

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO
THE HUMAN COMUNITY
(Catechism nn. 1877-1948)

Part Three of the Catechism is entitled 'Life in Christ'. Section One reflects on our vocation as human beings to live a 'life in the Spirit'. To this point we have been examining the teaching of the Catechism on what it calls 'The dignity of the human person'. We now move to considerations in regard to 'The Human Community' (Catechism n. 1877-1948).

It is impossible here to summarise adequately the rich and broad teaching of the Church in relation to Justice in the Social Sphere. A list of the most authoritative statements includes:

Pope Leo XIII '*Rerum Novarum*' ('On the Condition of Labour', 1891)

Pope Pius XI '*Quadragesimo Anno*' ('On Reconstructing the Social Order', 1931)

Pope John XXIII '*Mater et Magistra*' ('Christianity and Social Progress', 1961)

Vatican II '*Gaudium et Spes*' ('The Church in the Modern World', 1965)

Vatican II '*Dignitatis Humanae*' ('On Religious Freedom', 1965)

Pope Paul VI '*Populorum Progressio*' ('On the Development of Peoples', 1967)

Pope John-Paul II '*Laborem Exercens*' ('On Human Work', 1981)

Pope John-Paul II '*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*' ('On Social Concerns', 1987)

Pope John-Paul II '*Centesimus Annus*' ('On the 100th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*', 1991)

A fine summary has been published by the Pontifical Council for Justice & Peace. It is entitled '*A Compendium of the Social Teaching of the Church*' (St Pauls 2005), and runs to 426 pages.

We are not individuals living in isolation. We are graced to live in love as a community of persons. It is in community that we are created in God's image. In his '*Philosophy of God and Theology*', Bernard Lonergan writes:

'The person is not primordial [does not come first]. What is primordial is the community. It is within community through the way persons relate that the individual person emerges. Since persons are the products of community, and since the strongest and best of communities is based on love, religious experience and the emergence of personality go hand in hand.'

The Catechism makes the obvious point:

'There is a natural tendency for human beings to associate with one another for the sake of attaining objectives that exceed individual capacities' (n. 1882).

It adds the following caution (n. 1883):

'Socialisation presents dangers. Excessive intervention by the state can threaten personal freedom and initiative. The teaching of the Church has elaborated the principle of subsidiarity, according to which "a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions. Rather, it should support it in case of need and help to coordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good" (Pope John-Paul II, 1991, *Centesimus Annus* n. 48).'

Since God is love, and therefore respects the freedom of persons and of the universe, ‘we should behave as ministers of divine providence’(n. 1884). As indicated in earlier chapters, personal conversion of heart is basic. If it is genuine it will impel us to interact with others to build liberating social institutions (see n. 1888). In the introduction to its statement entitled ‘Justice in the World’ the 1971 Synod of Bishops writes:

‘Action on behalf of justice, and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.’

Authority

Authority is a key factor in our participation in the life of society. The word is derived from the Latin ‘*auctor*’, meaning one who causes or enables something to grow. It should be obvious that for the proper exercise of authority, one must be in communion with God, the ultimate Author of everything that exists. To enable growth, one must have something to say, and one must understand and respect the listeners so that what one says helps something grow in them. All authority in the Church is an expression of the authority of Jesus, God’s Word-made-flesh. Every baptised person shares in this authority. We all have something to say and to do to help others grow.

An authoritarian personality

To exercise appropriate authority one must avoid being authoritarian. Psychologists have identified an ‘authoritarian personality’ – a personality type that undermines the proper exercise of authority. The authoritarian personality is concerned to preserve a system of authoritarian order in which their security is maintained by buttressing and idealising those in authority. They claim to be defending the Church (or the Pope), but (unconsciously?) their real concern is not the truth of the matter, but their own psychological and social survival, which is maintained by ensuring that authority preserves an order of clarity and safety in which they participate because they are fearful of uncertainty. Their emptiness is filled by blind obedience to authority and, if this or the institution from which it emanates is questioned, their source of strength and meaning is endangered and their emptiness threatens to overwhelm them. When they attack someone whom they consider a heretic (or a ‘modernist’, or whatever other name is in vogue as derogatory), they are being propelled by fear. In the process they often act with little or no respect for truth, justice or fidelity to the ideas of those they attack. Their aim is to eliminate by any means that which they perceive as a threat. Opposing them feeds their insecurity and hardens their attack. Attempting to appease them by acting in ways that they want is fatal to the building of a healthy community, because such compliance is not in accordance with the truth.

