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## Chapter I

# Paradox and Catholic Social Teaching

### UNDERSTANDING

*(for your preparation as a leader)*

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### DISCUSSION

*(to use with your group)*

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UNDERSTANDING

# WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

*Main Thing:* The primary purpose of this Bible study is to introduce students Catholic Social Teaching in general and to two of its central principles: (1) the Universal Destination of Goods and (2) the Right to Private Property. This chapter will look closely at the following points:

- Catholic Social Teaching is the Church's thought on building a just society. It is paradoxical, radical, and does not allow compromise.
- The Universal Destination of Goods says that the whole of the world's resources are made to satisfy the whole of the world's needs. Scripture passages from Genesis and Leviticus will be used to discuss this principle.
- The Church recognizes a Right to Private Property. This right flows from our nature as free and rational creatures, but it is limited by the Universal Destination of Goods. The relationship between these two principles is not a compromise but a paradox.

*Leader Tip:* As will be the case in every chapter of this Bible study, we encourage those who wish to go deeper into the finer points of the teachings to consult the references in the footnotes as well as the

*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. For some, this study's content is sufficient to guide a fruitful conversation on the topic. For others, more depth and detail will be necessary. If your study falls in the latter group, we recommend purchasing a copy of the *Compendium* for further enrichment (though it can also be accessed online, as can the other Church documents mentioned in this study). The goal of this study is to provide simple outlines for conversation, along with references in source material to supplement those conversations, if desired. Thus, it is the responsibility of the leader to prepare and guide conversation at the appropriate level of depth for the members of their study. For your reference, the footnotes referring to Church documents throughout this study generally cite paragraph numbers (not page numbers), allowing for uniformity across editions.

### **Introduction: On Paradox, Compromise and Being Radical**

Spend a moment reflecting on the following three words: paradox, compromise and radical. The word *paradox* refers to something which appears contradictory, but which, in actuality, is not. A paradox is different from a contradiction: something which is paradoxical is not actually false, but only seemingly false. Consider this example: A good father must often do things which make his children cry. It may seem like such a father is not loving. After all, how could it be loving to make a child cry? Well, the reality is that sometimes love is tough. Sometimes fathers need to tell their children no, and sometimes doing so makes them cry. Thus, sometimes love is the sort of thing that makes people cry. It's a paradox, but it is true.

The first word, *paradox*, differs from the second word, *compromise*, and it's important that we understand the difference. Think about the example of the father with his children. It would be easy to interpret

his actions like this: “Sometimes fathers need to be loving, but sometimes fathers need to be tough. Good fathers should balance love and toughness. They should *compromise* between the two.” Is this interpretation correct? No! The problem with this interpretation is that it misunderstands love as compromise. The ultimate nature or true meaning of love is to pursue the good of another — that is, to love someone is to do what is best for them. For example, it is loving to take alcohol from an alcoholic, even though doing it might cause a lot of suffering. Therefore, the father in this situation is not compromising. In fact, exactly the opposite is the case. To love, really love, sometimes you need to be tough. The nature of love is paradoxical.

Authentic love brings us to our third word: radical. What does it mean to be radical? The Latin root of radical is *radix*, which means “root” or “origin.” Thus, to be radical means to live in accord with the “roots” or the true nature of things. It means to go back to the fundamentals, to understand the reasons behind the actions, and to live in accord with those reasons. Once again, a father who loves even when it is tough is not compromising. He is loving in truth. He knows the meaning of love, and he lives in accord with that meaning. He pursues the good of his children, even when it is painful. Paradoxically, in certain situations, to be loving is to be tough. For this reason, the father is not compromising. Rather, it would be more appropriate to say that the father is radical — that the father loves his children with a radical love.

