

LEADER



THE HIDDEN TREASURES OF CHRISTMAS

A Retreat Guide for Advent

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Produced by Coronation
CoronationMedia.com



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INTRODUCTION

THE HIDDEN TREASURES OF CHRISTMAS

RETREAT OVERVIEW

Advent and Christmas time are always busy, busy, busy. They come and go so quickly, and when the New Year arrives, we always feel like we should have lived them better; we should have given more time and effort to the simple things, the spiritual things, the real meaning of these important liturgical seasons. This Advent Retreat Guide, *The Hidden Treasures of Christmas*, won't solve that problem completely, but it will surely help.

The hidden treasures of the Christmas season are the rich liturgical celebrations that happen during the weeks following Christmas itself. Those twelve days are packed with ancient, inspiring liturgical memorials, but because of the busyness and fullness of the season, we almost never allow ourselves to enjoy them.

So why not use Advent as a time to look ahead, liturgically speaking, to savor some of those liturgical feasts that the Holy Spirit has placed, so to speak, under the Christmas tree? Each of them gives us a fresh and uplifting take on the great mystery of salvation linked to Christ's birth. Reflecting on them before Christmas arrives will help us enter into spiritual atmosphere of Advent.

- In the first meditation, we will contemplate the dramatic lives of two saints whose feast days are celebrated during the Christmas season: St. Stephen and St. Thomas Becket.
- In the second meditation, we will contemplate the two feasts that turn our minds to the perennial Christmas value of family life: the Holy Innocents, and the Holy Family.
- And in the conference, we will turn our attention to the Christian vision of how to organize human society for peace and prosperity—a vision linked to the Catholic way of celebrating New Year's Day, which the Church recognizes as the World Day of Peace, as well as the liturgical memorial of Mary, the Mother of God.

Let's begin by opening our souls to God, and humbly asking him, in the quiet of our hearts, for the grace to live this Advent better than ever, by savoring the hidden treasures of Christmas.

NOTES



FIRST MEDITATION

ALL FOR THE KINGDOM

INTRODUCTION

The day after Christmas is St. Stephen's Day. St. Stephen was the first Christian martyr. We are all familiar with his story, which is told in the Acts of the Apostles, Chapters 6 and 7.

ST. STEPHEN'S GLORIOUS CROWN

Stephen was one of the first seven deacons ordained by the Apostles. The Bible describes him, before his martyrdom, as being "filled with grace and power" and "working great wonders and signs among the people" (Acts 6:8). He was spreading the Christian faith in Jerusalem so effectively, that some of the synagogue leaders ganged up on him, to try and put a stop to his conversions. At first they tried to beat his arguments, but they couldn't. So then they falsely accused him of blasphemy and put him on trial in front of the Sanhedrin, just as they had done with Jesus. Stephen gave a long speech in his defense, where he showed how Jesus really was the fulfillment of the prophecies and the divine Messiah, and the Sanhedrin should not have put him to death.

His speech infuriated the court, and Stephen was condemned and dragged out of the city, where he was stoned to death. As he died, he had a vision of Jesus in heaven, and with his dying breath he forgave his murderers and prayed that God would have mercy on them.


THE OTHER SIDE OF CHRISTMAS

It really is a dramatic story, and it set the pattern for Christian martyrdom throughout the history of the Church, even up to our own day. But what does this story have to do with Christmas? Why does St. Stephen's Day come right after Christmas in the Church's liturgical calendar?

At first, it may seem random. But when we scratch beneath the surface, we find a moving and profound meaning in this connection. On Christmas day, what are we celebrating if not the entrance of our divine King into our exile here in this fallen world? And on St. Stephen's Day, what are we celebrating if not the exit of the first Christian soldier

from this world's exile and his entrance into the divine King's palace?

