

The Common Good and Catholic Social Teaching

[from a 1996 statement by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales]

Religion is always personal, but never just a private affair. Discipleship involves seeking God in this world, as well as preparing to meet him in the next. The Gospel imperative to love our neighbor entails not only that we should help those in need, but also address the causes of destitution and poverty. The deepening of the spiritual life must go hand in hand with practical concern for our neighbor, and thus with social action. However, the future of humanity does not depend on political reform, social revolution or scientific advance. Something else is needed. It starts with a true conversion of mind and heart.

Personal Dignity & Human Society

The Catholic social vision has as its focal point the human person, the clearest reflection of God among us. Jesus Christ challenges us to see his presence in our neighbor, especially the neighbor who suffers or who lacks what is essential to human flourishing.

The dignity of the human person is therefore the criterion by which every social institution or policy is tested.

The doctrine of the Trinity is the pattern for the social dimension of faith. For human beings are made in the image of God, and within the one God is a divine society of three Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

It is a distortion of human nature to suppose that individuals can exist independently of society, as if it had no demand on them. Just as members of society are individually subject to moral principles in their own lives, and these

implicit and explicit moral demands are not of their own invention, so with societies. They too have demands and those demands are not arbitrary. There are ways of structuring society which are inimical to human progress and personal development.

However society is structured, the basic cell remains the individual family. It should be a principle of good government, therefore, that no law should be passed with possible social consequences without first considering what effect it would have on family life and especially on children.

Democracy & Human Rights

Democracy can never be a self-fulfilling justification for policies that are intrinsically immoral. Democracy is not a self-sufficient moral system. Democracy, if it is to be healthy, requires more than universal suffrage: it requires the presence of a system of common values. In particular, the public needs to have an understanding of the common good. Otherwise they will be unlikely to support actions by public authority that are not to the immediate advantage of the majority. But then democracy can become a democratic tyranny in which the majority oppresses the minority.

Human rights are also necessary for the common good, but no more than democracy can they be taken for granted. Not everything said to be a right really is one. There is no "right to choose" to harm another, for instance. The proliferation of alleged rights can devalue the very concept. So can the amplification of rights without some concept of the common good to which all have an obligation to contribute.

Human rights are universal and flow from the one fundamental right: the right to life.

The Gospel & Political Activity

Evangelization always requires the transformation of an unjust social order; and one of its primary tasks is to oppose and denounce such injustices. All Catholics who engage in the political life of the nation are entitled to regard themselves as engaging in evangelization, provided they do so in accordance with the principles of Catholic social teaching.

Catholics should not regard the social teaching of the Church as optional. On the contrary, all Catholic citizens need an informed social conscience.

The Natural Law

Human rights themselves are an expression of the natural law. Knowledge of the natural law is possible by the use of human reason, even without faith, and is therefore a source of moral guidance which is open to everyone. So Catholics and non-Catholics can make common cause in response to the insights of natural law.

The interpretation and application of natural law is rarely straightforward, however, and often controversial. It is easier to say that natural law points to the need for a harmonious and balanced order than to say in any particular case exactly where that balance is to be found. Nevertheless, to ignore natural law, for instance by organizing society so that in effect it serves the interests of a few rather than the common good, is to collaborate with the structures of sin.

Capitalism vs. Collectivism

The ascendancy of market-based economic models over collective or command economic models has increased the importance of Catholic social teaching in the modern day, especially because its own

critical analysis of free-market capitalism has in no way been discredited. The Catholic Church has a long history of resistance to Marxist Communism, but it recognizes that the very existence of this ideological opposition to capitalism, however flawed, tended in the past to act as a balancing factor or crude brake on some of the excesses of which capitalism is capable.

Subsidiarity & Solidarity

Subsidiarity refers especially to passing powers downwards, though it can also mean passing appropriate powers upwards, even to an international body, so as to better serve the common good. The subsidiarity principle means that the State should not usurp the functions of subordinate groups. Subsidiarity supports a dispersal of authority as close to the grass roots as good government allows, and it prefers local over central decision-making. Subsidiarity also implies the existence of a range of institutions below the level of the State. So it cannot be seen as an ally of those who favor the maximization of State power, or centralization of the State at the expense of more local institutions.

Solidarity is an equivalent horizontal principle. It refers to the willingness to see others as another self, and so to regard injustice committed against another as no less serious than an injustice against oneself. With subsidiarity, solidarity is a fundamental principle of Catholic social teaching. The former should never be made an excuse for selfishness nor promoted at the expense of the common good or to the detriment of the poorest and most vulnerable sections of the community. Solidarity means that all are responsible for each other.

