

**CHRISTIAN COMMITMENT IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD
IN THE LIGHT OF PAPAL TEACHINGS**

Valentine U. Iheanacho, MSP

(Research Fellow, Department of Historical and Constructive Theology

Faculty of Theology, University of the Free State

valmsp73@gmail.com)

ABSTRACT

In the last 120 years the Church has particularly defended the human person: their dignity, human rights, equality, economic and social justice. The Church does so in the conviction that the human person is intrinsically related to the common good. In the light of discernible basic principles of Catholic social teaching as found in the different pronouncements of the Magisterium, this essay takes a historical approach in presenting the evolution of the social doctrine of the Church. It equally underscores certain salient issues where necessary.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is the general assumption nowadays that whoever ascends to the throne of St Peter as Pope is expected in one way or the other to make pronouncements on issues. Their pronouncements may cover a wide range of subjects or matters: war and peace, social justice and development, human rights and equality, science, politics, economics and ecology, etc. Such was not always the case in the past. The first use of an encyclical as a literary genre in pontifical documents owes its origin to Pope Benedict XIV (1740-1758). *Ubi Primum* (On the duties of Bishops)¹ issued by Benedict XIV on December 3, 1740 is commonly considered the first encyclical by any pope. After Benedict XIV and beginning with Pope Pius IX (1846-1878), encyclicals gradually became the preferred medium used by subsequent popes in treating a variety of issues or questions as may be demanded by various social, cultural and historical circumstances in a particular time.²

With regard to encyclicals on social matters, *Rerum Novarum*, issued on May 15, 1891 by Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903), is often regarded by common consent as the first social encyclical chronologically published by a pope. According to John Coleman, the roots and origins of the social teaching of the Church predated the pontificate of Leo XIII because “the life and words of Jesus” are the norm and the basis for the involvement of the Church in social problems. During the early Christian centuries, particularly in the Patristic period, the Church witnessed the insistence of Church fathers about caring for the poor and those at the margin of the society. In the medieval era, theologians and other intellectuals of the time debated and propounded theories and conditions for a just war in order to minimize

¹For the text of the encyclical, cf., <https://www.ewtn.com/library/ENCYC/B14UBIPR.HTM> (accessed: June 5, 2018).

²<https://www.britannica.com/topic/encyclical#ref218552> (accessed: June 5, 2018).

incessant wars that threatened the peace and stability of the medieval commonweal.³ They also preoccupied themselves with economic questions such as a 'just price', 'fair wage' and the use of money in the form of usury. But in the estimation of Paul Valley and Michael Walsh, the plethora of their thoughts was "never systematic."⁴

The systematization of the social teaching of the Church became possible only after many years of evolution with the confluence of historical realities and forces. Hence, in view of its long evolution and of its dynamic nature, Michael Schuck opines that it is wrong to uphold 1891 as the starting date for the beginning of the social teaching of the Church. On the contrary, Schuck devised a three-fold period of evolution of the official Church teaching on social issues using Pope Leo XIII as the referential point of departure: (1) pre-Leonine period: from the pontificate of Benedict XIV in 1740 to the pontificate of Pius IX in 1877; (2) Leonine period: from the pontificate of Leo XIII in 1878 to the death of Pius XII in 1958; (3) post-Leonine period: from the pontificate of John XXIII in 1958 to the present.⁵ Although distinguished by the different questions treated therein, each period, according to Schuck, discloses a dominant worldview of the Church peculiar to each epoch and a trend of thought that acts as a binding cord that tied them together into some form of coherence:

On one level, the discussions are dissimilar: pre-Leonine period encyclicals portray the world as a nourishing, yet dangerous pasture; Leonine period letters picture the world as a benign, cosmic hierarchy of being; post-Leonine period texts view the world as a temporal context wherein God and humanity journey together. Yet despite these shifting viewpoints, the popes collectively construe the world as a medium of God's ubiquity. Whether pictured as a pasture, a cosmos, or unmarked path, the world is imbued with God's presence . . . "There is no realm whatsoever outside the dominion of that God . . . Neither politics nor economics, neither national interests nor international affairs, neither technology nor commerce, neither aesthetics nor productivity, can ultimately be a law unto itself. . ." As a result, the popes uniformly criticize world views inspired by atheistic naturalism and dialectical materialism.⁶

The aim of this essay is to present a quick historic picture of papal pronouncements on Christian commitment to the building of a just society based on the promotion of human dignity and respect for the common good. It is not possible

³ John A. Coleman 1991. "A Tradition Celebrated, Reevaluated, and Applied" in John A. Coleman (ed.) *One Hundred Years of Catholic Social Thought: Celebration and Challenge*. New York: Orbis Books, 2; Michael P. Hornsby-Smith 2006. *An Introduction to Catholic Social Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 91.

⁴ Paul Valley 1998. Introduction, in Paul Valley (ed.) *The New Politics: Catholic Social Teaching for the Twenty-first Century*. London: SCM Press, 3.

⁵ Michael P. Hornsby-Smith, *An Introduction to Catholic Social Thought*, 91.

⁶ As cited by John A. Coleman, "A Tradition Celebrated, Reevaluated, and Applied", 4.

to make an in-depth exposé of each and every pontifical and conciliar documents on society and social justice. Due to the variegated nature of those documents and their multifaceted subjects and themes, this research limits itself to highlighting certain salient principles discernible in Catholic social thought. It will accord some prominence to *Populorum Progressio* (1967), *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971) by Pope Paul VI and *Justice in the World* (1971) in order to propose the reawakening of the hunger for social justice, peace and development that enveloped the life and activities of the Church of the post-Vatican era.