The whole reason that Christ became a man was to lead us to heaven. And so, the Church gives us these celebrations back-to-back: the Savior bursts asunder the darkness of sin by being born in Bethlehem, and then the very next day, liturgically speaking, a redeemed sinner bursts out of the darkness of this fallen world into the brightness of eternal glory. In the martyrdom of St. Stephen, the famous beginning of St. John's Gospel comes true:

 *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*

—John 1:5

A CROWN FOR EVERY CHRISTIAN

St. Stephen's fidelity to Christ up to death inspires us. But perhaps what is even more inspiring is how he followed Christ's example of forgiving his murderers. In doing that, he bore true witness to the power of the gospel to renew a fallen humanity, and truly earned his martyr's crown (the Greek word for "Stephen," by the way, means just that—crown).

The glory of Jesus being born in Bethlehem to set us free from our sins shines out brightly in St. Stephen's birth into heaven, celebrated on the day after Christmas. By following his example of courage, faithfulness, and forgiveness, even in the face of a hostile, anti-Christian world that is always trying to break us down, we will also follow him into heavenly glory.

ST. THOMAS BECKET'S RISE AND FALL

Just a few days after St. Stephen's Day, the liturgy turns our attention to another dramatic martyrdom, that of St. Thomas Becket, who entered heavenly glory in 1172.

Thomas grew up in London, was educated in the Cathedral there, and was ordained a deacon as a young man. He was brilliant, energetic, and well rounded. The prelates made valuable use of him as a diplomat, and he soon acquired a reputation for organization, effectiveness, and political problem solving. Such men are rare. King Henry II of



England knew it, and snatched him up, befriending him and appointing him Chancellor of the Realm (kind of like Prime Minister) before the future saint was 40 years old.

When the Archbishopric of Canterbury opened up, the King wanted Thomas appointed to it. Thomas resisted, however, because he knew that relations between the Church and the King were strained, and he didn't want to have to enter into conflict with his royal friend. But Henry wouldn't listen to his warnings, and so Thomas was made Archbishop.

A CONFLICT BETWEEN TWO KINGDOMS

After a brief period of calm, the anticipated antagonisms ensued. The King wanted to take measures that would put the Church, its influence, and its wealth wholly at the service of the state, and Thomas, correctly, refused to let that happen. They appealed to the Pope, Becket was exiled, the King of France was drawn into the fray, and all of Europe followed the developments with rapt attention.

At one point there seemed to be a rapprochement, but it turned out to be only superficial. Thomas firmly defended the spiritual autonomy of the Church, and the King constantly tried to compromise it—he didn't want any authority at all to be outside the reach of his royal scepter.

Finally, in a fit of rage, the King exclaimed that any loyal subject of England would not tolerate the presence of such a cleric. Four knights heard the words and rashly interpreted it as an order to have the archbishop murdered, which they brutally did in the afternoon of December 29th, while Becket was entering his Cathedral to celebrate vespers. They felled him right below the sanctuary, split open his head and scattered his brains on the holy pavement. The crime sent shock waves across Europe, and the slain Archbishop was immediately hailed as a martyr. Soon thereafter, King Henry II repented and did public penance, and the dignity and spiritual autonomy of the Church was vindicated.

CHRISTMAS WITH BECKET

At first glance, this liturgical memorial too may seem linked to Christmas only coincidentally. But once again, if we scratch just a little beneath the surface, we actually find a profound connection.

When Jesus came to earth to be our Savior, he also came to establish an everlasting Kingdom, a Kingdom that would begin its existence here on earth, through the Church, but

that would never be subject to merely earthly powers. And yet, throughout the history of this Church, earthly powers, reluctant to acknowledge obedience to any authority but their own, have consistently tried to absorb Christ's Kingdom, to make God and the Church obey them, so they won't have to obey God.

From his manger in Bethlehem, the newborn and everlasting King of the universe showed us how he would deal with those powers that try to resist his Kingship. He showed that he would always invite people to enter his Kingdom out of faith and love, not out of force—after all, how could a little baby force anyone to do anything?

In the history of the Church, martyrs like St. Thomas Becket have proven, over and over again, that the transforming power of this Christian faith and love is actually stronger than any earthly sovereign, than any earthly force. And it's a power that each of us can draw on as we, like all the saints before us, struggle to live faithful lives in this sinful world, because it dwells in the heart of everyone who believes in the message of Christmas.

