

FOUNDATIONS OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

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POPE LEO XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (RN) of 1891 represents a kind of *magna carta* for modern Catholic social teaching. The backdrop of the encyclical is the rise of modern industrial society and the radical changes taking place in the political, economic, and social fields. In the field of economics, a new form of property had emerged, namely, capital, which went hand in glove with a new form of labour, namely, labour for wages. Labour became a commodity to be bought and sold in the capitalist market place, with the result that workers were not assured of the bare minimum wage needed to support their families. Furthermore, the grim spectre of unemployment was always present, which burdened the suffering and anxiety of the workers and their families to the point where starvation and death became a part of the new industrial landscape. The radical changes underway at the end of the nineteenth century quickly gave rise to a society divided into two classes, and the new political order upheld this situation by safeguarding total economic freedom by the application of laws. At the same time, the advent of capitalism and its new form of labour spawned the growth of Marxist socialist philosophy that sought to address the injustices suffered by workers with its notion of a classless society where all ownership of property belongs to the state. The encyclical is keen to refute Marxist philosophy and upholds the natural right to private ownership of property (RN, 9–15).

The intention of *Rerum Novarum* was to shed light in a systematic way on the conflict that had arisen between capital and labour, and to articulate moral principles that are congruous with a Christian anthropology founded on the mystery of Jesus Christ. Many of the social teachings share a family resemblance with

democratic social thought where human reason is used to arrive at principles of justice that advance the well-being of society. Issues raised and principles espoused in *Rerum Novarum* that have a particular poignancy today include: an ongoing debate about what constitutes a fair and just relationship between capital and labour; the dignity of the worker and the dignity of work; the social dimension of work as integral to promoting the common good; the right to a just wage to procure what is required to live; the right to form professional associations such as trade unions or business groups; the requirement of the state authorities to provide properly for the welfare of the workers, their families, and of society in general; the right of the individual to discharge freely his/her religious duties; and the right to private property.

Much of the religious education programme in Catholic schools nowadays revolves around the social teaching of the church, and the social dimension of the gospel continues to receive significant emphasis in church teaching, as is evident in Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013). But an important question that arises here is the following: In what ways is Catholic social teaching distinctive from western secular thinking on social issues? If Catholics, both young and adults alike, are to be prepared adequately for activities of social-political praxis, they must have a good sense of what the church actually teaches about Christian life committed to the promotion of justice and the common good. The purpose of this essay is not so much to articulate and delineate fundamental tenets of Catholic social thought that overlap and are congruous with secular viewpoints, as to highlight distinctive dimensions of Catholic teaching that are

closely intertwined with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ who is the 'new creation' in person. In addition to Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, the essay will draw upon Pius XI's encyclicals *Quadragesimo Anno* (QA, 1931) and *Nova Impendet* (NI, 1931), Vatican II's *Gaudium et spes* (GS, 1965), Paul VI's encyclical *Octagesima Adveniens* (OA, 1971), John Paul II's encyclical *Centesimus Annus* (CA, 1991), and Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG, 2013).

Fundamental Aspects of Catholic Social Thought

(i) The first point to be made concerning Catholic social teaching is that it is informed by theological-christological reflections. It is not based purely on human reason (philosophical thought), but reason illuminated by the *revelation of Christ* the redeemer. The guiding principle of Leo XIII's encyclical, which is reflected in all of the church's social teaching, is a certain view of the human person informed by the history of revelation. The understanding of the human person created in the image and likeness of God, together with the unique Christian doctrine regarding our humanity as assumed by the person of the incarnate Word, serves to underline the inalienable worth and dignity of each and every human person; the destiny of which is to partake of the divine nature (CA, 11, 47, 53, 55; QA, 139; RN, 25, 26). Only God as creator and redeemer, and not the human existent as the recipient of divine grace, can ascribe such inalienable worth to creaturely beings. Because of this elevated view of the human person and its mysterious calling to partake of God, the aim of Catholic social teaching is to 'guide' intellectual thought and moral behaviour in pathways that advance the truth about the human person and its high vocation.