2. AN ENDURING TRADITION

The inaugural speech of Thomas Jefferson of America in 1801 succinctly articulated important criteria of a good government that is attentive to its people, such as honesty, truth, temperance, gratitude and the love of neighbour. Jefferson stated in his speech: “wise and frugal government, shall restrain men from injuring one another, shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement, and shall not take from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned” (emphasis added).⁷ President Ronald Reagan during his own inaugural address in 1981, slightly rephrased the ideas of Thomas Jefferson in which he called for “a new consensus with all those across the land who share a community of values embedded in these words: family, work, neighborhood, peace and freedom.”⁸ For Reagan, it was never his “. . . intention to do away with government. It is rather to make it work – work with us, not over us, to stand by our side, not to ride on our back. Government can and must provide opportunity, not smother it, foster productivity, not stifle it.”⁹ The ideas of Jefferson and Reagan are not radically different from the principles and notions that underpin the core ideas of Catholic social thought with regard to good governance and the economic wealth of the society.

Starting from 1931 with the exception of 1941 as estimated by Richard Rousseau, popes after Leo XIII, on the average, have issued at least every ten years a social encyclical in commemoration of *Rerum Novarum*. Only Pope Pius XII, given the bellicose circumstances of the Second World War, did not issue any social encyclical to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*. He only did so with his radio address on Pentecost Sunday of June 1, 1941¹⁰ and in that address, he underscored the interdependency of three fundamental values that are beneficiary to society. He identified those values as: (a) the material use of goods; (b) labour and (c) the family. According to him, these three values “are closely connected one with the other, mutually complementary and dependent.”¹¹ In that interconnectedness, the pope maintained that it was easy to “conclude that the

⁷ Cf. Michael Novak 1989. *Free Persons and the Common Good*. New York – London: Madison Books, 129-130.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹⁰ Richard W. Rousseau 2002. *Human Dignity and the Common Good: The Great Papal Social Encyclicals from Leo XIII to John Paul II*. Westport – London, 2.

¹¹ <https://thejosias.com/2017/06/02/pius-xii-la-solennita-della-pentecoste/> (accessed: June 7, 2018).

economic riches of a people do not properly consist in the abundance of goods measured according to a purely and solely material calculation of their worth but in the fact that such an abundance represents and offers really and effectively the material basis sufficient for the proper personal development of its members.”¹²

The thought of Pius XII bore resemblance to the thoughts of his predecessors who in the light of the many cultural, political, economic, social and religious changes that took place in Europe in the nineteenth century, as opined by Gene Burns, the popes “acquired a broadened sense of pastoral responsibility for the whole of Western civilization, a greater preoccupation with specific moral issues, and a stronger claim to religious and moral authority.”¹³ This “broadened sense of pastoral responsibility” can be gleaned from the fact that the post-Leonine popes altogether wrote no fewer than 185 encyclicals and in the reckoning of Hornsby-Smith, quite a good number of them were on social matters. Within a period of eighty years that spanned from 1878 to 1958, the following major issues were recurrent themes in the social writings of the popes: “political liberty, nationalism, war and peace, family life, the rights and duties of employers and employees, the right to private property, and the importance of intermediate organizations such as trade unions.”¹⁴

In the spectrum of events of his time, Leo XIII through *Rerum Novarum*, initiated a process, which though began as a reaction to socialism, has nonetheless coalesced into a formidable body of social teachings that has weathered the storm of contemporary epoch. The papal document of 1891 was cast against the background of the spread of Marxist socialism across Europe and the unification of Italy finally realized in 1870. Given the political and economic turmoil together with the dislocation of social cohesion, the social doctrine of Marxism positioned itself to fill the starving stomachs of the working class people who were being exploited by the unbridled and unrestrained capitalism.¹⁵ As an antithesis to Christianity and to the Church, atheistic socialism as conceived in the belly of historical materialism of Karl Marx, “promised happiness here, not hereafter”¹⁶ in order to end the economic alienation or the material conditions that determined the social being of a person. Leo XIII did not just stop at the mere condemnation of socialism especially its atheistic variant, and in its place so as to counter it, the pope expounded a clear-cut Catholic social teaching even though in its nascent stage at the time.

Subsequent popes following in the footsteps of Leo XIII constantly returned to the same themes: critique of capitalism in reaction to socialism. As Richard Rousseau rightly explicates, “with this background it is easy to miss the importance of Socialism to the development of the Church’s social doctrine.”¹⁷ When Pope Pius XI issued *Quadragesimo Anno* in May 1931 to mark the fortieth anniversary of *Rerum*

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³ Michael P. Hornsby-Smith, *An Introduction to Catholic Social Thought*, 92.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁵ J. Wright 1966. “The Common Good” in Benjamin L. Masse (ed.) *The Church and Social Progress: Background Readings for Pope John’s Mater et Magistra*. Milwaukee: Hallow Books, 227.

