

# Catholic Social Teaching in the Mission Ad Gentes

Msgr. Roger J. Landry • International Bishops Forum • January 16, 2026



# The Church's Mission



- Jesus' **Great Commission**, his valedictory address to the Church at her beginning and in every age, is to go to **all nations**, teaching, **proclaiming the Gospel to every creature**, instructing everyone to **observe** (not just know) everything he has commanded, conscious that **he's with us always**.



# The Church's Mission



- As the Second Vatican Council and recent popes have stressed, **the Church “is”** and does not just “have” **a mission.**
- Cooperating with the Holy Spirit, the Church, as Jesus’ Body and Bride, continues his saving work.
- The Church does this by **keeping the link between love of God and love of neighbor,** between proclaiming the Gospel and putting into into practice.



# The Church's Mission Today



- We have a **special moment in the history of the Church**, with the election of Pope Leo XIV, the first Pope since Peter who had **dedicated himself to the mission *ad gentes***. The night of his election, Leo said that we must “proclaim the Gospel without fear, to **be missionaries**” and “**must look for ways to be a missionary Church.**”
- He preaches routinely about the Church’s mission. He has repeatedly clarified, for example, that **the purpose of synodality is mission**, to strengthen the Church to bring the Gospel more efficaciously to others.



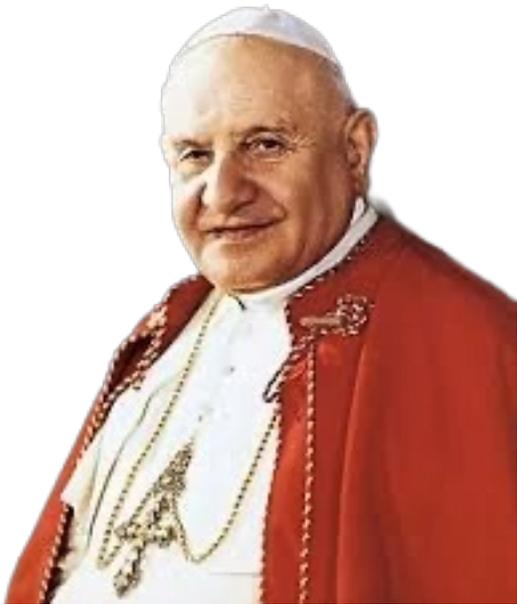
# The Church's Mission Today



- In the month of December, we celebrated the anniversaries of three major magisterial documents on mission:
  - The 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of ***Ad Gentes*** (Dec 7, 1965)
  - The 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of ***Evangelii Nuntiandi*** (Dec 8, 1975)
  - The 35<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of ***Redemptoris Missio*** (Dec 7, 1990)



# The Church's Mission Today



- **The Second Vatican Council's main emphasis** was to help the Church in **fulfilling her mission in the modern world**. It was to **help her communicate the deposit of faith with greater lucidity, love, and evangelical fire**, in the service of the universal call to holiness.
- St. John XXIII at the Council's opening said, "The sacred deposit of Christian doctrine should be guarded and **taught more efficaciously.**"





# The Church's Mission Today



- ***Ad Gentes***, published on the penultimate day of the Council, summarized the whole Council, **calling the Church a “universal sacrament of salvation”** and **reiterating her divine mandate to proclaim the Gospel.**
- Notably released the same day was ***Gaudium et Spes***, which said that the **joys, hopes, griefs and anxieties** of people today are the joys, hopes, griefs and anxieties of the Church.





# The Church's Mission Today



- After grounding the Church's theological anthropology and human dignity, *Gaudium et Spes* then applied those truths to the Church's approach to "problems of special urgency," **which were all basically topics of Catholic Social Teaching:** marriage and family, the development of culture, economic development and socio-economic life, the political community, the avoidance of war, and the fostering of peace and a community of nations.



# The Kerygma and Its Social Content



- Pope Francis, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, while emphasizing repeatedly the joyful proclamation of the kerygma, also emphasized that **“the kerygma has a clear social content:** at the very heart of the Gospel is life in community and engagement with others. The content of the first proclamation has an immediate moral implication centered on charity.
- “The Gospel is about the kingdom of God (cf. Lk 4:43); it is about loving God who reigns in our world. To the extent that he reigns within us, the life of society will be a setting for universal fraternity, justice, peace and dignity. **Both Christian preaching and life, then, are meant to have an impact on society”** (177-181)



# Sacred Scripture on the Social Content



- Throughout Scripture, we see clearly the primacy of **the love of God intrinsically connected the command of love of neighbor**, understood both spiritually and materially.
- In the Old Testament, in which God seeks to lead his people to faith and right worship in liturgy and life, we see **the emphasis God gives to charity**. His insistence on care for the widows, orphans, strangers and the poor. His words about the fasting he seeks in Isaiah 58. Love of neighbor is a consequence, the Old Testament underlines, of loving God.



# Sacred Scripture on the Social Content



- In the Gospel, **Jesus indicates that the command to love our neighbor flows from love of God.** He calls us to love one another (not him) as he has loved us; to show our love by feeding and tending his sheep and lambs; to care for him in the hungry, thirsty, naked, stranger, ill, imprisoned or otherwise in need.
- When Jesus sent the out 12 and then the 72, he gave them **not just a message**, “The Kingdom of God is at hand,” **but the authority to heal the sick, cleanse lepers, cast out demons, and even raise the dead.** Just like in his own ministry, when his miracles were confirmations of the authority of the Gospel he was proclaiming, so it was meant to be in the ongoing mission of his Church.



