

Program Overview

PROGRAM SUMMARY

In a time of deep division and social inequity, *Tend My Sheep: Addressing Poverty Through Catholic Social Teaching* is an opportunity to return to the foundational principles of our Catholic faith. The program is an opportunity to discern how we are called to love one another – including and especially our neighbors experiencing poverty. This small group experience traces the development, significance, and impact of Catholic Social Teaching (CST) as it has responded throughout history and today to systems that have undermined human dignity and left millions without access to the resources they need to flourish.

Weekly group gatherings, led by volunteers equipped with a detailed facilitator manual, feature prayer and meditation, song, respectful dialogue, and thoughtful reflections around the seven themes of Catholic Social Teaching. In an atmosphere of trust and openness, participants experience deep, authentic community, heightened awareness, and renewed inspiration through a Catholic tradition that may be entirely new to them. Participants exit the program prepared to help lead their parishes in addressing poverty and seeking social healing in their communities.

This series is designed to be flexible. For the richest, most transformative experience, we recommend completing all seven sessions and the *encuentro* (an immersion experience).[1] However, if you are on a shorter timeline, you may choose from the sessions that most interest your group. Whichever timeline you choose, we have provided preparation assignments and spiritual practices to help your group meaningfully engage with the content, have more fruitful dialogue, and get the most out of your time together.

WHAT IS CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING?

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) guides us in living our Catholic faith in the world. Rooted in Scripture, papal teaching, and Church doctrine, CST is, in the words of the U.S. Conference

[1] During the *encuentro*, participants connect with a local organization living out Catholic Social Teaching. The *encuentro* invites participants into a sacred encounter with the Living God as they meet, listen to, and build relationships with people and communities impacted by and responding to poverty.

of Catholic Bishops, "a rich treasure of wisdom about building a just society and living lives of holiness amidst the challenges of modern society."[2] CST is often articulated as seven intertwined and inextricable themes: Life and Dignity of the Human Person; Care for God's Creation; Solidarity; Option for the Poor and Vulnerable; Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers; Call to Family, Community, and Participation; and Rights and Responsibilities.

WHO IS THIS PROGRAM FOR?

- **Those looking for an entry-level introduction to Catholic Social Teaching:** This series is designed for Catholics who are new to Catholic Social Teaching (CST) or who are less familiar with God's call to seek justice in solidarity with our neighbors. The program was also created for those already formed in CST who are eager to bring its wisdom to their parish (or to other Catholic communities).

  Tend My Sheep: Addressing Poverty Through Catholic Social Teaching does not attempt a complete exploration of Catholic Social Teaching, whose themes are far too rich and far-reaching to be fully unpacked in any single program. What the program does offer is an introduction to a lifelong journey that will inspire, guide, and empower participants for years to come.

- **Those seeking a program on Catholic Social Teaching that is accessible to most parish adults:** Unlike other JustFaith programs that require multiple books and more extensive preparation assignments, this offering is specifically designed with accessibility in mind. It engages adults across a wide range of educational and socioeconomic backgrounds, and it is well-suited for those juggling full and busy lives.

- **Those looking for a gentle, inviting way to explore God's call to seek justice in solidarity with our neighbors:** In a world marked by deep division and mounting injustice, Catholic Social Teaching has never been more urgently needed. We sought to create a program that communicates CST's prophetic call to transform our lives and our world, while also cultivating the trust and community that keeps participants at the table when they feel challenged.

- **Those hoping to bring fresh direction and energy to their parishes:** In an era of increasingly empty pews, social division, and widespread loneliness, *Tend My*

[2] "Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching" (USCCB), www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/seven-themes-of-catholic-social-teaching

Sheep: Addressing Poverty Through Catholic Social Teaching provides a deep spiritual experience, leading to more committed members with faith alive in the Gospel. It can also inspire new and expanded ministries to make your church a more effective tool of God's healing and transformative presence in the world.

WHY POVERTY?

Catholic Social Teaching has implications for all decisions we make individually and collectively. Why focus on poverty?

- We designed this program to be **foundational**. Poverty intersects with nearly every issue Catholics care about: immigration, care for creation, racial justice, and more. *Tend My Sheep: Addressing Poverty Through Catholic Social Teaching* can be a unifying starting place for deeper, more focused conversations.[3]

- *Tend My Sheep* is intentionally designed as an **introduction**. We begin with poverty because it is one area where Catholics across a wide range of perspectives often find common ground. In a time when many important issues have become polarized, starting here allows us to build shared understanding and welcome as many participants as possible to the table.

