguish between those who have wealth and those who are controlled by wealth. Church history has shown us many saints who were quite wealthy and yet used their wealth for the greater corporate good of the society and most especially for the poor, namely, St. Louis King of France and St. Margaret of Scotland. Likewise, we have seen many saints such as St. Vincent de Paul and Blessed Teresa of Calcutta who have given us a charitable example to follow. Thus, it is not a sin to have wealth or goods, it is a sin to be controlled
by wealth or goods. One can similarly note the inordinate attachment to nonmaterial goods can likewise control a person in a negative way, such as attachment to ego and/or one’s reputation. In purgatory one is purified of the attachment to these “goods” and to sin so as to enter into heaven in a perfected state. Many times in the Gospels we hear of Our Lord’s exhortation to avoid attachment to goods:

Go your way; behold, I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. 4 Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and salute no one on the road (Lk 10:3-4).

Here Jesus teaches his apostles total dependence on Him and the grace of Divine Providence. When one is controlled by wealth, or even the desire for wealth three things inevitably occur: 1.) He neglects the emotional, spiritual, and temporal needs of others because greed has begun to poison his thinking. The psalmist tells us: “Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in his heart; there is no fear of God before his eyes. 2 For he flatters himself in his own eyes that his iniquity cannot be found out and hated” (Psalm 36:1-2). St. Paul likewise underscores the corrupting and blinding nature of sin: “They became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened” (Rm 1:21). In addressing the blinding nature of sin, St. Gregory of Nyssa notes:

If your mind is untainted by any evil, free from sin, and purified from all stain, then indeed you are blessed, because your sight is keen and clear. Once purified, you see things that others cannot see. When the mists of sin no longer cloud the eye of your soul, you see that blessed vision clearly in the peace and purity of your own heart (Liturgy of the Hours: Saturday, 12th Week of Ordinary Time).

The great challenge of course, as the saints have articulated over the centuries, is helping the sinner come to a realization of their sin when they are naïve to it, apathetic to it, or simply ignorant of it; and doing so in a charitable way (Caritas in Veritate). Because of the blinding nature of sin, quite often those involved in an ongoing sin continue to make poor choices and are consumed in greater sin because they refuse to listen to the truth of God written into their heart (natural law) and the exhortations of the Church. An analogy of this blindness would be perhaps an addict or alcoholic who fails to see the destructive impact that his addiction is taking on his family. In his own mind he is justified but others are repeatedly trying to convince him of the truth, yet he doggedly refuses to see it, thus continuing a cycle of destruction with each drink. John Paul II and Benedict XVI have repeatedly articulated that the Church “imposes nothing, but rather proposes the truth.” The acceptance of truth can never be forced, it must always be a choice of love and religious freedom (VCII: Dignitatis Humanae/Decree on Religious Freedom). This is, for instance, why the Church is perpetually in dialogue with other faiths, such as Islam, wherein the concept of religious freedom is virtually nonexistent. Pope Benedict XVI has noted: “The State may not impose religion, yet it must guarantee religious freedom and harmony between the followers of different religions” (Deus Caritas Est #28). In the same way truth, on a more personal level, must always be a choice of love and never imposed. If it accepted freely it grows and fully develops within the person, changing the person into the individual they were called to be by God. If, on the other hand, one accepts a particular faith out of obligation or fear, or danger of death, the faith
will never grow within the individual in a genuine way. One may outwardly practice the specific religious precepts of his faith, but inwardly never become fully human and find spiritual peace. Thus, the acceptance of truth is a free choice, not an imposition.

2.) He neglects his relationship with God as he creates a golden calf out of his own needs and ego. 3.) He fails to recognize his own wealth and blessings, namely that which he has thus far received in his life, in the desire to obtain greater wealth. Thus he has a thirst that can never be satiated, as he never reaches a point of monetary contentment. The irony herein lies, as Mother Teresa often alluded to, that while one may grow in monetary wealth and/or fame, power, etc., there are very often spiritually impoverished. During her first visit to the United States, Mother Teresa made the point that to some degree a physically poor person actually has an advantage over one who has wealth and is spiritually impoverished in the sense that at least when one has bodily hunger they know they need food, clothing, medical attention, etc. When one possesses these things and remains spiritually impoverished they often are unaware of the cause of this depression and/or spiritual impoverishment. They simply know that they are not content and are often searching for fulfillment in unfulfilling ways (promiscuous sex, drugs, alcohol, materialism), which leads of course to greater spiritual impoverishment and misery.

Jesus Christ was himself poor and God chose to be born into poverty rather than wealth. This is not by chance. God is clearly telling us that he has special love for the poor and those to whom the world considers undesirable. This is evident in the life of Jesus and his interactions with the poor, the prostitutes, tax collectors, and sinners. The Catechism of the Catholic Church makes the point that not only do we each have the moral duty to care for the needs of the poor if we wish to enter into heaven, likewise wealthier nations also have a moral duty to assist poorer nations in economic sustainability and training:

Rich nations have a grave moral responsibility toward those which are unable to ensure the means of their development by themselves or have been prevented from doing so by tragic historical events. It is a duty in solidarity and charity; it is also an obligation in justice if the prosperity of the rich nations has come from resources that have not been paid for fairly (CCC#2439).

Thus, every person has a duty to seek to alleviate poverty and to care for those in desperate need of physical and emotional sustainability in their lives. The Catechism goes on to point out that “Detachment from riches is necessary for entering the Kingdom of heaven” (CCC#2556). To some degree this sentiment runs contrary to the way that many Americans are taught to think. We tend to think, “I have earned this, I have a right to keep it!” While it is true, as mentioned in the last conference, that it is a moral good to earn the money have by hard work, determination, and the proper use of one’s skills and talents, it is likewise true that ultimately anything we have received is not guaranteed to us and is, in essence, on loan to us from God. Furthermore, no one can take his wealth or reputation with him when he dies. Jesus’ teachings underscore this point again and again:

19 "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, 20 but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven,
where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. 
21 For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Mt 6:19-21).

