

Catholic Social Thought, Human Rights and Governance

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The Industrial Revolution ushered in a lot of interesting developmental innovations such as the cottage industries, factories and mines replacing the hitherto agrarian industry. But the vast and rapid changes that followed in its wake caught nineteenth century Europe napping – in the sense that Europe was not prepared for such phenomenon as the mass rural-urban migration and its attending effects. There were no adequate housing opportunities and infrastructure. In effect, the mass movement from the countryside to the urban centres was so sudden and rapid that the urban centres were overstretched. The result was the emergence of slums and squalor in the cities. Besides, the exploitation of the working class by the rich employers was rampant. The unemployment rate was high and this made those who owned the means of production and were aiming at maximising profit to resort to sharp practices in the form of overworking their employees and underpaying them. They were very much aware that with that kind of situation if the workers complained – since there were no Labour unions to fight their cause – others in the workforce will be too willing to take their place. This dire situation led to women and even children taking up jobs not suited to their sex and age, all in a bid to make ends meet. The forced migration of the poor in their millions in search of employment also did an immense damage to the fabric of family and social life, as this also led to promiscuity in some areas.

In the face of this confusion the Socialists, who by now had adopted Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* as the “gospel” of the day, were making inroads practically into all of Christian Europe. Their war cry was the elimination of Capitalism and the religious, moral and civil order which was supposed to be indissolubly bound up with it.¹ Since “at all times the Church carries the responsibility of

¹ Joseph Kirwan, ed., *Rerum Novarum, Encyclical Letter of Pope Leo XIII with Introduction and Notes*. (London: CTS, 1991), “Preface,” ii.

reading the signs of the time² and interpreting them in the light of the gospel,”³ conscious of what his apostolic office demanded of him, Leo XIII decided to make clear the principles by means of which the struggle can be broken off and ended as equity and the facts of the case require. His chosen path was to issue an encyclical letter on the condition of the working class. The encyclical letter *Rerum Novarum* (henceforth RN) that has been described as an immortal document turned out to be both revolutionary and prophetic. Today by common consent scholars are in agreement that it was the publication of RN that gave birth to modern⁴ Catholic Social Doctrine.

Its publication was so epochal that it has turned out to be the one encyclical that is commemorated at regular intervals with the publication of a new document. What these commemorative documents do in effect is to build on the teachings of RN by updating its contents in the light of present-day happenings such that the embryonic “labour question” with which RN occupied itself has grown today to become the social and world question.

What is the Social Doctrine of the Church?

The question of a definition of the Social Doctrine of the Church has hardly occupied the minds of scholars. Thus there is no universally accepted definition. However, considering its lineaments and history, it can be described as a corpus or body of teaching that has

² A sign of the times is a distinctive characteristic of the age. Since the church is under the obligation to pay attention to the revelatory significance of human history in the societal changes specific to each historical epoch, the signs of the times emerge as challenges to which the church must provide answers in the light of the Gospel. According to Gutierrez, it is not primarily a speculative problem – that is, a problem to be studied or interpreted, it is first of all a call to action and secondly a call to interpretation. A sign of the time calls Christians to action. See Gustavo Gutierrez: “Toward a Theology of Liberation” in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, ed. Alfred T. Hennelly (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 62-75 at 64.

³ *Gaudium et Spes*, #4.

⁴ It should be noted that the Church has always had a social teaching. Indeed, “from the very outset Christian faith has intimately affected social as well as personal conduct, and the main Christian tradition carries with it a massive body of social teaching.” Cf. William Temple, *Christianity and Social Order* (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 1976), 47.

emerged from the Church's conscious attempt to bring the Gospel light to bear on social realities covering such areas as human rights, work, the economy, politics, family and solidarity. It constitutes a rich heritage which the Church has progressively acquired by drawing from the Word of God and being attentive to the changeable situations of peoples throughout the different historical eras.

In the introduction to his second social encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, John Paul II presents a graphic and effective picture of the social doctrine – an exhaustive historico-descriptive depiction which content spells out the main features of this doctrine.

The social concern of the church, directed toward an authentic development of man and society which would respect and promote all the dimensions of the human person, has always expressed itself in the most varied ways. In recent years, one of the special means of intervention has been the magisterium of the Roman pontiffs which, beginning with the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of Leo XIII as point of reference, has frequently dealt with the question and has sometimes made the dates of publication of the various social documents coincide with the anniversaries of that first document.

