



CHRISTIAN LIFE AND CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING: A Narrative

Catholic Christian life is grounded in the belief that humanity, created in the image of God, has an absolute and transcendent human dignity which gives rise to human rights. All humanity has innate rules of conduct known as natural law, which are inherent within the nature of the human person irrespective of religious beliefs. Natural law gives rise to humanity respecting the dignity of the human person. Catholics believe that this innate knowledge comes from the presence of God in each person. All humanity is part of the community of the world " ... *to build a society that is truly human means to put the person and his or her dignity at the centre, always, and never to sell him [or her] out to the logic of profit*" (Pope Francis, 2013).

The purpose of social order or social justice is quite simply *the person*. The mission of the Catholic Church, animated by the life and teaching of Jesus, is explicit in its call for Catholics to work within the Church community and beyond. By promoting right relationships with all people and with the environment on which humanity relies, Catholics believe they are giving witness to the Triune God. Respecting the dignity of the human person is the result of living in right relationship, and for Catholics this call is strengthened by Scripture and Church Tradition.

The human individual, far from being an object and, as it were, a merely passive element in the social order, is in fact, must be and must continue to be, its subject, its foundation and its end. (Pacem In Terris, 1963, #26).

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is officially called Catholic Social Doctrine and this doctrine can be found in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Some say CST is the best kept secret of the Church. Many do not know that the Church clearly outlines basic guiding principles and has spoken out in every age if the rights and dignity of the human person is adversely impacted upon. Whether the dignity of the human person is being abused in a political, industrial, economic, social, ecological arena, or any arena or institution, the Church with its long Tradition has responded. Look to the official Church documents on CST to get a sense of this.

CST can take the form of papal encyclicals, bishops' statements, pastoral letters, and encyclical letters. Each official document has been written in response to injustice in a particular time and context. Here are two examples. Firstly, *Rerum Novarum* (On the Condition of the Working Man), a papal encyclical of Pope Leo XIII was published in 1891. It covered topics such as the unjust wage system in the economic order and the condition of labour. The encyclical was written in response to poverty experienced during the Industrial Revolution when workers were being exploited by profit-hungry employers, and public authorities were not protecting the rights of the poor.

Secondly, in 2015 *Laudato Si'* (On Care for Our Common Home) an encyclical letter by Pope Francis was published. Most papal documents are addressed to the bishops of the Church or the lay faithful, but Pope Francis addressed this message to all people, to all humanity, not just Catholics. It concerns the disregard for the duty to cultivate and maintain a proper relationship with God and neighbour. It offered, and continues to offer, a powerful moral and spiritual imperative for environmental and social action. This encyclical calls on humanity to embrace a new lifestyle that respects all of creation, and asks political leaders to commit to effective global agreements.

The human person is the foundation, the cause and reason for the creation of social institutions. Because humans are social beings, society needs structure to help it operate efficiently and in a manner that benefits all. When the Catholic Church speaks out, it does so because people are always more important than things; people are never a means or an instrument to be used for the benefit of another. Human dignity means that we have the right to actively shape our histories and to take part in decision making that affects us, both as individuals and collectively.

Scripture gives insight into how people should live. In the first chapter of Genesis, having "dominion over the earth" (v.28) does not mean humanity has the absolute right to use and dispose of the earth's resources at will. Instead, due consideration must be given to how this will impact on all creation. Catholics see every aspect of the world as part of God's creation, part of the Kingdom/Reign of God, therefore faith is linked to justice in the world.

We should care for the environment like a steward, a stewardship that does not negate the fact that we have to use resources, but one that respects natural biological laws, the variety of species, the earth's natural beauty and

dwindling resources, so that future generations can live well. It is worth considering the link between right relationships with people and right relationships with the environment. The peaceful coexistence between people is often threatened when disregard is shown for the environment, particularly scarce resources. If one group of people use resources in a way that usurps the rights and existence of others, or causes hardship, this often results in conflict.

Sometimes we confuse philanthropy or charity with justice. We can raise funds for a charity but that does not necessarily mean we are “doing justice”. Caritas offers a guide to judge and respond to injustice: Is the action compassionate, active, moving beyond pity or shock? Does it ask questions about why drought affects Africans catastrophically, but less so in Australia? What are the structures: economic, political and social that condemn millions to live in poverty or to suffer in some way? How can I respond? What can I do? Who can I work with? What guides my action?

The principles of the Church's social doctrine, the very heart of CST, are meant to guide our decisions. The Catholic Church teaches that the fundamental moral understanding of the dignity of human persons is animated in the principles of Catholic Social Teaching, calling all humanity to respond. *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* makes clear that the principles of the Church's social doctrine must be appreciated in their unity, interrelatedness and articulation (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004). Sometimes we see principles other than those listed below, but we need to understand that all are interrelated. The Compendium contains much information on the human person, human rights and human dignity, therefore it is clear that this is fundamental to all principles it discusses in Chapter Four:

Key Principles of Catholic Social Teaching

The Dignity of the Human Person

This is fundamental to all principles and is a principle in its own right. Human beings are created in the image of God and, therefore, are endowed with dignity. This inherent dignity carries with it certain basic rights and responsibilities which are exercised within a social framework. Related themes could be: unity of the human family, defense of life, human rights, non-discrimination, priority of labour over capital, integral human development (Cornish, 2009).

The Common Good

While the dignity of the human person is affirmed, individuals live in common with others and the rights of individuals must be balanced with the wider common good for all. The rights and needs of others must always be respected. Related themes could be: option for the poor, integrity of creation, role of the state, promotion of peace and *The Universal Destination of Goods* - the world's goods are meant for all. Although the Church upholds the right to private property this is subordinate to the right to common use and the overall common good (Cornish, 2009).

Subsidiarity

This principle recognises that society is based on organisations or communities of people ranging from small groups or families right through to national and international institutions. As a rule of social organisation, subsidiarity affirms the right of individuals and social groups to make their own decisions and accomplish what they can by their own initiative and industry. A higher level community should not interfere in the life of a community at a lower level of social organisation unless its intention is to support and empower. Related themes could be: the role of the state, international community and *Participation* - Individuals and groups must be enabled to participate in society (Cornish, 2009).

Solidarity

Human beings are social by nature and do not exist merely as individuals. When considering the human community, it must be remembered that it consists of individual and social elements. Related themes could be: integral human development, option for the poor and the role of the economy (Cornish, 2009).

Making Moral, Ethical Decisions

Moral and ethical decisions are molded by a myriad of things e.g., family, the society people live in, religious teachings, educational opportunities. Therefore, the lens through which people judge moral or ethical dilemmas is unique to each individual. It is complex, because people are complex. All experiences form the conscience, which is the ‘self’ deep within, the human sense of what’s right, wrong, what’s moral (righteous) and what’s not. One of the things that may enter into this interior space is religious thought, such as the teachings of Jesus.

“Avoid evil, do good, and live forever” (Ps 37: 27) is a piece of guiding wisdom for all humanity, but for Christians, the “good” life is to live as Jesus did. Jesus is the benchmark for life choices. Sometimes it is not easy to speak out against injustice, but baptised Catholics share Jesus’ mission and therefore must make every effort to do so. The Catholic Church teaches that Christians have an obligation to always seek the truth as moral and ethical decisions need a well-formed conscience. The sources for moral and ethical decision-making from a Catholic perspective are: respect for the dignity of the human person, Sacred Scripture, and Church Tradition (including CST). After discernment, a judgement is made and is followed by action.

“..what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)

References

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