Civil authority and law

In relation to the subject of authority, we might consider the following statement from Paul’s Letter to the Romans (13:1-4):

‘Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.’

Common Good

‘Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Authority is God’s servant for your good.’

On the generous assumption that those exercising authority ‘are not a terror to good conduct but to bad’, Paul is urging the Christians of Rome not to join in anti-government activity. Civil authority has a place in divine providence and when it is exercised in accordance with God’s will it is to be honoured. We find a parallel statement in the First Letter of Peter:

‘For the Lord’s sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right.’

An important means for exercising authority in the social sphere is the creation of law. In his *Summa Theologica* (I-II.93.3 ad 2), Thomas Aquinas writes:

‘A human law has the character of law to the extent that it accords with right reason, and thus derives from the eternal law. Insofar as it falls short of right reason it is said to be an unjust law, and thus has not so much the nature of law as of a kind of violence.’

The Common Good

An important notion in the area of law is that of the common good (Catechism n. 1905-1912). It includes respect for the fundamental and inalienable rights of persons, concern for social wellbeing and the development of community, as well as concern for the stability and security of good order. In the words of the Catechism:

‘The common good is to be founded on truth, built up in justice, and animated by love’(n. 1912).

Because ‘all enjoy an equal dignity’(n. 1934),

‘every form of social or cultural discrimination in fundamental personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, colour, social conditions, language or religion must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God’s design ... Their equal dignity as persons demands that we strive for fairer and more humane conditions. Excessive economic and social disparity between individuals and peoples of the one human race is a source of scandal and militates against social justice, equity, and human dignity, as well as social and international peace’(Vatican II GS n. 29).

Social Justice and Poverty

In his encyclical ‘*Peace on Earth*’(*Pacem in Terris*, 1963, n. 63) Pope John XXIII writes:

‘It is not enough to acknowledge and respect everyone’s right to the means of sustenance if we do not strive, to the best of our ability, for a sufficient supply of what is necessary for this sustenance.’

In their 1996 Pastoral Statement entitled '*A New Beginning: Eradicating Poverty in our World*', the Australian Catholic Bishops speak of five forms of poverty. Economic poverty: the result of a low level of income and wealth. Socio-political poverty: an inability to access satisfactorily services such as education, health and social welfare. Political poverty: not being able to participate actively in the decisions that affect one's life. Cultural poverty: the reality of 'marginalisation', of living on the edge of mainstream society. Spiritual poverty – a poverty experienced in the depths of a person's being: the experience of rejection, loss of hope and energy, and often despair. The bishops go on to state:

'To work to eradicate poverty we must focus on the way in which both society and the economy are organised. To eradicate means to root out, to deal with the deepest causes. In the case of poverty these are structural in nature, that is, related to the way society is organised. The alleviation of poverty is, however, also a very significant and important action since it seeks to reduce the level of personal suffering associated with poverty. What is needed is both social, political and economic change to address the causes of poverty, and the more traditional welfare activities associated with welfare and charitable institutions to address the consequences or symptoms of poverty. The work of alleviation needs to be done in the light of the work of eradication. In the best programs, both dimensions are present.'

The Puebla Document, issued by the Latin American Episcopal Conference in 1969 (n. 32-39), speaks of

'the faces of young children, struck down by poverty before they are born ... the faces of young people who are disoriented because they cannot find their place in society, and who are frustrated by the lack of opportunity to find work ... the faces of indigenous people living marginalised lives in inhuman situations ... the faces of the unemployed and the under-employed subject to cold economic calculations ... the faces of old people frequently marginalised in a progress-orientated society.'

Preferential Option for the Poor

In recent years the Church has been referring to the need for us to make an option for the poor. The Australian Bishops (1996) define this option:

'The option for the poor is a decision for humility and for sharing power. It requires standing alongside poor and oppressed people and viewing the world through their eyes. It involves a commitment to work with poor people for the eradication of poverty in a spirit of service, not domination. It means allowing them to play the primary role in the struggle. It also means accepting, in a way that is not guilt-ridden but calmly and with courage, the way in which those of us who are not poor are caught up in the social systems which allow poverty to continue.'

