



LESSON TWENTY-SIX

The Social Doctrine of the Church and the Works of Mercy

Opening Prayer

Prayer for Peace

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.*

*O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

Amen.

Lesson Objectives:

- ❖ Understand that social justice is not based on political ideologies, but on the Incarnation and the inherent dignity of every human person, and from that, on our responsibilities to one another.
- ❖ Identify the principles of Catholic social doctrine: human dignity, the common good, solidarity, and subsidiarity, and recognize how they shape moral obligations toward others.
- ❖ Connect the works of mercy to opportunities in everyday life, understanding that the works of mercy, rooted in the Gospel, are a nonnegotiable part of discipleship and make love tangible.

BURNING QUESTIONS

❖ Isn't social justice just politics disguised as religion?

How would you define social justice? What is it in practice? Why do you think the Church is concerned with it?

❖ Why should I be responsible for others when I can barely take care of myself?

Is there any benefit to caring for others when we ourselves are needy? Has someone unexpected ever helped you or cared for you? Could your own neediness somehow help you help someone else?

St. Teresa of Calcutta (Mother Teresa)

Feast Day: September 5

Lived: August 26, 1910 – September 5, 1997 · Skopje, North Macedonia · Patron of the poor, Missionaries of Charity

Born Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu, she joined the Sisters of Loreto at eighteen and took the name Teresa, teaching in Calcutta for nearly two decades. In 1946 she experienced what she called “a call within a call”—a profound conviction that she was meant to leave the classroom and serve Christ in “the poorest of the poor.” She founded the Missionaries of Charity, dedicating her life to the dying, the abandoned, and the forgotten on the streets of Calcutta. She insisted that every person, no matter how broken or destitute, carried the same dignity as Christ himself—and that the deepest poverty in the modern world is often not material but the poverty of being unloved and unwanted.



“Today if we have no peace it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.”

St. Teresa of Calcutta

The Foundation: Human Dignity

Made in the Image of God

Catholic social teaching begins not with policy but with a theological truth: every human being, without exception, is made in the image and likeness of God (see Genesis 1:26) and therefore possesses inherent, inviolable dignity (see CCC 1700). This dignity does not depend on usefulness, ability, nationality, wealth, or any other condition. It is the foundation for everything the Church teaches about justice, and it cannot be earned, diminished, or taken away.

Jesus: The Pattern of Justice and Mercy

Jesus proclaimed good news to the poor, healed the sick, fed the hungry, and welcomed the outsider (see Luke 4:18–19). He told us plainly that we will be judged by how we treat others—whether we feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, or visit the sick and imprisoned (see Matthew 25:31–46). These are not metaphors; they are the pattern of Christ that Catholic social teaching follows.



“As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.”

Matthew 25:40

The Core Principles

The Common Good and Solidarity

The common good refers to the conditions that allow all people in a community to flourish—not merely the sum of material things (see CCC 1906). Solidarity flows from the recognition that, despite our differences, we share one Creator and are “ordered to his glory” (CCC 344). Solidarity demands that we listen to the cries of those who are poor and suffering, allowing their suffering to affect us rather than looking away.

Subsidiarity: The Importance of Local Action

Subsidiarity is the principle that decisions should be made at the most local level possible, starting with individuals and families. Larger institutions have a role, but it is one of support, not replacement. Real change often begins locally: a family taking in a foster child, a parish starting a food pantry, neighbors organizing to help a family in crisis.



“A community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order ... but rather should support it.”

CCC 1883, quoting *Centesimus Annus* 48

Living the Gospel Through Action

The Works of Mercy

Perhaps nowhere is Catholic social teaching more tangible than in the works of mercy—the practical, real-world expressions of love rooted in the teachings of Christ. Each act of mercy brings us into contact with him: when we feed the hungry, we feed him; when we comfort the grieving, we become his hands.