(ii) A second distinctive point to appreciate is that the church has always maintained the view that an essential bond exists between human *freedom* and *truth*. John Paul II points out that the origin of all the evils to which



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Rerum Novarum wished to give a response is 'a kind of freedom which, in the area of economic and social activity, cuts itself off from the truth about humankind' (CA, 4). When human freedom refuses to be bound to the truth, it falls into arbitrariness and ends up submitting itself to self-indulgence, self-interest, and a self-love 'which refuses to be limited by any demand of justice' (CA, 17). The error of detaching human freedom from the truth about humankind leads to devastating consequences that are apparent in the tragic series of wars, culminating in the Jewish Holocaust, that ravaged Europe in the twentieth century. The situation today in the developed world may seem somewhat better than it was in the last century, yet it would be foolish to not recognise that we are not so much in a state of peace as in a state of non-war. The ideal of true peace still remains elusive, the old forms of totalitarianism and authoritarianism are not completely vanquished and may regain their strength, and the promotion of utilitarian values in the developed world makes it difficult to discern and respect the true vocation of humankind and the dignity to which it is called.

The church has always maintained that no authentic progress is possible without 'knowing the truth and living according to that truth' (CA, 29). In the New Testament this is clearly set out in Jesus' profession: 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life' (John 14:6). On this view, it is not sufficient to think of progress and development in purely economic terms, for poverty is not only economic but cultural and spiritual as well. What is at stake is the full flourishing of the human person which

involves the upholding of basic human rights, the enhancing of creativity, and the formation of cultures that facilitate the human experience of encountering God who is the true good of humankind.

(iii) A third distinctive aspect has to do with a pneumatological perspective. The understanding of the human person as created in the divine image, redeemed by Christ, and genuinely free only when it lives according to the truth about itself, cannot be affirmed apart from the presence and workings of the *Holy Spirit* in the realm of history. Believers confess Jesus as Christ and Lord in the power of the Spirit, and they are empowered by the Spirit in their commitment to building up the common good which is ‘the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily’ (GS, 26). Non-believers, however, as Vatican II acknowledged, need not be excluded from the workings of the Spirit insofar as ‘grace is active invisibly’ in the hearts of all people of good will (GS, 22, 38). Non-believers can be open to the promptings of the Spirit without being aware of it. The difference between believers and non-believers lies in the nature of their receptivity to the Spirit. Christians are consciously aware, and thus more receptive, to the activity of the Spirit as the ‘first fruits’ of the new creation in the person of the risen Lord, as sanctifying the people of God, and as bringing the gift of communion with God as their final destiny; whereas with non-believers the Spirit simply leads them to work towards the common good. Nonetheless, with both believers and non-believers ‘the Spirit of God calls and gifts people to work in active anticipation of the eschatological transformation of the world’ (Volf, 2001, 123). The goal of social action is to be seen as the same in both the church and the world.

(iv) A fourth important point is that church teaching makes it very clear that the reality of the kingdom of God can never be identified with any socio-economic-political system. Whatever gains are made in history with re-

gard to upholding and advancing the common good, they remain a foretaste of the glory of the new creation to come, when sin and death will be no more. The church is all too aware of the limiting realities of *sin and death* in the world and of humankind’s fundamental need for redemption in Christ who ‘makes all things new’ (Rev 21:5). The ugly face of sin will continue to be an obstacle to God’s reign in the world as long as history is still running its course (CA, 25), yet at the same time there can be no question that the gospel of Christ requires believers to be actively involved in building up the world and to be keenly interested in the good of their fellows (GS, 34). By living ‘according to the Spirit’ (Rom 8), the faithful set their minds on the living God who works for good, find peace in living life in a way that is pleasing to God, and are assisted in their weaknesses and sufferings which are joined to the redemptive sufferings of Jesus Christ.

(v) In connection with the previous point, it is worth underscoring the point that the church affirms neither liberal capitalism nor Marxist socialism, but fundamental principles illuminated by faith in Christ the redeemer who elevates humankind to a dignity beyond compare. *Democracy* is certainly affirmed as an essential condition for human flourishing in keeping with the doctrine regarding our being created *imago Dei*, yet the church urges us to be ever vigilant so as to prevent democracy becoming a totalitarian regime in disguise. The fundamental principles of Catholic social teaching do not amount to political programmes or ideologies; rather, they give expression to the transcendent dignity of human existence and are intended as an ‘ideal orientation’ (CA, 43) that leads to the genuine promotion of the common good. Marxist ideology is criticised because of the way it absorbs individual freedom in the collectivity and proffers an atheistic materialism, and liberal ideology is equally criticised for exalting individual freedom by removing every limitation and seeking the autonomy of the individual (OA, 26). What is more, both liberal capital-

ism and Marxist collectivism are criticized for offering purely economic models of human existence that fail to uphold the inalienable dignity of humanity as created in God's image (Baum, 1991, 60). The Christian contribution to a positive transformation of society lies not in suggesting a 'middle ground' between these two economic models, but in 'going beyond every system' (OA, 36). The Christian faith is not an ideology, it does not propose a rigid schema into which all realities must be constrained and imprisoned.

