

□ CHAPTER SEVEN □

Catholic Social Teaching Since Vatican II

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I N THIS ESSAY I would like to look at three questions. First, what are a) Catholic social teaching and b) Catholic social action? Second, what are the central themes of Catholic social teaching as it has developed since Vatican II? And, third, why is Catholic social teaching still, as so many have said, the Church's best kept secret?

Social Teaching and Social Action

Catholic social thought is nothing more than the serious effort by Catholics to make sense of their faith in the midst of history. When that thought is gathered and offered in a systematic way by those exercising pastoral authority in the Church, we have Catholic social teaching. The phrase Catholic social teaching (or Catholic social thought) may simply be redundant, for all Catholic articulation of faith is, in some basic sense, social. Doctrinal formulations and prayers always have definite social and political implications, just as social and political claims made in the name of faith rest on theological judgements, stated or not.

Still, there is a body of Catholic teaching which is explicitly and deliberately understood as the conscious articulation of the meaning of the faith in the concrete setting of a particular historical situation. Leo XIII spoke to new things, "rerum novarum," by which he meant the phenomena associated with

industrial society. Pius XI spoke in 1931 to worldwide economic depression and ideological conflict, John XXIII in 1963 to Cold War militarism, the collapse of colonial empires and the spread of Christian democracy in Europe.

As these examples suggest, the meaning of the Church's faith and life turns on the meaning assigned to contemporary political and historical events. The revolutions in Catholic consciousness which have punctuated recent decades, from John XXIII on, found their origin not in libraries and monasteries but in the events of this tragic century. The sources of Vatican II lie in the fascist movements of the inter-war years, in the death camps, the Resistance and the bomb, in the anti-colonial rebellions, the successes of post-war Christian democracy and the failures of revolutionary Leninism. These events made thoughtful women and men ask new questions and frame new answers. Among Roman Catholics they led to a basic shift away from a church that cared mainly for itself, convinced that it alone offered the way to save humanity, and toward a church enlisted by choice in the common human enterprise.

So Catholic social teaching and lives based on it are nothing more than intelligent and responsible Catholicism, Catholicism engaged in thinking through the meaning of historical experience, personal and collective. The teaching embodies the Church's more or less systematic reflection in light of faith on its ongoing historical experience and, in dialectical fashion, its honest reflection on its faith in light of its ongoing historical experience.

In the United States, Catholic social thought has been associated with the work of so-called public theologians like John A. Ryan, director of the Social Action Department of the old National Catholic Welfare Conference from 1919 to 1945; John Courtney Murray, S.J., the most influential public theologian of the Vatican II years, best known for his work on church and state, and J. Bryan Hehir, architect of many of the post-Vatican II statements of the United States bishops. In its social teaching, the United States Church draws on the work of such thinkers to advise Catholics about their civic responsibilities. At the same time the Church seeks to speak to all Americans about the moral dimension of common problems.

Catholic social teaching has a dual function, then, to help the Church form its conscience on public matters and to help the multi-cultural public to develop a broad moral consensus to inform its necessary public choices.

In the United States, the hierarchy has provided this kind of guidance in a systematic way since 1919, when their newly established national office produced a detailed program for postwar reconstruction. Then, under Ryan's guidance, the bishops continued to offer moral commentary on public affairs and occasionally to take positions for and against specific legislation. In the 1930s they backed New Deal domestic legislation, and later they gave belated support to civil rights. More cautious in dealing with questions of war and peace, the hierarchy after Vatican II finally began to apply Catholic principles to the arms race, the military draft, and specific questions of military action. Two of their pastoral letters of the 1980s, one dealing with the moral problems posed by nuclear arms, the other offering a comprehensive commentary on the American economy, drew unusual attention not only among Catholics but across the country.

