

Pope Francis Has Significantly Advanced Catholic Social Teaching. Why Don't We Hear More About It from Our Bishops and Priests?

Speaking authoritatively as the Vicar of Christ, Pope Francis has significantly advanced Catholic Social Teaching on many of the most pressing issues facing humanity and the planet. In response, he has faced an unprecedented level of vocal opposition from some bishops and priests. A much greater number, however, choose not to talk about the Pope's prophetic teaching, leaving their flocks in the dark. When is the last time you heard from your bishop or pastor on the following topics?

War and the Arms Trade

"We can no longer think of war as a solution," Francis wrote in *Fratelli Tutti*, "because its risks will probably always be greater than its supposed benefits."¹ In fact, "[e]very war leaves our world worse than it was before."² "In view of this, it is very difficult nowadays . . . to speak of the possibility of a 'just war.' Never again war!" Francis declared.³

Moreover, if it is true for nations that "it no longer makes sense to maintain that war is a fit instrument with which to repair the violation of justice,"⁴ how much more so for Christians. For "[t]o be true followers of Jesus today also includes embracing his teaching about nonviolence," Francis wrote in 2016. Quoting Benedict XVI, he described love of one's enemy as "the nucleus of the 'Christian revolution'."⁵

Francis reiterated these points in his *Urbi et Orbi* Message last Christmas: "To say 'yes' to the Prince of Peace, then, means saying 'no' to war, to every war and to do so with courage, to the very mindset of war, an aimless voyage, a defeat without victors, an inexcusable folly. . . . To say 'no' to war means saying 'no' to weaponry. . . . And how can we even speak of peace, when arms production, sales and trade are on the rise?"⁶

Indeed, "to allocate a large part of spending to weapons means . . . continuing to take it away yet again from those who lack the basic necessities. And this is a scandal: spending on weapons. How much is spent on weapons, terrible!"⁷

¹ [Fratelli Tutti](#) (FT), Oct. 3, 2020, ¶ 258.

² FT ¶ 261. It follows that one of the "strict conditions" for any potential use of arms, that it "must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated" ([Catechism of the Catholic Church](#) ¶ 2309), cannot be met. See also [Address to the Security Council of the United Nations](#), June 14, 2023.

³ FT ¶ 258.

⁴ FT ¶ 260, quoting St. John XXIII.

⁵ [Message for the World Day of Peace 2017, "Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace,"](#) Dec. 8, 2016).

⁶ [Urbi et Orbi Message](#), Dec. 25, 2023.

⁷ [Address to Members of the Voluntary Organization "Ho Avuto Sete,"](#) Mar. 21, 2022. See also FT ¶ 262.

Nuclear Weapons

Going beyond his predecessors' provisional acceptance of nuclear weapons for deterrence purposes, Francis flatly declared in 2017, "the threat of their use, as well as their very possession, is to be firmly condemned."⁸

Two years later in Hiroshima, Francis repeated the point "with deep conviction." "The use of atomic energy for purposes of war is immoral, just as the possessing of nuclear weapons is immoral . . . We will be judged on this."⁹ In *Fratelli Tutti*, he called "the ultimate goal of the total elimination of nuclear weapons . . . a moral and humanitarian imperative"¹⁰

Climate Change

In his landmark encyclical, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, Francis declared, "Climate change is a global problem with grave implications It represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day."¹¹ He cited an "urgent need" to drastically reduce the emission of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases to prevent further warming and an "unprecedented destruction of ecosystems, with serious consequences for all of us."¹²

Francis wrote that a "true 'ecological debt' exists, particularly between the global north and south," due to the former's disproportionate effects on the environment and use of natural resources.¹³ "The developed countries ought to help pay this debt by significantly limiting their consumption of non-renewable energy and by assisting poorer countries to support policies and programs of sustainable development."¹⁴ We "must integrate questions of justice . . . so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*."¹⁵

Eight years later in *Laudate Deum*, Francis observed, "our responses have not been adequate, while the world in which we live is collapsing and may be nearing the breaking point."¹⁶ "No one can ignore the fact that in recent years we have witnessed extreme weather phenomena, frequent periods of unusual heat, drought and other cries of protest on the part of the earth that are only a few palpable expressions of a silent disease that affects everyone."¹⁷

Francis warned of "disastrous consequences" that would require "precipitous measures . . . to be taken, at enormous cost and with grave and intolerable economic and social

⁸ [Address to Participants in the International Symposium "Prospects for a World Free of Nuclear Weapons and for Integral Disarmament,"](#) Nov. 10, 2017.

