

# ACSJJC SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION GUIDE: *Mater et Magistra (On Christianity and Social Progress)*

Pope John XXIII's *Mater et Magistra* was issued at a time of great social, economic and cultural change. The 1950s and 60s were characterised by huge developments in science and technology, economic globalisation, decolonisation, civil rights and pop culture.

Some events of 1961 hint at the signs of the times. In February, the Beatles played for the first time in Liverpool's Cavern Club. In May, the US Freedom Riders began their journey against racism. On 15 May, the very day of the Encyclical's launch, scientists at the US National Institutes of Health deciphered the genetic code. Later that month, President Kennedy set the goal of putting a man on the moon. The building of the Berlin Wall began in August and the Vietnam War officially commenced in December.

Amid the social upheaval and rapid change of the time, Pope John restated Christ's commandment of love and highlighted the Church's ongoing concern for the dignity of the person and the sanctity of human life. (# 1–6).

## The human person is the focus

Pope John said that the focus of the Church's social doctrine is the human person, and that this concern rises above ideologies and endures through times of change:

*The permanent validity of the Catholic Church's social teaching admits of no doubt. This teaching rests on one basic principle: individual human beings are the foundation, the cause and the end of every social institution. (# 218–219)*

He had in mind those aspects of the modern era that would deny God and to attempt to reconstruct a social order that ignored people's spiritual aspirations and human dignity. (# 217)

The concern was that scientific, economic and other social advancements would be of little benefit and could actually harm individuals and communities if these basic principles were not observed:

*Scientific and technical progress, economic development and the betterment of living conditions, are certainly valuable elements in a civilisation. But we must realise that they are essentially instrumental in character. They are not supreme values in themselves. (# 175)*

Pope John particularly condemned the greed that saw 'science, technology and economics ... pursued for its own sake, as though material well-being were the be-all and end-all of life.' (# 176)

He said that, while nations were becoming more aware of the need to work together for their mutual development, the absence of trust among leaders of the world was preventing cooperation and, instead, fear and aggression led to 'a vast expenditure of human energy and natural resources on projects which are disruptive of human society rather than beneficial to it.' (# 203)

Some of the consequences he noted were:

- a growing gap between rich and poor (# 48)
- the decline and devaluation of agriculture with huge consequences for poorer communities (# 123 f)
- developed nations giving technical and financial aid with the intention of controlling the politics of recipient nations (# 171 f)
- scientific and economic resources used to produce 'instruments of ruin and death' (# 198)
- vast amounts being spent on armaments or 'building up an ill-conceived national prestige' (# 69, 203, 210).

*The only possible solution to this question is one which envisages the social and economic progress both of individuals and of the whole of human society, and which respects and promotes true human values. (# 192)*

The Pope called for a renewed commitment to human dignity and 'the immense worth of each individual human life'. This should be the basis of worldwide sharing of knowledge, capital and labour (# 192).



## A just distribution of wealth

Pope John made it clear that the economy must serve society:

*Economic progress must be accompanied by a corresponding social progress ... [T]he economic prosperity of a nation is not so much its total assets in terms of wealth and property, as the equitable division and distribution of this wealth. (# 73–74)*

He said governments had a vital role to address the wealth divide and to ensure the poorest communities had essential public services, basic economic opportunities, and an acceptable standard of living (# 150–151).

Some of the essential facilities included roads, transport, communications, water, housing with modern installations, health services, elementary through to professional education, religious and recreational facilities (# 127).

Pope John identified the responsibility of government to go further in ensuring justice and equity for vulnerable groups through the management of economic policies relating to taxation, credit and finance, pricing, industry assistance and social security (# 131–141).

He called for the empowerment and inclusion of poorer regions and communities in the decision-making process:

*Everything must be done to ensure that citizens of the less developed areas are treated as responsible human beings, and are allowed to play the major role in achieving their own economic, social and cultural advancement. (#151)*

## Reading the signs of the times

In *Mater et Magistra* we see the development of the Church's social teaching as a process or method of analysis and social action.

Pope John affirmed the process of 'See, Judge, Act':

*First, one reviews the concrete situation; secondly, one forms a judgment on it in the light of these same principles; thirdly, one decides what in the circumstances can and should be done to implement these principles. (# 236)*

The Pope called for the global promotion of this process, saying, 'We must reaffirm most strongly that this Catholic social doctrine is an integral part of the Christian conception of life.' (# 222)

He called for social teaching to be incorporated into the daily curriculum of Catholic schools, to be taught in seminaries, in the religious instruction programs of parishes and lay associations, and for its promotion in society through 'every modern means at our disposal' (# 223).

*We have given principles and directives which We exhort you earnestly to think over, and now, for your part, to put into effect. Your courageous co-operation in this respect will surely help to bring about the realisation of Christ's Kingdom in this world ... (#261)*

## For reflection and discussion

Where in Australia can you see economic growth without corresponding social progress? Who has not shared adequately in the prosperity of the last decade and a half?

What does the community development and empowerment approach of *Mater et Magistra* have to offer in terms of an alternative to the Northern Territory Intervention?

Consider practical ways Catholic social teaching can be promoted in parishes and schools.

## Documents

**The encyclical *Mater et Magistra* can be found at:** [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_j-xxiii\\_enc\\_15051961\\_mater\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_15051961_mater_en.html)

**2011 Pastoral Letter for the Feast of St Joseph the Worker, *Indigenous employment: the most basic form of social justice*:** <http://www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au>

**Address of Pope Benedict XVI on the 50th Anniversary of the Encyclical *Mater et Magistra*:**

[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2011/may/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20110516\\_justpeace\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2011/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110516_justpeace_en.html)