¹⁶ Richard W. Rousseau, *Human Dignity and the Common Good: The Great Papal Social Encyclicals from Leo XIII to John Paul II*, 3.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

Novarum, his intention was to update and endorse the core principles enunciated by Leo XIII. He treaded carefully between individualism and collectivism, between traditional liberalism and socialism which he described as “a remedy much more disastrous than the evil it is designed to cure.”¹⁸ It was the fear of socialism always lurking in the background that drove the Church to support fascist organizations in Austria, Portugal, Spain, Italy, Slovakia under Jozef Tiso and Vichy France.¹⁹ Sandwiched between liberalism and socialism, the Church cautiously preferred fascism as a midway between those two known enemies (liberalism and socialism) until the excesses and evils of fascism became manifestly evident. From the viewpoint of the Church at the time, the corporate state advanced by fascism appeared to be in harmony with the developing social teaching of the Church since fascism at first, did not present any apparent danger of class conflict.²⁰

The fact merits reiterating that the body of teachings now regarded as Catholic social thought in its complex form, does not strictly admit coherence in terms of approach, style and even issues. These are often determined by context and epoch since the various pronouncements made by the different pontiffs in general, are historically conditioned to respond to the needs of the time as understood by the popes. All that can be said with a very modicum of certainty in the affirmation of Michael Wash is that “each pope likes to present his teaching as in direct continuity with that of his predecessors – as is demonstrated by the encyclicals’ titles which frequently recall the anniversaries of *Rerum Novarum* to the most recent . . .”²¹

In terms of style, Pope John XXIII broke new grounds in 1961 with publication of *Mater et Magistra* and again in 1963 with *Pacem in Terris*. John XXIII abandoned the old style of arguing from natural law which was very fashionable among the popes before 1958. Instead of natural law, John XXIII opted for a more scriptural based reference. There was also a move away from abstract philosophy to concrete historical realities, and from general real life to the tangible life experiences of the ordinary people. The change in style and approach as signaled by the papal pronouncements of John XXIII would find their ways into the various documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962 - 65). Thus, from the pontificate of John XIII onwards, Catholic social teaching made a big transition from “. . . abstract philosophy to historical consciousness, from immutable essences to the changing facts of history, from deduction to induction, from the classical world to one which took account of Freud and Marx, from theory to the real life of ordinary people . . . Documents began with a consideration of a particular topic, or a section of the gospel which illuminated such a contemporary reality.”²²

Equally important to note is the discovery of human rights by the Church which now occupies a prominent place in the Church’s teaching on the human

¹⁸ James Wilkinson – H. Stuart Hughes 2004. *Contemporary Europe: A History*. New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 270.

¹⁹ Michael Wash 1998. “Lay the Foundations: from *Rerum Novarum* to the Second Vatican Council” in Paul Valley (ed.) *The New Politics: Catholic Social Teaching for the Twenty-first Century*. London: SCM Press, 34-35.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹*Ibid.*, 40.

²² Paul Valley, “Introduction”, 11-12.

person whose dignity must not be violated. As *Mater et Magistra* ushered in a new era in Catholic social teaching and also inaugurated the process of ending the political alliance between Catholics and socially conservative forces in Europe and Italy in particular, *Pacem in Terris* for its own part, provided a new avenue for the Church to operate and engage the contemporary society. That avenue was the defence of human rights and the place of the individual in the society whose human dignity in various manners is related to the common good.²³

Prior to the 1940s, the Church's attitude to question of human rights was at best very ambivalent because it previously considered such issues as part of the excesses of liberalism alongside its secular connotation. Although amidst the slaughter and destructions of the First World War, Pope Benedict XV (1914-1922) in his outright condemnation of it maintained that: "The equilibrium of the world and the prosperous and sincere tranquility of the nations rest on mutual benevolence and on respect of the right of others and their dignity much more than on multitude of armaments and on formidable wall of fortresses."²⁴ It was, however, with the monstrous Second World War that the Church decidedly shook off its old derision and suspicions of liberalism in terms of the promotion and defence of human rights. Pope Benedict XVI during his annual address to the Roman Curia on December 22, 2006, recalled in some manner the Church's journey towards the embracement of human rights and religious freedom. In reference to the 18th century Enlightenment period in Europe, he described human rights and religious freedom as the "true conquest" or achievement of the Enlightenment.²⁵ Wash rightly points out:

Given the emphasis which has been put upon human rights by recent popes . . . it is difficult to imagine the church as other than a champion of human rights. But it was not always so, and Pope Pius VI condemned the French Declaration of the Rights of Man in March 1791. To be fair to Pope Pius, his chief objection was to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, but in his rejection of that he included a condemnation of, among other things, freedom of religion and of expression. Papal rejection of these human rights, now regarded as fundamental to human dignity, was reiterated in the blanket condemnation of liberalism and the modern age to be found in Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors* of 1864.²⁶

Another key point in the evolution of Catholic social thought is the inherent tension that borders on the notion of justice. There are two notions of justice in the social teaching of the Church, namely: (1) natural justice and (2) biblical justice.²⁷ This tension exists in two camps because while biblical notion of justice is prophetic

²³ Charles Villa-Vicencio 1986. *Between Christ and Caesar: Classical and Contemporary Texts on Church and State*. Cape Town: David Philip, 113-4.

²⁴https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xv/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xv_exh_19150728_fummo-chiamati.html (accessed: June 8, 2018).

²⁵http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedictxvi/en/speeches/2006/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20061222_curia-romana.html (accessed: June 8, 2018).

²⁶ Michael Wash, "Lay the Foundations: from *Rerum Novarum* to the Second Vatican Council", 39-40.

