



## THE CHURCH AND FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

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In April 2021, Pope Francis's universal intention is for fundamental rights. "We pray for those who risk their lives while fighting for fundamental rights under dictatorships, authoritarian regimes and even in democracies in crisis," he says.

Since Pope John XXIII in the 1960s, human rights have been of central importance to Catholic social teaching and practice. Yet the approach of the Church to human rights is often different from that of the secular world.

First, the Church emphasizes daily rights. When St John XXIII listed the fundamental rights in his 1963 encyclical *Pacem in terris*, he began with what today are regarded as economic ones. "Man has the right to live," he says, "He has the right to bodily integrity and to the means necessary for the proper development of life, particularly food, clothing, shelter, medical care, rest, and, finally, the necessary social services."<sup>1</sup> Today, Pope Francis has the same emphasis, stressing in particular the rights to work, housing, land and food security - in Spanish, *tierra, techo y trabajo*. How important these prove to be during the COVID-19 pandemic!

Catholic social teaching roots human rights—economic and others—in the dignity of the human person. All the rights are interwoven, and all contribute to integral human development—the all-round development of each and every person along all dimensions of life from beginning to end, including future generations. Freedom connects them: people must be free to become active agents of their own development and care for our common home.

The second Catholic feature is that fundamental rights are not just individual. They are always rooted in the common good, not the satisfaction of individual desires. Hence Catholic social teaching has no truck with libertarian ideologies. In *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis notes "a tendency to claim ever broader individual – I am tempted to say individualistic – rights. Underlying this is a conception of the human person as detached from all social and anthropological contexts, as if the person were a "monad" (*monás*), increasingly unconcerned with others... Unless the rights of each individual are harmoniously ordered to the greater good, those rights will end up being considered limitless and consequently will become a source of conflicts and violence."<sup>2</sup> In fact, he says, "Individualism does not make us more free, more equal, more fraternal. The mere sum of individual interests is not capable of generating a better world for the whole human family. Nor can it save us from the many ills that are now increasingly globalized."<sup>3</sup>

Third, our Catholic approach links fundamental rights with fundamental duties. St John XXIII regarded them as two sides of the same coin: "In human society one man's natural right gives rise to a corresponding duty in other men; the duty, that is, of recognizing and respecting that right... Hence, to claim one's rights and

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<sup>1</sup> *Pacem in terris*, 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Fratelli tutti*, 111.

<sup>3</sup> *Fratelli tutti*, 105.

ignore one's duties, or only half fulfill them, is like building a house with one hand and tearing it down with the other.”<sup>4</sup> While this reciprocity of rights and duties is to be found between persons, it also engages the state in its positive role of promoting the common good and actualizing human rights. The modern state, on behalf of all of us, must make sure that every member of society effectively “has the right to be looked after in the event of ill health; disability stemming from his work; widowhood; old age; enforced unemployment; or whenever through no fault of his own he is deprived of the means of livelihood.”<sup>5</sup>

Thank God that there are brave men and women, including youth and seniors, who struggle to protect and promote fundamental human rights wherever and however they are threatened today. We pray that God bless, protect and strengthen the human rights defenders among us!

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<sup>4</sup> *Pacem in terris*, 30.

<sup>5</sup> *Pacem in terris*, 11.