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is difficult. Why? Because it is paradoxical. It does not allow compromise. And it challenges us to love radically. CST is paradoxical because it often encourages us to believe two things which seem to be in contradiction, but which, in actuality, are entirely consistent. When it comes to social justice, the world is full of people who choose to fight for one good cause at

the detriment of another. Unfortunately, such an approach usually makes the world worse, not better. In many cases, the Church asks us: “Do you have the courage to fight for your cause without sacrificing another?” Do you, for example, have the courage to fight for the poor and the unborn? Do you have the grit to protect the planet without sacrificing the sexual dignity? Do you have the tenacity to fight corrupt people without conceding to an unjust form of government? Do you have the wisdom to fight for global justice without destroying local community? These questions pose a challenge to love radically. Catholic Social Teaching is difficult because love is difficult.

This Bible study will examine the principles of Catholic Social Teaching. Before we launch into our first principle, there is one caveat. Catholic Social Teaching is the Church’s thought on building a just society. The principles of CST are important for our political decisions and actions. That said, they rarely require a specific political position. In most cases, the Church will define things at the level of principle but leave the application of that principle to the minds and hearts of individual believers. For example, the Church has said on many occasions that true Christians must have a deep respect for the ecological protection of our planet. Thus, in a certain sense, obedient Catholics are required to promote the dignity of creation. Thus, *as a principle*, Catholics must believe in the protection of the environment, and radically so. Nevertheless, it is perfectly acceptable for Catholics to disagree concerning the particulars of the application of this principle. For example, some Catholics may think it best to cultivate a greener planet through wind energy while others prefer solar. Both positions are acceptable, and neither is required by the Church. What is required is a radical commitment to the principle that God’s creation ought to be stewarded with care.

Finally, it may be common for Catholics involved with the New

Evangelization to wonder why FOCUS might need a Bible study on Catholic Social Teaching. There are many reasons motivating the importance of this study, all of which will become apparent as the study unfolds. That said, it was Pope John Paul II himself who insisted on the importance of the Church's social teaching when he said, "The 'new evangelization,' which the modern world urgently needs and which I have emphasized many times, must include among its essential elements a proclamation of the Church's social doctrine."<sup>1</sup>

### **The Universal Destination of Goods**

At its core, one might conceive of the debates between communists and capitalists as motivated by a simple question: To whom do the goods of the earth belong, to the individual or the common? Catholic Social Teaching gives a paradoxical answer: "Yes." This answer is clear from the Catholic Church's simultaneous affirmation of two principles: the Universal Destination of Goods and the Right to Private Property. You may have never heard of these principles, but understanding them is key to understanding Catholic Social Teaching. Our journey toward a deeper appreciation of them will begin in Genesis and move to Leviticus. Let's begin by reading a couple passages from the creation narratives in Genesis:

*"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters."<sup>2</sup>*

*"And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, a sixth day."<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Pope Saint John Paul II. *Centessimus Annus*. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 1:1

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 1:31

The Vatican begins its summary of CST with a reflection on the *gratuity* of creation and human existence.<sup>4</sup> What does “gratuity” mean, and what does it have to do with Genesis? Something is gratuitous if it is done without charge or payment. It’s like a donation or a gift. Before we go any further with Catholic Social Teaching, we must consider something very basic, but nevertheless very profound: Creation itself is gratuitous. Consider the passage from Genesis: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Before God’s creative act, there was only the void (or nothingness). Were it not for the creative power of God, neither you nor the universe itself would exist at all! All creation is gift!

Stop for a moment and think about the implications of the gratuitousness of creation. Human beings are often self-righteous and selfish. For example, it’s very common for a hard-working person to think that they deserve wealth, saying, “I worked hard, I deserve to be rich!” While the Church does not deny the importance of hard work and just reward, she encourages every person to keep God’s gratuity in mind. Even the hardest-working person has received their very existence from God. All of us are the beneficiaries not only of the creative act of God, but also of the sacrifice of the generations that have gone before us. For example, if we own and operate a computer, we benefit from the technological advancement of previous generations. If we live in a stable country, we are the beneficiaries of the sacrifice of millions of talented men and women who have fought to keep our borders safe. If we have a college education, we are reaping the rewards of centuries of scholars who have contributed to human patrimony. Human beings are utterly dependent on the work of prior generations in such a way that they could never repay the enormity of the gifts they have received. Life itself is gratuitous. To be human is to

<sup>4</sup> For additional Scripture references and a beautiful treatment of gratuity in Catholic Social Teaching, see paragraphs 20-27 of the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*.

live and breathe in the gifts which God and other people have freely given. The balances are always stacked against us; none of us could ever repay even a fraction of what we have received.