In another place Jesus tells the parable of the rich man who died suddenly and discovered that all of his wealth would become irrelevant as he faced the prospect of his mortality:

And he said to them, "Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." 16 And he told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man brought forth plentifully; 17 and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ 18 And he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns, and build larger ones; and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry.’ 20 But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ 21 So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God” (Lk 12:15-21).

In 1971, in *Octogesima Adveniens/On the 80th Anniversary of Rerum Novarum* (#3), Pope Paul VI spoke about what he referred to as a “preference for the poor,” or the understanding that rather than simply providing for the needs of the poor and impoverished we should actively seek to educate them and to alleviate their condition altogether. Given the daunting task this requires, it requires the efforts of every human being, and most especially every Catholic (1/6 of the world’s population). John Paul II likewise points out in *Centessimus Annus/On the One Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum*, that assisting the poor does not simply involve helping to provide basic necessities to them, in fact, he underscores that simply becoming a “social assistance state” may actually harm the very ones it is intending to help by not helping to draw out the best in people capacities. While it is certainly true that ultimately the individual must make the effort to better themselves, often the economic policies, racial barriers, or bureaucracies are in place which render that personal initiative deeply weakened.

In the 1980’s there were some within the Church who, in an effort to assist the poor (especially in Mexico and Central America), adopted a misguided practice known as liberation theology, or a theology which combined Marxist ideologies with the Catholic notion of “preferential option for the poor.” As a result of this many have been misinformed on the genuine Catholic doctrine concerning the Church’s missionary efforts to assist the poor. In Latin America, many former or presently active priests such as Leonardo Boff, Jon Sobrino, and Gustavo Gutierrez argued heavily for the theology of liberation. This theology often advocated military power to overthrow governments, adopting Marx’s notion of the rise of a proletariat state. Over the years, and especially under John Paul II and Benedict XVI, the Church has consistently reaffirmed that liberation theology is incompatible with Catholicism and is based on a faulty understanding of human freedom (See: *Instructions on Certain Aspects of the theology of Liberation* (1984) and *The Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation*. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. (1986). Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger). True human freedom, Pope Benedict XVI has noted, is found in the liberation of man from sin
and the discovery of truth ("You will find the truth and the truth shall set you free" (Jn 8:32)).

II. WHAT IS JUSTICE?:

Simply put, justice is the “moral virtue that consists in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbor” (CCC#1807). The Church has traditionally referred to the justice given to God as the “virtue of religion” or the habitual disposition of giving God proper honor and respect in one’s life and family. Scripturally, the “just man,” such as St. Joseph has been one who is free from sin and attachment to sin (Matthew’s Gospel). Luke tends to equate the just man with one who bares a reverential fear of God. Catholic Tradition has generally differentiated between commutative justice, or the justice which regulates relations between individual people, and distributive justice which regulates relations between groups and whole communities. As one of the four cardinal virtues (Prudence, Temperance, Fortitude), justice is essential for genuine growth in the spiritual life because in it we foster a profound respect for others, as we understand in a deeper way that God dwells within them, and similarly we come to an abiding love and respect both for God and for ourselves as having been made in God’s image and likeness.

In part II (sections 19-39) of his first encyclical letter Deus Caritas Est/God is Love (2005), Pope Benedict XVI addresses the nature of true charity to others, especially as it relates to the cardinal virtue of justice. The Holy Father notes:

Love of neighbor, grounded in the love of God, is first and foremost a responsibility for each individual member of the faithful, but it is also a responsibility for the entire ecclesial community at every level: from the local community to the particular Church and to the Church universal in its entirety. As a community, the Church must practice love (#20).

Part of this intrinsic love of neighbor involves fostering and working for what the Church refers to as the common good, or the good of the greater societal whole, rather than simply my own needs in a selfish way. Such an attitude involves genuine human justice. The Holy Father goes on to note that “Our times call for a new readiness to assist our neighbors in need” (D.C.E. #30). This is what Jesus refers to when he addresses love of one’s neighbor. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan whereby he specifically addresses whom is meant when with regards to our “neighbor”:

29 But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" 30 Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion, 34 and went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, "Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back."
Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed mercy on him." And Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise" (Lk 10:29-37).

This beautiful parable of Our Lord points out that while charitable acts are indeed needed and a practical response to the temporal, and often spiritual, needs of others, they are first and foremost an act and a giving of human love. Without love these acts deteriorate into a form of social service. For this reason the Church imparts her members to live and teach the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. Mother Teresa was fond of reminding her sisters about the fact that in their service to the Poorest of the poor, if this service is not done with genuine love, one becomes simply a social worker rather than a missionary of the Gospel. Pope Benedict XVI, in commenting on the Good Samaritan story has said:

Following the example given in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Christian charity is first of all the simple response to immediate needs and specific situations: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for and healing the sick, visiting those in prison, etc...We are dealing with human beings, and human beings always need something more than technically proper care. They need heartfelt concern (D.C.E. #31).

It should be reiterated here that this justice due to others is not simply a Catholic concept, as other faiths such a Buddhism and Hinduism similarly have these charitable facets within the precepts of their doctrine. However, Catholicism is unique in the fact that we believe that each person was made in God’s image and likeness, that each person possesses an immortal soul, and that after the Resurrection from the dead these souls will be reunited within their bodies again. Because every human person is our neighbor, and our brother and sister in the family of Christ, we are obliged to render charity and justice to them. As we do so, not only do we assist the individual with his/her practical needs, we ourselves grow and are transformed in the process. Most people who engage in charitable activities on a regular basis will readily acknowledge that they receive infinitely more than what they give. Such is the nature of human love, it goes out of itself and it transforms both the giver and receiver.

The Church’s teachings on Social Justice are based on essentially one thing: love (Christian charity). As mentioned prior, in caring for the temporal and spiritual needs of others the Church likewise seeks to bring the individual to the Gospel, and thus the truth, rather than simply providing for an immediate need. This is called evangelization. It is not, as some would claim, proselytizing, or “sheep stealing,” rather it is based on the call of Our Lord to preach the Gospel to all nations and all men and women of good will.

