

THE SOCIAL TEACHING OF THE CHURCH AS A LIVING TRADITION 100 YEARS AFTER *RERUM NOVARUM*

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1. Catholic social teaching is a dynamic theory

Catholic social doctrine is often said to be just a logically coherent system, which started to develop with the first social encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of Pope Leo XIII in 1891 and which has been based, since then, on the several papal documents dealing with social problems in politics and economics. But in such a statement there is little consideration of the fact that *Rerum Novarum* already was a synthesis of different currents of Christian social questioning and reflecting on different cultural backgrounds, different historical and political experiences and also on different philosophical traditions. Catholic social doctrine is – according to the German scholar H.J. Wallraff – a “network of open sentences” (*ein Gefüge offener Sätze*) rather than a closed system.

According to the double meaning of the Latin word “doctrina”, it is, therefore – as said in the title of this conference – a way of teaching rather than a real doctrine. There is, of course, an internal unity in this doctrine regarding goals, aims and principles. Human nature defines man as a person with its inalienable dignity and as an individual who may exist only as a truly human being in a social context in which justice and equality are being sought. This definition of man is in line with the bible, where Adam is shown as becoming fully a person only in partnership with Eve, and in line also with the theological tradition of the Church in the West. Since the Middle Ages, man has been defined as *animal sociale* according to the definition of Aristotle *zoon politikon*. This is also the understanding of St. Thomas Aquinas, whose commemoration you celebrate today. Human “nature”, man’s very *essentia*, is social. But social relations in today’s world are not any more as they used to be in the past: direct

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This is the text of a lecture which the author gave in May 1991 on the invitation of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Malta in commemoration of the centenary of *Rerum Novarum* as part of the annual academic celebration in honour of St. Thomas Aquinas.

connections as one finds in a family, a tribe or a village. Modern men live in a state, work mostly in factories, belong often to big transnational companies; they are affected by distant events as shown dramatically in the Gulf war. Briefly, man today is living in a real world-wide society. Respect for the personal dignity of every man cannot be, therefore, restricted just to the neighbour. Indeed Christians knew that always, at least theoretically. But in our days this truth acquired a practical significance. We have to ask how justice, as respect for human dignity, can be granted for everyone, for rich and poor, white or black, young or old.

Evidently it is impossible to satisfy the present day exigencies of justice by means of personal acts of charity and good will. What we need are rules and laws to prescribe how justice has to be realized in economics, politics, in the field of security and in other spheres of social life. We need what is called "social structures" and, as Christians, we ought to look very carefully not only to act according to what we feel to be just, but also and, even more so, that these social structures promote justice instead of privileges of the rich and the powerful. That is what Leo XIII asked for in his social encyclical *Rerum Novarum* on the basis of the social nature of man as seen by Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas and in view of the needs of modern times. As a remedy for the poverty of workers in the factories he did not ask just for works of charity but for a just salary to support not only a normal family but also to make some savings to provide for emergency cases. In the face of all kinds of injustice he did not ask people for patience but he invited them to defend the legitimate rights of the working people by forming unions and — if necessary — to insist on their rights even by striking. Before the word was even known, this Pope insisted on "social human rights" or, as we would say in our days "option for the poor". In this respect *Rerum Novarum* remains very much up to date, even 100 years after its publication and it is really worthwhile to make a *relecture* of it as John Paul II does in *Centesimus Annus*.

Disregard of man as a person, created in the image of God, is always an offence against God Himself and a violation of face-to-face relations as well as social relations characteristic of the modern big and sometimes even world-wide society. This moral duty and the ethical theory dealing with it, however, was never seen as a static doctrine. Its cultural and historical background has to be taken also into account. That was already the case in the time before *Rerum Novarum*, when Christians first started to reflect on the misery of the growing class of workers in the industrial centres. Even afterwards Catholic social teaching did not evolve into a real unity of doctrine. The social teaching of the Church has a rather dynamic unity in the sense that at one time, for some reason, a particular tradition may predominate without necessarily excluding other traditions or currents.

