



Catholic Social Teaching – Theological Context: Reading the Signs of the Times

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Excerpt from Catholic Social Teaching: Our Best Kept Secret, (2003) Orbis Books and the Center of Concern. CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING Catholic Social Teaching Theological Context: Reading the Signs of the Times Excerpted from Catholic Social

Teaching: Our Best Kept Secret, (2003) Orbis Books and the Center of Concern. To purchase this book, go to www.coc.org.

A foundational conviction underlying Catholic social teaching is that God is at work in human history. This was true in biblical times; it is true today. It is true in places the gospel has been embraced; and it is true in places and among people who have never heard of the gospel or of Jesus the Christ. God is at work healing and redeeming human history and inviting all people to participate in that work. Perceiving the historical action of God and discerning God's invitation are often now referred to as "reading the signs of the times."

"The term "signs of the times" in contemporary Catholic social thought is a term based upon Jesus' statement to the Pharisees and Sadducees in Matthew 16:4 —"You know how to read the face of the sky, but you cannot read the signs of the times." Pope John XXIII made the first use of the term in modern Catholic social teaching to refer to the principal characteristics of the age that are emerging from the collective consciousness of the human community in the form of shared understandings and social movements. In *Peace on Earth (Pacem in Terris)*, John XXIII identified the women's movement, the movement for workers' rights, and the ending of colonialism as important "signs of the times."

”The Second Vatican Council embraced the notion, bringing it to the heart of the church’s mission.

“...the church seeks but a solitary goal: to carry forward the work of Christ Himself under the lead of the befriending Spirit. And Christ entered this world to give witness to the truth, to rescue and not to sit in judgment, to serve and not to be served. To carry out such a task, the church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the gospel.” (The Church in the Modern World [Gaudium et Spes])

The “signs of the times,” then, embody and reflect the movement of the Holy Spirit in human history working to bring about the redemption of peoples and the fuller realization of the Reign of God. Interpreting the “signs of the times” requires prayerful discernment within the Christian community and in dialogue with all people of good will. The criteria for this discernment involve the coherence of the contemporary “signs of the times” with the gospels, the Christian understanding of human nature, and the common good.

The growing body of Catholic social teaching, beginning with On the Condition of Labor (Rerum Novarum), comprises a collection of efforts by the church to read the “signs of the times” since 1891.

1. In your opinion, what are some of the current “signs of the times?”
2. Why is it important that you and your colleagues identify and interpret the “signs of the times”?