## Sacred Scripture on the Social Content

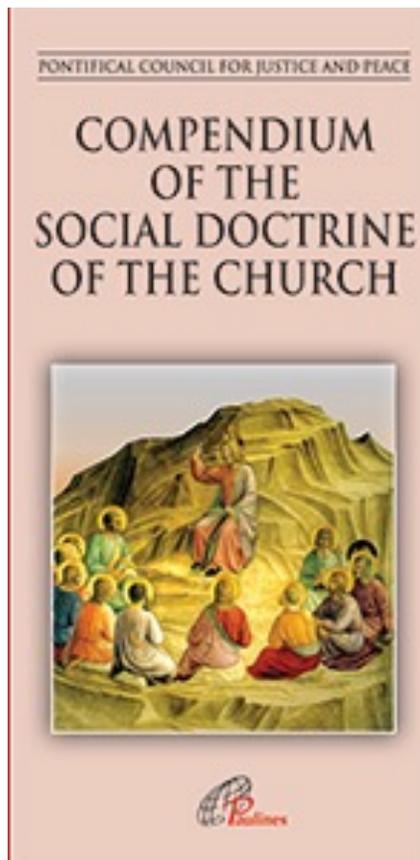


- In the Acts of the Apostles, we continue to see **this interplay between proclamation and charity** in Peter's preaching the Gospel and then his miracles of healing; in the Church's familial love by which **there was not a needy person among them**, because they had all things in common; in **the ordination of the first seven deacons**, which reveals the priority of prayer and the ministry of the Word in the life of the apostles, but also **how essential charity is in the Church's life** such that it could not be left overlooked.



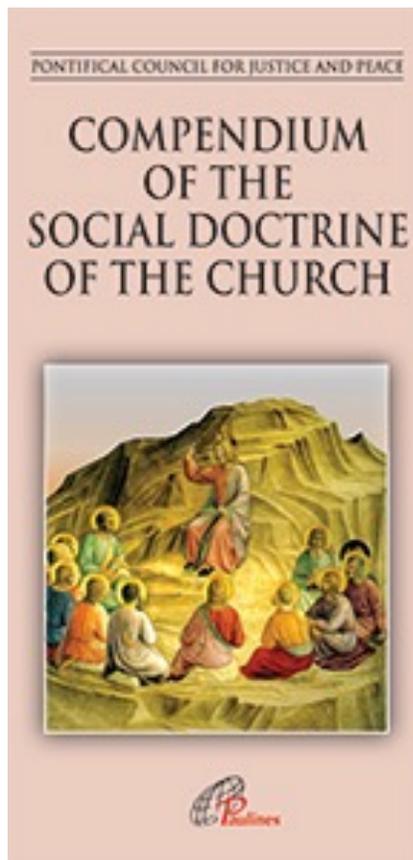
# The Church's Mission and Social Doctrine

- The ***Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*** underlines the role of Catholic Social Teaching in the mission of the Church (60-71).
- **“With her social teaching the Church seeks to proclaim the Gospel and make it present in the complex network of social relations, ... enriching and permeating society itself with the Gospel.”**





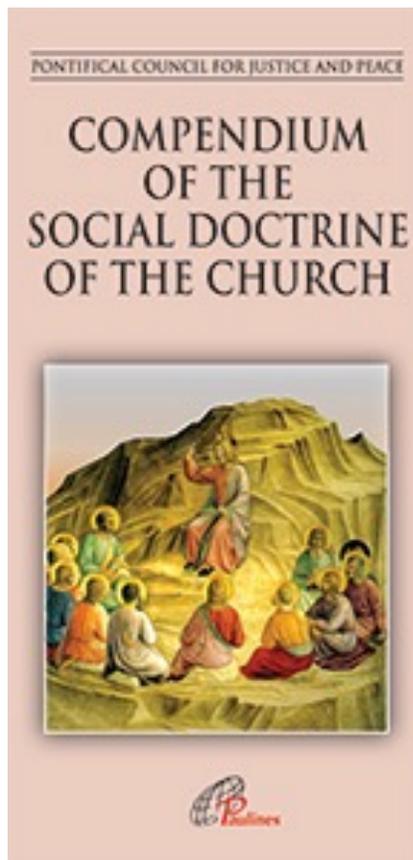
# The Church's Mission and Social Doctrine



- **“The Church is attentive to the moral quality ... of social life”** because “society ... is not simply a secular and and worldly reality,” but is **made up of men and women** who are the “primary and fundamental way of the Church.”
- **“By means of her social doctrine, the Church ... makes the message of the freedom and redemption** wrought by Christ, the Gospel of the Kingdom, **present in human history.**”



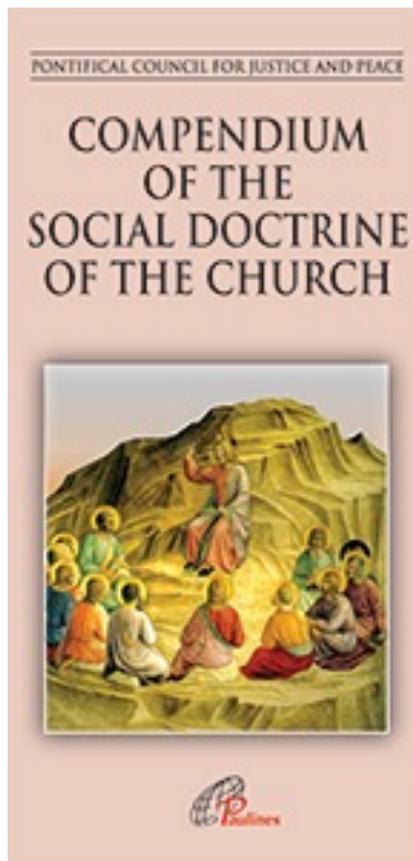
## The Church's Mission and Social Doctrine



- “With her social doctrine not only does the Church not stray from her mission but she **is rigorously faithful to it.**”
- While redemption and **the saving mission of the Church** is of the supernatural order, it **is integrally expressed in the living of Catholic Social Doctrine**, which seeks to infuse and raise the natural order.



