

## **Notes on the Development of Catholic Social Teaching**

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I have been invited to talk to you about Catholic Social Teaching—What is it? Where did it come from? How did it develop? And does it make any difference?

I enjoy this challenge, since most of my adult life as a Jesuit has been given to teaching Catholic social teaching, trying to apply it practically in concrete circumstances, and to helping the Canadian Bishops, Roman Synods, and the Jesuits to produce relevant social statements and valid interpretations of it for particular circumstances in Canada or elsewhere in the world.

We do well to ask these questions because most Catholics know very little about Catholic social teaching. Non-Catholics, once they discover this teaching, often ask us why we keep this teaching a deep secret from ordinary Catholics as well as from the general public. In fact, there are among us many good Catholics who believe that Catholicism is about saving souls—not about social justice or attempts to build a more human and just local community or world. In my own research I found that before Vatican II it was difficult to find in modern Catholic spirituality a strong case for caring for the world at all! After all, it was just a weary waiting room opening on heaven!

I suppose we could save a lot of time were we simply to accept the summary of Catholic social teaching given by my Jesuit friend, John Kavanaugh. For him it is all summed up in the teaching, "If you have a party, invite the poor!"

Even today there are strong conflicting views on the value and influence of this teaching. For example, when Pope John Paul II published *Centesimus Annus* in 1991 to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the first formal social encyclical by Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, on the troubling conditions of work after the industrial revolution, he wrote triumphantly as follows: "The encyclical [*Rerum Novarum*] and the related social teaching of the Church had far-reaching influence in the years bridging the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This influence is evident in the numerous reforms which were introduced in the areas of social security, pensions, health insurance and compensation in the case of accidents, within the framework of greater respect for the rights of workers." Harvey Cox, a popular Baptist minister, dismissed Pope John Paul's views

scornfully in the *New York Newsday* [June 11/91]. He writes, "Unfortunately, his years in Rome have not sharpened Karol Wojtyla's pen. He succeeds [in his exaggerated claims] in being pretentious, provincial and pedestrian at the same time.... But let us be more generous. What is exhausted is not the Pope but the social encyclical genre itself, with its improbable claims to universal validity and its consequent temptation to resort to bland truisms."

"My hope," he concludes, "is that *Centesimus Annus* marks not only the 100th anniversary of papal social teaching but the end of that chapter in Christian history." I believe that Cox's vexation stems more from his impatience with the triumphal Latin style of social encyclicals than from their messages. However, his question of whether one can have a universally valid social teaching without it appearing bland in any particular context, still stands, as we shall see later.

What is Catholic Social Teaching? It is a formula or a set of principles for reflection to evaluate the framework of society and to provide criteria for prudential judgment and direction for current policy and action. I believe there are three foundational principles involved -- a view confirmed by the recent InterAmerican Synod:

1. The inherent human dignity of every person that makes them "sacred"—created in God's image. This is the ultimate grounding for human rights.
2. The principle of human solidarity. Every person is radically social by nature and by nurture, destined to build up and share human community. The basic element of all creation is interconnectivity, interdependence, and relationships between and among all creatures. Without community we are not human.
3. The principle of subsidiarity. This principle balances the power between the individual and community. It calls for a pluralistic structuring of power in society. That is, human society is more than government; it is the thousands of voluntary and corporate associations that make up civil society. Decisions in society should be taken at the lowest competent level of society. [There is no justification here for either political or corporate economic dictatorship.]

Among other primary derivative principles are the following: Respect and protection for human life at every stage of development and decline. The right to association: we are social beings, and we achieve our fulfilment in families and social institutions. Participation. We have a right to be included in those institutions, including work, that are necessary for human fulfilment. Preferential protection for the poor and vulnerable. The neediest among us have a special claim

on our care and compassion. Stewardship. Our personal talents and property, as well as the environment that surrounds us, are meant to be used with a sense of responsibility for the common good. Human equality. This is the principle of fairness, rendering to each person what is his or her due. [Some Christians think that this principle of fairness is the whole of social justice and social teaching—but we see here that it is only one important part of it.] And finally, the common good: This refers to the social conditions that allow people to reach their full human potential and to realize their human dignity [cf. Bill Byron sj, *America*, Oct. 31/98, pp. 9-12]. And, of course, from these general principles we derive more concrete principles and rights such as those of private property, just wage, etc.