By constantly affirming the transcendent dignity of the human person, the church upholds respect for human freedom which attains to its full development by accepting the truth of humanity's vocation as created in the divine image and called to union and communion with God. If there is no ultimate truth—as held by skeptical relativism which is widely diffused today—to guide and direct social-political activity, then democracy can easily turn into a 'thinly disguised totalitarianism' (CA, 46). In a society without truth, freedom loses its foundation and falls into an arbitrariness and humankind are exposed 'to the violence of passion and to manipulation, both open and hidden' (CA, 46).

(vi) An especially important church teaching that must be appreciated for its distinctiveness from secular social thought is that the Christian is required to go beyond the principles of human rights enunciated in the papal encyclicals and exercise *charity*, for reception of the Spirit of the risen Christ means that the Christian is enabled to fulfill the new law of love (Rom 8:1–11; Gal 5; John 15:12). *Rerum Novarum*, appealing to Thomas Aquinas, reminds the faithful that material possessions should be shared without hesitation with those who are in need (RN, 22). Christians are not expected to distribute to others what is required for their own needs and those of their families, but they are bound by duty to give to the needy what remains over. It is a duty not of justice, but of Christian charity, which cannot be enforced by human law. Charity, as a theological virtue, pertains to the life of the church;

it is 'the mistress and the queen of virtues' (RN, 63) inasmuch as it is the fulfilling of the whole gospel law which alone can bring about the happy results that are much longed for. Justice alone can certainly remove the causes of social conflict, but it 'can never bring about union of minds and hearts' so that the 'constituent parts of society deeply feel themselves members of one great family' (QA, 137). Without a deep sense of solidarity and service to others, without exercising that love which 'bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things' (1 Cor 13:7), the strong emphasis on equality 'can give rise to an individualism in which each one claims his own rights without wishing to be answerable for the common good' (OA, 23).

With regard to the exercise of charity, the church teaches that love for the poor is not an optional extra, for in the poor the church sees Christ himself who 'became poor' (2 Cor 8:9) for the sake of enriching humanity and the world. Pope Francis has made the inclusion of the poor in society the first great issue in respect of the social dimension of the Gospel (EG, 186–216). The exercise of charity towards the poor involves more, though, than a mere giving from one's surplus: it also involves 'a change of life-styles, of models of production and consumption, and of the established structures of power which today govern societies' (CA, 58).

(vii) No human being can live without some form of hope in the future. What is distinctive about the Christian form of *hope* is that it is not grounded in the human capacity for scientific-technological advances and socio-political activity, but in the crucified and risen Lord who has conquered sin and death and transformed them into the glory of eternal life. Since the nineteenth century, western societies have founded hope on indefinite progress as the necessary condition for human freedom. To attain freedom, humans must master the realm of nature and continue to develop economically, so as to allow them to determine their own destiny (OA, 41). Genuine progress, however, cannot be measured

only in quantitative and scientific terms, since the common good also involves the attainment of objectives of a qualitative order.

There can be no genuine progress without the development of a moral consciousness that guarantees the quality and truth of human relations, and responsibility for the common good. For the Christian, progress comes up against the paschal mystery of Christ: 'The death of Christ and his resurrection and the outpouring of the Spirit of the Lord help humankind to place their freedom, in creativity and gratitude, within the context of the truth of all progress and *the only hope which does not deceive*' (OA, 41, 48). The Christian knows that many obstacles and barriers will have to be faced in promoting the spirit of the gospel, yet because Christian hope comes from the risen Lord they do not 'lose heart' (QA, 138) and are given strength to endure the struggles that are a mark of Christian life. Ultimately, the future of the 'new creation' will not come about by human effort and struggle, but as gift of God who has transformed and transfigured all things in the crucified and risen Lord. The Christian, by being radically tested in the living out of the gospel in a sinful world, gives 'witness' to the kingdom of God revealed in the person of Christ and anticipates the new life to come.