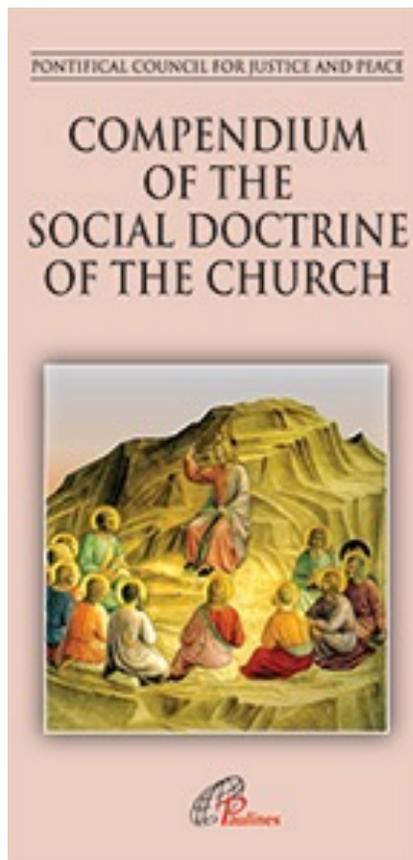
# The Church's Mission and Social Doctrine



- “Redemption begins with the Incarnation, by which **the Son of God takes on all that is human, except sin**, ... and embraces everything in his gift of redeeming Love. The whole man,” **including social relations**, “is involved in the salvific economy of the Gospel.”
- Therefore, **“the Church's social doctrine is an integral part of her evangelizing ministry.”**



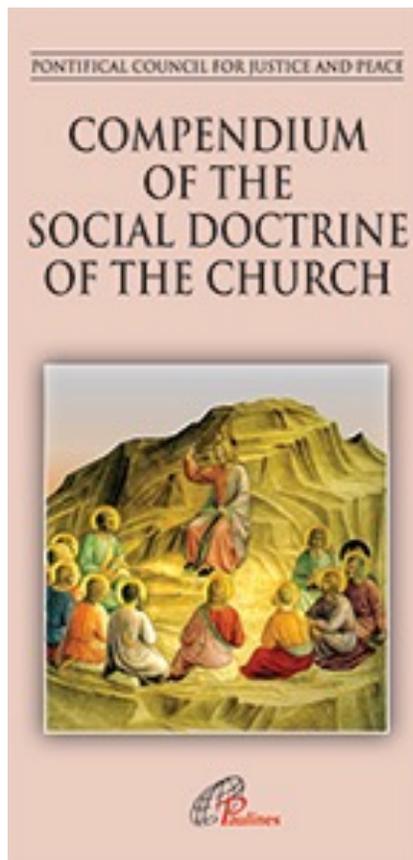
# The Church's Mission and Social Doctrine



- “The Church's social doctrine ... is born of **the always new meeting of the Gospel message and social life** ... and is an **essential part** of the Christian message.”
- “How can one proclaim **the new commandment without promoting** in justice and in peace **the true, authentic advancement of man?**”



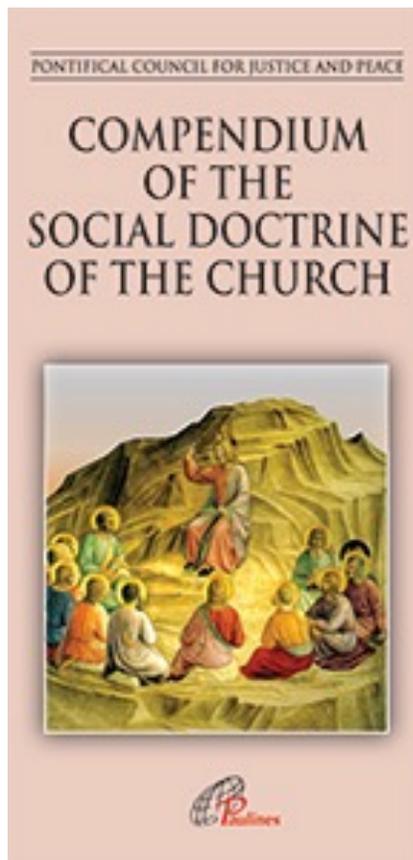
# The Church's Mission and Social Doctrine



- “The Church ... speaks with **the competence that is hers**, which is that of proclaiming Christ the Redeemer. ... This means that the Church **does not intervene in technical questions** with her social doctrine. ... This is not part of the mission entrusted to her by Christ. **The Church's competence comes from the Gospel: from the message that sets man free, the message proclaimed and borne witness to by the Son of God made man.**”



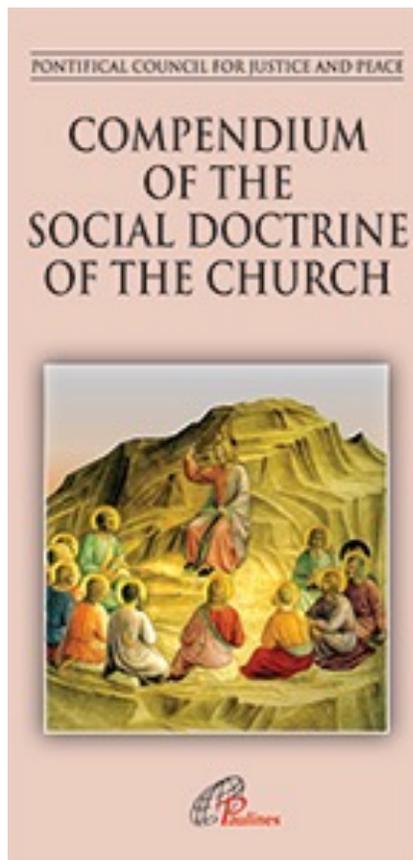
# The Church's Mission and Social Doctrine



- “With her social doctrine, the Church aims at **helping man on the path of salvation**. This is her **primary and sole purpose**.”
- **The Church is a teacher** of “the truth not only of dogmas but also **of the morals whose source lies in human nature itself and in the Gospel**. The word of the Gospel, in fact, is not only to be heard but is also **to be observed and put into practice**.”



