

Catholic Social Teaching on Private Property: An Examination of Christian Theology & Ethics
Dawn M. Carpenter

Abstract

“People are of greater value for what they are than for what they have. Technical progress is of less value than advances towards greater justice, wider kinship and a more humane social environment. Technical progress may supply the material for human advance but it is powerless to achieve it.”

Gaudium et Spes: The Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World, 1965

By all measure, modern man has enjoyed the highest standard of living ever experienced in human history. However, has this material progress advanced all aspects of man, and how should we think about materiality and private property and its purpose? Two of the most challenging questions in the 21st century relate to grappling with an understanding of why we work and what we should do with our wealth. One way to answer these vexing questions is to seek an ethical framework that provides a systematic logic for social order. Pope Saint John Paul II, in the Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens*, offers a compelling paradigm for understanding the social order when he concludes that the right to the common use of goods is “the first principle of the whole ethical and social order.” He further emphasized in his Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* that in fact it is “the characteristic principle of [the entire] Christian social doctrine.”

This paper will explore the notion of private property through the lens of Catholic Social Teaching and will argue that a proper understanding of the theological nature of private property makes it possible to understand man’s right relationship with the material world. This argument will be developed by elucidating the theological basis for private property while explaining the two core concepts of (1) universal destination of goods and (2) the natural law right to private property. In following, there will be a discussion of the evolution of the understanding of what private property is and what its distortions look like and will conclude by delineating the social function of private property and the role of the state.

OUTLINE:

1. Introduction
2. The Theological Basis for Private Property
3. The Universal Destination of Goods
4. The Natural Law Right to Private Property
5. The Evolution of the Understanding of Private Property
6. The Social Function of Private Property
7. Private Property and the Role of the State
8. Conclusion