²⁷ Marvin L. Krierk Mich 2003. *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements*. Bayard: Twenty-Third Publications, 193.

and tends to be more radical in its declaration, the natural notion of justice is more philosophical, nuanced and diplomatic. This tension may help to explain the difficult relation of the Vatican under John Paul II with Liberation theology which seems very radical in contradistinction to traditional theology. The conflict between natural and biblical notions of justice came to a head in 1971 and 1974 during the synods of bishops of those years. The conflict was on the word “constitutive”, described by Marvin Mich as “tension of perspective.”²⁸

The bishops in the synod of 1971 through *Justice in the World* emphatically stated: “action on behalf of justice . . . fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of preaching the Gospel” (par. 6). According to Mich, this was “a powerful statement” implying “that action on behalf of justice is an essential part of the mission of the church in preaching the gospel” but which in 1974 was met with some opposition because some bishops saw the statement as very strong and therefore, wanted a “softer” interpretation.²⁹ In the estimation of Charles Murphy as cited by Marvin Mich, the disagreement over “constitutive” was reflective of the differing notions of justice (natural and biblical) as currently visible in Catholic social thought:

If justice is conceived exclusively on the plan of the natural, human virtue of justice as explained in classical philosophical treatises, then such justice can only be conceived as an integral but nonessential part of preaching of the gospel. But if justice is conceived in the biblical sense of God’s liberating action which demands a necessary human response – a concept of justice which is far closer to agape than to justice in the classical philosophical sense – then justice must be defined as of the essence of the gospel itself.³⁰

The official Church often finds itself in a dilemma, and being pulled by both ends of the divide. However, a lot depends on historical circumstances because for the Church it remains the ideal to see itself as continuing the work of the biblical prophets who denounced evil, injustice and oppression in their milieu. Despite the misgivings of some bishops in the synod of 1974 about the word “constitutive”, Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, underscored the centrality of justice “as the kernel and centre of his Good News,” since “Christ proclaims salvation, this great gift of God which is liberation from everything that oppresses man” (EN no. 9).³¹ Through that affirmation, Paul VI reaffirmed the commitment of the Church to justice because everything that oppresses the human person which include material poverty and violence, injustice and denial of human rights, disfigure a person created in the image and likeness of God.

3. BASIC MORAL PRINCIPLES IN CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT

²⁸*Ibid.*, 192.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 192-3.

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹ Cf. Michael P. Hornsby-Smith, *An Introduction to Catholic Social Thought*, 98.

What the Bishops of the United States of America in their 1988 pastoral letter, *Economic Justice for All*, wrote concerning their intervention in the social and economic order of the American society is also true of any papal pronouncement that may pertain to economics, politics or the general welfare of human beings. Ideally, the intervention of popes and bishops ought to be done not from the perspectives of public officials but as pastors, not as economists but as moral teachers guided by the light of faith which impels the entire Church to be actively involved in the project of social and economic justice. In the words of the American bishops, "We seek not to make some political or ideological point but to lift up the human and ethical dimensions of economic life, aspects too often neglected in public discussion."³² The Church does not get tired repeating that its social teaching is not a blueprint for a perfect society. Were that to be the case, the Church without intending it, would be encouraging the construction of an earthly utopia. In the reality of economic life amidst scarce resources coupled with individual and collective egoism, the most that a person can expect is that the politics and economics of a society may work sufficiently for everybody.

Pope Paul VI took cognizance of the multiplicity of national settings and their peculiarities when he acknowledged in *Octogesima Adveiens* (May 1971): "In the face of such widely varying situations it is difficult for us to utter a unified message and to forward a solution which has universal validity. Such is not our ambition, nor is it our mission." In view of this fact, "It is up to Christian communities with the help of the Holy Spirit, in communion with the bishops . . . and in dialogue with other Christian brethren and all men of goodwill, to discern the options and commitments which are called for . . ." ³³ (par. 4). Hence, the following principles as envisaged in Catholic social teaching are meant to act as a rudder or a guide for Christians in their peculiar societies.

The Common Good: As a rich concept, it constitutes one of the major pillars of Catholic social thought, conceived as an indispensable component for the building of a just, social and economic order. According to John J. Wright, the common good is a time-tested Christian philosophical concept that incorporates within itself the hope of Hebrew prophecy for social justice and economic equity, the wisdom of Greek speculation, the practical acumen of the Roman law and the charity of the Christian Revelation.³⁴ As a Christian concept, it seeks to safeguard the human person together with his or her human dignity because they are the very hinges upon which the common good itself rests. It is for this very reason that any economic system is judged "by what it does *for* and to people and by how it permits all to *participate* in it."³⁵ Ultimately, it does mean that the economy ought to serve people

³² National Conference of Catholic Bishops of the United States of America 1988. *Economic Justice for All*. Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 15.

³³ Cf., Marvin L. Krierk Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements*, 179-180.

³⁴ John J. Wright, "The Common Good", 218. For the connection between economic activities and the common good, see, Christian Felber 2015. *Change Everything: Creating an Economy for the Common Good*. London: Zed Books, 15-16.

³⁵ National Conference of Catholic Bishops of the United States of America, *Economic Justice for All*, 16.

and their needs, and not that people should be sacrificed in order to serve the needs and interests of the economy.

In its proper perspective, the common good presupposes and implies a “bonum honestum” of the society.³⁶ That is, the honest good of the political society oriented towards its practical good in which the common good is truly served, human rights are respected, and the demands of justice and fraternal charity are upheld. It is in this respect, Jacques Maritain insisted that the common good both as a Christian and a philosophical notion:

Includes the sum or sociological integration of all the civic conscience, political virtues and sense of right and liberty, of all the activity, material prosperity and spiritual riches, of moral rectitude, justice, friendship, happiness, virtue and heroism in the individual lives of members. For these things are, in a certain measure, *communicable* and so revert to each member, helping him to perfect his life and liberty of person.³⁷