The body of Catholic teaching on public issues since Vatican II fills two large volumes. This corpus of work follows the basic structure erected at Vatican II: that is, the Church has no specific agenda of its own but seeks to affirm human dignity, defend human rights and contribute to building up the unity of the human family, and to apply these principles to specific public questions. The late Joseph Cardinal Bernardin helped his fellow bishops weave these together into what he called a "seamless garment" of pro-life positions which included opposition to abortion and capital punishment, moral limits on the use of military force, and advocacy for full employment, universal access to housing, education and health care, and government assistance for community-based economic development.

Through a standing committee and a national office, the bishops actively promote such views, occasionally testify before Congress, and even lobby for legislative action, as they did recently during the welfare reform debate. And they attempt to educate Catholics and the general public regarding the moral dimension of public policy, as in documents prepared for wide

distribution during presidential elections. Comparable educational and governmental work goes on at the state level through state Catholic conferences.

So there is a great deal of material available to answer the question "what does the Church think about matters of social justice?" But there is a second question: what does the Church do? Catholic social action, while based upon Catholic social teaching, often has a different orientation. More practical than theoretical, social action has to do with living the Gospel in the concrete circumstances in which the Church finds itself. At one level, of course, Catholic social action, like Catholic social teaching is redundant. The Church's ordinary work of worship, prayer, and pastoral care helps form and sustain persons, families, and communities, all with immeasurable social consequences. Then there is the tremendous array of Catholic social services, from quiet care for the poor in parishes and church-sponsored food pantries and soup kitchens, to massive Catholic hospitals and health centers, to the bewildering array of Catholic social service agencies at work among every group of persons in need in our country. Add the Catholic educational institutions which dot the landscape, and the tremendous fact of the Church's presence becomes clear.

Catholic social action, as distinct from social service, has to do with church-based efforts to address the causes of social injustice and unnecessary human suffering. In the United States such work ordinarily aims to empower people for participation in the always ambiguous marketplace realities of contemporary society. American Catholic social action reflects the Catholic experience of ethnic associations, trade unions, political machines and community organization, vehicles immigrant, working-class Catholics used to protect their interests and defend their values. Each reflected a self-interested, realistic quest for power and resources, as in trade union collective bargaining and "bread and butter" liberal politics, both in some tension with the principled pursuit of social justice and the common good which dominated Catholic social teaching.

In 1969 the American bishops launched their own war on poverty, the Campaign for Human Development, a national financial drive which provided seed money for self-help organizing

among poor and marginalized people. It has become a major source of support for such grass roots organizing, while other Catholic agencies have joined in efforts to organize people in need. Congregation-based organizing, aimed at drawing citizens into groups which can identify issues and find remedies, dominates the work of Catholic social action offices. Other organizing efforts, including efforts at building cooperatives, providing low- and middle-income housing, forming partnerships for economic development, or developing networks with the capacity to lobby government officials, all have in common bringing ordinary citizens into active civic participation while constructing grass roots institutions through which such responsible citizenship can be sustained.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the combination of social teaching and social action does not tell the whole story. There are movements of social engagement that have still another quality, which can be called the Catholic Social Gospel, symbolized by such activists as Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker movement or the witness of Jesuit Daniel Berrigan and the so-called Catholic peace movement. Catholic social teaching seeks to address Catholics as citizens in a pluralistic society, and to speak to the whole American public, so it moves from Gospel and faith imperatives to natural law categories of human dignity and rights, ending with arguments that make little direct reference to Christian mandates.

Similarly, Catholic social action seeks bottom-up mobilization and practical effectiveness, entering the give and take of politics with a stress on self-interest that sometimes seems at odds with Christian imperatives of self-sacrificing love. The Catholic social gospel, in contrast, is more prophetic, making a more direct application of Christian values to social realities. Social Gospel Catholics are impatient with the natural law moderation of Catholic social teaching and uncomfortable with the hard-headed realism and limited objectives of mainstream social action. Instead Catholic Social Gospel opts for personal conversion, intense community, and radical Christian witness as ways to build a just and peaceful society. While the number of people in such movements is limited, their influence is significant. Indeed the language

and spirit of the Catholic social gospel (as in, for example, the phrase “option for the poor”) informs much of the piety, the prayer, and the reflection evident in that enormous network of social services, from soup kitchens to prison ministries, that dot the American cityscape.