While the Catholic Church has always worked for the rights and dignity of every human person, her social doctrine really began to take shape in the 19th century, beginning with the great social encyclical by Leo XIII, Rerum Novarum/On the Condition of Workers (May 15, 1891) as he addressed the abysmal working conditions of laborers during the time of the industrial revolution. The Catechism of the Catholic Church underscores this point regarding human dignity and work:
The social doctrine of the Church developed in the nineteenth century when the Gospel encountered modern industrial society with its new structures for the production of consumer goods, its new concept of society, the state and authority, and its new forms of labor and ownership. The development of the doctrine of the Church on economic and social matters attests to the permanent value of the Church’s teaching at the same time as it attests to the true meaning of her Tradition, always living and active (CCC#2421).

During the last century and the last few years of this Millennium, many of the popes have repeatedly addressed the Christian imperative to assist the poor and those most vulnerable among us. By “assisting” the poor we are called to do more than simply help to provide for their temporal needs. Rather, the Church beckons us to a deeper sense of renewal of the whole person in assisting them with education, the possibility of work, agricultural developments, local justice, etc. In the history of the Catholic Church it has been through the efforts of Catholic Christians that much humanitarian aid, medical needs, hospice care, clothing, prison support, AIDS ministry, and housing needs have been brought to those most in need. The hospital system as we know it today was first established by the Catholic Church as well. The Church initiated the hospitals in the formal sense in the 4th century under Emperor Constantine to care for the sick and the poor, following the example of Christ in the Gospels. Quite often the homes of wealthy Christians, bishops, or other influential Christians were opened to assist the poor and those in need of medical assistance. In the 4th century St. Basil and St. Ephraim both opened hospitals specifically to address the medical needs of the poor. As time went on more hospitals were opened to address the particular needs of the elderly, the poor, the crippled, the handicapped, and those infirm who could not work. During the crusades, especially under St. Louis King of France (12th century), hospitals were opened all over Europe in order to assist the pilgrims going to the Holy Land and those in need of assistance. Today the Catholic Church, one of the single largest health-care providers in the United States, oversees the operation of over 600 hospitals. According to the Vatican Statistical Yearbook/Annuario Pontificio, there are currently 1.16 billion Catholics in the world, many of whom have been and are being cared for by Catholic hospitals and clinics around the world (including non-Catholics as well). The Church has always tried to care for the medical needs of the poor because she has always cared for the dignity of the human person as a definitive aspect of justice and charity.

III. Papal Encyclicals Addressing Social Justice and Poverty:

“In the beginning God entrusted the earth and its resources to the common stewardship of mankind to take care of them, master them by labor, and enjoy their fruits. The goods of creation are destined for the whole human race...In his use of things man should regard the external goods he legitimately owns not merely as exclusive to himself but common to others also, in the sense that they can benefit others as well as himself” (CCC#2402-2404).

All of the Church’s social doctrine, especially developed over the last two hundred years, finds at its root one thing which is its foundation: the dignity of the human person. Without this element in place, all other issues such as poverty, civil rights, labor, and
immigration issues, are to some degree irrelevant. The proper ordering of a society, John Paul II and the popes of the twentieth century inform us, begins first with the dignity of the human person. This is known as the principal of personalism, or the principal of human rights. Any society based on true justice and moral values does not begin first with the “the state, the party, or the tribe; neither does it begin with ethnicity, race, or gender,” but rather with the human person and the dignity and value inherent in his/her personhood (Against the Grain. George Weigel. Crossroad. 2008. p. 15). Likewise, as the culture then builds on the person, not the person on the culture, the person seeks to contribute to a better culture, or what traditional Catholic theology has referred to as the common good (communitarian principal), or the greater good of the societal whole. As we grow and become fully human, men and women tend to want to help others grow and reach their full potential as well. While there will always be those who abuse this and seek unbridled self-gain (concupiscence), the vast majority would likely seek the greater societal good. Many find this concept dubious because most of us have never known such a culture since our culture is primarily market driven and tends to be genuinely Darwinistic in nature. However, there are more than a few examples of societies and cultures around the world that place the dignity of the family and the human person above profit, consumerism, or the particular “needs” of the state.

Most Church historians catalogue the longest reigning Pontiff in the history of the Catholic Church, aside from St. Peter, as that of Blessed Pius IX, who reigned as pope from 1846-1878. In addition to convening the First Vatican Council (1869-1870), Pius IX declared that the Blessed Virgin Mary was indeed the Immaculate Conception (1854). The man who was elected as the successor to Bl. Pius IX, was an elderly man named Giacchino Vincenzo, who became Pope Leo XIII. Leo surprised everyone by the breadth of his intellect (he issued 85 Papal encyclicals), his frontal attack on Freemasonry (Humanum genus), and his robust defense of the dignity of the human person during his twenty-five year Pontificate. During his time as a diplomat, Leo had visited many of the cities in Europe and had seen the toll that the Industrial Revolution had taken on many of the poor and it became clear to him that the Church should more clearly enunciate her policies towards industry, business, and profit while simultaneously defending the rights of workers as well. The result was what the Church has come to know as the magna carta of sorts of the Church’s social doctrine: Rerum Novarum/On the Condition of Workers. Rerum Novarum was published on May 15, 1891 and would go on to have a tremendous impact on the Church and the future popes of the 20th & 21st centuries. The following is a brief catalogue of some of the Church’s social justice and moral encyclicals issued since the time of Pope Leo XIII:

a.) Rerum Novarum/On the Conditions of Workers (May 15, 1891): This great encyclical letter by Pope Leo XIII is sometimes titled in history books as “On Capital and Labor” as well. Prior to the publishing of Rerum Novarum, Pope Leo XIII published two other encyclicals addressing the issues of social justice: Inscrutabili Dei Consilio/On the Evils of Society (1878) and Quod Apostolici Muneris/On Socialism (1878). Herein, the Holy Father noted that profit at all costs, especially in the face of poverty and the denial of basic rights to workers, is morally reprehensible and that the Catholic Church vigorously defends the dignity of the human person, the dignity of labor, and the rights of industry, but that industry and business should recall that if their companies fail to see the
human being as the most important element of their business, over profit, they are
doomed to failure. The same principal has been articulated by John Paul II with regards
to culture. John Paul II consistently noted that culture drives history and when that
culture is morally flawed, history can in turn be disastrous. He notes that when a culture
adopts a “culture of death,” and fails to defend the rights of the unborn and most
defenseless, that culture can never ultimately sustain itself over time (Evangelium
Vitae/The Gospel of Life, #19). Addressing the point of the necessity of a culture to
defend the weak, poor, and most vulnerable in a society, Pope Leo states:

This ought to be considered...that the state has one basic purpose for existence,
which embraces in common the highest and lowest of its members. Non-owning
[poor] workers are unquestionably citizens by nature and virtue of the same right as
the rich, that is, that is true and vital parts whence, through the medium of families,
the body of the state is constituted: and it hardly need be added that they are by far
the greatest number in every urban area (#49).

Leo goes on to assert the rights of workers to own private property but underscores that
if, for some reason, their property was later needed for the greater good of a society, they
should surrender their property for the good of others. Likewise, he underscores the
rights of workers to fair and legitimate wages and the right to form labor unions if need
be. As noted in the earlier conference on the Dignity of the Human Person, work is good
and work is necessary for man to become fully who God calls him/her to be. In work, we
direct our energies towards a common good, whether it be on a micro or macro level.
Leo notes:

The work is to expand one’s energy for the purpose of securing the things necessary
for the various needs of life and especially for its preservation. “By the sweat of
your face you shall consume your bread” (Gen 3:19). Accordingly, in man labor
has two marks, as it were, implanted by nature, so that it is truly personal, because
work energy is inherent in the person and belongs completely to him by whom it is
expended and for whose use it is destined by nature. Secondly, work is necessary
because man has need of the fruit of his labors to preserve his life and nature
itself...commands him to preserve it (#62).

While it is true that work is good and necessary for both the temporal, psychological, and
spiritual welfare of the person, John Paul II reminds us that “it is not the goal of human
existence,” and thus we need to have legitimate time for leisure and to honor the Lord’s
Day with our families (Dies Domini/Observing and Celebrating the Day of the Lord.
July 30, 1998). This balance is essential for the proper formation of the couple in
marriage and likewise for the children. Often in our modern culture we see some parents
who, in an effort to provide things their children want, though often do not need, work
excessively and yet spend very little time with their children, especially in their formative
years. Likewise, there are some parents who adopt an attitude of near total apathy and
therein refuse to work and thus fail to provide their children with an adequate example of
the virtue of work and industry for the family. Thus a balance between work and leisure
with family and marriage needs to be reached and addressed openly within the family itself.

b.) Quadragesimo Anno/On Reconstructing the Social Order. Promulgated by Pope Pius XI on May 15, 1931. Published on the fortieth anniversary of Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical Rerum Novarum, in this document Pope Pius XI reiterates many of the points made by Leo XIII, yet Pius places them in an updated and global context within the times. During his Pontificate, Pius XI proved that he was not at all shy about addressing difficult topics in a frank and honest manner. In 1930, he published Casti Canubii/On Christian Marriage, wherein he reiterates the Church’s condemnation of artificial contraception. In 1937 he published Mit Brennender Sorge/With Burning Concern, wherein he vehemently attacks Nazi and communist ideologies (he wrote it in German and had it read from all the pulpits in Germany during the Nazi occupation). In his own reverence for Rerum Novarum, Pius refers to Leo’s encyclical as simply “outstanding,” and underscores that after forty years its principals are still very relevant within the life of the Church and the culture. Pius likewise refers to Rerum Novarum as the “Magna Charta of the social order” (#39). Published shortly after an ongoing global depression, which deeply affected our own country after the stock market crash, the encyclical attacks the principals of unrestrained capitalism and the undisciplined pursuit of profit. It likewise addressed the moral evils of Socialism, especially in its attack on human dignity.

Pope Pius underscores the dignity of the worker but likewise the moral necessity of the worker to respect the employer in an honest relationship with him/her. With regards to workers rights Pius notes that “The worker must be paid a wage sufficient to support him in his family” (#71). However, the pope goes on to note that this wage may be legitimately adjusted to meet the larger economic good of the company and societal economy (#74).

In our American culture we tend to understand economic growth and capitalism in terms of financial Darwinism, or survival of the fittest, rather than as a mission to both achieve profit and to serve human dignity. While it is true that there will naturally be those industrious entrepreneurs who rise to the top so-to-speak, Pius points out that unrestrained greed by these few at the expense of the poor is morally reprehensible and he refers to their financial domination as an economic “dictatorship”:

This dictatorship is being most forcibly exercised by those who, since they hold the money and completely control it, control credit also and the lending of money…This concentration of power and might, the characteristic mark, as it were, of contemporary economic life, is the fruit that the unlimited freedom of struggle among competitors has of its own nature produced, and which lets only the strongest survive; and this is often the same as saying, those who fight the most violently, those who give least heed to their conscience (#106-107).

Pius thereafter goes on to condemn the precepts of Communism as fundamentally and morally flawed concepts of economy and the human person (#112).

Quadragesimo Anno was the first encyclical letter by a pope which specifically addressed the Catholic principal of subsidiary, or the principal of civil society, whereby decision making is left to the lowest level as is possible, or the level most in proximity to
the issue or problem at hand. This is not only imminently practical in finding a palpable solution to the real life problems we encounter; it likewise contributes to the common good of a culture (i.e. local governments which handle local problems/issues).

c.) *Mater et Magistra/Mother and Teacher.* Promulgated by Pope John XXIII on May 15, 1961, this encyclical is sometimes referred to as “On Christianity and Social Progress.” It was published on the seventieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum,* and the document addresses a number of societal issues such as human rights, economic and political inequalities, rights of the poor, social justice and the just distribution of wealth to underdeveloped countries. With regards to the relevance of *Rerum Novarum* for his own time, the Holy Father notes:

> Even today, in spite of the long lapse of time since the letter was published, much of its effectiveness is still evident. It is indeed evident in the documents of the popes who succeeded Leo XIII…and who have always borrowed something from it (#9).