Pope John Paul II summed up the urgent task of Catholic teaching in a recent talk to the staff of *Civiltà Cattolica*, April/96, "Social, economic and financial problems are becoming more important for the destiny of humanity. On the one hand, they can provoke economic wars no less deadly and cruel than those fought with weapons, and, on the other hand, they aggravate social injustice in a world that is beset by poverty and underdevelopment in so many places. This is the dramatic choice of humanity today. The church's task is to warn people about dangers to which they are exposed, while pointing out the paths to happiness and peace."

The core of Catholic social teaching is found in several papal encyclicals and in the more than 1,500 contextualized social statements made by bishops' conferences round the world since Vatican II. I might mention that, at last count, the Canadian Bishops' Conference was producing about 8% of these 1,500 statements. And their Commission on Social Affairs' statement on "Ethical Reflections on the Economy," in 1983, received more media and public attention than any other statement their conference has made.

### **The Core Message and Its Sources**

The core message of social teaching is found in the Roman Synod on Justice in the World in 1971, at which Canadian bishops were very active. There the synod fathers state, "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation." Their teaching is clear. The gospel is not really preached if justice is not done and if Christians do not participate in building up a more just and loving society.

The basic source of such teaching is, of course, the Old and New Testaments. In them, with Walter Burghardt sj, I hold, with him, that their central teaching is

biblical justice. He defines it as "fidelity to the demands of covenant—not contractual—relationships, that is, right order relationships with God, and all brothers and sisters—and with the earth." Such social justice inevitably implies building up or restoring community at every level of human existence. In the Gospels and tradition we discover God as a Trinity of persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In other words, God's whole being is faithful enduring relationships of love. Created, as we are, in the image of God, we humans are commanded to image God's fidelity in all our relationships. Sin is always not only an offense against God but also the breaking of community. Mathew 25 says it all and makes it a matter of eternal salvation: "Whatever you do unto the least of your needy brothers or sisters—good or evil—you do unto Me!"

And remember that fidelity in relationships extends also to our caring for our "mother" earth. As St. Paul reminds us in Romans 8, the earth, like ourselves, groans impatiently as it awaits deliverance from sin as anxiously as we do. Biblical justice is not cold-hearted legal justice; it is a matter of the heart, it hears the cry of the poor! To escape the narrow sense of justice that associates it with legal crimes in daily life, perhaps we should, as Burghardt suggests, see "justice" in social teaching as a lens through which believers see all reality, for biblical justice is inseparable from faith and comprises fidelity to all covenant relations—with God—with all humans—and with the earth.

### **How did Social Teaching Develop?**

Rather than list and discuss all the great social encyclicals issued by popes over the last century, beginning with *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 and ending with *Centesimus Annus* in 1991, I would like to give you a sense of how social teaching has developed in the Church. You will see that it is not a fixed body of teaching and that it does not provide an infallible or ready answer or solution to any of today's great social, economic, political or ecological problems. Rather it suggests a framework within which to reflect on these issues and it opens directions or ways of proceeding in making concrete decisions or choices among proposed solutions.

In the Church's early tradition we find that the rich were believed to have been given wealth or power or property so that they could perform ministry to the poor, for the love of Christ. Christ was always seen as identifying himself with the poor. St. John Chrysostom is fairly representative of the early Church Fathers in this matter when he urges his people to cover the naked Christ [that is, the poor woman at the door] before they ornament Christ's table [the altar]. He forbids them to make a golden cup for Christ when they are refusing Him a cup of cold water in the poor! In the 17th century we find Bossuet, the renowned preacher at Notre

Dame Cathedral in Paris, telling the rich that they must care for the poor, for it is only they who can open the gates of heaven for the rich.

I should note in passing that in the mayhem of the industrial revolution Protestants in England, and later in America, preached a "social gospel" before Catholics did. In fact, in later decades much of what they preached was adopted into social legislation. However the "social gospel" itself failed. Some suggest that it did so largely because it over-identified the kingdom of God with particular socioeconomic situations, did not have a deep enough sense of the depth and stubbornness of sin and evil, of social injustice, and perhaps most of all because its followers overkilled on fighting prohibition.