The popes have not failed to throw fresh light by means of those messages upon new aspects of the social doctrine of the church. As a result, this doctrine beginning with the outstanding contribution of Leo XIII and enriched by the successive contributions of the magisterium, has now become an updated doctrinal corpus. It builds up gradually as the church... reads the events as they unfold in the course of history. She does seek to lead people to respond, with the support also of rational reflection and of the human sciences, to their vocation as responsible builders of earthly society.⁵

⁵ John Paul II: Encyclical Letter, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, #1.

John Paul II went on in the same encyclical to affirm that it is the accurate formulation of the results of a careful reflection on the complex realities of human existence, in society and in the international order, in the light of faith and of the church's tradition. Its main aim is to interpret these realities, determining their conformity with or divergence from the gospel's teaching on man and his vocation, a vocation which is at once earthly and transcendent; its aim is thus to guide Christian behaviour. It therefore belongs to the field, not of ideology but of theology and particularly of moral theology.⁶

Catholic social doctrine/teaching refers mainly to the teachings in the social field that come from the official magisterium (pope and bishops), *while Catholic social thought with which this article is concerned* refers to the broader theological and social reflection on social issues that takes place in the church. Catholic social thought includes the work of academics and professionals that reflects on social issues from the perspective of Christian faith and analyses and interprets Catholic social teaching, as well as the work of activists and social movements that endeavour to put the teaching into practice.⁷

At the forefront of the Social doctrine stands the radical primacy of human dignity which is the bedrock of human rights.⁸ Dignity in Catholic social thought means the worth of being human, and dignity is understood to be the foundation from which human rights derive.

Human Rights

World War II exhibited such monstrous atrocities that with the cessation of hostilities it became very clear to world leaders that the

⁶ Ibid, #41.

⁷ The scope of Catholic Social Thought is broader than social teaching – encompassing the Scriptures, Christian history and contemporary praxis – and the literature is obviously vast. Catholic social thought includes but not limited to Catholic social teaching. Theologian Judith Merkle uses the term Catholic social “tradition” ... and this term is a fitting synonym for Catholic social thought. See J. Milburn Thompson, *Introducing Catholic Social Thought* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 7.

⁸ John A. Coleman and Gregory Baum, “Editorial: A Tradition to Celebrate, Criticise and Bring Forward,” *Concilium* 5, (1991): vii-xii at vii.

promotion and defence of human rights was an idea whose time had come. It was this that led to the foundation of the United Nations Organisation. This conviction is clearly stated in the opening chapter of the Charter of the United Nations Organisation.

Up until the end of World War II it was internationally accepted that the question of how a country treated its citizens was a matter solely for its own sovereign decision. This is no longer the case. Even though some countries still reject interference in their internal affairs, the way a country treats its citizens is according to law a matter for all other countries too. For today all everyone falls under international law insofar as this protects human rights.⁹ A further confirmation of this awareness is seen in the fact that today “men and women in various parts of the world feel personally affected by the injustices and violations of human rights committed in distant countries which perhaps they will never visit.”¹⁰

Existentially speaking one has hardly the correct attitude let alone love for that which one has no idea about. Therefore, a presentation of human rights, albeit a brief one, calls for some attention at this juncture. According to the United Nations Organisation, human rights are those rights which are inherent in our nature and without which we cannot live as human beings.¹¹ In other words, they are inalienable entitlements without which one cannot be truly human and are part of humanity and dignity.

From a Christian theological perspective, Jürgen Moltmann opines that by fundamental human rights we mean those rights and duties which belong essentially to what it means to be truly human because without their being fully acknowledged and exercised human beings cannot fulfil their original destiny of being created in the image of God. These rights cannot be denied persons without denying their humanity.¹²

⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, “Human Rights, the Rights of Humanity and the Rights of Nature,” *Concilium* 2(1990): 120-134 at 121.

¹⁰ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, #138.

¹¹ United Nations Organisation, *Human Rights: Questions and Answers* (New York, NY: 1987), 4.

¹² Jürgen Moltmann, *On Human Dignity: Political Theology and Ethics*, (London: SCM Press, 1984), 23.