Pope John points out that the human person is the “foundation, cause, and end of all social institutions.” He likewise addresses head on the unjust greed of a few nations to the detriment of others:

> Our heart is filled with profound sadness when we observe, as it were, with our own eyes a wretched spectacle indeed, great masses of workers…who receive too little a return from their labor…It happens in some of these nations that the wealth and conspicuous consumption of a few stand out, and are in open and bold contrast with the needy (#68-69).

It is sometimes difficult for those who live in the developed countries to understand the Church’s imperative to initiate social and economic networks of security to assist the poor and underprivileged. Often there is the belief that ‘I earned this and I deserve it.’ While it true and good to earn one’s particular living, as individuals, as families, as communities, and as a country, we are likewise morally obliged to assist those poorer and underdeveloped countries however we can do so. For instance, Catholic Relief Services and other reputable organizations make it their mission to put the Church’s social teaching into practice. Years after the publication of *Pacem in Terris* (1963), John Paul II promulgated *Evangelium Vitae/The Gospel of Life* (1995), wherein he reiterates the point made by John XXIII regarding the moral need of wealthier countries to assist poorer one’s with economic development and temporal assistance:

> If we then look at the wider worldwide perspective, how can we fail to think that the very affirmation of the rights of individuals and peoples made in distinguished international assemblies is a merely futile exercise of rhetoric, if we fail to unmask the selfishness of rich countries which exclude poorer countries from access to development or make such access dependent on arbitrary prohibitions against procreation, setting up an opposition between development and man itself? (#18)
For his part, Pope John XXIII notes:

Genuine necessity, as well as justice, require that whenever countries give attention to the fostering of skills or commerce, they should aid the less developed nations without thought of domination, so that these latter eventually will be in a position to progress economically and socially on their own initiative (#173).

Thus it is vital that the wealthy countries, such as the United States, Western Europe, and the Middle East, avoid a form of economic colonialism, whereby we seek to manipulate a particular country’s goods for our own means. Likewise, as history has shown, quite often there are particular leaders of some countries who are steeped in corruption and manipulate the people and good of their country for their personal profit. As another tragedy, there have been efforts by a number of the developed countries, including the United Nations, to tie economic assistance to the mandated usage of artificial contraception and/or sterilization. Such a manipulation of power is a grave sin, it is morally reprehensible, and is often pushed forward by a select few with an alternative agenda (see: Cairo World Conference on Population – 1994 & Beijing Conference on Women – 1995).

d.) Octegisma Adveniens/On the 80th Anniversary of Rerum Novarum. Apostolic Letter published by Pope Paul VI on May 14, 1971. In the first section of this apostolic letter, Paul VI notes immediately that it is well within the Church’s Sacred Tradition to support social justice and the ministry to the poor:

The eightieth anniversary of the publication of the encyclical Rerum Novarum, the message of which continues to inspire action for social justice, prompts us to take up again and to extend the teachings of our predecessors, in response to the new needs of the changing world. The Church, in fact, travels forward with humanity and shares its lot in the setting of history (#1).

Herein the Holy Father addresses many social issues of great importance to the world including the dignity of workers, the value and beauty of youth and children, alleviating unemployment, politics, Communism/Marxism, the nature of the media, the need for peace among nations, immigration, the role and dignity of woman within the Church, and racial discrimination. Of this last point he notes:

Among the victims of situations of injustice, unfortunately no new phenomenon, must be placed those who are discriminated against …on account of their race, origin, color, culture, sex, or religion. The members of mankind share the same basic rights and duties, as well as the same supernatural destiny…all should be equal before the law, find equal admittance to economic, cultural, civic, and social life and benefit from a sharing of nation’s riches (#16).

What is definitively unique about Octegisma Adveniens is that it addresses the moral imperative to protect and care for the environment (a point reiterated and updated by
Benedict XVI in *Caritas in Veritate*). Paul VI points out that we can never justify mass pollution as necessary. Likewise, Benedict XVI underscores that quite often environmental pollution is a sign of a deeper moral pollution within our souls; thus we are called to cleanse our souls first.

e.) *Pacem in Terris/Peace on Earth.* Promulgated by Pope John XXIII on April 11, 1963, in this great encyclical the Holy Father addresses the letter not just to Catholics but “To all Men of Good Will,” and thus to all of humanity. This was the first encyclical addressed to all of humanity, rather than simply Catholics. It would likewise be the last encyclical by John XXIII, prior to his death. In the document he notes that peace is much more than simply the absence of conflict, but it likewise involves first and foremost a proper ordering of our own lives. Thus genuine peace always begins with our personal lives and habits prior to any public manifestation of peace on the societal level. Written during the Second Vatican Council, shortly after Cuban Missal Crisis, during the height of the Cold War, and shortly before he died, Pope John genuinely poured his heart and mind into this last encyclical and when one reads the text it is apparent that these issues touched him on a personal level. Pope John himself came from a very poor family and thus he never forgot the daily challenges of poverty, hunger, malnutrition, and unemployment.

In *Pacem in Terris,* we see the foundational element of the need to respect the dignity of the human person, which has been articulated for many years by the Church, yet John addresses this in a new and fresh manner:

Any human society, if it is to be well-ordered and productive, must lay down as a foundation this principal, namely, that every human being is a person, that is, his nature is endowed with intelligence and free will. Indeed, precisely because he is a person he has rights and obligations flowing directly and simultaneously from his very nature. And these rights and obligations are universal and inviolable so they cannot in any way be surrendered. If we look upon the dignity of the human person in the light of divinely revealed truth, we cannot help but esteem it more highly; for men are redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ, they are by grace the children and friends of God and heirs of eternal glory (#9).