CONCLUSION: CONTEMPLATING THE MARTYRS OF CHRISTMAS

This Advent, as we strive to make more room for God in our busy lives so that his kingship can bring peace and security to every corner of our souls and societies, we should spend some time contemplating the examples of St. Stephen and St. Thomas Becket, which the liturgy has placed underneath the Church's Christmas tree. Let's take a few quiet minutes right now to get started. The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION/GROUP DISCUSSION

1. When have I experienced most dramatically the clash between the demands of my Christian faith and the influences of the fallen world around me? How did I react? Why?
2. Stephen and Thomas Becket are saints not only because they gave up their lives, but because they gave up their lives doing what God was asking of them—they let Jesus be their king. What is God asking of me right now, in this season of my life? How can I respond generously to him during this Advent?



3. Part of the spirituality of Advent touches on Christ's promise to come again at the end of history to bring a definitive end to the power of evil in the world. How often do I think about Jesus' second coming? How often should I think of it? How does this truth of our faith make me feel, and how does it affect my daily life? How should it affect my daily life?

THREE QUOTATIONS TO HELP YOUR MEDITATION

Now there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were struck with great fear. The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

—Luke 2:8–14
NABRE

We too are invited by the angel of God, through the message of the Gospel, to set out in our hearts to see the child lying in the manger. God's sign is simplicity. God's sign is the baby. God's sign is that he makes himself small for us. This is how he reigns. He does not come with power and outward splendor. He comes as a baby—defenseless and in need of our help. He does not want to overwhelm us with his strength. He takes away our fear of his greatness. He asks for our love: so he makes himself a child. He wants nothing other from us than our love, through which we spontaneously learn to enter into his feelings, his thoughts and his will—we learn to live with him and to practice with him that humility of renunciation that belongs to the very essence of love. God made himself small so that we could understand him, welcome him, and love him.

—Pope Benedict XVI
Midnight Mass Homily
24 December 2006

... Although martyrdom represents the high point of the witness to moral truth, and one to which relatively few people are called, there is nonetheless a consistent witness which all Christians must daily be ready to make, even at the cost of suffering and grave sacrifice. Indeed, faced with the many difficulties which fidelity to the moral order can demand, even in the most ordinary circumstances, the Christian is called, with the grace of God invoked in prayer, to a sometimes heroic commitment. In this he or she is sustained by the virtue of fortitude, whereby—as Gregory the Great teaches—one can actually "love the difficulties of this world for the sake of eternal rewards."

—St. John Paul III
Veritatis Splendor, 93

NOTES



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SECOND MEDITATION

CHRISTMAS UNDER THE RADAR

INTRODUCTION

When we think about celebrating Christmas, it's impossible not to think about family get-togethers. The Christmas season has always been considered a special opportunity for families to get-together. School stops, work slows down, and cousins, aunts, and grandparents all get a chance to sit down by the fire and drink eggnog together.


Certainly, Christmas is much more than just an excuse for family gatherings, but family gatherings do seem to be particularly appropriate during the Christmas season. The Church recognizes this and affirms it in the liturgy, with two celebrations that occur during the Christmas octave—the first eight days after Christmas: The feast of the Holy Family, and the feast of the Holy Innocents.

The first Sunday that falls within the Christmas octave provides the liturgy with the feast of the Holy Family. It's a chance for us to contemplate a strange fact. When God became man, he did so through entering a family. He didn't have to—after all, the first Adam was formed directly out of the dust of the earth; the second Adam, Jesus, could have been formed in the same way. But he wasn't. He had a mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary; he had a foster father, St. Joseph; he had cousins and other relatives, referred to with biblical language as brothers and sisters. And, maybe what's most surprising of all, he lived on earth for 33 years, and 30 of them—that's 91% of his time in this world—was spent following the ordinary, unglamorous, undramatic lifestyle of a working class family in a small town. That's what his life in Nazareth was, a hidden life out of the spotlight, full of the normal concerns and activities of any small town, working class family.