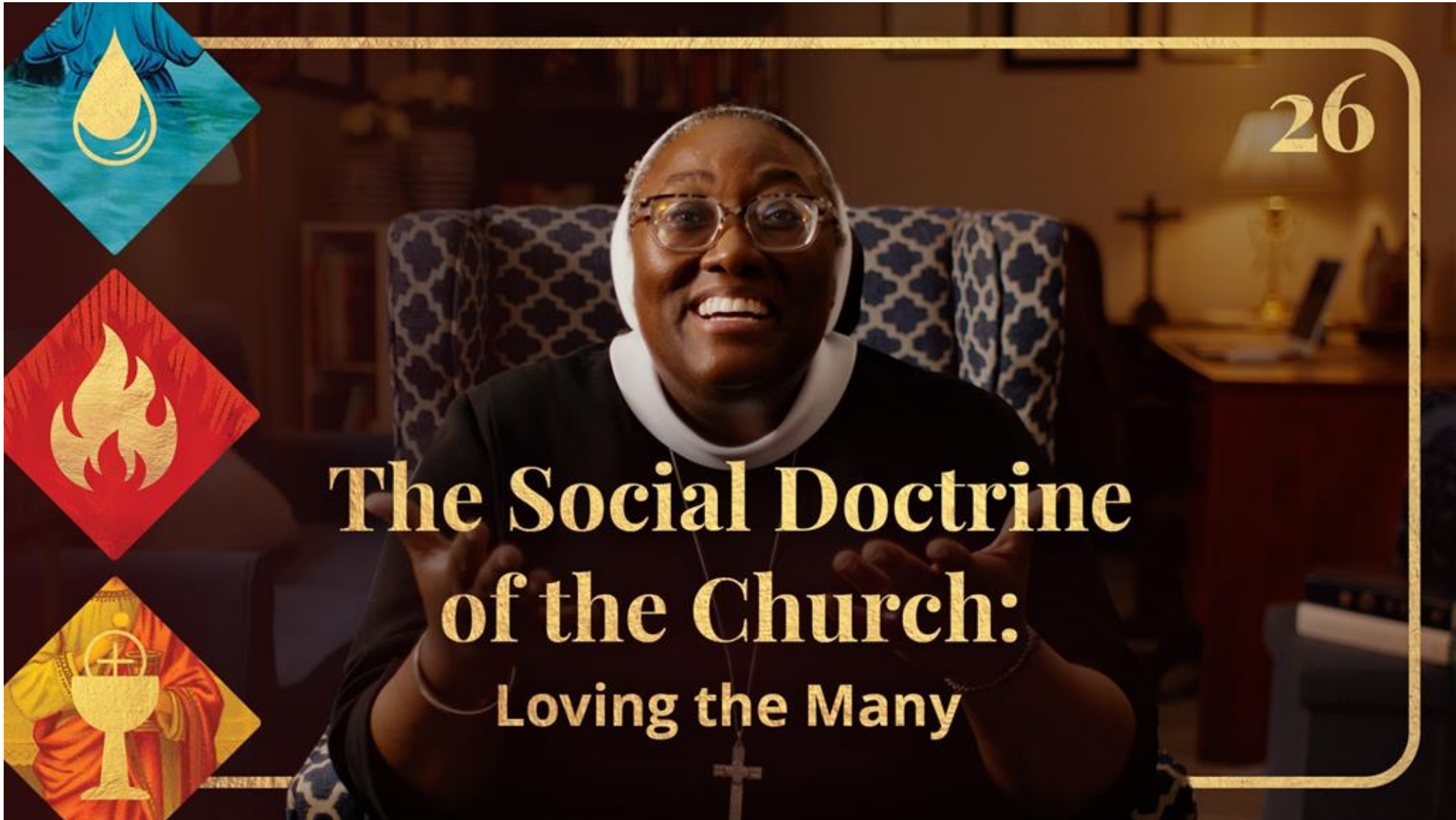
What Does This Mean for Us?

No one is responsible for solving every injustice in the world. But every person is responsible for something—a neighbor, a need, an opportunity right in front of them. When acted on faithfully, sacrificially, and consistently, even small acts of mercy become a witness to the Gospel, and the Kingdom of God begins to grow through them.



“Society as a whole must respect, defend and promote the dignity of every human person, at every moment and in every condition of that person’s life,”

John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*



Discussion Questions

- ❖ We understand human dignity as both a gift from God and a shared reality, in which “what happens to you or me also happens to Jesus.” How does this change the way we approach moral decisions in our daily lives?
- ❖ How does this understanding of interconnectedness shape our moral obligations? When have you witnessed or experienced how one person’s decision for justice benefited many others?
- ❖ What does it mean for social justice to flow naturally from faith rather than being an add-on or optional activity? How might this perspective challenge the common separation between personal spirituality and social engagement?

Faith and Fun

Which saint, known for his adventurous spirit and deep love for the poor, once skipped a wealthy party to bring medicine and food to sick families? He was nicknamed “The Man of the Eight Beatitudes.”

a. St. Vincent de Paul

b. St. Óscar Romero

c. St. Pier Giorgio Frassati

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St. Pier Giorgio Frassati embodied Catholic social teaching through quiet, consistent acts of love: serving the poor, defending justice, and living the Beatitudes with joy. His life reminds us that holiness and justice are not reserved for religious or clergy—they are the call of every baptized person. He shows us that service and sanctity can go hand in hand with joy, friendship, and ordinary life.

Foot Washing on Holy Thursday

What Happens During the *Mandatum*?

At the Last Supper, Jesus washes the feet of his disciples and says: “I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (John 13:15). On Holy Thursday, the Church commemorates this through an optional rite called the *Mandatum*—the washing of feet. After the homily, the priest washes the feet of selected members of the faithful, pouring water over each person’s feet and drying them.

The Deeper Meaning

Mandatum is Latin for “commission.” It refers to the commission Jesus gives his followers in John 13:34: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you.” When the priest, who shares in the ministry of Christ, humbles himself to serve each person, it mirrors the profound invitation Christ gives all of us.



Living It Out:

Choose one work of mercy, either corporal or spiritual, and commit to living it out this week. This could mean many different things. Journal about how this act affects you.

Closing Prayer

*Dear Jesus,
help us to spread your fragrance everywhere we go.
Flood our souls with your spirit and life.
Penetrate and possess our whole being so utterly
that our lives may only be a radiance of yours.
Shine through us, and be so in us
that every soul we come in contact with
may feel your presence in our soul.
Let them look up and see no longer us, but only Jesus!
Stay with us, and then we shall begin to shine as you shine;
so to shine as to be a light to others;*

*the light, O Jesus, will be all from you; none of it will be ours;
it will be you, shining on others through us.
Let us thus praise you in the way you love best,
by shining on those around us.
Let us preach you without preaching,
not by words but by our example,
by the catching force,
the sympathetic influence of what we do,
the evident fullness of the love our hearts bear to you.*

*Amen.*¹

1. Teresa of Calcutta, in *Mother Teresa's Secret Fire* by Joseph Langford (Our Sunday Visitor, 2008), 162, archive. org.

Announcements / Reminders — add notes here