Turning to formal Catholic social teaching: Pope Leo XIII, in 1891, heeded the suggestions of both bishops and Catholic lay groups that he address the subhuman conditions brought about for millions of people by industrialism and economic liberalism. He condemned the abuses and illusions of both liberal capitalism and socialism, especially Marxian class struggle. He defended the church's moral authority to promote justice in public life and the right of private property. He claimed that the state had an obligation to protect workers and their right to join trade unions through legislation. This teaching came as a shock, even a scandal, to many good Catholics, including some bishops, who themselves believing in the iron laws of the market, refused to share this novel teaching with their people until many years later. Later, however, popes and bishops gradually continued to fill out what is today known as Catholic social teaching. I will mention only a few highlights along the journey so that you may get the flavour of this type of Catholic teaching, which, today, finally finds its proper place in the new Catholic Catechism mostly under the Seventh Commandment.

Until Vatican II this teaching drew largely on natural law rather than on scripture to make spiritual sense of current socioeconomic situations. Pius XI, writing his *Quadragesimo Anno* in 1931, forty years after Leo's *Rerum Novarum*, and in deep economic depression, confirms and deepens the earlier teaching. He is harsher than Pope Leo on the abuses of corporate capitalism, even foreseeing the possibility of opening a new "third way" between capitalism and socialism, in order to rid society of bitter class struggle between capital and labour. He talks of replacing corporate capitalism with professional or vocational groupings that cut across class lines, as in medieval times.

During the Second World War, in his Radio Messages, Pope Pius XII restated clearly the social obligations of property owners and advocated the need for a new international order and a new international authority to ensure peace—thus anticipating the United Nations. With Pope John XXIII, the social question became global. In *Mater et Magistra* [Mother and Teacher] in 1961, he shifted the

traditional focus from European social questions to extremes of poverty in the world and the widening gap between rich and poor countries. In 1963, he addressed *Pacem in Terris* [Peace on Earth] not only to Catholics but to all people of good will, emphasizing not only legal and political rights but also economic rights such as the right to work and the right to a just wage.

In addressing all peoples Pope John implies that one need not have Catholic faith to accept this social teaching.

At Vatican II [1962-65], the 2500 Catholic bishops of the world in union with the pope solemnly recognized that the church by virtue of the mission entrusted to it by Christ has a unique responsibility for shaping values and institutions in the modern world, by proposing not specific models or blueprints but rather principles, values and directions that must guide just solutions. They also recognized that they must do this in today's pluralistic world not by coercion but through dialogue respecting the religious convictions of those who disagree with them. I personally believe that Vatican II's statement on Freedom of Religion was perhaps its most significant and influential statement in today's world.

Paul VI was the first to devote an entire encyclical, *Populorum Progressio* [Progress of Peoples] in 1967, to the international development issue. In a less optimistic mood than Vatican II, probably influenced by Latin American experience and liberation theology, he dwelt on the downside of development and the growing struggle between rich and poor nations. More important perhaps, in a follow-up encyclical *Octagesimo Anno* [Call to Action], in 1971, 80 years after *Rerum Novarum*, Paul made a dramatic shift to greater reliance on inductive methodology and political action to achieve economic goals in a decentralized church community. He even wondered aloud whether it was really possible in this new pluralist world to address a single, relevant universal message in social teaching to all Catholics. Some have asked the question whether John Paul II later misread the situation of Latin America and tried to apply his successful Polish solution to it.

In 1987, in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* [Social Concerns], John Paul II returns to Pope Leo's critique of liberal capitalism and the destructiveness of collectivist socialism. He talks of "structures of sin" that must be transformed, as well as individual hearts that must be converted to a preferential option for the poor, if we are to have justice in the world. Finally, in *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul uses the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of Catholic social teaching, in 1991, primarily to draw lessons from the sudden and unexpected collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe. He dances on the tomb of Karl Marx and effectively says, in no uncertain terms, "We popes, starting with Leo XIII, have

told you so!" What these popes have been trying to do is reveal the spiritual meaning of history by discerning what is true progress in today's complex society.

Perhaps by looking briefly at some of the more dramatic shifts that have taken place in Catholic social teaching over the century we may get a clearer idea of its nature and also of where it may go in the future.