One example might help illustrate these categories. In their 1986 pastoral letter on the American economy, the bishops spoke in some sections of the “option for the poor” in ways which condemned materialism and consumerism and urged counter-cultural witness to Gospel values. That social gospel emphasis was less evident when they spoke of public policy, where they offered very modest recommendations to improve provision of services for the needy while working toward full employment. And there was still a different tone when they spoke of their continuing support for labor organization and widespread participation in decisions on economic policy. While these were not necessarily in irreducible conflict with each other, the tensions involved may account for the weakness of the final sections of the text, when the bishops confined their recommendations for Catholic action to modest prescriptions for prayer, family life, and personal witness.

There was no ringing call for political engagement, as the policy sections might have suggested, nor for renewed organizing drives in accord with their own tradition and practice, nor for voluntary poverty as the option the poor might require. Social teaching, social action, and social gospel remain, it seems, on different tracks.

Themes of Catholic Social Teaching Since Vatican II

Human Rights

Before World War II, the Church was equivocal at best in dealing with human rights, but John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris* (1963), with its long list of political and civil as well as social and economic rights, marked a decisive turning point. It is important to note the presence of those two forms of rights and the Church's insistence on both.

In many ways, provision for social and economic rights remains the central agenda of Catholic social teaching. If the popes have campaigned for political and civil rights, including religious liberty, in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, they have campaigned with equal fervor for recognition of social and economic rights less accepted in the United States. The American welfare system has always fallen short of including everyone or meeting basic needs, so the Church in this country has often been an advocate on behalf of basic minimum social and economic rights, especially amid the pressures for welfare reform.

Still, the Church insists that exclusive emphasis on rights and distributive justice is inadequate. In the past, in the United States, the language of rights made sense for a church which saw itself as an outsider battling for acceptance. For an insider church, sharing responsibility, advocacy must be balanced against wider responsibility, especially in times of slow economic growth and diminishing public finances.

This is probably why John Paul II speaks in a different tone to better-off Catholics than to the poor, insisting to the one group that their demand for a place at the table is justified, insisting to the other group that they had better go beyond sharing crumbs from that table to making it work better for everyone. Similarly, despite claims to the contrary, the economic thought of the U.S. hierarchy has modified its demands for distributive justice with careful assessment of the need for economic growth, investment, productivity, and stability.

Nevertheless, human dignity and human rights remain, of course, a central element of Church teaching today, perhaps the central element. That teaching will always place the Church in a prophetic stance, especially as it draws out the political and civil rights implications in some countries, the social and economic implications in others. Across the globe, even while internally the Church seems to become more conservative, the Church stands out as a major voice for human rights. This is true at an official level, bishops and Church agencies, and at the level of lay Catholic movements, often at the forefront of defense of human rights. This is a major change since Vatican II, and one which should sustain a positive sense of the process of renewal.

The Common Good

This has been a far more crucial theme of papal teaching than it has been in the United States. Leo XIII, addressing an apparently successful liberal capitalism in 1891, advocated reform and only hinted at the need for institutional change. But Pius XI, writing at the start of the great depression, made institutional change the centerpiece of *Quadragesimo Anno* in 1931, offering a Christian alternative, the long-forgotten system of vocational or occupational groups. More generally, he argued that social justice, defined as the common good, could only be implemented if there were new structures which transcended individual and group interests. What was missing then, as now, amid the contending demands of free market liberalism and state-directed socialism was an alternative which would allow persons to work for the common good without dictation. His Christian social order was intended to do that.

American Catholics were never comfortable with European corporatism, but many did understand the need to go beyond rights to examine how the economy could be reorganized to insure the common good. The 1919 program spoke of cooperatives, stock and profit sharing plans, and copartnership schemes which would allow workers to share in decision-making. In the mid-1930s almost every major social action leader signed a manifesto entitled "Organized Social Justice," which outlined a democratized version of the papal system. Later the CIO's abortive industrial council plan, proposing that unions and management groups collaborate on industry-wide policies, reflected a continued striving to move beyond the limitations of American business unionism to build structures of shared responsibility into the American political economy.