When we hear Pope John XXIII note that every human person is “endowed with intelligence and free will,” and his rights are “universal and inviolable,” we can rightly see that this statement sounds remarkably similar to the Declaration of Independence written by Thomas Jefferson:

We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, and among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Here the founding fathers use the word “inalienable,” meaning “cannot be removed” or taken away. These rights are intrinsic to the person and are given by God, not man. John XXIII notes that these rights are: “universal and inviolable so they cannot in any way be surrendered.” Both documents underscore the fact that human dignity is the foundational
element of a society and that the rights of the human person are given to him by Divine origin and can never be legitimately taken away by the state. This is ironic given our present “culture of death,” as John Paul II notes in *Evangelium Vitae/The Gospel of Life*, wherein we have adopted a Darwinian and utilitarian understanding of humanity; namely, that the weak (elderly, unborn, mentally handicapped) are considered expendable and one’s value is judged primarily on one’s productivity (#21). Examples of this include the vast numbers of terminated pregnancies involving children with Down’s syndrome, where it is assumed that the child would be a burden to the parents and culture. Likewise in many Asian cultures one witnesses a proportionate imbalance between the sexes whereby many families prefer male children and often abort female babies or seek out I.V.F. (in Vitro Fertilization) that produces only a male child. John Paul II notes that we now see a genuine “eclipse of the sense of God and man” among humanity, and this eclipse will ultimately lead to self-destruction if we do not change.

As mentioned prior, in *Pacem in Terris*, John XXIII points out that genuine peace is much more than simply the absence of conflict, it is the tranquilitas ordinis/tranquility of order that comes with true justice given to every human person and a proper respect for Christian morality. While not specifically addressed in this encyclical, the Church does, and has always taught that there may be legitimate times wherein a war may be justifiable (Just War Theory). There have been many within the Church over the years who have argued for a policy of total Pacifism, or the philosophy that war and self-defense are never moral or justifiable. They often quote the Sermon on the Mount to support this claim. However, as St. Augustine taught in the 4th century, and as the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches in #2309, there may be times when the engaging in armed conflict is the only viable option when faced with an unjust aggressor. The terms by which a war is just and/or unjust must be strictly adhered to and evaluated as the CCC notes that “The evaluation of these conditions for moral legitimacy belongs to the prudential judgment of those who have responsibility for the common good”. The Church believes that governments have both the “right and duty” to protect their people against harm, and furthermore that families also have a duty to defend themselves against an unjust aggressor: “Legitimate defense can be not only a right but a grave duty for one who is responsible for the lives of others” (#2265).

f.) *Populorum Progressio/On the Development of Peoples*: Promulgated by Pope Paul VI. March 26, 1967. Often within the Church there are many who confuse the virtue of justice with the virtue of charity. While it is certainly true that the two are interrelated, Pope Benedict in *Caritas in Veritate/Charity in Truth*, has noted that genuine charity supersedes a basic level of justice that is due to every human person. In *Populorum Progressio*, Paul VI underscores the fact that wealthier people and nations have a moral obligation to distribute goods, services, and social development to poor people and nations out of a basic sense of the justice that is due them as persons. Healthy economic development forms an economy around the basic principal of the dignity of the human person. This assistance, the Holy Father points out, may require a restructuring of trade negotiations with poorer countries as well. When these factors are not considered or the dignity of the human person is overlooked and/or ignored, there is witnessed and ever-widening gap between the wealthy and the poorer nations and peoples. The Holy Father notes that “The new name for peace is development” (#87).
In Caritas in Veritate, Pope Benedict XVI quotes from Populorum Progressio quite often:

I express my conviction that Populorum Progressio deserves to be considered “the Rerum Novarum of the present age,” shedding light upon humanity’s journey towards unity (#8). A fresh reading of Populorum Progressio, more than forty years after its publication, invites us to remain faithful to its message of charity and truth…within the tradition of the Church’s social doctrine (#10).

In this encyclical letter, similar to Humanae Vitae/On Human Life (published roughly 2 years later), Paul VI is very frank and to the point. He attacks the apathy of many towards the plight of the poor. He also notes that such a person will ultimately have to answer before God:

There are without a doubt situations which, because of their injustice, cry out bitterly for God’s punishment. For when entire populations, deprived of the necessities of life, are so subjected to the domination of others that they are denied any self-initiated activity, responsibility, attainment of higher culture, and participation is the social and public life, men are easily tempted to remove by force the injustice done to human dignity (#30).

In this beautiful document the Holy Father points out that illiteracy is a form of poverty of mind and spirit and that an illiterate is “a person suffering from starvation of the spirit” (#35). Thus those in a position to do so must take active steps to alleviate illiteracy and the lack of education among the world’s poor. This Holy Father likewise addresses the real issue of economic justice in the context of economic stability and economic systems worldwide. What is definitively unique about P.P. is that it serves as an extension of sorts to the Vatican II document Gaudium et Spes/Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, published only three years prior. Herein the Second Vatican Council fathers call for economic justice in the distribution of goods and resources worldwide among the wealthy and the poor. Paul VI addresses here what he terms ‘authentic development’ or the growth of sustainable economic systems (rather than simply donating money) and the proper respect for the dignity of the human person.