As an idea, the common good runs through the entire length and breadth of papal social pronouncements from the time of Leo XIII. It is a recurrent theme in the social teaching of the Church and features prominently in conciliar and synodal documents. For instance, John XXIII in *Pacem in Terris*, reiterated his definition of the common good as found in his earlier encyclical, *Mater et Magistra* where he defined it as “the sum total of those conditions of social living whereby men are enabled to achieve their own integral perfection more fully and more easily”. And because it “applies to the wholeness of man, both corporal and spiritual”, “civil authorities need to protect and promote both” that is the material and the spiritual needs of the human person (*Pacem in Terris*, nn. 55-59).³⁸ The Second Vatican Council in the footsteps of Pope John XXIII reaffirmed: “The political community exists for the sake of the common good, in which it finds its full justification and significance, and the source of its inherent legitimacy. Indeed, the common good embraces the sum of those conditions of the social life whereby men, families and associations more adequately and readily may attain their own perfection” (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 74).³⁹ In his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), Pope Benedict VI links justice to the common good as two basic requirements that ought to guide and inform moral actions in the political society. Every Christian is called upon to practice both in his or her daily life understood as two forms of charity in practical terms. And also, because the common good:

³⁶ Jacques Maritain 1947. *The Person and the Common Good*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 43.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

³⁸ Cf. Richard W. Rousseau, *Human Dignity and the Common Good: The Great Papal Social Encyclicals from Leo XIII to John Paul II*, 7.

³⁹ Cf. Charles Villa-Vicencio, *Between Christ and Caesar: Classical and Contemporary Texts on Church and State*, 114; http://www.lifeissues.net/writers/doc/ges/ges_gaudium_et_spes10.html (accessed: June 14, 2018). For the 1996 the statement by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, entitled *The Common Good and the Catholic Church's Social Teaching*, confer, [http://www.cbcew.org.uk/CBCEW-Home/Publications/The-Common-Good-1996/\(language\)/eng-GB](http://www.cbcew.org.uk/CBCEW-Home/Publications/The-Common-Good-1996/(language)/eng-GB) (accessed: June 14, 2018)

. . . is the good of “all of us”, made up of individuals, families and intermediate groups who together constitute society . . . Every Christian is called to practise this charity, in a manner corresponding to his vocation and according to the degree of influence he wields in the *pólis*. This is the institutional path – we might also call it the political path – of charity, no less excellent and effective than the kind of charity which encounters the neighbour directly, outside the institutional mediation of the *polis* (*C in V*, nn 6-7).⁴⁰

Subsidiarity and Solidarity

The “principle of subsidiarity” first appeared in Catholic social teaching in *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) by Pope Pius XI. Conceived against the background of a stratified and hierarchically structured society, and in the context of the great economic recession of 1929, Pius XI maintained that it was “gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community.” In equal measure, it was also “an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do.” As the pope understood it, “every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the body social, and never destroy and absorb them.” This right order of things, he described as “the principle of “subsidiary function”” (*QA* nn 79-80).⁴¹ John Paul II in *Centesimus Annus* (1991) elaborated further on this principle insisting that “a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to co-ordinate its activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good” (*CA* no. 48).⁴²

A companion to the principle of subsidiarity in Catholic social teaching is **solidarity**. In the understanding and teaching of John Paul II, the terminology does not mean “a feeling of vague compassion . . . at the misfortunes of many people” but rather “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good” (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 38).⁴³ It implies the obligation to ‘love our neighbour’ with social implications requiring “a broader commitment” to the civil, political and economic rights of everyone in the society. In the judgment of the American bishops, “the partial ways” like “Gross National Product, per capita income, stock market prices and so forth”, used to measure and debate the health of a nation’s economy are grossly inadequate when juxtaposed with the Christian vision of economy. With the human person at the centre of its consideration, “the

⁴⁰http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html (accessed: June 14, 2018).

⁴¹http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19310515_quadragesimo-anno.html (accessed: June 14, 2018).

⁴² Cf. Michael P. Hornsby-Smith, *An Introduction to Catholic Social Thought*, 105-6.

⁴³*Ibid.* 106-7.

Christian vision of economic life looks beyond” such abstract economic measurements and poses the question: “Does economic life enhance or threaten our life together as a community?”⁴⁴ The deliberate resolve to ensure that no man, no woman and no child is left behind to languish in poverty and want is the core of solidarity because a society is judged fair and just by how it treats its vulnerable members at the margin of society. True solidarity implies a true charity that leads to advocacy.⁴⁵

Human Rights

It is inconceivable nowadays to think of Catholic social teaching without its unapologetic defence of the inviolable rights and dignity of the human person. With particular reference to “dignity” – a word that is almost on everyone’s lips, it still remains somewhat illusive to pin down in concrete terms its proper and universally accepted definition. According to M. Douglas Meeks, “*dignitas*” from the Enlightenment has become closely associated with “*humanitas*” so that both may be said to be co-extensive with “the fundamental meaning of being human.”⁴⁶ The Christian perspective of human dignity goes beyond certain narrow ideological definitions that identify human rights and dignity with “a few dimensions of human life or with a limited number of human rights.” The Christian understanding which is biblical is predicated on this theological truth: “. . . human rights are grounded in God’s creation of the human being in God’s image.” It means that “to be created as a human being” carries alongside with it a responsibility implying that the human person is “commissioned to represent God’s will to the creation.” Therefore, “this commission is what distinguishes the human being from the rest of creation and what constitutes being human. Human rights are whatever human beings need in order to keep this commission.”⁴⁷

Although the Catholic Church was slow in catching up with regard to the promotion and protection of human rights, but once it woke from its immobile conservatism, it positioned itself as a champion of the human person in order to keep him or her safe from all that may harm and disfigure their God-impressed image. Long before the 1948 United Nations Declaration of Human rights, the popes when the occasion warranted, never missed the opportunity to denounce any violation of human rights. And many years before the formal definition of genocide as a crime against humanity, Pope Benedict XV during World War I, pronounced these memorable words against the senseless destruction of human lives: “Let each put aside the purpose of destruction, and reflect that nations do not die: impatiently they bear the yoke put on them, preparing for revenge, and handing down from generation to generation a miserable heritage of hatred and vengeance.”⁴⁸ Pope Pius

⁴⁴ National Conference of Catholic Bishops of the United States of America, *Economic Justice for All*, 16.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁴⁶ M. Douglas Meeks 1984. “Introduction” in Jürgen Moltmann, *On Human Dignity: Political Theology and Ethics*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, ix.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, x.