In the task of expounding the importance of human rights, the church opts for using the very substance of the Christian faith. She is very much aware that a theological lack of clarity can considerably weaken the credibility and effectuality of her service and witness. The logical starting point therefore is found in the Scriptures and specifically in the creation story, according to which God created man in his image and likeness (Gen 1:26f). Further on, it is said that God breathed life into the nostrils of man.¹³ These are details reserved for man alone and they make man a specially endowed creature. And these words placed at the beginning of the Bible never cease to be relevant. Human dignity gives rise to human rights. Since all men are created in the image of God, this dignity is equal in all humans and the rights that proceed from human dignity are universal, indivisible and inviolable.¹⁴

The peak of the theological foundation, however, is placed at the Christological level. In the Christ-event, the dignity of man arrives at its peak. The equal dignity of human beings because they are created in God's image and likeness is reinforced and perfected in Christ. Because human nature by the fact that it was assumed, not absorbed, in Christ, has been raised in us also to a dignity beyond compare. This fact is well expressed in *Gaudium et Spes*, when it says that by his incarnation, Jesus Christ, the Son of God has in a certain way united himself with each man (GS, #22). What this means is that in taking on our human nature, and especially in his redeeming work on the cross Christ demonstrates how much each person is worth. Therefore, Jesus is the deepest source assuring the

¹³ A lot has been written about the fact of man being created in God's image but the fact of God breathing life into the nostrils of man has not been given as much attention. This fact indicates that God enriched the human person thereby communicated his very life to man. Therefore, in a sense it could be said that man shares in the very life of God. For this reason human life is seen as something sacred because something of the radiance of God's majesty shines through the human being. This fact and the creation of man in God's image constitute the most primitive grounds for human dignity. On account of this the human person must be given the maximum respect.

¹⁴ Human rights are by nature universal because they have as their source the equal dignity of every person; they are indivisible because no human right is safe if we fail to commit ourselves to safeguarding all of them; they are inviolable because they cannot be abridged without denying the person his or her dignity.

dignity of the person and his or her rights.¹⁵ This was well expressed by John Paul II:

The dignity of the human person is manifested in all his radiance when the person's origin and destiny are considered: created by God in his image and likeness as well as redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, the person is called to be a “child in the Son” and living temple of the Holy Spirit, destined for the eternal life of blessed communion with God. For this reason every violation of the personal dignity of the human being cries out in vengeance to God and is an offence against the Creator of the individual.¹⁶

Thus, it is helpful to note that the Catholic Church's view of human rights is distinctive because it is grounded on a complete theological framework, in which God is the ultimate source of our rights.¹⁷

What flows from the theological foundation of the human rights is that commitment to the dignity and rights of man is a constitutive part of the witness of the Gospel. If the church holds the human person in high esteem it is due to her veneration of human dignity which is the source of human rights. Christianity professes to believe startling things about man. Christ died for me. But if Christ is literally the infinite and Lord of all and he died for me and for each other human being, whom I know to be like me in infinite longing and weakness; if each man can rightly say, he who is God died for me, then the individual is of a worth beyond eloquence.¹⁸ This was why Pope John Paul II could cry out: with what veneration must the apostle of Christ utter this word: “man”! Thus the life, death and resurrection of Jesus have added new meaning to the

¹⁵ This idea is fully developed in the Santo Domingo Final Document. See Alfred T. Hennelly (ed): *Santo Domingo & Beyond: Documents and Commentaries From The Historic Meeting of the Latin American Bishops' Conference*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), #164.

¹⁶ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, AAS 81(1981), #37.

¹⁷ Thomas Massaro, *Living justice: Catholic Social Teaching in Action* (Franklin Wisconsin: Sheed & Ward, 2000), 118.

¹⁸ R.D. Lawler, *The Christian Personalism of John Paul II* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1982), 31-32.

dignity of the person. Indeed, from the moment God became man, the human being is the measure of all things.¹⁹

It does not come as a surprise therefore that “human rights fall under the preferential themes of the Church's Social Doctrine in the sense that man and his dignity remain the constant concern of the Church.”²⁰ Indeed, human rights have come to represent a topical task for the church, or a challenge to her. They are emerging today as an important focus of all aspirations for justice and the humanisation of mankind's condition and relationship whether personal or public because more than other problems the issue of human rights touches the very nerve of modern living.

These rights are traditionally grouped into two broad categories, including on the one hand civil and political rights and on the other economic, social and cultural rights. Both categories, though to different degrees are guaranteed by international agreements. All human rights are in fact closely connected, being the expression of different dimensions of a single subject, the human person. The integral promotion of every category of human rights is therefore the true guarantee of full respect for each individual right. Thus, no human right is safe if there is no commitment to safeguarding all of them. When the violation of any fundamental human right is accepted without reaction all other rights are placed at risk.

