Catholic Social Teaching: Major Themes

http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/projects/socialteaching/socialteaching.htm#themes

The Church's social teaching is a rich treasure of wisdom about building a just society and living lives of holiness amidst the challenges of modern society. It offers moral principles and coherent values that are badly needed in our time. In this time of widespread violence and diminished respect for human life and dignity in our country and around the world, the Gospel of life and the biblical call to justice need to be proclaimed and shared with new clarity, urgency, and energy.

1. Life and Dignity of the Human Person
In a world warped by materialism and declining respect for human life, the Catholic Church proclaims that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. Our belief in the sanctity of human life and the inherent dignity of the human person is the foundation of all the principles of our social teaching. In our society, human life is under direct attack from abortion and assisted suicide. The value of human life is being threatened by increasing use of the death penalty. The dignity of life is undermined when the creation of human life is reduced to the manufacture of a product, as in human cloning or proposals for genetic engineering to create "perfect" human beings. We believe that every person is precious, that people are more important than things, and that the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person.

2. Call to Family, Community, and Participation
In a global culture driven by excessive individualism, our tradition proclaims that the person is not only sacred but also social. How we organize our society—in economics and politics, in law and policy—directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community. The family is the central social institution that must be supported and strengthened, not undermined. While our society often exalts individualism, the Catholic tradition teaches that human beings grow and achieve fulfillment in community. We believe people have a right and a duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable. Our Church teaches that the role of government and other institutions is to protect human life and human dignity and promote the common good.

3. Rights and Responsibilities
In a world where some speak mostly of "rights" and others mostly of "responsibilities," the Catholic tradition teaches that human dignity can be protected and a healthy community can be achieved only if human rights are protected and responsibilities are met. Therefore, every person has a fundamental right to life and a right to those things required for human decency. Corresponding to these rights are duties and
responsibilities—to one another, to our families, and to the larger society. While public
debate in our nation is often divided between those who focus on personal responsibility
and those who focus on social responsibilities, our tradition insists that both are
necessary.

4. Option for the Poor and Vulnerable
In a world characterized by growing prosperity for some and pervasive poverty for
others, Catholic teaching proclaims that a basic moral test is how our most vulnerable
members are faring. In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor,
our tradition recalls the story of the Last Judgment (Mt 25:31-46) and instructs us to put
the needs of the poor and vulnerable first.

5. The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers
In a marketplace where too often the quarterly bottom line takes precedence over the
rights of workers, we believe that the economy must serve people, not the other way
around. Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation
in God's creation. If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of
workers must be respected—the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to
organize and join unions, to private property, and to economic initiative. Respecting these
rights promotes an economy that protects human life, defends human rights, and
advances the well-being of all.

6. Solidarity
Our culture is tempted to turn inward, becoming indifferent and sometimes isolationist in
the face of international responsibilities. Catholic social teaching proclaims that we are
our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they live. We are one human family, whatever
our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. Learning to practice
the virtue of solidarity means learning that "loving our neighbor" has global dimensions
in an interdependent world. This virtue is described by John Paul II as "a firm and
persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the
good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all"
(Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, no. 38).

7. Care for God's Creation
On a planet conflicted over environmental issues, the Catholic tradition insists that we
show our respect for the Creator by our stewardship of creation. Care for the earth is not
just an Earth Day slogan, it is a requirement of our faith. We are called to protect people
and the planet, living our faith in relationship with all of God's creation. This
environmental challenge has fundamental moral and ethical dimensions that cannot be
ignored.