⁹ [Address in Hiroshima,](#) Nov. 24, 2019.

¹⁰ *FT* ¶ 262.

¹¹ [Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home \(LS\),](#) May 24, 2015, ¶ 25.

¹² *LS* ¶¶ 24, 26.

¹³ *LS* ¶ 51.

¹⁴ *LS* ¶ 52.

¹⁵ *LS* ¶ 49.

¹⁶ [Laudate Deum \(LD\),](#) Oct. 4, 2023, ¶ 2.

¹⁷ *LD* ¶ 5.

effects.”¹⁸ And he called for “a broad change in the irresponsible lifestyle connected with the Western model” as a means of “making progress along the way to genuine care for one another.”¹⁹

The Death Penalty

In 2017, Francis declared, “the death penalty is an inhumane measure that, regardless of how it is carried out, abases human dignity. It is per se contrary to the Gospel [N]o matter how serious the crime that has been committed, the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and the dignity of the person.”²⁰

He repeated the point in *Fratelli Tutti*, adding, “All Christians and people of good will are today called to work not only for the abolition of the death penalty, legal or illegal, in all its forms, but also to work for the improvement of prison conditions, out of respect for the human dignity of persons deprived of their freedom. I would link this to life imprisonment A life sentence is a secret death penalty.”²¹

Immigration and Inclusion

Francis has made countless statements on the rights of migrants and refugees. In *Fratelli Tutti*, he tied those rights to a core principle of Catholic Social Teaching, the universal destination of goods. “‘God gave the earth to the whole human race for the sustenance of all its members, without excluding or favoring anyone.’ . . . [T]he Christian tradition has never recognized the right to private property as absolute or inviolable, and has stressed the social purpose of all forms of private property’.”²²

“No one, then, can remain excluded because of his or her place of birth,” Francis wrote, “much less because of privileges enjoyed by others who were born in lands of greater opportunity. The limits and borders of individual states cannot stand in the way of this. . . . [I]t is unacceptable that . . . the mere place of one’s birth or residence should result in his or her possessing fewer opportunities for a developed and dignified life.”²³ Rather, “we are obliged to respect the right of all individuals to find a place that meets their basic needs and those of their families, and where they can find personal fulfilment.”²⁴

In *Laudato Si’*, Francis had written of “a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation. . . . Sadly, there is

¹⁸ *LD* ¶ 56.

¹⁹ *LD* ¶ 72.

²⁰ [Address to Participants in the Meeting Promoted by the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization](#), Oct. 11, 2017.

²¹ *FT* ¶¶ 263, 268.

²² *FT* ¶ 120, quoting from *LS* ¶ 93.

²³ *FT* ¶ 121.

²⁴ *FT* ¶ 129.

widespread indifference to such suffering, which is even now taking place throughout our world.”²⁵

“My friends, we cannot tolerate or turn a blind eye to racism and exclusion in any form and yet claim to defend the sacredness of every human life.”²⁶

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The moral clarity with which Pope Francis has addressed these critical issues deserves widespread praise and amplification to all the faithful. They are tied together by a deep commitment to human life and dignity. Our Church leaders need to challenge us all to respond with greater compassion and solidarity, casting off indifference to those victimized by war, wasteful military spending, nuclear weapons threats, climate disasters, the criminal legal system, unjust immigration policies, and racism.

Let your bishop and priests know the faithful need to hear Pope Francis’s prophetic words from *them*. For your bishop’s name and address, see www.usccb.org/about/bishops-and-dioceses/all-dioceses. Of course, if your bishop or pastor has communicated the Pope’s teaching on these issues, be sure to thank him!

²⁵ *LS* ¶ 25.

²⁶ [General Audience](#), June 3, 2020.