The Plight of the Poor

The common good implies that every individual, no matter how high or low, has a duty to share in promoting the welfare of the community as well as a right to benefit from that welfare. The common good is contradicted if any section of the population is excluded from participation in the life of the community, even at a minimal level.

There must come a point at which the scale of the gap between the very wealthy and those at the bottom of the range of income begins to undermine the common good. This is the point at which society starts to be run for the benefit of the rich, not for all its members.

Catholic social teaching recognizes the fundamental and positive value of business, the market, private property and free human creativity in the economic sector. But sometimes market forces cannot deliver what the common good demands, and other remedies have to be sought. The poor must not be excluded from society.

Pros & Cons of Market Forces

The Catholic doctrine of the common good is incompatible with unlimited free-market, or laissez-faire, capitalism. The end result of market forces must be scrutinized and if necessary corrected in the name of natural law, social justice, human rights and the common good. Left to themselves, market forces are just as likely to lead to evil results as to good ones.

Nevertheless, the market has proved itself immensely efficient in the creation of wealth—indeed, no other system has so far shown itself superior. When properly regulated in the name of the common good, market forces can be an efficient mechanism for matching resources to needs in a developed society.

However, the good functioning of the market requires ethical behavior and the embodiment of certain ethical principles within a regulatory and legal framework.

There is no doubt, too, that competition can often harness creative energy and encourage product innovation and improvement. The danger is individual selfishness. Those who advocate unlimited free-market capitalism and at the same time lament the decline in public and private morality, to which the encouragement of selfishness is a prime contributing factor, must ask themselves whether the messages they are sending are in fact mutually contradictory.

Free markets need supervision and regulation to prevent an option *against* the poor. Where such provisions as health and education are concerned, the common good requires a supervising authority that can step in with remedies as soon as deficiencies become apparent, rather than waiting until the logic of the market causes failing institutions to close, harming those who must still rely on them.

The ideology of consumerism reduces the individual to the status of an isolated economic agent, whose life has meaning only as a consumer. Those who suffer are then the poor, vulnerable, powerless and defenseless—those who do not have wealth to spend.

Work

Workers have rights which are superior to the rights of capital. These include the right to decent work, to just wages, to security of employment, to adequate rest and holidays, to limitation of hours of work, to health and safety protection, to non-discrimination, to form and join trade unions, and, as a last resort, to go on strike. Sometimes co-ownership and worker shareholding schemes can offer more human

ways of running business and industry than the traditional sharp separation of employees from employers.

The Global Common Good

The global common good is violated if there are places anywhere in the world where basic needs like clean water, food, shelter, health care, education and livelihood are not available to all or if the rights and dignity of all are not respected.

There is a need for developed nations to work towards the long-standing United Nations target for overseas aid of 0.7% of Gross National Product, and towards resolving the debt burden of poorer countries.

The principle of solidarity also requires the developed world to restrict the promotion of arms sales to poor countries, to open further their own markets to the products of the developing world, actively to support the establishment of appropriate regional security structures, and to refrain from imposing harsh economic adjustment programs on the poorest countries which curtail essential social expenditure on health and education, especially for women.

The Environment

We have to reject some of the easy assumptions of an earlier stage of industrialization, such as that the human race, because God had given it dominion over the world, had an unlimited freedom to despoil the natural environment for its own purposes. Environmental “common goods” are not only available for careful use and enjoyment today, but are held in trust for the use and enjoyment of future generations. Damage to the environment is no respecter of frontiers, and damage done by one generation has the capacity to damage future generations. Hence the need for

effective global authorities responsible for the common good at international level.

Ownership & Property

Increased distribution of ownership of capital assets, through investment trusts, pension funds, insurance companies and the like, gives a much larger share of the population an indirect stake in the profitability of companies in the private sector.

Both managers and shareholders have a social responsibility. Any economic enterprise has a range of stakeholders: shareholders, suppliers, managers, workers, consumers, the local community, even the natural environment. None of these interests should prevail to the extent that it excludes the interests of the others.

Employees as a body are a form of social capital, a reservoir of human effort, wisdom and experience. Accounting methods should not disregard such assets. It is deplorable when, in company “downsizing” operations, such human social capital is dumped.

Political Reform

The political arena has to be reclaimed in the name of the common good. Public life needs rescuing from utilitarian expediency and the pursuit of self-interest. Society must not turn its back on poor people nor on the stranger at the gate.

The twin principles of solidarity and subsidiarity need to be applied systematically to the reform of the institutions of public life. The protection of human rights must be reinforced, the mechanisms of democracy repaired, the integrity of the environment defended. The common good must be made to prevail, even against strong economic forces that would deny it.