Why would God choose to live that way for 30 years? It's pretty obvious, really. He wanted to send us a message. What's really important in life isn't glamor or fame or worldly success. Rather, it's the protecting and extending the circle of love that's the lifeblood of every family. As human beings, we find lasting fulfillment and meaning in living out our vocation to image God in this world, and that means, in the first place, living the self-forgetful, faithful kind of love that family life is built on.

The Blessed Virgin Mary is the holiest saint the Church has ever had, and St. Joseph is not far behind. And yet, how many books did they write? How many hospitals did

they found? How many speeches did they give? How many trophies did they win? How big was their bank account? The thirty years during which Jesus lived with them in Nazareth shows us clearly that all those things, good as they may be in certain cases, are secondary. What's primary is the mutual self-giving that's at the heart of family life. That's where we image the Trinity, first and foremost. That's why St. John Paul II could write:

 *The divine mystery of the Incarnation of the Word thus has an intimate connection with the human family. Not only with one family, that of Nazareth, but in some way with every family ... the Church considers serving the family to be one of her essential duties. In this sense both man and the family constitute "the way of the Church."*

—St. John Paul II,
Letter to Families, 2

As followers of Jesus, who dedicated the vast majority of his time on earth to the simple joys and duties of family life, we need to continually reflect on our life-priorities, on where we think we will find happiness. The example of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, who found the secret to a meaningful life by fulfilling God's will in such a simple way, should give us courage to focus on the essentials and not be distracted by the false promises of a post-Christian culture.

CHRISTMAS TEARS

But it's not always easy to do this. Have you noticed that? Family life is hard. This is equally true for families with spouses and children as it is for spiritual families of consecrated men and women living in communities. Family life has its joys, but it also has its challenges. And that's part of the message contained in the liturgical feast of the Holy Innocents, which occurs every year on December 28th.

This memorial calls to mind the horrendous murder of all the young babies in Bethlehem soon after the birth of Jesus. It was king Herod's attempt to destroy the Messiah, whose birth, so he thought, was a threat to the earthly kingdom that he had spent his life consolidating. The wise men from the east had come to Jerusalem and



announced that they had seen heavenly signs indicating that the promised Savior, the new King of the Jews, had been born. Herod responded to this news not with faith and gratitude to God, but with fear and violence: he wanted to be king, and he would tolerate no competitors. He wasn't able to find Jesus individually. So he resorted to drastic measures: He ordered the slaughter of all the baby boys in the city.

Every one of those children belonged to a family, and every one of those families suffered unspeakably because of the sinfulness of this worldly king.

The liturgy refers to these babies as martyrs who gave their lives for Christ. At first glance it may seem odd to refer to them in that way. But if we dig a little deeper, we can find a profound truth here.

VICTORIOUS VICTIMS

Those children certainly didn't freely choose to be faithful to Jesus in the face of violent persecution, as later martyrs would. But they did die at the hand of an enemy of God, a man who set himself against the message of Jesus and tried to extinguish Christianity right at its very inception. These children were innocent victims of a society that refused to submit itself to God's moral law and God's plan for salvation. And in that sense, they truly were martyrs, and the Church assures us that they have received a martyr's reward in heaven.

We can all relate to that. We all experience the forces of evil in the world, the effects of our fallen human nature, the attacks of selfishness and sin that ceaselessly look to discourage and disorient us. We all experience the brokenness and anguish coming from social trends that refuse to accept the moral law built into our human identity by a loving God. We all face, sometimes dramatically, the challenge of sticking up for what is true and right in spite of powerful, confusing, and humiliating opposition.

This is what happened to the families in Bethlehem who suffered under the swords of Herod's soldiers. But God didn't forget about them. He doesn't forget about any of his martyrs. He is faithful, and whenever we suffer generously for Christ, Christ will even more generously reward us—this too is part of the message of Christmas; part of the lesson the Church wants us to learn by turning our attention to the Holy Innocents.


