The Principle of Rights and Responsibilities

The 10 second Summary:

What does the Church say about Rights and Responsibilities?

The protection of human dignity is the foundation upon which an understanding of rights and responsibilities rests. The human person, made in God’s image and likeness, is born into a community of relationships and is social by nature. Rights and responsibilities are seen as the demands of upholding and defending human dignity in the social, economic and political spheres.

Rights begin with the most fundamental of rights, the right to life and include the right to those things necessary for basic human survival. The responsibilities begin with responsibilities to one another, to one’s family and to the larger society.

What does the Catechism say?

“The faithful should distinguish carefully between the rights and the duties which they have as belonging to the Church and those which fall to them as members of the human society. They will strive to unite the two harmoniously, remembering that in every temporal affair they are to be guided by a Christian conscience, since no human activity, even of the temporal order, can be withdrawn from God’s dominion.”

“...the life of the community, both domestically and internationally, clearly demonstrates that respect for rights, and the guarantees that follow from them, are measures of the common good that serve to evaluate the relationship between justice and injustice, development and poverty, security and conflict.”

Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the United Nations, April 2008

How does this teaching on Rights connect with my life?

It provides:
- Principles for reflection;
- Criteria for judgment;
- Guidelines for action;
- Tools for conscience formation.

Where does this teaching on Rights come from?

- Biblical source: Scripture—rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament;
- Moral source: Tradition—the use of reason and reflection based on the Catholic tradition;
- Ecclesial source: Church teaching—expressed in the Popes’ Encyclicals, letters, Apostolic letters, Synod documents, Apostolic exhortations, and the Bishops’ pastoral letters, which respond to the issues of the day.

Education for JUSTICE
### Encyclicals and Rights

This chart highlights some of the historical developments, or "signs of the times" that caused the Church to take notice and respond to the call for rights.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What were the signs of the times?</th>
<th>Document &amp; Year</th>
<th>What was proposed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The inhumane treatment of workers as a result of the Industrial Revolution moved the Church to advocate for the rights of workers through labor unions, and support for the right to private property.</td>
<td>The Condition of Labor (Rerum Novarum) Pope Leo XIII 1891</td>
<td>Pope Leo XIII supports the rights of workers to form associations (unions) to provide safeguards from being exploited at the rise of the Industrial Revolution. The rights to private property and a just wage are asserted to ensure a worker's ability to reap the benefits of his/her labor. The Church stands with the worker and the poor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severe economic depression: world-wide and growing social injustice were making it clear that threats to human dignity could not be contained within political borders. Both capitalism and communism were seen as threats to rights of human beings.</td>
<td>The Reconstruction of the Social Order (Quadragesimo Anno) Pope Pius XI 1931</td>
<td>Pius XI focuses on the right to life, to the economic means of existence, to the right to work and an adequate pay marked out by God, the right of free association and the right to possess and use property.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severe gaps between the rich and the poor in the world were becoming evident and problematic for the realization of human dignity. The use or misuse of power was a significant reality.</td>
<td>Christianity and Social Progress (Mater et Magistra) Pope John XXIII 1961</td>
<td>The inequalities between rich and poor countries required analysis. Private property rights were confirmed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The growing threat of nuclear war was extremely problematic. The world was beginning to realize its capacity to destroy itself and that threat was choking off the development of peoples, particularly the poor.</td>
<td>Peace on Earth (Pacem in Terris) Pope John XXIII 1965</td>
<td>Assessed that the human person is entitled to civil, political, social and economic rights. “Universal” rights include the right to life and the right to bodily integrity, the right to food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care and education. This document is essentially the Church’s declaration of human rights.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Second Vatican Council was working with articulating a &quot;modern&quot; understanding of the role of the Church in the world. Ideological divisions in the world were a threat to human unity.</td>
<td>The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes) 1965</td>
<td>In the movement of Vatican II’s theology which included “a turn to the subject” as well as a turn towards the world, a growing awareness of the global interdependence of the human community resulted in an articulation of the importance of safeguarding every human person’s basic rights.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Church had until this point largely opposed the Enlightenment and brought about a separation of church and state. Prior to this document, the Church had never recognized the right to religious freedom.</td>
<td>The Declaration on Religious Freedom (Dignitatis Humanae) Pope John XXIII 1965</td>
<td>This landmark document addressed to the world at large and affirmed that religious freedom was the right of every human person. This was a dramatic shift from the Church’s previous position which held that those who persecuted other religious beliefs were in error, and error had no rights.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