g.) Sollicitudo Rei Socialis/On Social Concern. Promulgated by Pope John Paul II on December 30, 1987. Published on the twentieth anniversary of Paul VI’s social encyclical Populorum Progressio/On the Development of Peoples, John Paul II here reiterates the points made in P.P., namely, the need of all nations to promote the proper development and care of every human person, rather than simply the wealthy. Likewise, John Paul notes that the poor of the world are equally entitled to the world’s resources and the benefits they bring to the culture and the wealthier countries and companies have a moral duty to distribute these financial and economic resources in a just and equitable manner. The Holy Father refers to this duty among the wealthy as a “most serious duty,” therefore not to be taken lightly (#7). He calls for a deeper sense of solidarity among the world community, whereby humanity is seen less as competing cultures and more as a one-world family. However, he notes that the economic divide among the “developed
north” and the “developing south” is continuing to grow as the wealthy grow wealthier and the poor are steeped continually in poverty. As we see an increase in globalization, we must maintain a genuine sense of virtue when applying capitalist thought to economic growth and thus we must seek not just a free society, but a “free and virtuous society” (Centessimus Annus). This cannot be achieved if wealthier nations yield to a “selfish isolation” which would translate into a “real desertion of their moral obligation” (#22). John Paul II cites as positive signs within the world a greater sense of societal interdependence and a deeper awareness of the necessity of respecting the environment. He goes on to note that this greater awareness of interdependence should lead to a greater sense of global solidarity with the poor and ultimately dependence on God.

John Paul warns the wealthy that they can easily fall into a mentality which leads to the “cult of having,” or the need to continually acquire more and more for one’s peace of mind. Such a person never has enough and has placed his/her peace on external security (#28). Similarly, he notes that as we each tend to grow in personal sin this therein leads to greater “structures of sin” or what he would later term a “culture of death.” Rather than build a society based on structures of sin, we are called to build a “civilization of love” by our solidarity with one another and our willingness to make practical sacrifices for the common good of the world community (#33).

h.) Centessimus Annus/On the One Hundredth Year of Rerum Novarum. Promulgated by Pope John Paul II on May 1, 1991 (Feast of St. Joseph the Worker). This is perhaps, in this author’s opinion, one of the most under-read and under-appreciated documents of the Pontificate of John Paul II. In this magnanimous encyclical letter, the Holy Father commemorates the 100th anniversary of the publication of Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical Rerum Novarum, undoubtedly the magna charta of the Church’s social doctrine. In reaffirming the teachings of Pope Leo in Rerum Novarum, John Paul II notes:

What was essential to the encyclical was precisely its proclamation of the fundamental conditions for justice in the economic and social situation of the time...We need to repeat that there can be no genuine solution to the social question apart from the Gospel.

In the document, John Paul II reaffirms many of the points articulated by Leo, Pius XI, John XXIII, and Paul VI, namely, the right own property, the dignity of workers, importance of a just working wage, and religious freedom.

One of the interesting aspects of Centessimus Annus is that it addresses the recent fall of Communism (2 years prior), whereby John Paul cites the “spiritual void brought about by atheism” as its fundamental flaw. This atheism of course, lead to a warped and deeply misguided sense of the dignity of the human person, which as we have noted, is the fundamental element of every family and culture. On this point he notes:

The guiding principal of Pope Leo’s encyclical, and of all the Church’s social doctrine, is a correct view of the human person and the person’s unique value...God has imprinted his own image and likeness on human beings which confers upon them an incomparable dignity (#11).
This real atheism is still seen today in various communist regimes such as in Asia and Cuba. Likewise, many countries in the West have embraced what Pope Benedict XVI has referred to as a “practical atheism,” wherein people have surrendered their Christian faith for complete secularism and the worship of self/ego. Such a mentality is in some ways even more insidious and morally destructive. The document goes on to address a number of social issues of practical importance such as materialism, consumerism, profit of companies, ecology, abortion, capitalism, and authentic democracy. It should be noted that in addressing the free market economy and capitalism he warns that this can easily deteriorate into greed, ego, and materialism. Thus he calls not just for a free society, but for a “free and virtuous society,” because freedom which is ultimately amputated from virtue leads to self-destruction. George Weigel notes that the goal of Rerum Novarum and Centessimus Annus to move the world towards an authentic humanity among the wealthy and the poorer countries has seen measurable progress in certain parts of the world:

The analysis of John Paul II’s groundbreaking 1991 social encyclical Centessimus Annus, in which the poor are conceived of as people with potential, and which stresses incorporation into systems of productivity and exchange as the key to resolving the scandal of world poverty, has been vindicated in the economic success stories of east Asia and India (God’s Choice. Harper-Collins. 2005. p. 258).

Within a free and virtuous society priority is always given to the human person and likewise, the family. When profit or power becomes the sole motive of a culture or socio-economic system, the result is almost always an abuse of power and the wholesale destruction of the weak by the wealthy/powerful. In section #34, John Paul II praises the free market as “the most efficient system for utilizing resources and effectively responding to needs,” though this can similarly fall victim to unethical practices such as societal greed and narcissism. In his address before the United Nations General Assembly in October of 1979, John Paul noted that the genuine key to a “more promising future” is respect for the dignity of the human person and the inalienable rights of the person (The Splendor of Faith. Avery Cardinal Dulles. Crossroad. 1999. p. 139).

i.) Deus Caritas Est/God is Love. Promulgated by Pope Benedict XVI on December 25, 2005. In his first encyclical letter as pope, Benedict XVI addresses two aspects of human love: 1.) The transformation of eros/erotic love (love experienced in attraction) to agape/selfless love (love which leads to deeper self-donation). His work draws upon the principals of self-giving articulated by the Second Vatican Council and John Paul II (“Law of the Gift”). 2.) The nature of charity in action in our service to others. Of this B16 notes:

Love of neighbor, grounded in the love of God, is first and foremost a responsibility for each individual member of the faithful, but it is also a responsibility for the entire ecclesial community at every level: from the local community to the particular Church and to the Church universal in its entirety. As a community, the Church must practice love (#20).
Herein, Benedict underscores several key aspects of the Church’s social doctrine: 1.) True love shows itself in service to the weakest members of a society (unborn, elderly, poor). As Catholic Christians we must always and everywhere defend the rights of these weakest in the society. 2.) While the Church cannot be involved in directly politics and political decision making, she must likewise be involved in the arguments of politics by nature of her eschatological mission. Of this he writes:

The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument…A just society must be the achievement of politics, not of the Church (#28).