⁴⁸ https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xv/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xv_exh_19150728_fummo-chiamati.html (accessed: June 8, 2018).

XII during World War II declared unambiguously: "To protect the inviolable field of the rights of the human person and facilitate the fulfillment of his duties, should be the essential task of every public authority."⁴⁹

In two important documents of the Second Vatican Council: *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions) and *Dignitatis humanae* (Declaration on Religious Freedom), the Council Fathers affirmed that the rights of individuals and of communities to social and civil liberties equally embody in themselves the right to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups especially in religious matters. That is to say that every human being has a right to his or her freedom of conscience, since they are endowed with reason and freewill to seek the truth and to adhere to it. Unarguably, human rights and the inherent dignity of the human person are among the cornerstones of contemporary Catholic social teaching.⁵⁰

Other principles of Catholic social thought are (1) preferential option for the poor; (2) no recourse to violence as a tool for social change⁵¹ and (3) peace. The theological shift or perspective that began in Vatican II and continued throughout the pontificate of Paul VI seemed to have reached its climax with the Second General Conference of the Latin American Bishops held at Medellin, Colombia in 1968, together with the 1971 Synod of Bishops on Justice in the World. In many respects, it could be said that Liberation theology was born out of the strong ecclesial emphasis on justice and development in the years that followed immediately after Vatican Council II. It equally brought to the fore the Church's "preferential option for the poor", on the basis of "denouncing global injustice and addressing justice within the church itself, on theology that should ground the church's involvement in social justice, and on the need for new approaches to education for justice."⁵² Similar conclusion can be made about the Church's concerns and efforts for peace. According to Mary Ann Cejka, "peace is central to the social teaching of the church" which "is not just 'made' out of conflict, but built, day by day with the bricks of human dignity, development, solidarity, and world order."⁵³ Regrettably as it is sad to note, the official teachings of the Church "in matters of personal morality – or personal piety, or details of Catholic liturgy" often have the unintentional effect of obscuring "Catholic social teaching on poverty, development, justice and peace."⁵⁴

⁴⁹<https://thejosias.com/2017/06/02/pius-xii-la-solennita-della-pentecoste/> (accessed: June 7, 2018).

⁵⁰Cf. Peter K. A. Turkson 2014. *The Catholic Church and Human Rights*. Address presented to Slovak Bishops' Conference, Bratislava, March 4, 2014; Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Città del Vaticano: Editrice Vaticana); Paolo G. Carozza – Daniel Philpott 2012. "The Catholic Church, Human Rights, and Democracy: Convergence and Conflict with the Modern State" *Scholarly Works. Paper 882* (http://scholarship.law.nd.edu/law_faculty_scholarship/882) (accessed: March 18, 2017).

⁵¹ Cf. Michael P. Hornsby-Smith, *An Introduction to Catholic Social Thought*, 106-7.

⁵² Marvin L. Krierk Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements*, 190.

⁵³ Mary Ann Cejka 2007. "The Wrath of the Poor: Peace, Poverty, and Catholicism since Populorum Progressio" in International Jesuit Network for Development, *The Development of Peoples: Challenges for Today and Tomorrow (Essays to mark the Fortieth Anniversary of Populorum Progressio)*. Dublin: Columba Press, 37, 50.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 49.

Ecology

Another area of concern today in Catholic social teaching is Ecology. Just as Pope Paul VI in *Populorum Progressio* (1967) called “peace, the new name for development” (PP no. 76), today’s concerns for the protection and preservation of the ecosystem may rightly identify ecology as “the new name for development.” What the Filipino bishops said in 1988 about the Philippines has universal import: “God intended this land for us, his special creatures, but not so that we might destroy it and turn it into a wasteland. Rather, He charged us to be stewards of his creation, to care for it, to protect its fruitfulness and not to allow it to be devastated (Gen. 1:28) . . . More and more we must recognize that the commitment to work for justice and to preserve the integrity of creation are two inseparable dimensions of our Christian vocation to work for the coming of the kingdom of God in our times.”⁵⁵

The Filipino Bishops anticipated by two years Pope John Paul II’s 1990 Message for World Day of Peace. Devoted entirely to environmental concerns, the message was titled, *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All Creation*. As affirmed by Marvin Mich, this text of John Paul II was “a breakthrough in Roman Catholic official teaching on the environment” intimately connecting “respect for life and for the dignity of the human person” “to the rest of creation, which is called to join man in praising God (cf. Ps 148:96)” (par. 16).⁵⁶ A particularly major breakthrough is *Laudato Si* (On Care for Our Common Home) by Pope Francis (2015). It is the first ever papal encyclical dedicated solely to the environment. In it, the pope calls for an “ecological conversion” in order to protect the earth and everything that lives on it. “Ecological conversion” demands a *metanoia* – a change of attitude about pollution, waste, the throwaway culture, the use of water and other natural resources:

“The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast”. For this reason, the ecological crisis is also a summons to profound interior conversion. It must be said that some committed and prayerful Christians, with the excuse of realism and pragmatism, tend to ridicule expressions of concern for the environment. Others are passive; they choose not to change their habits and thus become inconsistent. So what they all need is an “ecological conversion”, whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them. Living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience (LS no. 217).⁵⁷

4. RECAPTURING THE LOST VIBRANCY

⁵⁵<http://www.catholicsocialteaching.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/What-is-Happening-to-our-Beautiful-Land.pdf> (accessed: June 5, 2018)

⁵⁶ Marvin L. Kierk Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements*, 390-391.