- This series intends to be a **launch pad into action**, guiding participants in discerning how they will live out what they have learned in the program. In most communities throughout the country, Catholic groups and nonprofits addressing poverty are prepared to receive JustFaith graduates as partners, advocates, and volunteers.

PROGRAM GOALS

1. Inspire and equip participants to live out their Catholic faith in action to address poverty through the two feet of love in action: social justice (addressing root causes and changing social structures), and charitable works (responding to immediate needs).

[3] JustFaith Ministries offers additional Catholic programs that offer a deeper dive, as well as ecumenical programs on a wide variety of important issues, including immigration, racial justice, creation care, and Indigenous justice. Continuing on to another JustFaith program can be a great next step.

2. Educate parishioners about how Catholic Social Teaching is integral in the practice of their faith, while exploring how the sacraments shape the way we live out God's love for the world – especially in response to poverty and its root causes.

3. Assist Catholics in articulating and practicing a spirituality that emphasizes our intertwined relationships with God, with the earth, and with our neighbors.

4. Transform a collection of individuals into a community of love and support prepared to lead their parish and the larger community in addressing local poverty.

SESSION CONTENT

SESSION 1 **Life and Dignity of the Human Person –** Participants are introduced to this foundational theme of Catholic Social Teaching on which all other teachings are built. When we recognize God's image in ourselves and one another, we see a glimpse of God. It is a small and imperfect glimpse, but it is a glimpse nonetheless. Through immersive activities and dialogue rooted in deep listening, group members practice affirming the sacredness of their own lives and prepare to extend this practice outward as they address poverty and seek healing in their communities. Though the theme of Life and Dignity of the Human Person is introduced during Session 1, it is also woven throughout every session of the program.

SESSION 2 **The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers –** Catholic Social Teaching insists that work exists for people, not the other way around. The group reflects on work not simply as economic activity, but as a deeply human and spiritual reality that shapes identity, family life, and wellbeing. Through an overview of key Church teaching throughout history, Scripture, and shared storytelling, participants explore how work can be life-giving – or deeply harmful – and how unjust labor practices are inseparable from the realities of poverty. Attending carefully to the diverse experiences people bring to paid and unpaid labor, the session cultivates compassion, critical awareness, and a renewed commitment to creating policies and practices that honor the dignity of every worker.

SESSION 3 **Option for the Poor and Vulnerable –** Participants engage deeply with one of the most misunderstood and challenging principles of Catholic Social Teaching: God's preferential option for the poor. Guided by the Prophet Isaiah and the teachings of Pope Leo XIV, participants explore how this "preference" is not about exclusion, but particular and attentive love for those whose dignity is most threatened by poverty. Through

prayer, dialogue, and reflection on the Eucharist, participants are invited to encounter Christ in those who are hurting or overlooked and to consider how their Catholic faith must take shape in concrete love for the poor.

SESSION 4 **Solidarity: Promoting Racial Justice and Reconciliation —** The theme of solidarity reminds us that we are one human family across national, racial, economic, and ideological differences, and that we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they may be. Session 4 particularly focuses on the relationship between racial injustice and poverty, inviting participants to work in solidarity with people of all backgrounds to uphold human dignity and confront the injustices that threaten it.

ENCUENTRO **Experience in the Local Community (optional but strongly encouraged) —** Participants connect with an organization living out Catholic Social Teaching in their community. The facilitator manual provides instructions for organizing and conducting the *encuentro*, community prayer, spiritual preparation, and reflection questions to guide the group in processing their experience and discerning what it means for their individual vocations and life together.

SESSION 5 **Call to Family, Community, and Participation —** Participants reflect on the social nature of human beings and the ways faith is learned and lived within families and communities. Through prayer and deep dialogue, the session honors both the gifts and wounds present in family life. It also invites participants to consider how their homes, parishes, and communities can become places of healing, hospitality, and shared participation in God's work of justice and peace.

SESSION 6 **Care for God's Creation —** Session 6 celebrates the wonder of God's Creation. Through excerpts from Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'* and a prayerful encounter with the natural world, the group explores the inextricable connections among the themes of care for creation, human dignity, and the lived reality of poverty. In doing so, participants consider how faithful stewardship, public action, and concrete choices can help heal our common home — and all who depend on its health.

SESSION 7 **Rights and Responsibilities –** This session kindles renewed energy to the Church's mandate to be collaborators with God in transforming every realm of creation. Drawing on the rich resources available through Catholic organizations, participants collaborate in choosing their commitments to transformative action in their families, communities, and the greater global context.