Is it Catholic doctrine or teaching? We saw how with Pope John the basis of this teaching shifted substantially away from a rather rigid interpretation of natural law to "a reading of the sign of the times" in the light of the Gospel. It now becomes an essential dimension of preaching the Gospel, and yet, because its applications involve inductive reasoning and prudential judgments, it is open to error. That is why some prefer to call it Catholic social teaching rather than social doctrine. But Pope John Paul calls it doctrine, probably to insist that it is an essential dimension of evangelization, and there is now talk today in the Vatican of issuing a Social Catechism! Does this mean abandoning Paul VI's more decentralized view that such teaching today must be discerned in the local situation by the whole local community?

Over time, there has also been a shift in the understanding of the right of private property. Leo insisted on this right in order to ground human dignity and to stimulate personal initiative in opposition to socialism. Pius XI insisted on the social responsibility of private property and of business corporations. Pius XII returned to an earlier tradition, stating that the only justification for private property is as a means to implement the more general human right of all people to have access to the goods of the earth. Finally, John Paul II includes personal skills and know-how as a new type of private property, thus blurring the earlier sharp division between capital and labour. Bill Gates does not need extensive real estate to be rich!

Again, Pius XI dabbles in the possibility of having the Church propose a "third way" between capitalism and socialism. This smelled too much of dictatorial corporatist models of the 30's, and so later popes quietly dropped this initiative. In saying "no" to a market economy that is not ordered to the common good in a particular situation today, John Paul II does not propose any alternative—any so-called "third way." There are, of course, Catholics who still believe in the feasibility or at least possibility of a utopian socialist community-based economy, which would be more in harmony with Gospel teachings.

Perhaps the most significant shift in Catholic teaching over the years has been to move from rejection of class conflict to confrontation within solidarity, and to see the poor themselves as agents of change. Earlier popes did not see how one could have economic change without revolution or violence between capital and labour.

In their fear of violent solutions, they were wary of "change from below" and so too of liberal democracy. Even legal strikes were allowed only as a last resort. They allowed unions for the workers, but still instinctively looked to the benevolence of the state and of the powerful and wealthy of the times to bring about justice for the poor. Implicitly, they accepted the trickle-down theory of economics until Liberation Theology showed its head in Latin America and the themes of structural sin and preferential option for the poor were soon cautiously canonized by the Roman Synod on Justice in the World in 1971, and in Paul VI's encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi* [Preaching the Good News] in 1974. The church now teaches that ours is a Gospel that does justice. Christians must have a preferential option for the poor, and this option requires that they work for changes in unjust political, economic, and social structures, a task in which the poor themselves are the first agents of change.

But how could the Church be sure that this was not the way to violent revolution? John Paul II discovered a new synthesis from his personal experience of fostering the Solidarity movement in Poland. Here the workers' model was confrontational, as was evident from their many strikes against their communist bosses. However, it was confrontation justified on the grounds of violation of human rights by the Communist government. Solidarity was a "self-limiting" movement, not aimed at overthrowing the Communist government but rather through dialogue and confrontation at achieving a compromise that would not invite a Soviet invasion by Gorbachev.

It is evident in *Centesimus Annus* that John Paul believes that with the demise of Communism he now has proof that class struggle is neither a valid nor an effective means of achieving social justice, and that Catholic social teaching has in fact shown the right way. He holds up the experience of Poland's Solidarity movement as a showcase for the whole world that "the complex problems faced by peoples can be resolved through dialogue and solidarity, rather than in struggle to destroy the enemy through war." Participation by the people as agents of change is now central to Catholic social thought.

Other shifts in Catholic social teaching are just underway. For example, visible response to the challenge given the Church itself by the Roman Synod on Justice in World in 1971, to give a prophetic witness to justice and love of the poor in its own administration and use of goods, is still weak and often not credible. And there are burning major issues that still have not received adequate treatment in Catholic social teaching, such as ecology, the population issue, and a more central role for the laity, and especially women in decision making in both the church and civil society. All these issues have been discussed positively at length by the present pope—but have still not merited authoritative treatment in a social encyclical and are seldom heard in the local pulpit.

Finally, on some very difficult political questions at the present time, how should the Church address or challenge such phenomena as secessionist movements in formerly unitary or federalist states, or humanitarian intervention in places where ethnic violence descends to the level of barbarism, or even the civilizational conflict on a grand scale between the West and Islam or China? I believe that Catholic teaching can and should, out of its rich cross-cultural experience, bring more discernment to these central questions than simply bringing the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity [cf. for example, John Langan sj, "Issues of Catholic Social Thought," *Origins*, pp. 45-48, 2000].