CONCLUSION: VALUING THE LITTLE THINGS

Thirty years of normal family life in Nazareth; painful suffering at the hand of a world that refuses to accept the Savior: These too are some of the hidden treasures of Christmas. They are hidden, because we so often overlook their spiritual significance, but they are treasures, because when we take time to contemplate them, they enrich our souls. Let's take a few minutes right now to let that happen. The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.


QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION/GROUP DISCUSSION

1. How firmly do I believe that family life is the very first arena of activity where God wants me to learn and grow in love? What is my habitual attitude towards my family life (or life in my religious community)? Where does that attitude come from? What attitude does God want me to have?
2. How do I tend to respond to the difficulties that come from living in a fallen world, the things that make it hard for me to live a fully Christ-like life? How would I like to respond? What can I do to fill in the gap?
3. What are the "Herods" most present and active in our society today? What massacres are they engaged in?

THREE QUOTATIONS TO HELP YOUR MEDITATION

 *When the days were completed for their purification according to the law of Moses, they took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. When they had fulfilled all the prescriptions of the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.*

—Luke 22:39–40
NABRE

 *When Herod realized that he had been deceived by the magi, he became furious. He ordered the massacre of all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had ascertained from the magi. Then was fulfilled what had been said*



through Jeremiah the prophet: “A voice was heard in Ramah, sobbing and loud lamentation; Rachel weeping for her children, and she would not be consoled, since they were no more.” When Herod had died, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child’s life are dead.” He rose, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go back there. And because he had been warned in a dream, he departed for the region of Galilee. He went and dwelt in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He shall be called a Nazorean.”

—Matthew 2:16–23

NABRE

Among these many paths, the family is the first and the most important. It is a path common to all, yet one which is particular, unique and unrepeatable, just as every individual is unrepeatable; it is a path from which man cannot withdraw. Indeed, a person normally comes into the world within a family, and can be said to owe to the family the very fact of his existing as an individual. When he has no family, the person coming into the world develops an anguished sense of pain and loss, one which will subsequently burden his whole life. The Church draws near with loving concern to all who experience situations such as these, for she knows well the fundamental role which the family is called upon to play. Furthermore, she knows that a person goes forth from the family in order to realize in a new family unit his particular vocation in life. Even if someone chooses to remain single, the family continues to be, as it were, his existential horizon, that fundamental community in which the whole network of social relations is grounded, from the closest and most immediate to the most distant. Do we not often speak of the “human family” when referring to all the people living in the world?

—St. John Paul II

Letter to Families, 2

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CONFERENCE

IS WORLD PEACE REALLY POSSIBLE? AN OVERVIEW OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

INTRODUCTION

Liturgically, New Year's Day always falls within the Christmas season. And since New Year's Day always gives people a sense of optimism and a fresh start, the Church has dubbed it the World Day of Peace. Ever since 1968, popes have used the occasion to preach about Catholic social doctrine, the Christian vision of how to promote healthy, peaceful, and prosperous societies.

In 1969, Pope Paul VI restored the ancient Roman practice of celebrating on January 1st a liturgical solemnity honoring Mary as the Mother of God. In his Apostolic Letter on Marian devotion, he made a connection between these two dimensions of how the Church welcomes the New Year. He wrote:

“... [T]he restored Solemnity of Mary the holy Mother of God... is likewise a fitting occasion for renewing adoration of the newborn Prince of Peace, for listening once more to the glad tidings of the angels, and for imploring from God, through the Queen of Peace, the supreme gift of peace. It is for this reason that, in the happy concurrence of the Octave of Christmas and the first day of the year, we have instituted the World Day of Peace, an occasion that is gaining increasing support and already bringing forth fruits of peace in the hearts of many.”

In their annual speeches for the World Day of Peace, the popes have addressed a dizzying array of social topics—from nuclear weapons to abortion to protecting the environment, and everything in between. But these specific issues are always interpreted in light of the unchanging principles that every society needs to respect in order to be healthy and just. These are the basic principles of Catholic social teaching.

