Basic Elements of Catholic Social Thought

Catholic Church has the longest and broadest tradition of reflection on the complication of revelation and tradition for human society. The four basic principles which underpin this body of thought are:

1.) Personalism -

All thinking about society begins with the notion of the inalienable, inviolable value of the human person. This must transcend the state, nation, tribe, gender, race, and etc. Human beings are always ends in themselves they can never be used as means. Human beings have an inherent dignity and are equal and that equality is their equality-in-dignity endowed by their immortal soul.

A significant element of the Catholic opposition to <u>fetal stem cell</u> research and abortion is rooted in this principle. There is no Catholic opposition to other stem cell research.

2.) The Common Good -

The stress here is on the structures of community beginning with the family. One can only grow into one's full potential as a human being through human relations. We can never become fully human except in society. Thus we must live out our freedom in a way that contributes to the commonwealth. Catholic Social Thought speaks of persons rather than individuals.

3.) Subsidiary -

This principle underlines the importance of free association for human being and the establishment of civil society. It distinguishes sharply between state or government and civil society. Voluntary associations and the family are the tissue of a free society.

Decision making about all human problems should be left at the lowest level possible and still serve the common good. This principle cemented an anxiety about the state into Catholic Social Thought. It is suspicious that all states seek to grow and to aggrandize their power.

4.) Solidarity -

This is the principle of civic friendship. Free civil society requires deeper level of relationships between people than just contracts.

In the twentieth Century, Catholic Social Thought added a strong emphasis on the significance of work. It was seen as a human participation in God's creation. We become fully ourselves through work. This was to an important degree the influence of John Paul II who once observed that to end the World God would have to stop doing and that we are his partners in this doing. As part of this sense of the importance of work was also the right of economic initiative as an element of human creativity which has to be protected from the state and corporate institutions.

Other issues raised by the dialogue of Catholic thought with the World in the 20th Century are the public function of wealth which must be seen not a stuff to be owned and kept but as a store of human resources and the product of creativity which must be used in the common good and new ways to think about poverty. The basic questions is not how to transfer resources to help the poor but how to include the poor in networks of participation and creativity. This has spawned the idea of "the preferential option for the poor" as a watchword of Catholic Social Thought.

Underlying all of these notions is that human freedom and creativity require virtue and a public culture based on moral principles. These moral principles are accessible to all through human reason. You do not have to be Catholic or have access to revelation to know them.