Central Principles of Catholic Social Teaching

1. **Human Dignity** (L. *dignitas*: worthy). To have dignity means to be worthy of honor and respect; to be highly valued. All humans possess an intrinsic value or worth because they reflect the image of their Creator and are all called to share in God’s life together.

   The underlying theological anthropology (understanding of the human in light of an understanding of God) is that humans, like the God they image, are free and rational. Thus the principle of human dignity requires respect for the exercise of freedom and rationality.

   **Implications:**
   a) Human life is of infinite value and must be respected from conception to natural death. Abortion, euthanasia, and most capital punishment today fail to respect human dignity.
   b) There is a basic equality of dignity among humans. There must be a minimum level of social equality such that all humans can survive and develop their potential.
   c) All humans possess certain inalienable rights. John XXIII lists many of these rights in *Pacem in Terris*. Examples include the right to a worthy standard of living, to work, to association, to search for the truth, to worship God according to conscience, to basic education, and to share in the benefits and responsibilities of cultural life.

   **Criterion:** everything in the social realm is to be judged by whether it promotes or harms human dignity.

2. **Common Good** (common: shared + good: something that fulfills potential). The common good is the sum total of social conditions by which individuals and groups can achieve their own fulfillment in a relatively ready and thorough way.

   The underlying theological anthropology is that humans are created in the image of a God who is a community of persons united in the perfect love of Father/Mother, Son, and Holy Spirit. Humans are fundamentally social and interdependent. They are created for life with others and can become who they are created to be by developing and sharing their gifts in cooperation with others. Indeed, humans are saved in community, i.e., by incorporation into the communal Body of Christ. In contrast to modern individualism, God created the world such that the fullest good of the individual is in ultimate harmony with the good of society. Catholic teaching has treated the government as a privileged agent of the common good.

   **Solidarity** (Fr. *solide*: solid, whole, unified) is unity of feeling and action of a group. It recognizes our interdependence through an inner attitude of concern for the well being of others and external expressions of this concern.

   **Criteria:** a) each society is to be measured by how well it provides the conditions for the fulfillment of *all* of its members; b) each individual is to be judged by how well s/he contributes to the common good.

   **Note:** the remaining principles of CST specify the implications of the two core principles of human dignity and the common good.
3. **Right to Meaningful Participation** in social, political, and economic life. Humans, by virtue of their dignity and common good, have the right to a) share in the cultural benefits of a society; b) a meaningful say in the decisions that affect their lives; and c) work. This does not mean that everyone must decide everything.

**Criterion:** In light of what is workable and/or reasonable, does an organization provide meaningful opportunities for participation to those most directly affected?

4. **The Family is the Basic Foundation of Society.** The family is the “domestic church” because it mediates God’s kingdom and love to the individual. It also mediates the values and traditions of the wider society.

**Criterion:** The health of a society depends upon the health of its families and vice versa. We judge policies based upon whether they promote or harm the health of families.

5. **Subsidiarity.** (L. *sub*: under + *sedere*: to sit; *subsidium*: a reserve of troops, support, assistance). A central (and/or larger) authority should assist or supplement more local (and/or smaller) authorities and should perform only those tasks which cannot be performed more effectively at a more immediate or local level. “As small and local as possible, but big and global when necessary.” The principle assumes that the best institutions for responding to a social task are the ones closest to the task.

**Criteria** (cut in two directions): a) a presumption against direct involvement by larger scale institutions and in favor of smaller, local ones; and b) a necessary role of larger scale institutions to support smaller ones without absorbing or destroying them.

**Historical Context:** Pius XI first articulated this principle in his 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*. His concern was to guard against the dangers of totalitarianism (e.g., communism and Nazi fascism) or “overcentralization” by respecting the rightful autonomy of groups (including the family and labor groups). Pius XI envisioned a healthy society as a complex network of intermediate groups that mediate the relationship between the individual and the state (rather than one group with all of the power).

The current historical context of globalization (with its increasing interdependence and a shrinking world) may significantly alter the meaning of this principle as the local increasingly affects the global situation and vice versa.

6. **A Limited Right to Private Property & the Universal Destination of All Goods.** On the one hand, it is good for individuals to have the autonomy and opportunities that come from being entrusted with their own property. On the other hand, “the goods of the world are equally meant for all” (137). The common good is harmed when one person has more than s/he needs while others lack the basic necessities. The common good limits or conditions the right to private property. All resources are ultimately God’s and are entrusted to us for the good of all of God’s creation. John Paul II says that our property is under a “social mortgage.” This mortgage is permanent. One might say that there are really two overlapping forms of property ownership: private and common.
Aquinas is a primary source for this teaching. He argues that the right to private property does not “vest” or become a reality until everyone has enough to survive.

**Criterion:** Are goods used in a way that respects the good of all creation?

7. **The Priority of Labor over Capital.** (Capital: the means of production or the wealth used to produce more wealth). Workers and their work must always be treated as more important than profit or material goods. Work must serve the dignity of workers by allowing them to develop their potential.

   Justice or fair treatment of workers includes the right to a) work; b) a living wage; c) organize into labor unions; d) safe and humane working conditions; and e) some meaningful participation in the decisions that affect their work.

   **Criterion:** Are persons and their work treated as more important than things?

8. **Distributive Justice.** The global common good obliges all persons and groups (including nations) to distribute goods fairly throughout the world. They must do so through: a) immediate aid to those in need; and b) working for structural changes that establish a fairer distribution of goods and address the root causes of poverty.

   **Criterion:** Are goods distributed fairly?

9. **Peacemaking and Disarmament through Just War or Pacifism.** All persons and groups are called to be peacemakers and to disarm responsibly. Both the just war tradition and the pacifist tradition are options affirmed by CST. Vatican II affirmed that Catholic individuals have a right to be conscientious objectors to military service.

   **Criteria:** Are either of the following satisfied: a) just war criteria; b) the principles of nonviolent resistance to injustice and non-cooperation with evil.

10. **Option for the Poor and Vulnerable.** Like the triage system in an emergency room, the mission of the church and its members is first to serve those most in need and empower those who are most powerless in society. In 1979 the Latin American Bishops spoke of a “preferential option for the poor” as a way of referring to the priority we should give to those most in need. The underlying theology is twofold: a) Jesus reached out first and foremost to the poor; and b) we are all one body of humanity in Christ such that what affects one affects all.

    **Criterion:** The measure of a society is how well it treats its poorest and least powerful members.