⁵⁷http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html (accessed: June 14, 2018)

Many an author concurs that the ecclesial climate in the immediate post-Vatican II Church was characterized by dialogue and openness both within and outside the Church. This was manifested in a number of initiatives at the level of the local churches and at the international level led by the foresighted Pope Paul VI. In that climate of openness and dialogue in which the Church demonstrated the qualities of a listening Church, much readier to learn than quicker to prescribe instructions, a plethora of lay Catholic thinkers and writers played some notable roles in the formulation of Church's documents on social justice, economy, politics, development and peace. It was a period that saw, for instance, the tireless work of Jacques Maritain in helping with Paul VI's active commitment to the United Nations and the pope's support to post-World War II Christian Democracy in Europe.⁵⁸ The contribution of Lady Barbara Ward Jackson (renowned British economist) to the 1971 Synod of Bishop remains till date very remarkable. Speaking on "Structures for World Justice," she urged the Church and her children to "reconsider social structures and personal living standards" and called particularly on bishops "to ensure that the church itself conduct its own affairs "in the strict spirit of justice and poverty.""⁵⁹

The epitome of the vibrancy of the immediate post-Vatican II years can be located in 1971 with two important documents: *Justice in the World* and *Octogesima Adveniens*. In addition to notching the local churches to take initiatives and lead in social justice ministry, those two documents continued with the typical attitude of openness and freshness of the Second Vatican Council so that as opined by Mich, the positive outcome was "a convergence of vision, creativity and energy that led to a new level of commitment to social justice ministry."⁶⁰ Both 1971 and the papal documents of that same year could be described as milestones in Catholic social teaching. Those years were unrepeatabe moment, truly graced and energizing as the entire Church came to the realization that "justice was neither an option nor a postscript to the gospel: it was its very essence."⁶¹

Sadly, as 1970s waned, receding through the 1980s into the 1990s under the pontificate of John Paul II, previously unleashed energy and initiatives from the local churches progressively slacked. One of the criticisms against the pontificate of John Paul II was its lip service to the principle of subsidiarity when the Church often failed to apply the same principle to itself in terms of Church governance and decision-making process. With regard the official articulation of Catholic social teaching as presented in *Compendium of Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004), Michael Hornsby-Smith observed that the book only "reflects the teaching of Pope John Paul II and marginalizes all conflicting or alternative views . . ."⁶² The same author maintains that while previously there were efforts by liberation theologians to move the Church towards the direction of dialogical and inductive approaches to seeking

⁵⁸ Michael P. Hornsby-Smith, *An Introduction to Catholic Social Thought*, 110.

⁵⁹ Marvin L. Krierk Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements*, 191.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Michael P. Hornsby-Smith, *An Introduction to Catholic Social Thought*, 109.

social justice, the positions of John Paul II as clearly set out in the *Compendium* and *Centesimus Annus* (1991) hardly demonstrated “an openness to the modern world or to a willingness to dialogue about the marvels as well as the challenges of modern science.”⁶³

Thankfully, the pontificate of Pope Francis appears to be bringing back the Church once more towards the paths of dialogue and openness. His indications also reveal a conscious attempt to recapture that sense of an ecclesial community constructed together with Peter and under Peter that was emblematic of the immediate post-Vatican II Church. From the vantage point, his *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) and *Amoris Laetitia* (2016) could be considered as a single corpus. Both documents most remarkably, convey the efforts of Pope Francis to “face-lift” the Church, often perceived rightly or wrongly as a stern and ever-demanding teacher. His apostolic exhortation (2018) *Gaudete et Exultate* (On Call to Holiness) continues in the same spirit and could be interpreted as a clarion call to Catholics to work for social justice. Accordingly, “Just as you cannot understand Christ apart from the kingdom he came to bring, so too your personal mission is inseparable from the building of that kingdom: “Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Mt 6:33). Your identification with Christ and his will involves a commitment to build with him that kingdom of love, justice and universal peace” (*G et E*, no. 25).⁶⁴

⁶³*Ibid.*, 110.

⁶⁴http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20180319_gaudete-et-exultate.html (accessed: June 15, 2018).