In today's world, when cultural and political trends are leading so many societies further and further away from the message of Christ, it's important that all of us understand at least the basics of this social teaching. That way, we can all engage more wisely in our civic and community lives, always being part of the solution rather than part of the problem. We certainly will never be able to create heaven on earth—though some modern philosophers have tried to convince us that we can—but we are all called to do

our part to build a civilization characterized by justice and love, and these principles are our guide.

Three of the basic Catholic social principles are so fundamental that the others can be grouped around them. This conference will take a look at each of these three core principles, one by one. We don't have enough time to be exhaustive in our treatment, but we can at least lock down the most important concepts.

THE GOAL OF SOCIAL LIVING

The first core Catholic social principle has to do with the goal of living in society, and it is called “the common good.”

This is a tricky concept, and a lot of modern and not-so-modern theorists have distorted and abused it. Yet, we need to understand its proper meaning if we hope to be positive influencers in our communities and countries.

Here is how the Catechism defines the common good:

“... [T]he sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.”
—Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1906

One modern Catholic philosopher has explained this concept in a very practical way: a good society is a society that makes it easy to be good. In other words, the goal of social living, from God's perspective, is to create a social environment in which human beings can flourish—that's what we mean by the common good, and it requires three essential elements.

THREE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE COMMON GOOD

First, human dignity must be respected. Insofar as a society violates basic human rights and freedoms, by enshrining racism in its legal structures, for example, as Nazi Germany did, it is not promoting the common good.

Second, material and spiritual development must be encouraged. When members of a society can't meet their



most basic physical needs, like food and shelter, it's much harder for them to flourish as human beings. When they aren't permitted to develop their spiritual potential—as for example under Soviet communism, where all children were required to attend public schools that indoctrinated them into atheism—their human possibilities are squelched.

And third, peace (which the Catechism defines not simply as the absence of war, but as “the stability and security of a just order” CCC 1909) needs to be protected and maintained.

The common good, then, the social atmosphere that makes it easier for people to live truly good lives, requires respect for human dignity, the promotion of human development (both material and spiritual), and the security and stability of peace. To the extent that these elements are present, the life of the society will more easily lead to human flourishing. That's the first core principle of Catholic social teaching.

THE FREEDOM TO FLOURISH: THE PRINCIPLE OF SUBSIDIARITY

Subsidiarity is a fancy word for a simple principle, but it's a principle too often misunderstood or ignored, with tragic results. The principle states that a community of a higher social order (like a local or national government) should not interfere with the internal life of a community of a more basic social order (like a family or a parish), depriving the latter of its functions. Rather, it should support the more basic community in case of need and help coordinate its activities with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good.

This is common sense. It stems from the human person's innate need and ability to form societies and communities. Some of these communities are found everywhere, because they are built right into human nature (like the family and the state). Others spring from human creativity (like universities or country clubs or businesses). But in both cases, mankind's natural socializing capacity should be respected for the same reason that all human rights should be respected: because the dignity of the human person deserves it. Respecting this socializing capacity is called subsidiarity.

This may sound complicated, but it really isn't. In communist China, for example, the government passed laws that dictate how many children a married couple is allowed to have. In that case, the government is grossly interfering in

the internal life of families. Sometimes, however, in order to protect the common good, the larger society needs to step in—breaking up child slavery rings, for example, or helping provide temporary assistance to communities suffering from natural disasters. But each community within a larger society has its own purpose and its own autonomy. The larger society needs to respect that, and work to coordinate the activities of all the smaller communities in a harmonious way that safeguards the common good. That's the principle of subsidiarity.

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR? THE PRINCIPLE OF SOLIDARITY

Subsidiarity is a dependable landmark along the way to the common good. But it's not the only one. Solidarity is equally important.

