

A photograph of an elderly person's hand holding a child's hand, with a piece of bread held between them. The background is a soft, out-of-focus blue-grey.

*A Well-Ordered Society Rooted in
Truth, Justice, and Peace*

A Pastoral Letter by Archbishop Paul D. Etienne

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Grace and peace to you in Our Lord Jesus Christ.

In these turbulent times — marked by conflict abroad, fragmentation at home, and profound questions about our shared moral life — the Church once again lifts high the Gospel as the light by which we must walk. The Second Vatican Council*, Catholic Social Teaching* and the Jan. 9, 2026, address of Pope Leo XIV* to the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See illuminate our path with clarity and a renewed urgency. In his address, the Holy Father framed the challenges of our age through the lens of St. Augustine’s “City of God,”* offering a deeply Christian vision of peace, justice, and right order.

I wish to reflect with you on these themes, especially as they touch two essential pillars of any Christian society:

- 1. Charity — love of neighbor**
- 2. Respect for the rule of law**

These do not stand apart from the principles of our social teaching, but they flow directly from them.

Our Catholic Social Teaching makes clear that rights also come with corresponding duties. Every person has the right to what is necessary for human decency — food, work, safety, health care — but also the responsibility to ensure these rights for others.

The purpose of this pastoral letter is to help us understand these basic principles and to commit ourselves to building a better society.



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1. The Dignity of Every Human Person

Catholic Social Teaching begins with the unshakeable truth that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God. This fundamental dignity forms the bedrock of all moral life and a just society.

It is up to every person to evaluate how the complex realities of our present world are in “compliance with or divergence from the Gospel teaching on the human person and his or her vocation, a vocation which is at once earthly and transcendent; its aim is thus to guide Christian behavior” (*Compendium of The Social Doctrine of the Church*, #72)*. Referring to the Catholic Social Doctrine, St. Pope John Paul II said: “This teaching ... is to be found at the crossroads where Christian life and conscience come into contact with the real world. It is seen in the efforts of individuals, families, people involved in cultural and social life, as well as politicians and statesmen to give it a concrete form and application in history” (*Centesimus Annus*, #59)*.

Our task is to continually seek righteousness in our own life — to seek and follow the will of God — to live according to the natural moral order written on every human heart.

“Blessed is the one who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the way of sinners, nor sit in company with scoffers. Rather, the law of the Lord is his joy; and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted near streams of water, that yields its fruit in season.” – *Psalms 1:1-3**

Pope Leo XIV reminded the world that the **right to life is the foundation of every other right**. When societies disregard the sanctity of the unborn, the vulnerable, or the marginalized, they undermine justice at its root. Authentic respect for life also extends to refugees and migrants, to those who suffer discrimination, to the elderly, the poor, and the weary. Every life is sacred, regardless of the actions of the individual, and every individual is capable of living in right relationship with God.

Love of neighbor begins here — by seeing Christ in each person and responding with reverence and compassion. We practice it daily in the way we treat a person who is homeless, how we talk to one another, how we respond to our neighbors, including those who may appear to be shunned by the broader community.

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2. The Common Good and the Rule of Law

The **common good**, as the fathers of the Second Vatican Council taught in *Gaudium et Spes*^{*}, consists of the social conditions that allow all people and communities to flourish. At the heart of these conditions stands **respect for the rule of law**.

The Rule of Law as a Moral Pillar

The rule of law is not simply a political convenience. It is a moral achievement. It embodies the conviction that justice, not force, must govern human relationships. Laws grounded in moral truth safeguard the weak, hold the strong accountable, and restrain the impulses of domination that St. Augustine identifies with the “city of man.”

Pope Leo XIV warned that when nations and leaders abandon dialogue in favor of coercion, they erode “**the foundation of all peaceful civil coexistence**.” When the law becomes a tool of power rather than a guardian of justice, society begins to fracture.

St. Augustine’s Wisdom

St. Augustine’s idea of “**the tranquility of order**” helps us see that peace is not merely the absence of conflict — it is the presence of right order. Just laws, rightly applied, form the framework within which charity, freedom, and human dignity can flourish.

Thus, **respect for the rule of law is an expression of our commitment to the common good**. It ensures that justice, rather than self-interest, shapes our shared life. To be valid, the rule of law must be applied with due regard for the dignity of the human person and the sanctity of life. Violence begets violence. Whether it is an individual or a nation that has strayed from the rule of law, as Pope Francis stated, “the logic of hatred and violence” can never be justified.

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3. Solidarity: Love in Social Form

Solidarity is the social expression of charity. It calls us to recognize every person as a brother or sister and to bear one another's burdens.

*"I call you friends." –John 15:15**

Today, Pope Leo XIV draws attention to the suffering of countless Christians facing persecution across the world. He also warns of subtle but real forms of discrimination in nations that once heralded religious freedom.