The Old Testament prophets had a strong sense of God's gratuitous action. They realized that human beings tend to be selfish, so they specifically enacted rules to keep people from falling to their selfish inclinations. Consider the following from the book of Deuteronomy:

*"At the end of every seven years you shall grant a release. And this is the manner of the release: every creditor shall release what he has lent to his neighbor; he shall not exact it of his neighbor, his brother, because the Lord's release has been proclaimed."<sup>5</sup>*

While the practice of the "Sabbatical Year," as it was called amongst the ancient Jews, is not taught by the Catholic Church, this ancient practice offers an important lesson. As humans, our desires are insatiable, and we tend to consume and amass as much wealth as we can get our hands on. Our selfish tendencies contradict God's gratuity, who made the universe not just for us but for the entire human race! The Catholic Church calls this the *Universal Destination of Goods*, which says that, "God destined the earth and all it contains for all men and all people."<sup>6</sup> We can understand a lot about the Universal Destination of Goods simply by looking at the name; in the end, all the goods of creation have the same, universal destination. That destination is the satisfaction of the whole of the world's genuine needs. If anyone in humanity uses the goods of the world in a wasteful way, they are violating the gift which God intended for the whole human race. In this sense, the whole of creation is the possession of the entirety of

<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 15. These laws are also found in Leviticus 25 and Exodus 23.

<sup>6</sup> For a fuller treatment of the origin and meaning of the Universal Destination of Goods, please refer to the *Compendium*, particularly paragraphs 171 – 181.



the human race. The earth was not made for the satisfaction of a few; it was made for the satisfaction of all.

## **The Right to Private Property**

*The Universal Destination of Goods* says that the whole of creation is given to satisfy the whole of the world's needs. Some people might interpret this principle to say that the Church teaches communism, but nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, the Church has explicitly condemned communism on various occasions.<sup>7</sup> Instead, the Church takes the paradoxical position of believing not only in the Universal Destination of Goods, but also the Right to Private Property. How could the Church believe in both of these things? Well, let's first take a look at the Church's reasoning on private property. For context, let's once again return to Genesis. After creating the heavens and the earth, God created humanity:

*"God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and God said to them: Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that crawl on the earth. God also said: See, I give you every seed-bearing plant on all the earth and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit on it to be your food; and to all the wild animals, all the birds of the air, and all the living creatures that crawl on the earth, I give all the green plants for food. And so it happened."*<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Here, it is important to note that the promulgation of *Rerum Novarum*, a document which many view as the beginning of the Church's writings on social teaching, was motivated in large part by a desire to condemn the ills of communism and socialism. These condemnations are explicit throughout the encyclical. For anyone interested in understanding the Church's position on social doctrine, economics and/or politics as it pertains to economics, *Rerum Novarum* is a must-read.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 1:27 – 30.

The Church draws so much theology from Genesis, so you have probably heard these passages many times. When it comes to private property, two elements of this passage are most important: one, the *Imago Dei*, or God's creation of Adam and Eve in his image; and two, God's giving of creation to Adam and Eve. What do these have to do with private property?

To be created in God's image and likeness is to be created both free and rational — but freedom and rationality are difficult to exercise without some basic possessions. For example, most people would agree that a free person should be allowed to use one's mind to provide for oneself and one's family. When people lack basic goods like food and shelter, they lack the freedom to do something which is fundamentally human (e.g., a person is not free to fix their home if they don't own a hammer). Basic freedom requires ownership of basic goods. When the Church upholds the right to private property, she is not merely upholding a person's right to own things; she is upholding a view of humanity in which the human person is both free and rational. It is for this reason that the Church has always condemned communism.

