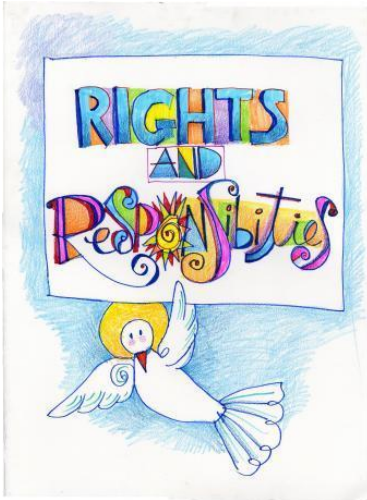




Rights and Responsibilities

Principle III

After a week of reflection on our new statues of Saints Louis and Zélie Martin, we return to our summer series on the seven principles of Catholic Social Teaching. We have looked at the principles that each person has dignity and our call to participate in family and society given that we are social creatures.

Principle three is about rights and responsibilities, which sounds pretty vague. The idea behind this principle is that not only do we have a right to life, but we have a right to a decent life or a certain quality of life (e.g., food, healthcare, housing, education, and employment).

Scripturally, Jesus gives the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31). The rich man, dressed in purple garments, dines sumptuously each day while a poor man named Lazarus lies by his door. The poor man's condition is highlighted by the fact that dogs came and licked his sores. Dogs always try to help. Unfortunately, the rich man did not.

We then learn about the reversal of fortunes in that after both died, the rich man is tormented, while Lazarus is comforted. In short, the rich man did not see Lazarus as his brother. Instead, he was simply an "other" or a nuisance.

St. John Paul II commented on this passage during his visit to the United States in 1979. Speaking at Yankee Stadium, he said, "We cannot stand idly by, enjoying our own riches and freedom, if, in any place, Lazarus of the twentieth century stands at our doors." There are many Lazarus' in our world who are hungry and often ignored.

The parable of Lazarus is a warning to anyone who lives as if the poor do not exist or are the problem of someone else (e.g., the State, their family, or their own fault). Francis Cardinal George once said, "The poor need you to draw them out of poverty, and you need the poor to keep you out of hell."

What do we mean by rights? A right is a justified claim. There are natural rights like a right to life. Natural rights belong to us because we are human beings. To violate them is an assault on human dignity. There are also created rights, which arise from some human interaction.

For example, you enter into a contract. You have a right to receive compensation from a product or service that you provide. Created rights may also arise from the nature of a relationship. Children have a right to receive food, clothing, and an education from their parents.

If someone possesses a right, then someone else has a duty to provide it. Hence, this principle is called "Rights and Responsibilities." The challenge, of course, is determining who has the responsibility of fulfilling the rights that others possess.

Additionally, once it is determined who will fulfill the right (e.g., the State), there may be legitimate disagreement *how* the right will be met. For example, people have a right to decent housing. How will this be fulfilled? There may be disagreement how to best provide housing for those with low income.

Furthermore, people also have a right to food. There will be disagreement how the poor receive food (e.g., from a food shelter, EBT cards, tax credits, etc.). The Church relies on the expertise and good will of competent lay people to help create and pass policies that will help people experience a decent livelihood.

On a personal level, you have a duty to help, as far as possible, those around you, those in our community, and even those we know struggling in distant places. We have a responsibility of seeing others as children of God, as brothers and sisters in Christ, and therefore, of doing our best to help them experience a quality human life. After taking his brother's life and being questioned by the Lord, Cain asked, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gn 4:9). Essentially, the Lord said, "Yes! You are!"

Do not be like the rich man who remained callous to the needs of Lazarus! There are Lazarus' all around you who cry out for your help. We must remember that they are God's children, the fruit of love, and created for love. They need your love, your support.

Jesus' calls you to be His hands and feet, to "slake Jesus' thirst" for love as Mother Teresa was so fond of saying. This humble servant of the Lord reminds us, "Let us touch the dying, the poor, the lonely and the unwanted according to the graces we have received and let us not be ashamed or slow to do the humble work." Indeed, may each of you do your part to serve Jesus in the poor with confidence and great love!

~St. Therese, pray for us!



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