All these efforts failed. In articulating the demands of the common good, Catholics ran into two problems which plagued American reformers. One was the problem of relying upon the state. On the one hand, only the government had the power to checkmate the power of private corporations and make construction of alternative institutions possible. Occasionally the government did exert a negative check on corporate power, but

the combination of political pluralism and constitutional federalism limited its ability, except in war time, to define and enforce the terms of the common good or the public interest. In domestic policy, Americans consistently settled for a compensatory system, in which the federal government intervened to compensate for the failures of the market. Thus our modified version of the welfare state and our fiscal and monetary systems of nudging the private sector while leaving intact its autonomous decision making structures. This compromise is sustained by a variety of political and cultural ideologies of a quasi-religious character.

But there are deeper problems facing those who would construct institutions based on common rather than particular interests. Part of it is the individualism of American culture, which makes us all reluctant to accept the disciplines of corporate responsibility: the church and the university provide two excellent examples. Then there is the structural as opposed to moral selfishness of our dominant institutions, which render them incapable of sacrificing short-run interests to common concerns. There is much else. The church is not alone in failing to find a common good appeal as strong as its appeals about rights. Labor, civil rights, and feminist groups similarly mobilize considerable resources around specific questions of rights; they have far greater difficulty articulating constructive alternatives for society as a whole. In the end, who has a good answer for the question: how does a free and pluralistic community define what is common and voluntarily give it priority?

Still, there can be no avoidance of John XXIII's insistence that articulation of rights carries with it the responsibility to join in the more ambiguous political and cultural struggle to determine how these rights are to be implemented. In Karl Rahner's formulation, it is possible in the name of Church teaching to authoritatively name an evil, for example, the deprivation of rights, and to insist on responsibility to overcome that evil; it is not possible, in the name of the faith, to say how it is to be done.

Yet each citizen must try, and this means learning how to translate Christian faith and its impulse toward human rights and solidarity into terms comprehensible to all citizens, and not just

comprehensible but compelling enough to motivate sacrifice and risk. The pastoral letters of the bishops represented a courageous attempt to help shape the common culture and the common institutions for which Catholics, no longer immigrant outsiders, now share responsibility. This is where they have to prove that recognizing human rights and meeting human needs makes sense, that it can be done in such a way as to help develop the common life. Similarly, it means learning how to translate the Gospel imperative of peacemaking into policies of national and global security which are realistic and persuasive. The application of this argument to the abortion question is obvious: it is not enough to be right, it is also necessary to persuade in terms of the common national life.

The option for the poor, the human rights of the unborn, and the value of nonviolence may be admirable for churches and for some unusually religious people; they have not been accepted as normative for the common life of this country. That, it seems to me, is the greatest challenge Catholics now face. It is a cultural challenge first of all, deciding what our relationship as Christians is with our fellow Americans, what is the meaning of this national community, and what can we say to assist our people to feel that they are one people, that they share a common life, and that they can build together a common history. Catholics need to continue to take up that task, begun so well with those pastoral letters: to contend for the American conscience.

Participation

It is no secret that Catholic social teaching before John XXIII was not very democratic. Not only was it weak on political and civil, as distinguished from social and economic, rights, but it lacked any real appreciation of popular participation. At its best, it reflected a benevolent paternalism; to take one example, unions and Catholic action groups were always spoken of as under clerical protection and guidance. On this score much has changed. John XXIII insisted that the community as a whole, not simply the government, had the obligation to work together to construct a society in which his long list of human rights could be

implemented.³ Since Vatican II, liberation theologues around the world have almost always rejected top down socialization in favor of bottom up mobilization (quite the contrary of the charges of Marxist state-directed socialism levelled against liberation theology advocates). The poor, they have insisted, must be the agents of their own liberation.

