A Reflection on Rights and Duties as Presented in *Pacem in Terris*

**INTRODUCTION**

In his 1963 encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, Pope John XXIII writes that “peace on earth, which all people of every era have most eagerly yearned for, can be firmly established only if the order laid down by God be dutifully observed.” This order is based on rights and duties that are to be followed by individuals, public authorities, national governments, and the world community.

The following reflection guides the reader through a series of quotes, prayers and questions to help explore the philosophy of rights and duties that is presented by John XXIII in *Pacem in Terris*.

(Please note: this reflection focuses specifically on the topic of rights and duties. It is not intended to cover all of the concepts and principles presented in the encyclical. To learn more about Pacem in Terris, go to http://www.coc.org/pdfs/ej/paceminterris.pdf.)

**Rights and Duties of Individuals**

As children of God created in God’s image, human persons have a preeminent place in creation. Human dignity is the result of human existence. It is not earned by achievements or bestowed by any authorities other than God.

**Questions for Reflection**

*When have we acknowledged all of the people of the earth as children of God?*
*When have we failed to recognize all of the people of the earth as children of God?*
*How can we care for others as our brothers and sisters?*

Catholic Social Thought teaches that rights are an expression of human dignity. All people have certain rights:

- The right food, clothing, shelter, medical care, rest and necessary social services
- The right to education, the pursuit of knowledge, and freedom of expression
- The right to freedom of religion and conscience
- The right to choose one’s state in life, whether that be to marry, remain single, enter religious life
- The right to work with just and sufficient wages and to hold private property
- The right to emigrate and immigrate
- The right to participate in public affairs

With human rights come their corresponding duties to honor and protect the rights of all others and to build the kind of society that protects and nourishes the rights of all.

**Prayer**

We are thankful, O God, for you have blessed us with food, clothing, shelter, medical care, rest, education, work, freedom of expression, freedom of conscience and so much more.

Yet, we ask for forgiveness, for we have not fulfilled our duties. We look around us and see so many of our brothers and sisters who are hungry, homeless, uninsured, uneducated and suffering in a multitude of ways.

O God, help us to establish an order of justice based on rights and duties. Help us to create peace.

Amen.

**Rights and Duties of Public Authorities**

The role of public authorities is to promote the common good; that is, to ensure that personal rights and duties are “recognized, respected, coordinated, defended and promoted . . .” (*Pacem in Terris*, #60).
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**Questions for Reflection**

How have we held our elected officials accountable to the common good? How have we failed to do so?

How can we learn more about the issues that affect our impoverished brothers and sisters? How can we make this a priority of our faith community?

**Prayer**

O God, we ask for your forgiveness, for we have not done all that we can to effect change in the laws that hurt our brothers and sisters.

O God, help us to establish an order of justice based on rights and duties. Help us to create peace.

Amen.

**Rights and Duties of National Governments**

Nations are also subjects of reciprocal rights and duties, and that the promotion of the common good must be of primary concern. “The prosperity and progress of any State is in part consequence, and in part cause, of the prosperity and progress of all other States” (*Pacem in Terris*, #131).

**Questions for Reflection**

How has our nation fulfilled its duties towards other nations? How has our nation failed to fulfill its duties towards other nations?

Our nation has increased its wealth, while at the same time impoverishing developing countries through unjust trade agreements and burdensome debt. What does this say about the U.S. attitude towards the common good? How can we learn about, and critically question, our nation’s foreign policy?

St. Augustine wrote “Take away justice, and what are kingdoms but mighty bands of robbers.”

**Prayer**

O God, forgive us, for in our ignorance and inaction, we support the status quo. It is our duty, as citizens, to ensure that our nation not act as a “mighty band of robbers.”

O God, help us to establish an order of justice based on rights and duties. Help us to create peace.

Amen.

**Rights and Duties of the World Community**

There exist certain issues that have world-wide dimensions; they cannot be solved by one nation alone, but rather, they demand a cooperative and collaborative effort of the entire global community. The coordination of such an effort requires a “public authority which is in a position to operate in an effective manner on a world-wide basis” (*Pacem in Terris*, #137).

We all belong to one human family. As such we have mutual obligations to promote the rights and development of all people across communities, nations and the world, irrespective of national boundaries.

**Questions for Reflection**

How has our nation cooperated with the global community to solve issues of world-wide dimensions (e.g., the environment)? How can we learn more about our nation’s commitment to the United Nations?

**Prayer**

O God, forgive us, for we have not demanded that our nation work with the global community to promote the universal common good.

O God, help us to establish an order of justice based on rights and duties. Help us to create peace.

Amen.
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**Concluding Questions for Discussion**

How can a framework of rights and duties among the different actors of society—individuals, public authorities, nations, and the world community—help you to evaluate efforts for peace?

How would refusal to acknowledge and support rights and duties on one level of society threaten peace? How would it impact other levels of society?

Have we, as individuals and groups, work within our faith groups to promote a greater understanding of rights and duties as a framework for peace?