

EXCELLENCE *in* TEACHING CONFERENCE

Making STEM a Force for Good

Primer on Catholic Social Teaching

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is addressed to all people of good will -- to all who desire a world characterized by greater equity and unity, and perfected in neighborly love. It expresses a perspective that recognizes the solemn, inherent dignity of every person and values their capacity for human flourishing as members of community, interdependent and bound together to a common destiny ([EFH.8](#)).

For the Christian faith tradition, these convictions are rooted in the scriptural witness of Jesus and informed by its tradition; these same convictions compel and animate “action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world” ([JW.6](#)). Together we are called to pursue *justice* and the *renewal of peace* in our societies, so that as a human family we together may build up a civilization characterized by love.

At the Notre Dame Center for STEM Education, we believe that the humanistic social vision of **CST** provides a common, unitive, and fruitful framework for educators -- across both public and private sectors -- that can advance *STEM education as a force for good in our world*.

- ***What is Catholic Social Teaching, and where does it come from?***

CST is a coherent collection of guidance regarding social interactions that has been offered by the Catholic faith tradition to all people of good will in the hope of building up a society worthy of the human person -- a civilization permeated by love ([CSD.58o](#)). **CST** draws from a *Catholic social tradition* that has continued developing over thousands of years of study and reflection on the human person, their relations in community, and their ultimate flourishing. This living history of *social thought* draws from the scriptural witness of Jesus, assimilates wisdom about the human person across cultures and times, consolidates understanding through dialogue and prayer, and etches itself in the subtle art of daily living of those ordinary saints among us.

CST is founded in the belief that each person is loved by God, has inherent and immeasurable worth, and has been created to be in relationship with others. Confronted with pressing social concerns over the last 130 years, papal encyclicals and other documents of the Catholic Church have applied these ideas to address distinct social issues. Beginning with Pope Leo XIII’s *Rerum novarum* (1891) on worker’s rights, the *documentary tradition of CST* includes an expansive set of writings. Other key areas that have been addressed include: economic life, the international community, the family, the environment, and peace-building. In a narrow sense, **CST** refers specifically to this 130-year documentary tradition of official teachings; in a broader sense, **CST** encompasses the entire vision of social thought that informs those documents.

- ***What are the CST principles, and why do lists of them differ?***

It has been the work of scholars, researchers, and task forces to distill *CST principles* from official writings of the Catholic Church ([SCST.4](#)). These principles -- other times called *CST themes* -- are meant to serve as guides for thinking about the many different dimensions of social life. Because the principles have been developed inductively, these lists vary in number and specificity. Nevertheless, all principles elaborate upon two foundational tenets: (1) the inherent dignity of each human person, and (2) the communal pursuit of the common good. All other themes of **CST** derive from the interplay of these two fundamental tenets.

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- ***Can you explain more about the CST principle of elevating the dignity of the individual?***



Every human person is precious and sacred; each person possesses **human dignity** that is inherent and indelible. It calls for an unconditioned respect for one another not based on individual merit or mutual benefit, but rather according to the belief that each person has immeasurable worth and is equally a member of the human family. This principle is the fundamental touchstone of all of CST, and it is the foundation for a just society.

In the Christian tradition, this conviction is based on the belief that each person is uniquely formed and loved by God. Created in God's image and likeness, human beings reflect the divine capacity for love, possessing a *human spirit* that has been made for relationship and is endowed with intellect and creativity. Human dignity does not need to be earned, and it cannot be lost or revoked, although it can fail to be recognized by others. The fundamental measure by which we should judge all social interactions and institutions is the extent to which they witness to, affirm, and elevate the sacred dignity of each human person.

- ***Can you elaborate further on the CST principle of promoting the common good?***



The human person is inherently social and is naturally embedded in networks and communities of other people. CST presents a *communitarian* perspective that emphasizes the communal aspect of our humanity. It maintains that each person is entrusted with *rights and responsibilities* to participate in their communities. Endowed with *human dignity*, each person possesses certain fundamental rights, among these the rights to life, food, shelter, health care, education, and work ([UN.13](#)); correspondingly, each person is also entrusted with responsibilities to ensure these rights for others. Together, we are one human family.

With this foundation, communities should be directed toward the **common good**; “common” because (1) it is contributed to by all and (2) its benefits flow back upon all. The *common good* is not an aggregate sum of individual goods, so it cannot be optimized by raising up some at the expense of others. Instead, the *common good* fosters equitable *justice* and a sense of *solidarity*, an understanding that each person's good is bound up in the good of others, including the most at-risk.

- ***How does CST have implications for STEM classrooms (and education more broadly)?***

CST provides a person-centered foundation for promoting social *justice* and advancing *equity*. Our schools and our classrooms are bustling communities wherein each student and each teacher is a unique and irreplaceable member. We can be deliberate about how our teaching practice can help cultivate a community that promotes the common good and consistently elevates the dignity of one another. These elements are likely present in some of our instructional practice; excellent! Yet there will surely be ways that we can improve our own instruction or imbue our curriculum, for instance by, [promoting more inclusive education](#) practices and dispositions within our classrooms. We believe the humanistic social vision of CST provides a helpful framework for educators as we work together to advance *STEM education as a force for good*.