

MAKE ME AN INSTRUMENT OF YOUR PEACE

Rights and responsibilities

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Fourth in a series

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. Every basic human right draws its authoritative force from the natural law, which confers it and attaches to it its respective duty. Hence, to claim one's rights and ignore one's duties, or only half fulfill them, is like building a house with one hand and tearing it down with the other.

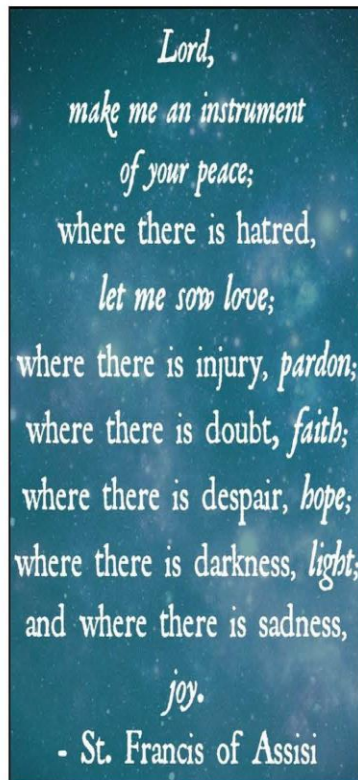
-Pope St. John XXIII

Encyclical: *Pacem in Terris, Peace on Earth*

As citizens and residents of the United States, we often regard our rights as those which are enumerated in the Bill of Rights of our Constitution, such as: freedom of religion, speech, and the press, freedom to peaceably assemble, freedom to petition the government, the right to keep and bear arms, the right to due process and a fair trial, etc. And the Ninth Amendment even reminds us that the people retain rights that are not explicitly stated in the Constitution.

But the Church is not limited to that which is recognized by governments. We do hope that governments reflect Christian values, and we should strive to hold our governments accountable to that end, but we have the individual responsibility to recognize and respect rights, even if our government fails to do so.

The statement above from Pope John illustrates how the Church recognizes responsibilities and rights - as a twofold dynamic that must remain in balance. Our responsibilities in response to the rights of others is based on the concept of *solidarity*, which will be explained later in this series, "Make Me An Instrument of Your Peace." *Subsidiarity* is employed to work in conjunction with *solidarity*.



As Pope Benedict XVI explained in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (Charity in Truth), when people are unable to accomplish something on their own, *subsidiarity* describes the assistance given to them that is "designed to achieve their emancipation, because it fosters freedom and participation through assumption of responsibility" (no. 57).

With this description, Habitat for Humanity comes to mind. The organization builds homes for people who would otherwise be unable to afford them.

In addition to repaying the affordable mortgage, the homebuyer invests hundreds of hours of labor alongside volunteers and other Habitat

homeowners. This is not a "handout" but an investment in the community and in the individual, and it is done on a very local level.

That is another characteristic of *subsidiarity* - keeping the authority and decision-making at the lowest level to achieve a goal. It avoids what Pope Benedict called, "paternalist social assistance that is demeaning to those in need." (no. 58)

Pope St. John Paul II wrote in his apostolic exhortation, *Christifideles Laici*, "The inviolability of the person which is a reflection of the absolute inviolability of God, finds its primary and fundamental expression in the *inviolability of human life*. Above all, the common outcry, which is justly made on behalf of human rights - for example, the right to health, to home, to work, to family, to culture - is false and illusory if the *right to life*, the most basic and fundamental right and the condition for all other personal rights, is not defended with maximum determination." (no. 38)

So, the right to life is first. This does not absolve us of our duties to the other rights he mentioned. When the right to life is respected, the demand for these other rights is, in his words, "justly made."

The "duty" to which Pope John refers, is to our neighbor, and respecting that right means directly responding to it when we have the ability. How could we be aware of a hungry or homeless member of our community and not respond as Jesus commanded us? The rights that our faith recognizes all stem from our human dignity: the right to life, the right to bodily integrity, the right to nourishment, the right to medical care. All require, to one degree or another, the cooperation of others. Christ's teaching about love of neighbor is the very foundation of the Works of Mercy, both corporal and spiritual, that are taught by the Church.

One last thought: St. Teresa of Calcutta recognized the rights of all those for whom she cared. She based it on the reflection of Jesus in their being. When we consider this in our responsibilities towards our neighbors, it is much easier to act in charity and for the "duty" to come with much less effort.