With this understanding of private property, we are now in a better position to understand the relationship between the Right to Private Property and the Universal Destination of Goods. Recall that the Universal Destination of Goods says that the whole of the world's goods is given to satisfy the whole of the world's needs. The ability to exercise one's freedom and rationality is a basic human need. This applies not only to food and shelter, but also to the development of one's human capacities. Thus, human beings not only need food, water, shelter and other such corporeal necessities. Human beings, if they are to live in a dignified way, ought to own the basic goods necessary to exercise and develop their freedom and rationality. In

this way, ownership of private property is among those things listed as basic needs. And in this way, the paradox is resolved. There is both a Universal Destination of Goods and a Right to Private Property because private property is among humanity's basic needs. Just like a father's love sometimes requires the father to be tough, the satisfaction of the world's needs requires the ownership of basic goods.<sup>9</sup>

This is just one example of the Church's belief in two things which seem to contradict one another, but which are in fact entirely consistent: the Universal Destination of Goods and the Right to Private Property. That said, the Church does not allow for an unlimited right to private property, through which the greedy ownership of some precludes the basic needs of others. For the Church, the Right to Private Property is limited by the Universal Destination of Goods. Thus, it is unjust for some to own so much that their greed keeps others from things like food, shelter, healthcare and education. Unfortunately, in contemporary consumerist culture, we often own so many things that we keep others from owning the things that they need. Further, it is all too common for those of us in wealthy countries to become slaves to our possessions, handing over our souls to the American rat race. This is a tragedy, and it flies in the face of Catholic Social Teaching. Private property is meant to expand man's freedom, not diminish it. We who live in wealthy countries must always be wary of our seemingly insatiable desires to own more stuff. With every trip to the store, we should ask ourselves: "Does this purchase make me free, or does it make me a slave?"

<sup>9</sup> The interconnected nature of Private Property and the Universal Destination of Goods is further explained in paragraph 177 of the *Compendium*: "Private property, in fact, regardless of the concrete forms of the regulations and juridical norms relative to it, is in its essence only an instrument for respecting the principle of the universal destination of goods; in the final analysis, therefore, it is not an end but a means". Thus, in the final analysis, the right to private property is subservient to meeting the genuine needs of the entire human population.

DISCUSSION

# DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

*Note for Leaders: For additional preparation, please seek further understanding from the Vatican's Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church. For this chapter, leaders are encouraged to consult paragraphs 160 – 184.*

## Section 1: Contradiction, Paradox and Radicality

*Note to leader: please read aloud.*

As we dive into our conversation about Catholic Social Teaching, we are going to begin our discussion with a conversation about three words: contradiction, paradox, and radical. The relationship between these words is very important.

1. What is a contradiction?

*Response: A contradiction involves two statements which negate each other. Both of them cannot be true. At least one must be false.*

2. What is a paradox?

*Response: A paradox involves two statements which seem to contradict one another, but which in actuality do not.*

3. What does it mean to be radical?

*Response: See above explanation of the word radical involving the Latin root radix.*

4. Do you feel like you understand the differences between these three words?

*Response: Discuss.*

*Note to leader: Please read aloud.*

Catholic Social Thought is the Church's teaching about how to build a just society. It provides us with a set of principles which are designed to help us change the world for the better.

5. Considering what we know about the word "radical," why do you think Catholic Social Teaching is sometimes described in this way?

*Response: Catholic Social Thought is a call to get back to the root (radix) of things. It's a call to return to the way things were created to be. Oftentimes the principles of CST seem contradictory when in fact they are paradoxical. This presents a temptation to choose to believe in some teachings and not others. The faithful Catholic believes in all the Church's teachings, seeing paradoxes in place of contradictions.*

## Section 2: The Universal Destination of Goods

*Note to leader: Please read aloud.*

Next, we're going to look at two Scripture passages.