Here in the United States, the American bishops, perhaps influenced by their long association with community organizing, took up the theme of justice as participation in the Campaign for Human Development and in their pastoral letter on the economy. Most remarkable, they even argued that the common good factor of social justice could best be pursued through a new American experiment in democracy and shared responsibility. Clearly arising from the history of episcopal proposals for cooperatives and industrial councils in the past, this section of the pastoral demonstrated how structural analysis might be detached from its long and tragic association with authoritarian ideologies of both left and right and be integrated with democratic values inherent in our new theology of human dignity and solidarity.

It is remarkable that there has been so little theological or political reflection on this dimension of the American Catholic experience. Millions of poor immigrants came to this country and, over a few generations, many, not all, achieved the economic independence, education, and access to dominant institutions which are the goals of historical liberation movements. The ethnic associations, political machines, trade unions and community organizations which were part of this struggle have rarely attracted any but critical examination. Yet there is surely here a story not only of an always ambiguous material success, but of liberation. People who had few choices, now have many; people who were marginal are now insiders; people who once thought ill of themselves now walk with heads held high. It is an American story worth telling, and telling it will perhaps contribute to an articulation of that common ground we must seek. Most of all it may suggest that participation is of the very essence of democracy, and motivate us to explore how new institutions might be built to give all of us a share of responsibility for the outcome of the historical project.

Why Has Catholic Social Teaching Been the Church's "Best Kept Secret"?

I would argue that the Church suffers today from a polarization about Catholic social teaching between evangelical radicals and conservative accommodationists. The first group, often heroic in their commitment to peace and social justice, ask in each situation, what would Jesus do? They speak easily of nonviolence and the option for the poor. They are at their best in questioning the integrity of the Church and pricking the conscience of its members, from the pews to the chanceries. They carry on their fight most often with comfortable accommodationists who recognize few serious defects in American institutions or American policy. Solidly grounded in American experience and in modern social sciences, they have worked hard for the last twenty years to persuade the Vatican and the American hierarchy to be more appreciative of American political institutions, free market economic policies, and, until recently, cold war strategies of military deterrence and third world interventionism. Convinced that, however flawed, American ideals and institutions are the best available, they seem to spend far more energy fighting what they take to be threats from the left, at home and abroad, than proposing ways to resolve outstanding problems. Most of all they want to keep religion confined to the religious sphere of church, family, and personal life, and persuade bishops and popes to confine their remarks about politics and economics to general moral prescriptions and make specific recommendations only on matters of family, sexuality, and personal morality. For lay people grown weary of the sometimes "ain't it awful" tone of preaching and teaching by social gospel enthusiasts, the comfortable accommodationists probably seem a reasonable alternative.

The best kept secret remains secret because it is presented by evangelical Catholics under a guise that makes it so demanding that it negates lay life, or, when presented by accommodationists, it is so modest that it makes no real difference. Until a third way, at once demanding and responsible, emerges with greater clarity, the rich, vital body of Catholic social teaching will likely remain too little known.

Conclusion

During and after World War II, many Catholics felt compelled by the tragic events of the war and the Holocaust to reconsider their church and its place in human history. That rethinking burst into the open with the arrival of Pope John XXIII in 1958 and especially at the Second Vatican Council, 1962 to 1965. Pope John affirmed human rights that Catholicism had long denied and asked Christians to think of Christ's church as humanity's partner and friend, sharing with others the responsibility to make peace by reforming human society on the basis of truth, justice, charity, and freedom. The Council endorsed this turn away from the Church as an exclusive channel of other worldly salvation to one which made its own "the joys and the hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted."

The beginning of renewal for Christians, then and now, was this new realism, this willingness to look around and see "the signs of the times" through the eyes of faith. That process, dramatic at times in Latin America, the Philippines, and Poland, constitutes the central drama of modern Catholic history. Its outcome remains, where it began, in the hands of Catholics themselves. The story is not yet over.

