

# Human Rights and Catholic Social Tradition

*Below, you will find quotes on human rights from popes over the past century. Most of these messages and addresses are not as well known in the body of Catholic social tradition (CST) as, say, the social encyclicals. However, these statements are powerful examples of how closely CST and human rights intersect. Reflection questions are included for discussion.*

## POPE FRANCIS

On the institutional level, indifference to others and to their dignity, their fundamental rights and their freedom, [...] can foster and even justify actions and policies which ultimately represent threats to peace. Indifference can even lead to justifying deplorable economic policies which breed injustice, division and violence for the sake of ensuring the wellbeing of individuals or nations. Not infrequently, economic and political projects aim at securing or maintaining power and wealth, even at the cost of trampling on the basic rights and needs of others. When people witness the denial of their elementary rights, such as the right to food, water, health care or employment, they are tempted to obtain them by force.

– Pope Francis, *World Day of Peace Message*, January 2015

There is a need for just laws which are centered on the human person, uphold fundamental rights and restore those rights when they have been violated. Such laws should also provide for the rehabilitation of victims, ensure their personal safety, and include effective means of enforcement which leave no room for corruption or impunity. The role of women in society must also be recognized, not least through initiatives in the sectors of culture and social communications.

– Pope Francis, *World Day of Peace Message*, January 2014

The common home of all men and women must continue to rise on the foundations of a right understanding of universal fraternity and respect for the sacredness of every human life, of every man and every woman, the poor, the elderly, children, the infirm, the unborn, the unemployed, the abandoned, those considered disposable because they are only considered as part of a statistic. This common home of all men and women must also be built on the understanding of a certain sacredness of created nature.

– Pope Francis, *Address to the United Nations*, September 2015



Our world demands of all government leaders a will which is effective, practical and constant, concrete steps and immediate measures for preserving and improving the natural environment and thus putting an end as quickly as possible to the phenomenon of social and economic exclusion, with its baneful consequences: human trafficking, the marketing of human organs and tissues, the sexual exploitation of boys and girls, slave labor, including prostitution, the drug and weapons trade, terrorism and international organized crime.

– Pope Francis, *Address to the United Nations*, September 2015

Government leaders must do everything possible to ensure that all can have the minimum spiritual and material means needed to live in dignity and to create and support a family, which is the primary cell of any social development. In practical terms, this absolute minimum has three names: lodging, labour, and land; and one spiritual name: spiritual freedom, which includes religious freedom, the right to education and all other civil rights.

– Pope Francis, *Address to the United Nations*, September 2015

## POPE BENEDICT XVI

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Human rights must include the right to religious freedom, understood at once (as) individual and communitarian. ... It is inconceivable, then, that believers should have to suppress a part of themselves – their faith – in order to be active citizens. It should never be necessary to deny God in order to enjoy one's rights.

– Pope Benedict XVI, *Address to the United Nations*, April 2008

The common good that human rights help to accomplish cannot, however, be attained merely by applying correct procedures, nor even less by achieving a balance between competing rights. The merit of the Universal Declaration is that it has enabled different cultures, juridical expressions and institutional models to converge around a fundamental nucleus of values, and hence of rights.

– Pope Benedict XVI, *Address to the United Nations*, April 2008

Since rights and the resulting duties follow naturally from human interaction, it is easy to forget that they are the fruit of a commonly held sense of justice built primarily upon solidarity among the members of society, and hence valid at all times and for all peoples.

– Pope Benedict XVI, *Address to the United Nations*, April 2008

The promotion of human rights remains the most effective strategy for eliminating inequalities between countries and social groups, and for increasing security.

– Pope Benedict XVI, *Address to the United Nations*, April 2008

Human rights, then, must be respected as an expression of justice, and not merely because they are enforceable through the will of the legislators.

– Pope Benedict XVI, *Address to the United Nations*, April 2008



Peace is based on respect for the rights of all. Conscious of this, the Church champions the fundamental rights of each person. In particular she promotes and defends respect for the life and the religious freedom of everyone.

– Pope Benedict XVI, *World Day of Peace Message*, January 2007

The duty to respect the dignity of each human being, in whose nature the image of the Creator is reflected, means in consequence that the person can not be disposed of at will. Those with greater political, technical, or economic power may not use that power to violate the rights of others who are less fortunate.

– Pope Benedict XVI, *World Day of Peace Message*, January 2007

## POPE JOHN PAUL II

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Consciences must be educated so that the unbearable violence weighing upon our brothers ceases once and for all, and so that all people mobilize to ensure that everyone's fundamental rights are respected.

– Pope John Paul II, *No Peace Without Respect for Human Rights*, May 2004

The material and spiritual well-being of humanity, the protection of the freedom and rights of the human person, selfless public service, closeness to concrete conditions: all of these take precedence over every political project and constitute a moral necessity which in itself is the best guarantee of peace within nations and peace between States.

– Pope John Paul II, *Address to the Diplomatic Corps*, January 2003

The Universal Declaration is clear: it acknowledges the rights which it proclaims but does not confer them, since they are inherent in the human person and in human dignity. Consequently, no one can legitimately deprive another person, whoever they may be, of these rights, since this would do violence to their nature.

– Pope John Paul II, *World Day of Peace Message*, January 1999

Defence of the universality and indivisibility of human rights is essential for the construction of a peaceful society and for the overall development of individuals, peoples and nations.

– Pope John Paul II, *World Day of Peace Message*, January 1999



## 1971 SYNOD OF BISHOPS

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Church has the right, indeed the duty, to proclaim justice on the social, national and international level, and to denounce instances of injustice, when the fundamental rights of people and their very salvation demand it.

– 1971 Synod, *Justice in the World*

Let recognition be given to the fact that international order is rooted in the inalienable rights and dignity of the human being. Let the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights be ratified by all Governments who have not yet adhered to it, and let it be fully observed by all.

– 1971 Synod, *Justice in the World*

## POPE PAUL VI

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In order that [the human person] may be guaranteed the right to life, to liberty, to equality, to culture, to the enjoyment of the benefits of civilization, to personal and social dignity, Peace is necessary: when Peace loses its equilibrium and efficiency, Human Rights become precarious and are compromised.

– Pope Paul VI, *World Day of Peace Message*, January 1969

Only in a climate of Peace can right be recognized, can justice advance, can freedom breathe. If, then, such is the meaning of Peace, if such is the value of Peace, then Peace is a duty.

– Pope Paul VI, *World Day of Peace Message*, January 1969

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How much did you know about the connection between Catholic social tradition and human rights before reading these statements? Are you surprised by anything you read? Explain.
2. Think of two human rights violations that your faith community, either locally or globally, has condemned and worked to end through advocacy and education. Share with the group.
3. What do you know about the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)? How do these SDGs uphold human rights and Catholic social tradition?
4. What were the signs of the times for each of these quotes? In other words, what was going on in the world when each pope gave his address or message? How have human rights violations remained the same or changed over the years?
5. What are the human rights violations happening in your own backyard? Think about the different institutions in your neighborhood or state that could be violating human dignity: business, government, education, etc.