(viii) Finally, since Christian faith is always a tested faith, the Christian has recourse to the practice of *lament* when things become too distressing and replete with anguish. The lament as a speech form is a 'limit expression,' that is, it respects the voice of pain and suffering—How long? and Why?—and dares to complain to God about distressing aspects of present reality that defy all our attempts to control everything and gain certainty about the future. The lament is not, however, an opportunity to wallow in sorrow, self-pity, and misery; rather, because the lament is raised to God in the confidence that God will hear the complaint and perform a new action that will pave a way into a brighter future, it is designed to perform an empowering function. 'Lament gives hope, because embedded in the lament

is an appeal that arises out of trust in the God whose love is forever. Lament is the mode by which hope is reborn' (Hicks, 2005, 79). In the lament psalms, the complaint to God never stands by itself but is accompanied by a confession of trust in God and concludes with a vow of future praise and thanksgiving. With regard to Jesus' passion, he pleads with the Father that 'the cup' be removed from him, yet he confirms his utter obedience to the Father with whom he is one. The Father does respond to Jesus' cry of lament on the cross, which takes the form of the new action of raising Jesus from the dead. In this new action of resurrection wherein the work of salvation is completed, a glorious new future has opened up to humanity and the world (Novello, 2013).

On the view that salvation comes through the life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ, the negative realities of suffering, anguish, and death are no longer to be regarded as proof of the absence of God, but rather are to be affirmed as 'modes of God's presence' (Fiddes, 1988, 191–92). Suffering and death are not only conditions from which we seek deliverance, but the means by which final salvation comes. Since lament is the mode by which hope is reborn, the Christian must not seek to keep Christ's wounds at arm's length, for Christ, as Pope Francis asserts, wants his disciples 'to touch human misery, to touch the suffering flesh of others' (EG, 270). At the same time, the pontiff exhorts the faithful to recover the joy of the gospel that should accompany the task of discipleship. Christian joy is not shallow; it adapts, changes, and endures through difficult times, and waits on the final salvation of the Lord (EG, 6). Believers, then, do not lose heart when faced with the negative realities of the world. To whom and to what can non-believers turn when their social-political programmes bear little fruit or no fruit at all? How can true joy be found in a troubled and suffering world without turning to the transcendent reality of God who is both in the fray and above the fray?

Conclusion: Future as Gift of God

It has been shown that Catholic social teaching belongs not to the field of ideology, but theology, and has a decidedly eschatological thrust. Ideological systems and practical agendas all suffer the fate of becoming ends in themselves, and of losing touch with the transcendent ideals that continue to inspire human action in pathways that promote and build up the common good. When we turn our attention to the gospel narratives, it becomes readily apparent that the kingdom preached by Jesus is beyond every political and social system. The kingdom of God can never be identified with worldly progress or achievement, although the salvation that comes with the Christ-event is certainly concerned with the temporal welfare as well as the eternal welfare of humanity and the world.

Vatican II explicitly stated that ‘although we must be careful to distinguish earthly progress clearly from the increase of the kingdom of Christ, such progress is of vital concern to the kingdom of God insofar as it can contribute to the better ordering of human society’ (*GS*, 39). The activity of social praxis should therefore be ascribed *inherent* and not merely instrumental value (*i.e.* doing good things as a sanctifying process that leads to the heavenly life). Christian commitment to social justice comes not only under the rubric of sanctification of the individual, but also God’s purposes for the whole of creation. By actively cooperating with God in history, moreover, believers become beacons of hope for their fellow human beings. ‘Always be prepared to make a defence to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you’ (1 Pet 3:15). Christians are essentially persons who are ‘saved in hope’ (Novello, 2013).

Christians, while committed to the pursuit of the common good, must not be too starry eyed about the human ability to transform the face of the earth. Progress can and should be made, to be sure, but whatever advances are made will always remain a modest contribution to God’s ‘new creation.’ As *Rerum Novarum* rightly points out, strive as we may, the ills and troubles that beset human life will

never be banished as long as history continues to run its course (*RN*, 18). The western world aspires to reaching a golden socio-economic-political age where people are free from pain and suffering and trouble, and are assured of undisturbed peace and constant enjoyment, but Christians must be wary of such delusions that fail to acknowledge the reality of sin, the finitude of the human being, and the inevitability of death.

As the mystic Julian of Norwich asserted long ago: ‘But all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well’ (Julian, 1966, ch. 27). The final salvation in view here is conceived as an ineffable divine gift, for what is impossible to humankind is possible to God, who, in the person of Christ, has transformed the reality of this world into a glorified new creation. The joyful future that humankind so long for will ultimately come as unmerited gift of God, not through human effort and enterprise that is always marked by sin, self-interest, and self-indulgence. Only the perfection of love (*cf.* 1 John 4:7–21) made manifest in Christ can transform the face of the earth and bring about the heavenly life of the new creation.

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