

Tips for Reading Catholic Social Teaching Documents

Anniversaries of major Catholic Social Teaching documents often encourage us to re-read significant documents, and to reflect on their contribution to our understanding of social issues. It raises the question of how to approach reading the major documents that are considered to make up the canon of Catholic Social Teaching. Here are some tips on what to do, and what not to do.

Do	Don't
Context	
Consider when the document was written and what was going on in society, culture, politics and different fields of knowledge.	Judge documents as though they were written today.
Intention	
Ask why the document was written, and what its purpose was.	Assess documents in terms of objectives that they were not attempting to address.
Audience	
Consider to whom the document was addressed and whom it sought to influence.	Expect every document to speak in the same way to the same audience.
Content	
Read the whole document.	Pay attention only to the parts of the document that you like, or rely on summaries or simplified versions.
Read particular statements in the context of their place in the document	Take particular statements out of their context.
Use quotes to illustrate the key points being made in the document.	Use quotes out of context as 'proof texts' to make a predetermined point.
Consider the scope and concerns of the document.	Expect any document to cover everything.
Methodology	
Pay attention to the sources used, the amount of emphasis given to each, the theological method and the approach to ethics used.	Presume that all documents approach theology and social ethics in the same way.
Formal Authority	
Notice who the author of the document is and the form that the document takes. What level of formal authority is attached to this document?	Treat all documents as though they carried equal weight.
Distinguish between different elements within a document and the level of authority attached to each. For example, a statement of principle is more authoritative than a practical judgment that relies on the state of knowledge available at the time or a particular historical context.	Treat every statement within a document as though it had equal authority.
Contribution	
Ask what came before and what was added to that by this document?	Treat individual documents as though they stand alone outside the context of the body of Catholic Social Teaching.
Notice how the teachings developed after this document, building on it, developing it, or changing directions?	Treat any document as though it were the last word, failing to take into account more recent teachings on the same matters.