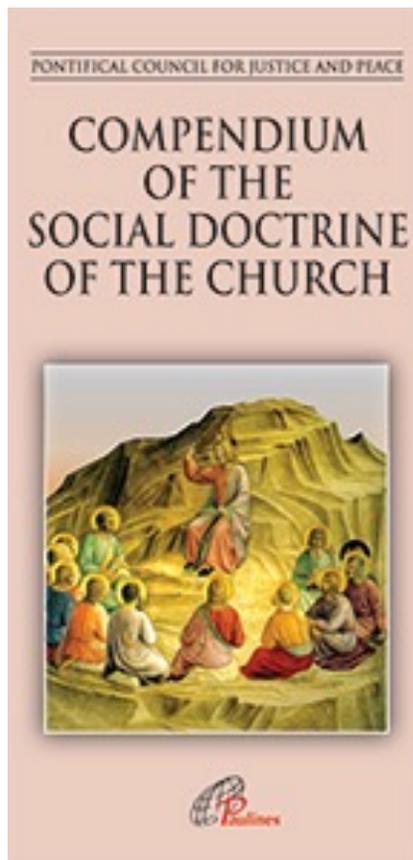
# The Church's Mission and Social Doctrine



- She seeks to “make **the liberating word of the Gospel resound** in the complex worlds of production, labor, business, finance, trade, politics, law, culture, social communications, where men and women live.”
- “This **right** of the Church is at the same time a **duty**, because **she cannot forsake this responsibility without denying herself and her fidelity to Christ**: ‘Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!’”



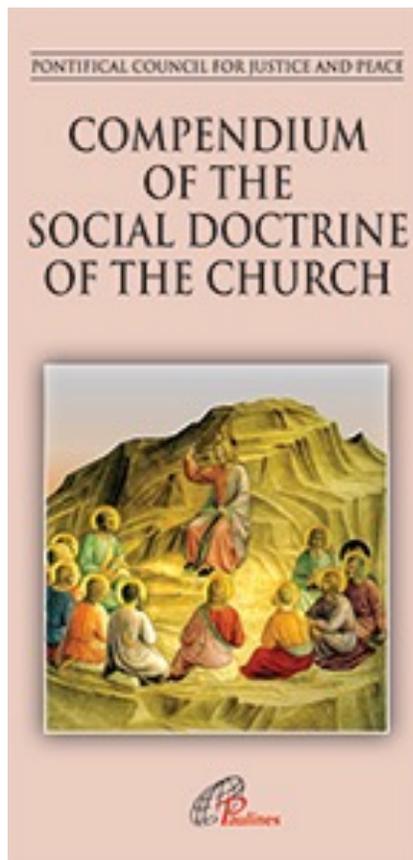
## The Church's Mission and Social Doctrine



- “Because of the public relevance of the Gospel and faith, because of the corrupting effects of injustice, that is, of sin, **the Church cannot remain indifferent to social matters.**”
- We see the relevance of these principles when we turn to **the pillars of Catholic Social Teaching:**



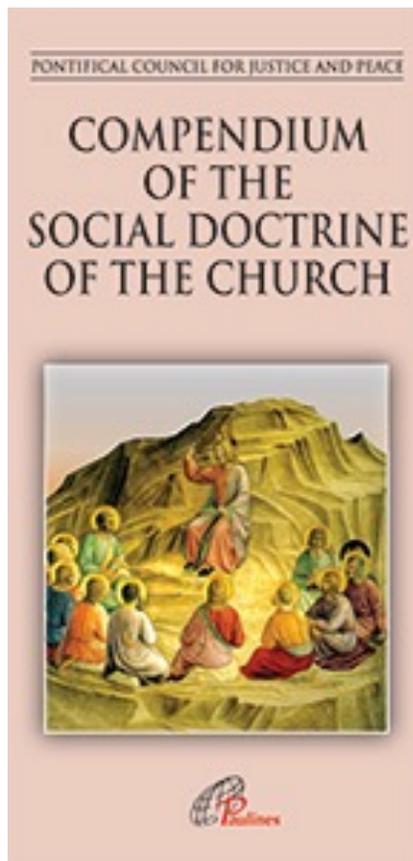
# The Church's Mission and Social Doctrine



- **Human dignity** flowing from the image of God and the rights that flow from that dignity and protect it;
- The **common good**, the sum total of conditions that allow people to achieve their fulfillment more completely and easily, including their transcendent nature;
- **Solidarity**, for we are our brothers' keepers, summoned to be Good Samaritans; and
- **Subsidiarity**, beginning with reverence for people to be dignified participants and protagonists of their own destiny.



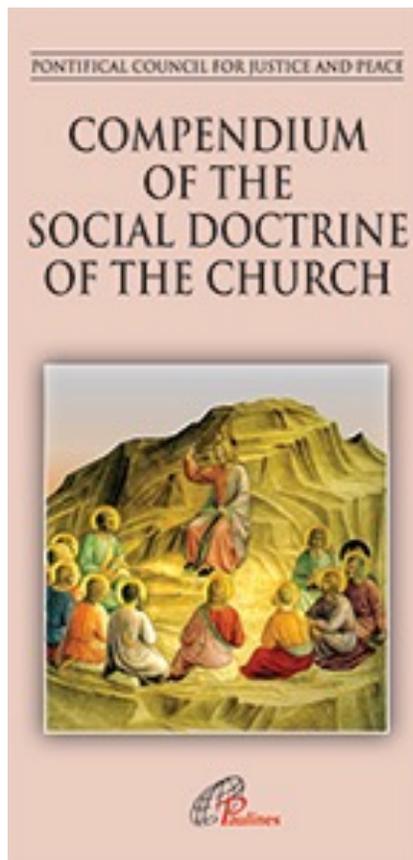
# The Church's Mission and Social Doctrine



- We see it likewise in the **fundamental values** of social life:
  - **Truth**
  - **Freedom**
  - **Justice**
  - **Love**



# The Church's Mission and Social Doctrine



- We see it similarly in the various themes of Catholic Social Teaching discussed in the *Compendium*:
  - **Marriage and Family**, flowing from Genesis, to Matthew, to Ephesians.
  - **Human Work**, flowing from Genesis.
  - **Economic Life**, flowing from Jesus' teaching about so many trades, about wealth, about spiritual poverty.
  - **The Political Community**, based on God's authority and Jesus' teaching about Caesar.
  - **The International Community**, flowing from the unity of the Holy Family.
  - **The environment**, of which the person has been made the steward.
  - **The promotion of peace** against war.