Finally the Holy Father notes that our charitable acts must always involve love and sacrifice. Without love, our charity becomes simply another form of social work. Herein he uses the Good Samaritan story as an example of self-less love. Likewise, Benedict reminds the faithful that as we care for others we should never forget that the person is really and truly a child of God: “We are dealing with human beings, and human beings always need something more than technicly proper care. They need humanity. They need heartfelt concern” (#31).

j.) Caritas in Veritate/Charity in Truth. Promulgated by Pope Benedict XVI on June 29, 2009, here the Holy Father addresses both believers and non-believers alike. In this his latest encyclical letter, the Holy Father begins by underscoring the importance and current relevance of several of the great social encyclicals of our Church (encyclicals which address the social needs and issues of the culture) including Rerum Novarum, Populorum Progressio, Octagesima Adveniens, and Sollicitudo Rei Socialis. Herein Benedict addresses a number of pertinent issues seen in the world today, namely, the economy, globalization, human sexuality, the dignity of workers, and the need for genuine ethics and virtue with regards to business (this in light of the economic meltdown and ponzi schemes orchestrated by some). Originally scheduled for an earlier release, the Holy Father delayed the release of the document in order to better address the current financial crisis in which much of the Western world now finds itself. He repeatedly makes the point that a healthy and steadfast economy must always have as its foundation the dignity of the human person, and without this it will ultimately self-destruct.

The Holy Father begins the encyclical by defining his terms so-to-speak, namely, he addresses the nature of true charity and true truth, and how the two are fundamentally interconnected. He notes that “charity” is not simply giving to another in need, but rather involves a genuine desire to bring about a greater good for the person (e.g. their salvation, health, family welfare) and a desire to be of service to them as Christ taught us: “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever would be first among you must be your slave” (Mt 20:26-27). He notes that “Charity is at the heart of the Church’s social doctrine,” and that “integral human development,” or rather a concern not just for oneself but for the societal whole, promotes “the good of every man and the whole man.” Thus, three things become abundantly clear: 1.) We are called to think
beyond ourselves to the greater needs and goods of the culture and/or society. 2.) The “whole man” we are called to foster and protect in humanity similarly includes spiritual, emotional, and physical components. 3.) Authentic human development in any culture and any faith requires first and foremost a profound respect for the dignity of the human person, from conception to natural death. Without a foundation based on human dignity and development, the popes have noted, a culture will ultimately embrace the total denial of objective truth (relativism) and will collapse by its own moral absurdity. Likewise Pope Benedict notes that with regards to social and political institutions and political systems, that authentic charity is necessary for “justice to be genuine justice.” An example of this need for authentic justice is found in the biotechnology sector. The Holy Father underscores that while their work is definitively needed and certainly brings benefits to humanity, there are some things that are always objectively immoral (killing of unborn, destroying embryos, cloning, in vitro fertilization) and man should humbly recognize that there are many areas wherein God alone can decide upon the fate of the person rather than having that decision based on a utilitarian notion of human value (e.g. Terri Shiavo) In section #28 he notes:

Openness to life is at the center of true human development. When a society moves towards the denial or repression of life, it ends up no longer finding the necessary motivation and energy to strive for man’s true good. If personal and social sensitivity towards the acceptance of a new life is lost, then other forms of acceptance that are valuable for a society will also wither away (#28).

The pope goes on to point out that “by cultivating openness to life, wealthy peoples can better understand the needs of poor ones,” which will further lead to “respecting the fundamental right to life of every person and every individual” (#28). Herein the Holy Father articulates the fundamental principal upon which all of the Church’s social doctrine is based: the Right to Life. Unfortunately, there are many within the Church advocating social justice who fail to make this connection; namely, that without the basic and most fundamental right of social justice, that is the right to exist and be born, all other “rights” and issues are irrelevant.

In the United States, we tend to perceive reality through the lens of economic activity and capitalist ideology, which is not altogether negative in and of itself in that it can lead to the creation of jobs, the dignity of human labor, and ideally greater assistance to the underprivileged and the poor. However, when profit becomes the sole motive of one’s job, family, company, state, or political system, it becomes morally corrupted and will eventually disregard human dignity in place of financial gain. Pope Benedict makes this point in section #36:

Economic activity cannot solve all social problems through the simple application of commercial logic…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.
He notes that it is not the economy or market per se that must usually be called to
correction, but rather “man’s darkened reason that produces these consequences” of greed
and profit at all costs. He underscores this point still again:

Therefore it is not the instrument [market] that must be called to account, but
individuals, their moral conscience, and their personal and social responsibility.

Whenever we call others to moral accountability with regards to their actions or finances
quite often the response is either tepid or altogether hostile. However, as has been noted
prior, this donation of ourselves and this sacrifice not only assists the practical needs of
others, its changes the giver him/herself as well.

Unique to Pope Benedict’s encyclical, and to some degree to the Church’s social
doctrine, is the Holy Father’s insistence that man has a moral duty to care for and be a
responsible steward of the environment. He notes that when we are environmentally
destructive quite often this is indicative of an inward chaos present in man and in the
greater culture as a whole. He states:

Today the subject of development is also closely related to the duties arising
from our relationship to the natural environment. The environment is God’s gift
to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor,
towards future generations, and towards humanity as a whole (#48).

Finally, Benedict underscores a point made repeatedly throughout Church history,
including Vatican Council I (Dei Filiius), and John Paul II’s encyclical Fides et Ratio,
that faith and reason are not opposed to each other but rather are fundamentally
complementary. He points out:

Fruitful dialogue between faith and reason cannot but render the work of charity
more effective within society (#57).

Thus we see that the Church is not opposed to reason, as her critics often charge (e.g. Dan
Brown), but rather throughout the history of the Catholic Church we have long supported
the legitimate achievements and successes that science, medicine, and reason have
brought. Popes Benedict XIV, Pius XII, Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI have
all, within their respective circumstances, underscored the complementary nature of both
faith and reason as “two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of
truth” (Fides et Ratio, #1).