

KEY SOCIAL JUSTICE DOCUMENTS **AN OVERVIEW**

The following is a chronological list of some important social justice documents of the Catholic Church.

1891 Leo XIII—*The Condition of Labour (Rerum Novarum)*: Emphasizes the role of the state to pass laws to preserve rights of workers, including the right to work and unionise, to a just wage and to own private property. Seminal document that begins century plus of forward-looking social teaching.

1931 Pius XI—*The Reconstruction of the Social Order (Quadragesimo Anno)*: Reaffirms *Rerum Novarum* on just wages and unions; critiques unbridled capitalism and communism; urges international economic cooperation; introduces the idea of subsidiarity.

1961 John XXIII—*Christianity and Social Progress (Mater et Magistra)*: Criticizes disparities between rich nations and poor nations; urges global interdependence; encourages worker participation and collective bargaining for modern industrial workers.

1963 John XXIII—*Peace on Earth (Pacem in Terris)*: Details basic human rights and corresponding responsibilities that flow from human dignity; decries arms race; stresses concept of the common good; addressed to Catholics and all people of good will.

1965 Vatican II—*Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*: Analyzes the modern world in light of human dignity; looks at the relationship between the Church and the world; treats issues of the family, society, politics, economics, and world peace.

1967 Paul VI—*The Development of Peoples (Populorum Progressio)*: Discusses relationship between development and peace; focuses on fair trade relationships to help underdeveloped nations; advocates a form of taxation of rich nations and international cooperation.

1971 Paul VI—*A Call to Action (Octogesima Adveniens)*: Treats the problems caused by modern urbanization; discusses discrimination; encourages political action and involvement.

1971 Synod of Bishops—*Justice in the World*: Defines justice as an essential ingredient of the gospel and the Church's mission; cites modern injustices, especially against the poor and powerless for whom the Church should speak in a special way; encourages the Church itself to be an exemplar of justice in the way it treats its own members.

1981 John Paul II—*On Human Work (Laborum Exercens)*: Develops a strong spirituality of work as it supports unions and workers' rights; reaffirms family life; criticizes both Marxism and capitalism.

1986 US Bishops—*Economic Justice for All*: Applies the Christian vision for economic life to the American economy; issues a challenge to re-examine the inequalities in income, consumption, power, and privilege and their impact on the poor.

1987 John Paul II—*On Social Concern (Sollicitudo Rei Socialis)*: Notes the obvious disparities in wealth between northern and southern hemispheres; critiques the West as succumbing to materialism and consumerism; critiques the moral bankruptcy of the East which ignores basic human rights; decries the arms race as an injustice to the poor; calls for refocusing of resources and cooperation for international development; highlights theme of preferential option for the poor.

1991 John Paul II—*Centesimus Annus (The One Hundredth Year)*: Written in the wake of the collapse of communism; celebrates the centenary of *Rerum Novarum*; examines strengths and weaknesses of various form of capitalism; reiterates themes of work, just wages, unemployment, profit, unions, atheism, family, etc.; explains how Church offers vision of human dignity rooted in Jesus who became one of us; underscores special option for the poor; critiques the abuses of consumerism as an excessive drain on the environment.

1995 John Paul II—*Evangelium Vitae (The Gospel of Life)*: Defends the most fundamental right we have: the right to life. Discusses the sources of this right and its implications. Treats very well the topics of abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, capital punishment, and other modern-day threats to human life.

The above synopsis focuses on major social justice documents. However, we could also add the Christmas messages of Pope Pius XII, Vatican II's Declaration on Religious Freedom, Paul VI's Evangelization in the Modern World, John Paul II's Redeemer of Humankind and Rich in Mercy, the American Bishops' pastoral letter The Challenge of Peace, statements from the Vatican's Peace and Justice Commission, key documents of other national and regional conferences of bishops, and the like.