The church's involvement with human rights goes very deep. To say that Jesus is the only name given to men through which they can be saved, (Acts 4:2), means that the salvation and well-being of every man is entrusted to him. What follows from this is that since the church's self-awareness makes her believe that her mission is to continue the mission of Christ, on account of the mystery of the Redemption, each man is also entrusted to the solicitude of the Church. The human person's dignity itself becomes part of the

¹⁹ Gutierrez: “Toward A Theology of Liberation,” 69

²⁰ See Anna Konne de Messe Zinsou, “The Compendium and the Pastoral Promotion of Human Rights in Africa,” in *Towards a New Evangelization of African Society*, ed. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vatican, 2008), 198-221 at 198.

content of the proclamation of the Gospel.²¹ Therefore, a major conviction of the church is that she cannot proclaim the truth of the Gospel without concerning herself with the concrete problems of society. Her interest in human rights, therefore, is prompted by an authentically evangelical commitment which, like that of Christ, is primarily a commitment to those most in need.²²

The human person to whom the Church proclaims the gospel is both sacred and social. That is to say that the human person can realise his full potentials only in union with others. Therefore the social nature of the person is not an added extra or an appendix to his nature. This means that by his innermost nature, the human person is a social being; and if he does not enter into relations with others, he can neither live nor develop his gifts.²³ Since man is a social being, he naturally years to live in society.

The human person has certain needs that can be met only in society. These needs are requisites for the achievement of his dignity and, as we have seen, dignity is one of the most fundamental defining attributes of human existence. Since the human person is ontologically directed toward others, intersubjectivity cannot be seen as an accessory dimension of the human being, rather it is its qualifying trait. The social dimension is therefore constitutive of human existence. The “we” of society is more than just a multitude of individuals like grains of rice. It indicates many individuals who co-exist and are involved in common actions of sorts. “Common” here indicates that these actions and the existence of the many individuals are tied to some value that can rightly be called “common good.” The relationship of the individuals to the common good is the nucleus of the social community. It is this which gives rise to the political community.

The political community is necessary because human co-existence calls for a certain order in society. This is because human

²¹ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptor Hominis*, #12 & 13.

²² John Paul II: Address *Esta Hora* (III,3) at Puebla, January 28, 1979. See *Puebla and Beyond*, ed. John Eagleson and Philip Scharper (New York, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 57-70.

²³ See *Gaudium et Spes*, #12.

society cannot hold together unless someone is in command to give effective direction and unity of purpose. Hence every civilised community must have a ruling authority. This is why, according to John XXIII, “human society can be neither well ordered nor prosperous without the presence of those who, invested with legal authority, preserve its institutions and do all that is necessary to sponsor actively the interests of all its members. It is this that specifically leads to governance” (*Pacem in Terris* #46; see also GS #74).

Governance

Governance, according to John Onaiyekan, has to do with leadership – organising the society of free and basically equal human beings. All through the history of mankind, it has been found necessary that human beings organise themselves by submitting themselves to some basic rules and regulations in order that chaos may not result. Those who decide on these rules and implement them are considered to be involved in governance. The necessity to organise society calls also for wielding of power in order to make sure that good order is maintained. The only justification for one human being wielding power over another is precisely the common good of all.²⁴ Therefore, governance must be seen as a service to the growth and development of the social community.

Catholic social thought therefore acknowledges the need to have some persons in positions of governance. Since the wellbeing of every individual is at the core of the Church's preoccupation, she necessarily insists that all those engaged in the art of governance must keep in mind the whole gamut of human rights. Catholic morality demands the equitable and wise use of earthly goods on personal and communal levels. Therefore, the idea of governance is tied up with the common good. Those saddled with the responsibility of governance must see that certain basic needs of their citizens are met: food, health care, culture. They must recognise the duty of the state to create social safety nets for the

²⁴ John Onaiyekan, *The Church and The State: The Imperative of Collaborating Towards Political Stability in Nigeria* (Abuja: Gaudium et Spes Institute, 2008), 187.

most vulnerable and to serve as a helping hand to those who have the will to make something of their lives but simply lack the means. This is what is known in CST as the principle of subsidiarity.