Some German theologians happen to consider their own tradition as the really true one. The important influence of German theologians in the time of Pope Pius XI and Pope Pius XII may give some credit to this view but it is an exaggeration. Since the pontificate of John XXIII and Paul VI and since Vatican Council II the French understanding of the social teaching of the Church became more important. With the election of John Paul II in 1978 the Church's social teaching began to reflect more his specifically Polish experience. *Centesimus Annus* gives us the Polish experience of Solidarnosc as an example how to struggle in a Christian way for right and justice. Nevertheless, that is just one way to resolve social problems, and not — as mentioned already in commentaries in Latin America — the only one. But every one of these traditions remain an important stream in Catholic social doctrine. It may be, therefore, of some interest to consider these currents for a moment while keeping in mind that each one is just a part of the whole Catholic social tradition.

2. *Different currents*

2.1 *Different approaches before 1891*

In German speaking countries social responsibility as an ethical duty was strongly felt long before *Rerum Novarum*. In 1848, the same year in which Karl Marx published the *Communist Manifesto*, Bishop G.W. von Ketteler preached his sermons about the “social question” in the Cathedral of Mainz underlining the Christian obligation to work for social justice. Marx was very angry about that. But in Christianity religion is not “opium for the people” but a challenge to work for social justice. Besides these initiatives in Germany one finds in Austria the ideas of K. von Vogelsang who proposed the rather romantic concept of the so-called *berufständische Ordnung*, the re-establishment of the medieval order in the different unions of arts and crafts, as a way of overcoming class opposition and struggle. In Belgium it was also a Christian layman, Mr. Perin, who organized Christians in pressure groups for human rights. He had, of course, the support of the Pope, who was in 1830 the first nuntio in Belgium after its liberation and separation from the Netherlands. In Italy during the same period different groups were studying the “social question” and in France, especially since the Revolution of 1848, people like Ozanam and de Mun started their initiatives to help the working class — the “misérables” as Victor Hugo described it most successfully in his famous book. But again this help was not just a form of charity organization; it was also the beginning of a pressure group for rights and justice in social structures. In Switzerland finally, the later Cardinal G. Mermillod had the idea of bringing together several people who were dealing with the social question in the different European countries. Under the name of *Union de Fribourg* he established international contacts for

all these groups. The result of all these contacts was that the Pope asked the *Union de Fribourg* to elaborate a first draft for the very first social encyclical of the Church.

2.2 *The German Current*

It is, certainly, not an exaggeration to say that currents of experience and thinking were important in the elaboration of Catholic social doctrine. But in the subsequent evolution of this doctrine German influence increased. On the basis of the experiences of the so-called *Mönchengladbacher Volksverein* (an association of working people set up to instruct and educate its members how to be able to defend their own interests) F. Hitze felt it was necessary to study the propositions of *Rerum Novarum* on an academical level at the university. In Münster in Westfalia he founded the first Chair of Christian Social Sciences two years after the publication of *Rerum Novarum*, i.e. in 1893 and I am now the fifth Professor in this Chair. This idea was so popular that after 1920 Chairs for social ethics in Catholic Theological Faculties were set up and the teaching of Christian social ethics became by law a compulsory component of the regular theological curriculum for future priests. Nowadays these Chairs are even granted by the concordat at German universities.

In the following years German influence became even more predominant. The threat of the emerging ideologies of National Socialism and Stalinist Communism led the general of the Jesuits, W. Ledochowski, to persuade Pope Pius XI that the concept of society in these ideologies, despite their differences, would put the human being as a person in great danger. A new statement of the magisterium on the social problem of the day was in order. The Pope agreed and asked whether the general could propose a scholar to prepare a first draft. The general mentioned O. von Nell-Breuning who was then only recently appointed Professor for Social Ethics in Frankfurt. Having been well trained in economics and social science by the Jesuit H. Pesch, he was promoted Doctor in Moral Theology with a thesis about the morality of stock exchange. Thus this young professor was the right man for the task to prepare a new social encyclical. As Fr. Nell-Breuning was also a member of a small association of people interested in social problems, — the so-called *Königswinterer Kreis* — he could discuss various points of the social problem with the other members without letting them know why he was specifically doing so. There was also another Jesuit in the group, a social philosopher with a solid training in neo-scholastic ontology, called Fr. G. Gundlach, who later became the main adviser to Pope Pius XII in matters of social ethics. Without mentioning the reason why, Nell-Breuning brought all the social problems featuring in his draft for discussion in this *Königswinterer Kreis*. The result of this process was the second social

encyclical of the Church *Quadragesimo Anno* in 1931, forty years after *Rerum Novarum*, an encyclical which betrays clearly a German way of thinking.