3 For a complete analysis of these documents, see Modern Catholic Social Teaching, by Kenneth Himes, ed. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What were the signs of the times?</th>
<th>Document &amp; Year</th>
<th>What was proposed?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extreme poverty and global hunger</td>
<td>The Development of Peoples (Papal Encyclical) John Paul II 1967</td>
<td>The focus here was on the articulation of economic rights and the economic well-being of all persons recognizing we are mutually responsible for one another and the lives of the world’s rich are intertwined with the lives of the world’s poor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The devastating effects of urbanization were becoming widespread. Growing numbers of people, especially women and children, the elderly and handicapped were increasingly vulnerable to being ignored or exploited.</td>
<td>A Call to Action (General Assembly) United Nations 1971</td>
<td>A more theological vision of human dignity is presented here: Christian faith was in a unique position to spotlight the claim of the absolute truth and subjective claims in the quest for practical means of promoting human dignity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victims of war as exploitable forces of production were facing a threat to human dignity. The rise of technology and its displacement of the workforce was also a cause for genuine concern.</td>
<td>On Human Work (Laudato Si') John Paul II 1981</td>
<td>Restored the dignity of labor (people) over capital. The letter deals specifically with human dignity as present in and enhanced by work. The human being is the “subject” of work and must always be respected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The question of development has become even greater. The problem of development rises not only in economically undeveloped countries but also in economically developed areas as well.</td>
<td>On Social Justice (Sollicitudo Rei Socialis) John Paul II 1987</td>
<td>The significant contribution to the solution of human dignity lies in the development based on the concept of solidarity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The rise of debtor, the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe (1989), and global uncertainty and instability are creating great change and shifts of political and economic power.</td>
<td>One Hundred Years (Centenario Anniversario) John Paul II 1991</td>
<td>A rise of violence, alienation, and instability pose clear threats to human dignity. Here the call is renewed to take seriously the transcendent and social nature of human persons in order to protect human dignity.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Selected Quotes from Catholic Social Teaching on Rights and Responsibilities

There is a growing awareness of the sublime dignity of human persons, who stand above all things and whose rights and duties are universal and inviolable. They ought, therefore, to have ready access to all that is necessary for living a genuinely human life: for example, food, clothing, housing, the right freely to choose their state of life and set up a family, the right to education, work, to their good name, to respect, to proper knowledge, the right to act according to the dictates of conscience and to safeguard their privacy, and rightful freedom, including freedom of religion.

The Church in the Modern World, #26

It is no easy matter to define the relative rights and mutual duties of the rich and of the poor, of capital and of labor. And the danger lies in this, that crafty speculators are intent on making use of these differences of opinion to pervert men’s judgments and to stir up the people to sedition.

Return Novament #2

For, every man has by nature the right to possess property as his own. This is one of the chief points of distinction between man and the animal creation, for the brute has no power of self-direction, but is governed by two main instincts, which keep his powers on the alert, impel him to develop them in a fitting manner, and stimulate and determine him to action without any power of choice.

Rerum Novarum, #6

Beginning our discussion of the rights of man, we see that every man has the right to life, to bodily integrity, and to the means which are suitable for the proper development of life; these are primarily food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, and finally the necessary social services. Therefore a human being also has the right to security in cases of sickness, invalidity to work, widowerhood, old age, unemployment, or in any other case in which he is deprived of the means of subsistence through no fault of his own.

Pacem in Terris, #11

The natural rights with which we have been dealing are inseparably connected, in the very person who is their subject, with just as many respective duties; and rights as well as duties find their source, their sustenance and their inviolability in the natural law which grants or enjoins them.

Peace on Earth, #28

A well-ordered human society requires that men recognize and observe their mutual rights and duties. It also demands that each contribute generously to the establishment of a civic order in which rights and duties are more sincerely and effectively acknowledged and fulfilled.

Peace on Earth, #31

It is not enough, for example, to acknowledge and respect every man’s right to the means of subsistence if we do not strive to the best of our ability for a sufficient supply of what is necessary for his sustenance.

Peace on Earth, #32

The right to development must be seen as a dynamic interpretative of all those fundamental human rights upon which the aspirations of individuals and nations are based.

Justice in the World, #13

The Church’s social teaching rests on one basic principle: individual human beings are the foundation, the cause and the end of every social institution.

Mater et Magistra, #210

Education for Justice in a Democratic Society