# The Impact of Getting The Connection Right



- We see in the **early Church** the impact of **the Church's lived proclamation of the social content of the Gospel**.
- In contrast to the Roman empire and some of the exclusionary tendencies in first century Jewish life, the first Christians **ate** together, **prayed** together, **made pilgrimages** to Jerusalem together and **voluntarily sacrificed** so that **there would not be a needy person among them**.
- This type of Christian mutual charity **attracted** so many people to **the Source of that charity**.



## The Impact of Getting The Connection Right



- We likewise saw it in the **ordination of the first deacons** and then in the **formation of *diakonia***, particularly in Rome (St. Lawrence).
- **Julian the Apostate**, seeing the success of Christian charity in drawing people to the faith, **sought to imitate it** in support of neo-paganism.



## The Impact of Getting The Connection Wrong



- We likewise see in the early Church and beyond the impact of getting the connection wrong.
- In **ancient Corinth**, **rivalries** and the **lack of mutual care** caused a great scandal, which weakened the proclamation of the Gospel. St. Paul said that their lack of concern after the Eucharist was eating and drinking condemnation upon themselves.





# The Impact of Getting The Connection Wrong



- There is the great scandal of the **lack of Christian unity through the lack of mutual charity**. Jesus said our unity, or lack of it, will reflect upon the **credibility of his incarnation** and the **message of divine love** (Jn 17).
- We have seen throughout Church history the **scandalous impact of Catholics not living the Gospel**, seen recently in the hemorrhage of many faithful because of the **clergy sexual abuse crisis**.





## The Challenges Today



- While the social content of the Gospel is clearly part of the kerygma, to be *Catholic*, **it must remain connected and ordered to that kerygma.**
- One problem the Church has confronted over the last 60 years has been, in various places, the attempt to **sever the Church's work from the kerygma** or **redefine the kerygma without reference to Christ and the nature of his saving work.**



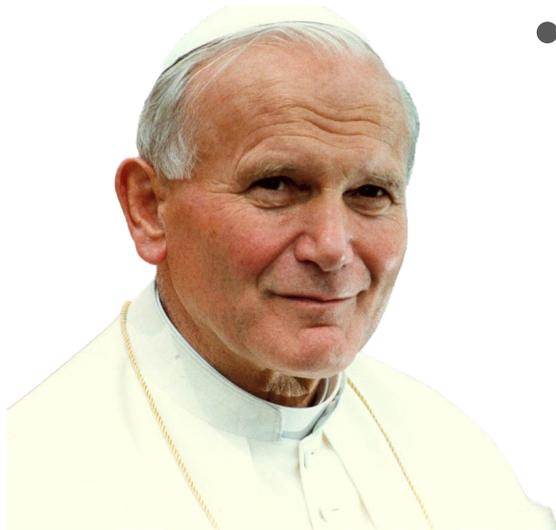
## The Challenges Today



- In *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, St. Paul VI warned about the temptation in some places **to reduce salvation and the Church's mission "to the dimensions of a simply temporal project, ...** her aims to a man-centered goal, salvation ... to material well-being, her activity [to] ... initiatives of the political or social order" (32).



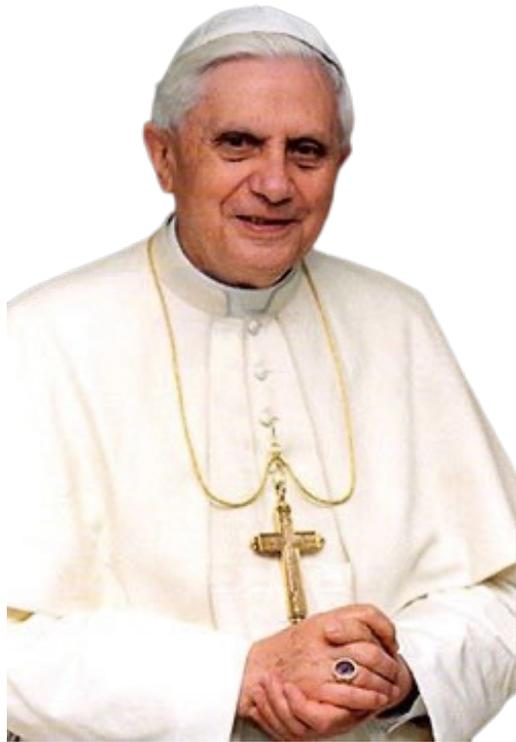
## The Challenges Today



- 15 years later, St. John Paul II had to be even more specific about the problem of trying to reduce the Gospel to development. He asked at the beginning of *Redemptoris Missio*: “Is missionary work among non-Christians still relevant? ... **Is not human development an adequate goal of the Church's mission?** Does not respect for conscience and for freedom exclude all efforts at conversion? Is it not possible to attain salvation in any religion? **Why then should there be missionary activity?**” (4)
- He wrote *Redemptoris Missio* to respond to those questions.



## The Challenges Today



- Pope Benedict XVI, in both the second section of ***Deus Caritas Est*** (2006) and in ***Caritas in Veritate*** (2009), had to emphasize that **the Church's charitable work had to be tied to "faith working through love" and to the truth.**
- Pope Francis regularly expressed **concern about the Church's behaving like an NGO**, focused more in bringing material help than the fullness of the Gospel to the poor.



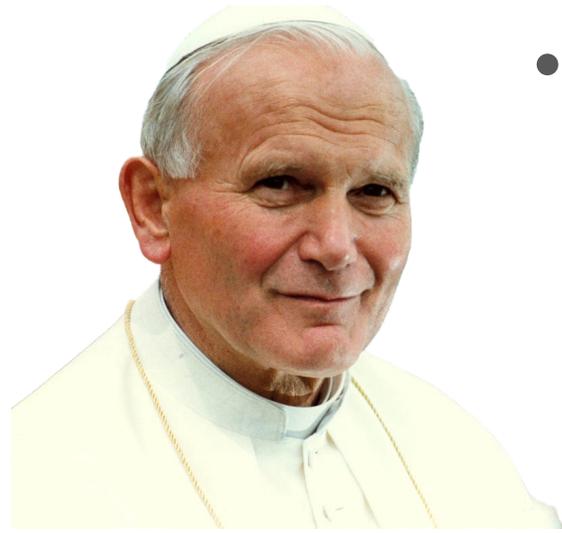
## The Challenges Today



- Pope Francis similarly spoke about **the danger of focusing not on the “essentials”** but on a “disjointed multitude of doctrines.”
- So it’s key to maintain the both/and in the Church’s kerygma — love of God and of neighbor — and **to understand and show the clear connection between the two.**
- We cannot proclaim the kerygma without showing faith working through love; or advance the mission of the Church without a clear reference to Jesus’ saving mission.