Solidarity is more like a virtue than a principle. Simply put, as the Church has defined it, it refers to the firm and lasting determination of individuals and groups to promote the common good. It flows from the principle that human beings are meant to live in society, that they can only achieve their full potential by living in society, and therefore every person should cultivate a vibrant awareness of belonging to a larger community. That awareness will create openness and generosity on the part of individuals and groups towards other groups, and towards society as a whole. Solidarity is an attitude that looks on others—all others—as brothers and sisters, not as intrinsic enemies and rivals.

Only if each member of society cares about the common good and is willing to work side by side with others to pursue it can society achieve its glory. When your neighbor's house is on fire, you grab a hose and help put it out. In its essence, solidarity is that simple.

TWO COROLLARIES OF SOLIDARITY

Two other frequently mentioned principles flow from this one; first, what is called in Catholic teaching “a preferential love for the poor” (CCC 2448). This refers to our duty of making a special effort to help those who are in special need, insofar as we are able to; and second, what is called the “universal destination of goods.” This refers to God's original entrusting of “the earth and its resources to the common stewardship of mankind” (CCC 2402). In other words, the goods that we use, acquire, and possess have a dual purpose: they are meant to help us flourish, but they are also meant



to help those around us flourish. This doesn't contradict the human right to private property, as the Catechism makes clear. Rather, it simply means that our goods – along with all the common resources of the earth—should be invested, insofar as possible, for the benefit of all, out of solidarity:

In his use of things man should regard the external goods he legitimately owns not merely as exclusive to himself but common to others also, in the sense that they can benefit others as well as himself.

—CCC 2404

CONCLUSION: BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS

The common good, with its promotion of human dignity, development and peace; subsidiarity; and solidarity: these are three core principles of Catholic social teaching that flow from what Jesus revealed to us about our true identity when he was born in a humble stable-cave in the little town of Bethlehem on Christmas night. They are principles that the Church continually tries to live out and communicate to our needy world, especially every year on January 1st, the World Day of Peace and the Solemnity of the Motherhood of Mary, Queen of Peace. We should all try to understand them deeply, and to apply them to our own lives, so that we can be true followers of the Prince of Peace, and true builders of his everlasting Kingdom.

Take some time now to prayerfully reflect on the ten questions in the personal questionnaire, which are designed to help you do just that.

PERSONAL QUESTIONNAIRE

1. How frequently do I hear these basic principles of Catholic teaching mentioned in the news or talked about in relation to current social and political issues? Why don't I hear them mentioned more frequently?
2. How familiar am I with these basic principles? How familiar with them would I like to be?
3. Explain the principle of the common good and its three essential elements in my own words. How does this apply to the different societies of which I am a member (my family, my parish, my community, my business community, my country...)?
4. How would I explain the principle of the common good to someone who had never heard of it before?

5. Explain the principle of subsidiarity in my own words. How does it apply to the different societies of which I am a member?
6. Have I ever experienced a violation of this principle? What happened and what were the results?
7. Explain the principle (or virtue) of solidarity in my own words. How does it apply to the different societies of which I am a member?
8. How deeply do I live this virtue of solidarity? In what ways could I live it more deeply?
9. In my mind, what does it mean to “be a good steward” of the goods that I possess (like my money and my talents) or the common goods that I use (like the environment)?
10. What do I think of when I hear the term “social justice”? How does my understanding of this term compare with the definition given in the glossary of the Catechism:
 - **SOCIAL JUSTICE:** The respect for the human person and the rights which flow from human dignity and guarantee it. Society must provide the conditions that allow people to obtain what is their due, according to their nature and vocation.

NOTES



Lined writing area consisting of two columns of horizontal lines for notes.



FURTHER READING

If you feel moved to continue reflecting and praying about this theme, you may find the following books helpful:

- *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives*
by Pope Benedict XVI
- *To Know Christ Jesus*
by Frank Sheed
- *Thomas Becket: Warrior, Priest, Rebel*
by John Guy
- *An Introduction to Catholic Social Teaching*
by Roger Charles, SJ
- *Church, State, and Society: An Introduction to Catholic Social Doctrine*
by J. Brian Benested

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