Bibliography

- Cejka, Mary Ann 2007. “The Wrath of the Poor: Peace, Poverty, and Catholicism since *Populorum Progressio*” in International Jesuit Network for Development, *The Development of Peoples: Challenges for Today and Tomorrow (Essays to mark the Fortieth Anniversary of Populorum Progressio)*. Dublin: Columba Press.
- Coleman, John A. 1991. A Tradition Celebrated, Reevaluated, and Applied, in John A. Coleman (ed.) *One Hundred Years of Catholic Social Thought: Celebration and Challenge*. New York: Orbis Books.
- Douglas Meeks, M. 1984. Introduction, in Jürgen Moltmann, *On Human Dignity: Political Theology and Ethics*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Felber, Christian 2015. *Change Everything: Creating an Economy for the Common Good*. London: Zed Books.
- Hornsby-Smith, Michael P. 2006. *An Introduction to Catholic Social Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Krierk Mich, Marvin L. 2003. *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements*. Bayard: Twenty-Third Publications.
- Maritain, Jacques 1947. *The Person and the Common Good*. New York: Charles Scribrier’s Sons.
- National Conference of Catholic Bishops of the United States of America 1988. *Economic Justice for All*. Washington: United States Catholic Conference.
- Novak, Michael 1989. *Free Persons and the Common Good*. New York – London: Madison Books.
- Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Città del Vaticano: Editrice Vaticana.
- Rousseau, Richard W. 2002. *Human Dignity and the Common Good: The Great Papal Social Encyclicals from Leo XIII to John Paul II*. Westport – London.
- Turkson, Peter K. A. 2014. *The Catholic Church and Human Rights*. Address presented to Slovak Bishops’ Conference, Bratislava, March 4, 2014.

5. CONCLUSION

As this essay has endeavoured to demonstrate, the one hundred and twenty-years of the social teaching of the Church (1891 - 2018) bear the footprints impressed upon it by the variegated circumstances, experiences and issues that were peculiar to the time of each pronouncement or teaching. It is difficult and will even be misleading to make a general and categorical summation that may explicitly capture into a coherent unity various pontifical teachings and pronouncements on social issues and questions of their different epochs. Be that as it may, some principles have been identified as constituting the kernel of Catholic social teaching. They include: the common good, subsidiarity, solidarity, human rights, peace and ecology.

-
- Valley, Paul 1998. Introduction, in Paul Valley (ed.) *The New Politics: Catholic Social Teaching for the Twenty-first Century*. London: SCM Press.
- Villa-Vicencio, Charles 1986. *Between Christ and Caesar: Classical and Contemporary Texts on Church and State*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Wash, Michael 1998. Lay the Foundations: from *Rerum Novarum* to the Second Vatican Council, in Paul Valley (ed.) *The New Politics: Catholic Social Teaching for the Twenty-first Century*. London: SCM Press.
- Wilkinson, James – Stuart Hughes, H. 2004. *Contemporary Europe: A History*. New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Wright, John 1966. The Common Good, in Benjamin L. Masse (ed.) *The Church and Social Progress: Background Readings for Pope John's Mater et Magistra*. Milwaukee: Hallow Books.

Internet Sources

- <https://www.ewtn.com/library/ENCYC/B14UBIPR.HTM> (accessed: June 5, 2018).
- <https://www.britannica.com/topic/encyclical#ref218552> (accessed: June 5, 2018).
- <https://thejosias.com/2017/06/02/pius-xii-la-solennita-della-pentecoste/> (accessed: June 7, 2018).
- https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xv/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xv_exh_19150728_fummo-chiamati.html (accessed: June 8, 2018).
- http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedictxvi/en/speeches/2006/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20061222_curia-romana.html (accessed: June 8, 2018).
- http://www.lifeissues.net/writers/doc/ges/ges_gaudium_et_spes10.html (accessed: June 14, 2018).
- [http://www.cbcew.org.uk/CBCEW-Home/Publications/The-Common-Good-1996/\(language\)/eng-GB](http://www.cbcew.org.uk/CBCEW-Home/Publications/The-Common-Good-1996/(language)/eng-GB) (accessed: June 14, 2018)
- http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html (accessed: June 14, 2018).
- http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19310515_quadregesimo-anno.html (accessed: June 14, 2018).
- https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xv/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xv_exh_19150728_fummo-chiamati.html (accessed: June 8, 2018).
- <https://thejosias.com/2017/06/02/pius-xii-la-solennita-della-pentecoste/> (accessed: June 7, 2018).
- Paolo G. Carozza – Daniel Philpott 2012. “The Catholic Church, Human Rights, and Democracy: Convergence and Conflict with the Modern State” *Scholarly Works. Paper 882*.
- http://scholarship.law.nd.edu/law_faculty_scholarship/882 (accessed: March 18, 2017).
- <http://www.catholicsocialteaching.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/What-is-Happening-to-our-Beautiful-Land.pdf> (accessed: June 5, 2018).
- http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html (accessed: June 14, 2018).
- http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20180319_gaudete-et-exultate.html (accessed: June 15, 2018).

Another thing to recognize is the Church's triple-faced opposition to unbridled capitalism, liberalism and atheistic socialism. In its opposition to unrestrained capitalism together with its concern to protect the common good, the Church's social teaching leans more towards wealth redistribution rather than wealth creation. This is an inherent weakness in Catholic social teaching that requires a rethinking, perhaps, to be balanced with Calvinistic work ethic that places much emphasis on hard work and political participation. Experience has taught human beings two hard lessons: wealth must be created before it can be redistributed; and nature gives human beings nothing on a platter of gold as daily bread must be earned through sweat and ingenuity.

There is no shortage of Church documents on any conceivable social question. As a matter of fact, it suffers from superabundance which renders it more of an intellectual activity devoid of concrete applications. The change in tone and approach by Pope Francis in this regard is a welcomed development. It is only to be hoped that he can help the entire Church to recapture once again the enthusiasm and zest of the late 1960s and 1970s in which the Church was alive with initiatives and activities in social justice ministry. Mere knowledge of the Church's social teaching is not sufficient. It can happen that a person may be a "good" Catholic and still support an oppressive government, vote for obnoxious policies, harbour contempt for the poor, defend unjust structures and without regard for the environment and biodiversity. Effective pronouncements must be marched with effective and concrete actions at an institutional level and at a personal level.