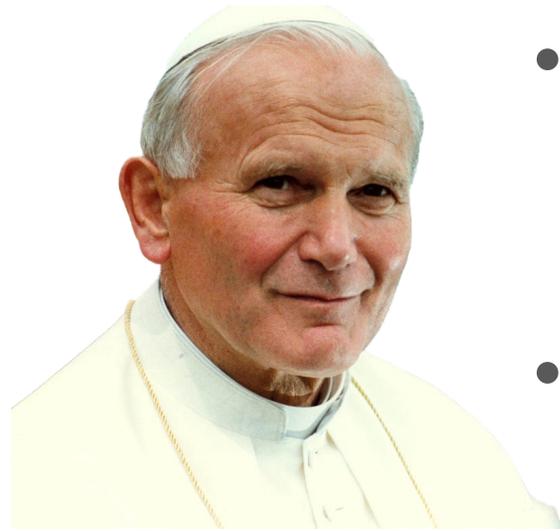
## Maintaining the Crucial Connection



- Pope John Paul II, in *Redemptoris Missio*, noted the **practical power of the Church's social teaching in advancing the Gospel**: “The **evangelical witness** that the world finds most appealing is that of **concern for people**, and of charity toward the poor, the weak and those who suffer. The complete generosity underlying this attitude and these actions stands in marked contrast to human selfishness. ... A commitment to peace, justice, human rights and human promotion **is also a witness to the Gospel** when it is a sign of concern for persons and is directed toward integral human development” (42).



# Maintaining the Crucial Connection

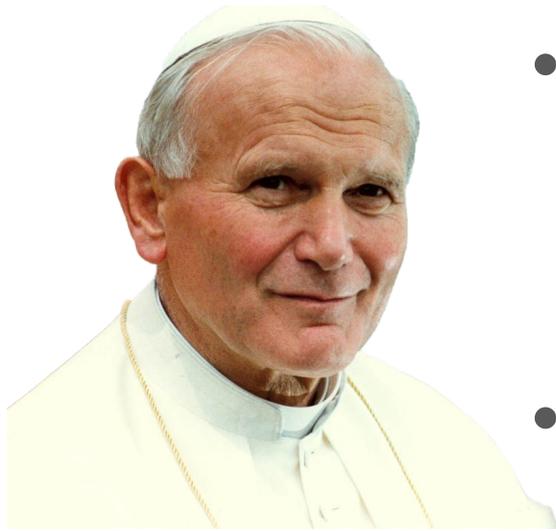


- But he emphasized that the Church "offers her **first contribution** to the solution of the urgent problem of development **when she proclaims the truth about Christ, about herself and about man, applying this truth to a concrete situation**" (58)
- "It is not the Church's mission to work directly on the economic, technical or political levels, or to contribute materially to development. Rather, **her mission consists essentially in offering people an opportunity** not to "have more" but **to "be more,"** by awakening their consciences through the Gospel. Authentic human development must be rooted in an **ever deeper evangelization.**" (58)





## Maintaining the Crucial Connection

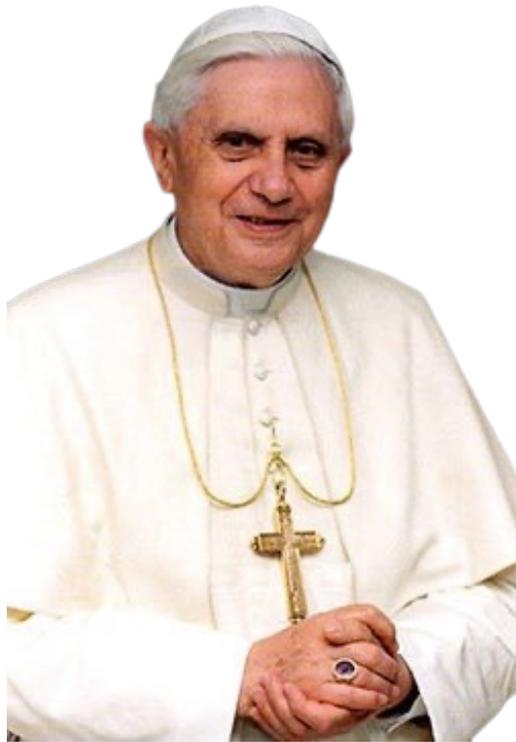


- “A people's **development** does not derive primarily from money, material assistance or technological means, but **from the formation of consciences and the gradual maturing of ways of thinking and patterns of behavior.**” (58)
- “**Man's development derives from God**, and from the model of Jesus — God and man — **and must lead back to God.** That is why **there is a close connection between the proclamation of the Gospel and human promotion.**” (59)





## Maintaining the Crucial Connection



- Pope Benedict XVI in *Deus Caritas Est* talked about the connection within the **very structure of authentic ecclesiology**:
- “With the formation of this group of seven, ***diakonia*** — the ministry of charity exercised in a communitarian, orderly way — **became part of the fundamental structure of the Church.** (DCE 22).