In the light of what CST is and its appreciation of human rights, its highest aspiration is to wish for a form of government that accords maximum respect for human rights. While the church promotes no particular political system to implement its vision of the just society, it does put forth basic principles that should inform all governments and their positive legislation. The kind of governance that follows upon the recognition of human rights and that can make human rights meaningful is realised in an authentic democracy. For this reason, while she is not identified with any political community nor bound by ties to any political system, the church's preference is for the democratic form of government (GS #76). This is because democracy allows the choice of political leaders through free elections. But at the same time, it must be borne in mind that this is not a matter of accepting that the majority determines morality. Therefore democracy without values clearly meets its just censure.

The church values the democratic system inasmuch as it ensures the participation of citizens in making political choices, guarantees to the governed the possibility both of electing and holding accountable those who govern them and of replacing them through peaceful means when appropriate.²⁵

The kind of democratic governance that CST favours is one that keeps in sight the dignity of every human person, the respect for human rights, commitment to the common good as the purpose and guiding criterion for political life.²⁶ Precisely because it has at heart the common good, the interests of the weak must be given special consideration. This being so, any expression of governance that counts on the endorsement of CST must direct the development of

²⁵ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*, #46.

²⁶ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004), #407.

human rights policies toward overcoming the marginalisation of the poor and vulnerable. These are men, women and children – often the majority for whom poverty is not merely an academic notion but an existential reality. These are people who have their roots outside the centres where the decision-making process takes place. Getting them involved in such process helps policy makers to see through the eyes of the poor and marginalised. In fact, “it would appear that needs are best understood and satisfied by people who are closest to them. ... For certain kinds of demands often call for a response which is not simply material, but which is capable of perceiving deeper human need.”²⁷

Thus the importance of carrying everyone along, which is characteristic of an authentic democracy, cannot be overemphasised. This is because where governance is seen by all as the exercise of authority in managing the resources of the common weal, governance will be seen as the exercise of power aimed at improving quality of life enjoyed by all the citizens. The fact is that people are more likely to have confidence in their government if decisions are made in a transparent manner and those in authority can be held accountable. This also serves to remind those in authority that they are acting on behalf of their people and that since the people were part of the decision-making process, they will be scrutinised in terms of accountability.

Such an attempt is the only one that can truly carry everyone along. Consequently, it must work with the conviction that:

1. the needs of the poor take priority over the wants of the rich.
2. The freedom of the dominated takes priority over the liberty of the powerful, and
3. The participation of the marginalised groups (in politics especially in the decision-making process) takes priority over the preservation of an order which excludes them.²⁸

²⁷ John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, #48.

²⁸ Cf. J. Milburn Thompson, *Justice and Peace: A Christian Primer* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 96.

Therefore, from the perspective of Catholic social thought public authorities are expected to use the standards of the Gospel in the allocation of the resources of the community.

Ultimately, it is in the seats of governance that decisions affecting the lives of all and on which their wellbeing depends are taken. Therefore the life and dignity of all depend on such decisions. Consequently, political leaders have the moral obligation, according to the degree of each one's responsibility to take into consideration in personal decisions and decisions of government, the relationship which exists between their conduct and the poverty and the underdevelopment of so many people.²⁹ If the poor are truly to benefit from such political decisions, they must be judged in the light of what they do *for* the poor, what they do *to* the poor, and what they enable the poor to do *for* themselves. Because the fundamental criterion for all decisions, policies and institutions is this: They must be at the service of all people, especially the poor.³⁰

In order to realise these high ideals CST insists that those who occupy positions of responsibility – especially if they are Catholics – must prepare themselves for political, economic and social tasks by means of a solid formation in the Church's social doctrine.³¹ In that way they can live concretely the social implications of the Gospel.

Conclusion

We have tried to show the importance of human rights and their theological foundation in Catholic social thought. Today, the demand for the protection of human rights is undeniable. This demand places a big responsibility on those in authority who, by

²⁹ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, #9.

³⁰ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy* (1986), #24.

³¹ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, #90. John Paul II also insisted on this regarding “the lay faithful who have responsibilities in various fields of society and public life,” adding that “it is indispensable that they have a more exact knowledge – and this demands a more widespread and precise presentation of the Church's social doctrine.” John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, #60.

virtue of their positions, must see to it that they are guaranteed and promoted everywhere. (GS #73). This is a call to place the human person at the centre of consideration in governance.