

Social doctrine taught by the Church

-Bishop Timothy L. Doherty

Most of my recent columns address matters of spiritual interiority. This was deliberate because people wonder how to maintain a spiritual life in turbulent times. But I encourage an interior health as a complement to right social interactions. This is a “both-and” balance that best expresses our faith. Homilies and parish religious education efforts also address the balance.

During a time of accelerated change in our lives, there are values and virtues that guide us to good outcomes. Our tradition maintains that we can come to know the good, the true and the beautiful — that not everything is simply a matter of opinion, but that facts and right reason can help to “keep it real.”

The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church was published during the time of St. John Paul II. This document is available online and in print. It reflects his advancement of many of our social teachings which continue to develop.

Let me suggest three keys to apprehending our social doctrines. First, the teachings are based on core values but evolve over time in the context of monarchies or democracies, etc. Few are set in stone as the wording of a dogma might be.

Second, our social doctrine is a means of evangelization. That is, the mission is to bring people to Christ while guiding us to correct living. Central to these teachings is an understanding about who we are as human beings. The idea of who we are will direct how we act, and how we will judge the correctness of our actions. While the Scriptures help to shape our self-understanding, so does natural law. Natural law refers to guides to personal and social structures discoverable by human reason. Do not confuse this with “laws of nature.”

Third, the content of social doctrine is larger than one of its components which is social justice. It helps us to cast a wide net around what we see and how we judge before we act. Without an awareness of the doctrine, which should be taught at every level of Church life and ministry, many people start discussions at the “act” part. This is why there are many unproductive conversations about the death penalty, the minimum wage, just treatment of immigrants and refugees, and health care provision. Pick almost any social issue. When discussions start at the “back end,” we find people too quick to take out so-called liberal and conservative positions. For example, knowing the basis of our doctrines is necessary to keep communities from fracturing over inadequate interpretations of Luke’s Gospel, Chapter 4, verses 17 to 21. Is Jesus being liberal or conservative in his teaching here?

I include The Catholic Moment among the ministries that strive to balance teaching about spiritual interiority and social doctrine. It can’t be done by word count, but by presenting the right things at opportune moments. The balance is at the heart of our tradition. An obligation of reason, not an option.

If you want samples of topics covered in our Church’s social doctrine, you can read the 165-page analytical index in the print or online Compendium. Being a good person is work in itself.

Working for the common good of thousands and millions of people deserves our proportionate attention.