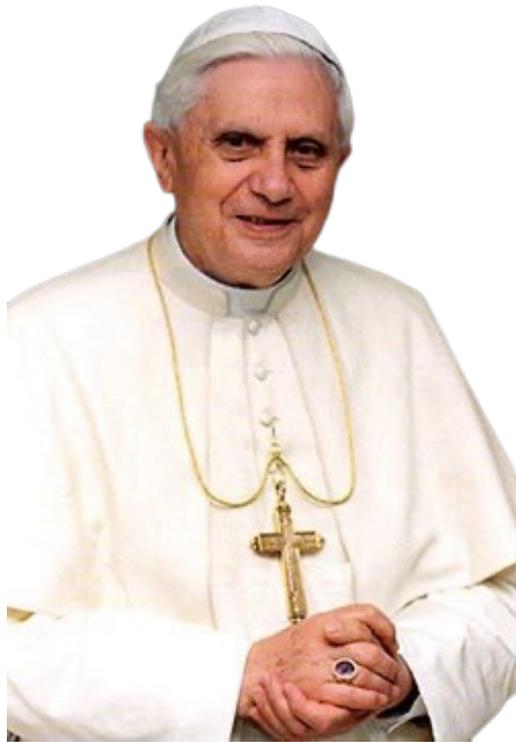
## Maintaining the Crucial Connection



- “As the years went by and the Church spread further afield, **the exercise of charity became established as one of her essential activities, along with the administration of the sacraments and the proclamation of the word:** love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind, is as essential to her as the ministry of the sacraments and preaching of the Gospel. **The Church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the Sacraments and the Word”** (DCE 22).



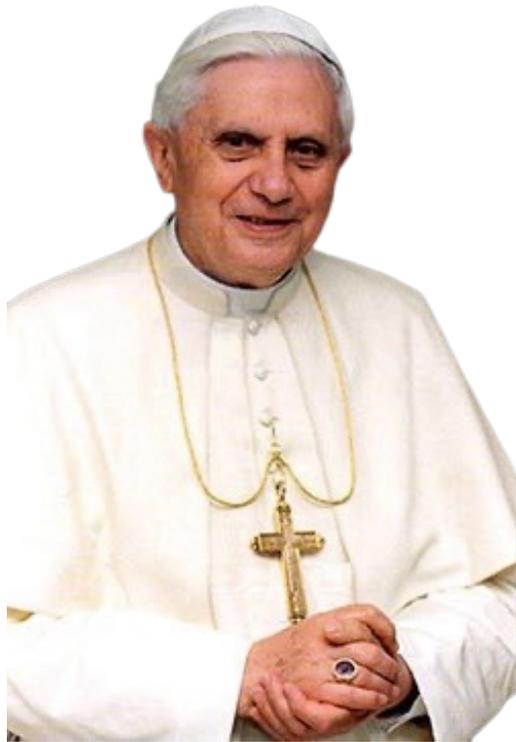
## Maintaining the Crucial Connection



- He added: “**The Church's deepest nature** is expressed in her **three-fold responsibility**: of **proclaiming the word of God** (*kerygma-martyria*), **celebrating the sacraments** (*leitourgia*), and **exercising the ministry of charity** (*diakonia*). **These duties presuppose each other and are inseparable.**
- “For the Church, **charity is not a kind of welfare activity** which could equally well be left to others, but is a **part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being**” (DCE 25).



## Maintaining the Crucial Connection



- “The increase in diversified organizations engaged in meeting various human needs is ultimately due to the fact that **the command of love of neighbor is inscribed by the Creator in man's very nature.** It is also **a result of the presence of Christianity in the world,** since Christianity constantly revives and acts out this imperative, so often profoundly obscured in the course of time.” (DCE 31)



## Maintaining the Crucial Connection

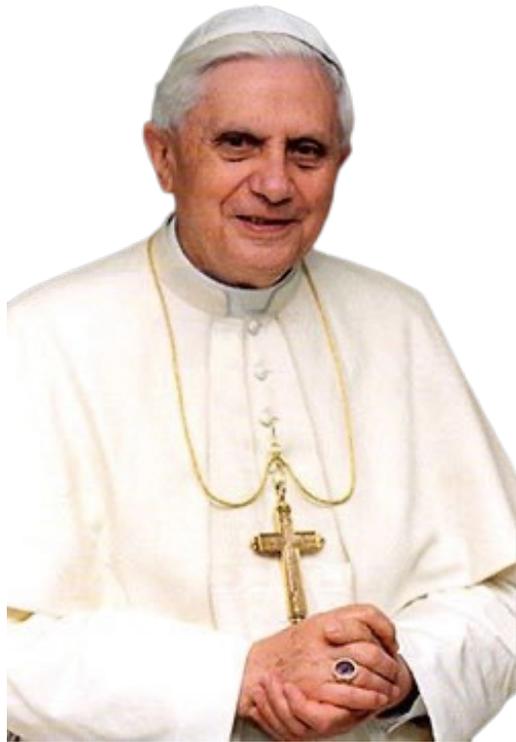


- “For this reason, **it is very important that the Church's charitable activity maintains all its splendor** and does not become just another form of social assistance” (DCE 31).
- “Individuals who care for those in need must first be **professionally competent**: they should be properly trained in what to do and how to do it and committed to continuing care. **Yet, while professional competence is a primary, fundamental requirement, it is not of itself sufficient.**” (31).





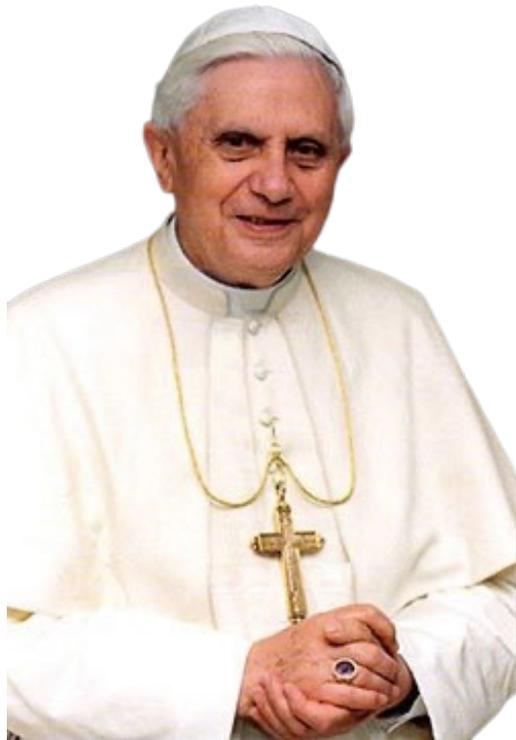
# Maintaining the Crucial Connection



- **“Human beings always need something more than technically proper care. They need humanity. They need heartfelt concern.** ... Consequently, in addition to their necessary professional training, **these charity workers need a ‘formation of the heart’:** they need to be led to that **encounter with God in Christ** that awakens their love and opens their spirits to others. As a result, **love of neighbor will [be] ... a consequence deriving from their faith, a faith which becomes active through love** (cf. Gal 5:6). ... **The Christian's program** —the program of the Good Samaritan, the program of Jesus—**is ‘a heart that sees’** where love is needed and acts accordingly” (31).