### **An Untidy Process**

Many people have difficulty understanding what they see as contradictions in the social teachings of the church. One document seems to praise capitalism, the next to condemn it. One document seems to bless liberation theology, the next to condemn it. Class conflict is condemned, yet labour confrontation is praised.

Gregory Baum attributes much of what seems to be contradictory in social teaching as church leaders' attempts to balance the maintenance needs of the church with those of its prophetic mission. What priority should they place on safeguarding unity in the church while preaching the prophetic preferential option for the poor?

I don't disagree with Baum's explanation. However, I also believe that the evolution of social teaching is itself inevitably an untidy process in its attempt, in one universal document, to discern where in complex situations the Spirit is leading the church at any given time. And this discernment process it is likely to become even more untidy as more Episcopal conferences learn with their people how better to "read the signs of the times" and engage Christian communities in believing, preaching and acting on a preferential option for the poor, in a world that we now see more clearly as structured sinfully in so many ways. I believe that Catholic social teaching should gradually become more statements or teachings of the whole Catholic community [rather] than authoritative declarations of the pope.

Be that as it may, Pope John Paul can still rightly rejoice and thank God that the church has been faithful to the heritage of Leo XIII. As the church struggles to understand what the processes of globalization of knowledge, culture, economics and politics mean for the swelling numbers of Catholics in poorer regions of the world—as well as for the stagnant, if not diminishing numbers of Catholics in the Western world—a case can be made, I believe, that the church presently has a social teaching more attuned to our tumultuous present times than was its social teaching attuned to the needs and aspirations of our proletarian brothers and sisters during the Industrial Revolution in Europe in nineteenth century.

## **Catholic Social Teaching**

Beautiful words! But does it really matter in the real world? Lack of time prevents me from developing my favorite thesis on the real but ambiguous influence of religion on shaping society in today's world. Suffice to point out that religion and spirituality are exploding in every country in the world, often in reaction to the dehumanizing forces of globalization. A hopeful sign of the times is the growing inter-religious solidarity and dialogue with other NGOs. Witness, for example, the recent ongoing dialogue between religious and World Bank leaders [World Faith Dialogue on Development] on improving the lot of the poor; and, more concretely, the joint conference organized by the Islamic Movement for a Just World and the Christian Peace Movement [Pax Christi] in Malaysia in 1997, at the time of the Asian financial meltdown, to examine the impact of globalization on religious traditions and cultural communities. Similarly, the recent huge Millennium Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders hosted by the Secretary General, Kofi Amman, in the United National grand Assembly Hall in New York in late August, to discuss peace, the eradication of poverty, and the saving of the environment, was a hopeful symbol of the interest and potential of religious collaboration in tackling present day global crises.

These are likewise striking examples of the more significant recent development of a widespread process of de-privatizing religions and churches to give them a more active role in the public forum. This process is well documented and argued by sociologist Jose Casanova of the New School for Social Research in his book, *Public Religions in the Modern World* [1994]. He defends his central thesis—that we are witnessing everywhere the de-privatization of religion—through sociohistorical case studies in Spain, Poland, Brazil and USA, with corroborating references to similar and even more dramatic happenings on other continents, such as the Islamic revolution in Iran. He documents "the fact that religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to accept the marginal and privileged role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization had reserved for them." In other words, for Casanova, the narrow secular view that holds that religion is dying or withering away is itself now dead. And more and more sociologists are recognizing this trend. He ends his book with a cocky cryptic challenge to reductionist social scientists. I quote, "It would be profoundly ironic if, after all the beatings it has received from modernity, religion could somehow unintentionally help modernity to save itself."

Catholic social teaching is part of this vital movement that refuses to accept the incessant media message—the materialist secular dogma of today—that "the market is God." Numerous Catholic bishops, priests, and laity have been martyred in recent years for standing by and for the world's poor. We Jesuits have had more than 40 murdered for identifying with the poor in the last two decades. Last year,

in East Timor, two more of my brother Jesuits were murdered, along with several unnamed priests, religious and laymen and women! Yes, religious social teaching does matter—Catholic social teaching, along with the social teaching of other world religions. What people are willing to live for and die for always matters!

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