In view of the needs of those days the emphasis of this document was put on the rights of the individual human being as a person and on the autonomy of smaller groups rather than on common welfare or on the rights of society. Therefore, the principle of subsidiarity seems to be of greater importance than the principle of solidarity. The right to private property and personal initiatives in economic activity is obviously still understood as being linked with social responsibility but it is also very much defended against every attempt at its socialisation. Socialism is clearly rejected. One can find — so to say — the same sound again in *Centesimus Annus*. As a whole, the teaching of *Quadragesimo Anno* is put in a neo-scholastic framework and its systematical logic clearly gives the impression of a “doctrine” with stable principles but it is not sufficiently dynamic to respond to the new problems of the time.

In the following years, especially after the election of Pope Pius XII (1939) as Fr. Gundlach became the main adviser for social ethics in the Roman curia, Catholic social doctrine continued to develop as a result of the many statements of the Pope, particularly those dealing with practical political problems. But the main influence of this kind of social teaching came after World War II with the elaboration of the principles of the constitution (the *Grundgesetz*) of the Federal Republic of Germany, that is, as a federal democracy in the framework of Human Rights (according to the UN declaration of 1948) and in the order of a socially mitigated competitive profit system of a *soziale Marktwirtschaft*, a “social market economy” which now *Centesimus Annus* seems to regard as a model how to organize the economy even on a worldwide level. The great success of this new German state in Europe regarding democratic rule and economic evolution — everyone spoke of the “German economic miracle” — increased greatly the prestige of this type of social doctrine. But after the death of Pius XII in 1958, the new Pope, John XXIII, who was before a nuntio in Paris (contrary to Pius XII who stayed in Berlin) changed the staff of his advisers. The fairly exclusive influence of German theology diminished and another current of thought became decisive for the social teaching of the Popes.

2.3 The French Current

French experience and thinking became more important. New problems arose particularly regarding economic justice — not only on the level of every single nation but on a world scale. The former colonial system disappeared, but there was the need for a global solidarity and, therefore, special regards in view of the fact that the newly independent countries remained under-developed economically. Their problems got now a central importance both in Christian

social ethics in general and in the social doctrine of the magisterium of the Church, i.e. in papal encyclicals and in the Pastoral Constitution of Vatican II. Dominicans like Louis Lebreton and Marie-Dominique Chenu became important; together with Pierre Bigo (a French Jesuit working in Chile) and Professor Pietro Pavan (today cardinal) of Rome, they changed in 1960 a first draft, written by Fr. Gundlach, for the social encyclical which John XXIII had ordered for the 70th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*. Chenu insisted that in the Pastoral Constitution of Vatican II the word social "doctrine" was changed into "teaching" and Lebreton was charged by Paul VI with the preparation of a draft for the famous encyclical *Populorum Progressio* of 1967.

But what was so different from earlier documents that led quite a number of commentators to speak of a turning-point or even a rupture in Catholic social doctrine? It was, of course, not the general Christian understanding of man and the duty, based on social justice, to help especially the poor peoples and nations. It was rather the way of thinking that was different. The German scholars were philosophers, thinking in a rationalistic and systematic way. Out of general principles they deduced a whole system of laws and rules, valid for all times and nations. The French instead were much more practical; according to the advice of the later Cardinal Joseph Cardijn, the Belgian founder of the Young Christian Movement (YCW) the method was: see — judge — act. They started by analysing the reality, its needs and possibilities and then they looked out for a strategy of improvement. Before becoming a Dominican and an expert in social science, Fr. Lebreton was a sailor; he knew the misery of the poor in the harbours of the world. His social teaching was, therefore, very practical and Pope Paul VI agreed: *Populorum Progressio* is word by word written by Lebreton. (I know a scholar who is a friend of the family Lebreton which obtained the draft after the death of Fr. Lebreton and still has it and who compared this draft very carefully with the final document). It represents a new way of thinking and was easier to be understood by modern people — especially by Latin Americans. Quite a number of liberation theologians studied in Belgium and France in those days. The emphasis was put on the principle of solidarity. The new social documents of John XXIII and Paul VI were felt as new and encouraging orientation in the social teaching of the church. There was a measure of understanding for the aims of socialist policy and the emphasis was put on the social obligation of private property. These points were, of course, not completely new — but still the accent was different!