At home, where division and suspicion are rising, solidarity takes the form of a renewed commitment to **love of neighbor**:

- Resisting contempt and division
- Protecting the vulnerable
- Welcoming the stranger
- Standing with those who suffer injustice

Solidarity is charity lived at all levels of society: family, neighborhood, city, state, nation, international community. Solidarity includes international assistance. Solidarity involves compassion for those fleeing their homeland due to violence or persecution or any number of realities that violate human dignity and safety. Solidarity is lived when Catholic Charities entities serve anyone who comes to them. Solidarity is speaking up to protect all human life from conception to natural death.

Solidarity, perhaps more than any other principle of a well-ordered society, emphasizes the necessity of good relationships in a world that has so many levels of interdependence. The Compendium of The Social Doctrine of the Church makes this quite clear:

Solidarity is also an authentic moral virtue, not a "feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is 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." Solidarity rises to the rank of fundamental social virtue since it places itself in the sphere of justice. It is a virtue directed par excellence to the common good, and is found in "a commitment to the good of one's neighbor with the readiness, in the Gospel sense, to 'lose oneself' for the sake of the other instead of exploiting him, and to 'serve him' instead of oppressing him for one's own advantage." (#193)*

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4. Subsidiarity and the Freedom to Love

Jesus commissioned the 12 apostles (*Matthew 10*)* and sent out the 72 disciples (*Luke 10*)*. Jesus entrusts real responsibility to individuals and communities to demonstrate that participation and responsibility belong at every level.

The principle of **subsidiarity** affirms that decisions should be made at the most local level possible, respecting the integrity of families, parishes, and communities. This principle only functions when those local communities are animated by **charity** – the daily, practical love that strengthens relationships.

Pope Leo XIV's concern about the manipulation of language and the erosion of truth reveals another danger: When truth is distorted, families and communities lose the freedom to act rightly. Subsidiarity requires truthful discourse, moral clarity, and the freedom to pursue the good.

“Jesus said: ‘I am the way and the truth and the life.’” –*John 14:6* *

5. Charity and Love of Neighbor: The Heart of Christian Society

While the rule of law ensures order, **charity ensures humanity**. While the law provides structure, **love provides meaning**.

Jesus Christ makes love of neighbor the second greatest commandment, inseparable from love of God (*Matthew 22:37-40*)*. No society rooted merely in legality can flourish; it must also be rooted in mercy, compassion, and self-giving love.

Charity is not optional; it is the soul of Christian social life.

Where charity is absent, the law becomes cold. Harsh enforcement of laws in ruthless and intimidating fashion lacks the basic demand of human dignity, respect and compassion.

Where the law is absent, charity becomes vulnerable. Together, law and charity form the harmony St. Augustine envisioned and Pope Leo XIV calls us to rediscover.

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Conclusion

The principles laid out in this instruction are the building blocks, the basic foundation for a well-ordered society. When these rights and responsibilities are lacking or ignored, the human family begins to live in discord, disharmony, chaos. Many people today are asking what we can do to recover a more tranquil experience of life. Paying attention to these principles is a good place to find the answers to that question.

Brothers and sisters, the world around us is undergoing profound change and we are experiencing no small amount of fragmentation, but Christ remains our sure foundation. Pope Leo XIV's Augustinian vision reminds us that the destiny of society depends on the love that shapes it. May we choose, again and again, the path of truth, justice, charity, and peace.

With gratitude for your witness and trust in Christ's abiding presence, I remain,

In the Heart of Christ,



✠ Paul D. Etienne, DD, STL
Archbishop of Seattle

O God, who arrange all things
according to a wonderful design,
Graciously receive the prayers we pour
out for our country,

That, through the wisdom of its leaders
and the integrity of its citizens,
Harmony and justice may be assured
and lasting prosperity come with peace.

Through our Lord, Jesus Christ, your
Son, who lives and reigns with you in
the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God for ever and ever.

Amen.

*(Roman Missal)**



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A Call to the Church in Western Washington

Dear friends, mindful of the foundational principles of our Catholic Social Teaching and the corresponding responsibility of every person to act accordingly for a sound society, I invite you to:

1. Deepen your faith.

Return to the sacraments, Scripture, and daily prayer. Christ Himself is our peace. Renewing and strengthening our relationship with and in Christ is a lifelong journey.

2. Practice charity intentionally.

In your homes, workplaces, and communities, choose mercy over judgment, service over self, encounter over suspicion. A daily examination of conscience keeps us on the path of conversion and growth according to the wisdom of God.

3. Honor the rule of law and promote justice.

Work for a society where laws protect the weak, uphold truth, and serve the common good.

4. Strengthen families and local communities.

These are the primary places where love is learned and lived, where the Gospel is put into action.

5. Pray and work for peace.

Let us intercede for nations in conflict, for leaders who bear heavy responsibilities, and for all who long for security and justice.