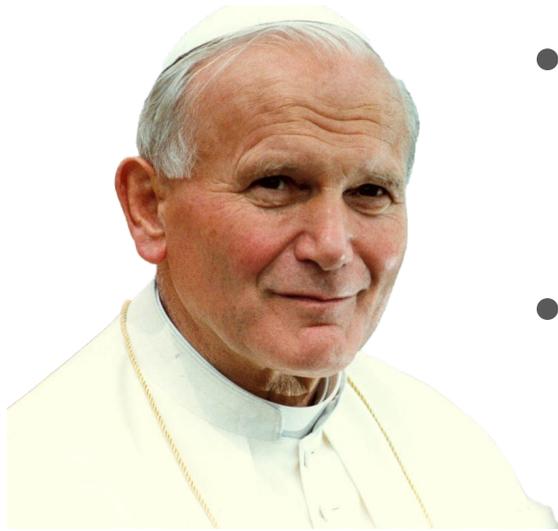
# Maintaining the Crucial Connection



- There is a danger when those involved in the mission of the Church lose such a seeing and loving heart.
- Pope Benedict spoke of this loss in 2011 in Freiburg, Germany, in a meeting with the Central Committee of German Catholics. He said: **“The Church in Germany is superbly organized.** But behind the structures, **is there also a corresponding spiritual strength,** the strength **of faith in the living God?** We must honestly admit that we have more than enough by way of structure but **not enough by way of Spirit.** I would add: **the real crisis facing the Church** in the western world **is a crisis of faith.** If we do not find a way of genuinely **renewing our faith,** all structural reform will remain ineffective.”



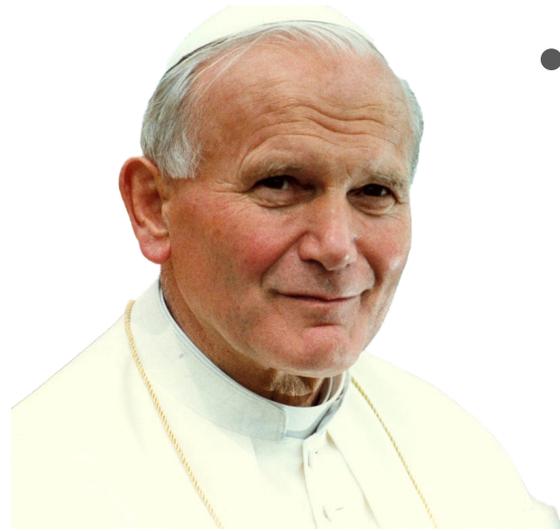
## Maintaining the Crucial Connection



- John Paul II, in *Redemptoris Missio*, responded to **the criticism** that keeping the Church's charity tied to the kerygma would essentially become a form of **evangelical bribery**.
- He said: "**Charity cannot be used as a means of engaging in** what is nowadays considered **proselytism**. Love is free; it is not practiced as a way of achieving other ends. **But this does not mean that charitable activity must somehow leave God and Christ aside. For it is always concerned with the whole man. Often the deepest cause of suffering is the very absence of God.**" (31)



# Maintaining the Crucial Connection



- “Those who practice charity ... realize that **a pure and generous love is the best witness to the God** in whom we believe and by whom we are driven to love. **A Christian knows** when it is time to speak of God and **when it is better to say nothing and to let love alone speak**. He knows that God is love (cf. 1 Jn 4:8) and that **God's presence is felt at the very time when the only thing we do is to love**. ... It is the **responsibility of the Church's charitable organizations to reinforce this awareness** in their members, **so that ... they may be credible witnesses to Christ**” (31).





## Pope Leo in *Dilexi Te*



- Pope Leo XIV, in his first encyclical, finished a document Pope Francis had started before his death.
- In the midst of a **global crisis in overseas development assistance** (ODA), which can sometimes tempt the Church's missionary organs to prioritize humanitarian works, he had us focus on the love of neighbor that flows from the love of God.
- We can finish our examination of Catholic Social Teaching in the Mission *ad gentes* by pondering some of what Pope Leo wrote.



## Pope Leo in *Dilexi Te*



- “**Love for the Lord**, then, **is one with love for the poor**. The same Jesus who tells us, ‘**The poor you will always have with you**’ (Mt 26:11), also promises the disciples: ‘**I am with you always**’ (Mt 28:20). We likewise think of his saying: ‘Just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, **you did it to me**’ (Mt 25:40). This is not a matter of mere human kindness but **a revelation**: contact with those who are lowly and powerless is a **fundamental way of encountering the Lord of history**. In the poor, he continues to speak to us” (5).



## Pope Leo in *Dilexi Te*



- “Jesus’ teaching on the primacy of love for God is clearly complemented by his insistence that one cannot love God without extending one’s love to the poor. Love for our neighbor is tangible proof of the authenticity of our love for God, as the Apostle John attests: ‘No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us... God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them’ (1 Jn 4:12,16). **The two loves are distinct yet inseparable.** Even in cases where there is no explicit reference to God, the Lord himself teaches that **every act of love for one’s neighbor is in some way a reflection of divine charity**” (26).



## Concluding Summary



- The Church, which is a mission, exists to fulfill the Great Commission, proclaiming and observing.
- The Church's magisterium has focused on this mission more since Vatican II.
- CST is part of the Church's proclamation and putting the Gospel into practice. *Diakonia* is as essential to the Church as *kerygma* and *leitourgia*.
- Challenges have come from emphasizing the kerygma without CST, or a watered-down, horizontal CST without Jesus.
- Evangelized evangelizers — clergy, religious and laity — keep the connection between love of God and love of others in their head and in their heart.



Thank **you!**