**(Read Genesis 1:1.)**

**(Read Genesis 1:31.)**

6. What do these verses have to with Catholic Social Teaching and how to build the kingdom of God?

*Response: Allow students to discuss. Emphasize the gift of creation and God's generosity.*

7. Does anyone know what the word "gratuity" means?

*Response: Something is gratuitous if it is done without charge or payment. It's like a donation or a gift. At the beginning of their discussion of Catholic Social Teaching, the bishops are encouraging us to consider something basic, but nevertheless profound. Creation itself is gratuitous. Consider the passage from Genesis: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Before God's creative act, there was only the void (or nothingness). Were it not for the creative power of God, neither you nor the universe itself would exist at all! All creation is gift! If we are to change the world for the better, we must begin by understanding the world itself is a gift! It was given to us! We did not make it!*

8. Do you appreciate the gratuity of creation? Do you view creation, including your own life, as gratuitous?

*Response: Discuss. Here it may be helpful to bring up the following examples: national security, technological advance, academia (scholastic patrimony). In all instances, college students are the beneficiaries of people whom they could never repay. As for national security, anyone living in a safe country is benefitting from a sacrifice of those who gave their very lives (a gift which can never be repaid). As for technological advance, any college student who regularly uses technology is benefitting from the cumulative results of thousands of years of work (again, this is a gift which can never be repaid). As for academia and scholastic patrimony, the university system itself is a sort of philanthropy on which students are the beneficiaries of hundreds of years of academic development. In all three cases, the fruits of previous generations are given in a manner that can never be repaid.*

9. The first principle of Catholic Social Thought is called the "Universal Destination of Goods." The Universal Destination of Goods says that creation is given to meet the needs of all of humanity. Creation is for everyone, not just the rich. What does gratuity have to do with the Universal Destination of Goods?

*Response: Once someone recognizes the gratuitous nature of creation, it is much more difficult to selfishly amass wealth. All of creation is a gift, and none of us has an unlimited right to wealth and possessions.*

10. Do you personally seek to bring about the Universal Destination of Goods? In other words, are you seeking to meet the basic needs of those who have less than you?

*Response: Discuss.*

### Section 3: The Right to Private Property

*Note to leader: Please read aloud.*

The Universal Destination of Good might make it seem like the Church believes in communism, or the belief that all property should be owned by the common group. However, this is not the case. The Church also believes in the right to private property. Let's look at a passage from Scripture to begin our discussion of private property.

**(Read Genesis 1:27-30.)**

11. *What do you think this passage has to do with the right to private property?*

*Response: The Church has always understand the "dominion" given to Adam to mean that Adam was given ownership.*

12. *The Church teaches that human beings are both rational and free. What do these qualities have to do with the Right to Private Property?*

*Response: Private Property is a natural extension of man's rationality and freedom. Think about it. Human beings are called to do things like start families, build homes, and provide for those families. They are called to do these things in a way that respects freedom and rationality. Like Adam, they are called to have dominion over creation. But a person without any property is not really free. Abject poverty is prison which keeps people from living fulfilled human lives. That is, they are not really capable of doing these basic human things. Without some property, human beings are not free to fulfill their humanity by doing basic human things in a dignified way.*



13. *How is it possible for the Church to believe in both the Universal Destination of Goods and the Right to Private Property? Is this a paradox or a contradiction?*

*Response: See discussion in the application section of the Leader Guide. Remember, the ownership of basic goods is a human need.*

14. *It has often been said that the world contains enough to satisfy the whole of the world's need but not enough to satisfy the whole of the world's greed. What might this statement have to do with the relationship between the Right to Private Property and the Universal Destination of Goods?*

*Response: Paradoxically, the Church believes in both the Right to Private Property and the Universal Destination of Goods, but the Right to Private Property is not unlimited. People are encouraged to own private property in such a way that contributes to the Universal Destination of Goods; anything else is greed.*

15. *Do you think your own property corresponds to the way in which the Church sees property?*

*Response: Discuss.*

16. *Do you own any possessions which make you less, not more, free? Would it be best for you to rid yourself of such possessions? If the answer is yes, can you do so by the next study session?*

*Response: Discuss.*