The acceptance of this change among German scholars was, nevertheless, rather slow as one could see from the fact that in a lecture held last year before German Professors of social ethics a German bishop raised the question whether they had really understood the challenge of *Gaudium et Spes*.

Despite the well-established position which social ethics enjoyed in the theological faculties at German universities its influence on the political scene and public opinion decreased substantially. It is often somehow reduced to an apologetical defence of the programmes of the Christian political parties but still presented as the social doctrine of the Church (by minimizing of course the changes in the Church since 1958). Many of the younger generations of theologians got even the impression that the social doctrine of the Church did no longer contribute to a solution of the actual social questions.

3. *General Consequences*

That may be a lesson for us — and perhaps even for you here in Malta: The way to teach social ethics in a certain historical epoch and culture can be very useful and successful but it cannot be valid for all times. Changing situations demand changing theories. Who forgets this point becomes sterile and hides the aims of the Gospel rather than preach the Gospel according to the actual needs of modern society.

I think that Latin American liberation theologians understood that; certainly many of their proposals are not yet established critically enough. Many of the concepts as those of socialism, dependence as a factor of exploitation, etc. remain very vague; the historical analysis is often incomplete and unfair, while criticism of corruption in Third World countries or quarrels among the poor themselves remain very weak. But to base the theory of social improvement on action not only for but also with the poor is an approach which is close to the Gospel. The social encyclical of John Paul II *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987) is very open to this kind of thinking; it is certainly not lacking in criticism but it does not issue any kind of condemnation as it was expected by some conservative groups of Catholic theologians and politicians, and *Centersimus Annus* retained this general orientation in its analysis of the changes that took place in Eastern Europe following the collapse of socialism.

After the German and the French period of the Church's social teaching it seems that a third period is beginning. This teaching will probably be less systematic, less a product of university scholars working alone in their study-office but rather the product of a wide and open discussion. Professors are still needed for drafting, for defining the problem, for asking questions; but the experience of all the faithful has then to be taken into consideration. That may then be followed by pastoral letters of local Churches on their specific social problems. Such a pastoral letter was elaborated by the Bishops' Conference of the USA in 1986 and the Austrian bishops did the same in 1990. The results are encouraging and I think that it could be the way to go for a social teaching close to the living experiences of the faithful involved in the daily social problems of

our societies. Without such an orientation the social teaching of the Church risks to lose its power and unity as, unfortunately, it is the case in different parts of the world. Among young (and often rather leftist) people social questions are raised only in the context of the life experiences of basic groups from which theological reflection is absent. The case among academic people varies; some try to stay in contact mainly with working people and the unions others still follow the traditional way by trying to keep good contacts with the politically and economically leading groups of society.

But all these approaches remain too unilateral. Our own tradition invites us to go back to the dynamic origins of social ethics since *Rerum Novarum* by defining clearly the anthropological foundation of ethical principles and retaining the post-conciliar emphasis on human values as understood in the light of Christian faith and life experiences in a pluralistic society. Seen in this way, one may be realistically hopeful that Christian values can still play a relevant role actually in all spheres and at all levels of social life.

I am personally convinced that this is a healthy way to communicate the Gospel in the actual historical context and restore the importance of the social doctrine of the Church. As the most recent documents of the magisterium *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* and *Centesimus Annus* seem to confirm this view and the demand for such theory of social ethics is increasing among the public at large, I think that this opinion is not quite unrealistic. The social teaching of the Church can be a living tradition, if it responds to the needs and the problems of changing situations by presenting the Gospel as the good news of Jesus for all men, especially for the poor.

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