In 1975 the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace wrote:

'The Church must preach more forcefully, and realise more effectively, liberation of the poor, of the oppressed and the outcast. The Church must work with others to build a world where every person, no matter what race, religion or nationality, can live a fully human life, freed from servitude.'

Option for the poor

Albert Nolan OP defines the option for the poor:

‘The option for the poor is an uncompromising and unequivocal taking of sides in a situation of structural conflict. It is not a matter of preaching to some people rather than to others, or a matter of being generous to the ‘under-privileged’, or a judgment about the personal guilt of the rich, or even, in the first instance, a matter of life-style. It is the assertion that Christian faith entails, for everyone and as part of its essence, the taking of sides in the structural conflict between the oppressor and the oppressed ... A thoroughgoing option for the poor includes the willingness to question one’s assumptions and to learn from those who are oppressed. It is only after one has learned to have confidence in the ability of the oppressed to promote their own cause and to bring about their own liberation that one can begin to share that struggle with them and to make a contribution in real solidarity with all those who have taken an option against oppression’ (*Meaning of ‘option for the poor’* in New Blackfriars 1986).

In 1957 Abbé Pierre included the following statement in the rule for the Companions of Emmaus:

‘Let us never lose our living conviction that it is not necessary to wait until we are splendid people before we can do splendid things. That would probably mean waiting a long time, too long in fact! We need only to understand one splendid thing and then try to base our whole life upon it: and that thing is that the person we must help in all things is the person who is suffering the most.’

Structures that contribute to Poverty

In their 1996 Pastoral Statement, the Australian Bishops list the following factors as contributing to the structures that issue in and maintain poverty. To work for Social Justice, we need to be working against these factors:

- The concentration of power in the hands of relatively small groups.
- Unemployment.
- Low wages for some forms of full-time work and insufficient income support for those not in full-time paid employment.
- Inadequate access, or discrimination in obtaining such access, to services and resources such as health, education, energy, water, information and transport.
- Unjust trade relations between rich and poor countries.
- The effects of European colonialism on poor countries.
- The oppression of women and children.
- The operation of totally State-controlled economies and societies, stifling freedom and creativity, or the unrestrained operation of capitalist economies, which idolise profit, competition and the ownership of the means of production.
- Wars and widespread conflicts.
- Racism, discrimination and the violation of human rights.
- Ecological damage due either to lack of information or to economic need.

Readings from the Hebrew Bible

As an inspiration, and challenge, to involve ourselves in the struggle for justice, we might reflect on the following passages from the Hebrew Bible:

‘You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn ... If you lend money to the poor among you, you shall not exact interest from them. If you take your neighbour’s cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down’(Exodus 22:21-26).

‘Thus says the Lord: I will not revoke my punishment on Israel, because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way ... and in the house of their God they drink wine bought with fines they imposed’(Amos 2:6-8).

‘Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land!’(Isaiah 5:8).

‘Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey!’(Isaiah 10:1-2).

‘Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail’(Isaiah 58:6-11).

‘Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbours work for nothing, and does not give them their wages; who says, ‘I will build myself a spacious house with large upper rooms,’ and who cuts out windows for it, panelling it with cedar, and painting it with vermilion. Are you a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? says the Lord. But your eyes and heart are only on your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practising oppression and violence’(Jeremiah 22:13-17).

‘The king must not acquire many horses for himself, or return the people to Egypt in order to acquire more horses, since YHWH has said to you, “You must never return that way again.” And he must not acquire many wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; also silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself. When he has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy of this law written for him in the presence of the levitical priests. It shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear YHWH his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes, neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment, either to the right or to the left’ (Deuteronomy 17:16-20).

Early Christian Writers

A powerful challenge comes also from some of the writers from the early Christian centuries:

‘When someone steals another person’s clothes we call that person a thief. Should we not give the same name to one who could clothe the naked and does not? The bread in your cupboard belongs to the person who is hungry. The coat hanging unused in your wardrobe belongs to the person who needs it. The shoes rotting there belong to the one who has no shoes. The money you are hoarding belongs to the poor’ (Saint Basil, died 379).

‘Tell me, how did you come by your wealth? Did you receive it from someone? From where did he get it? From his grandfather or father? Are you able to show, as you go back through the generations, that it was justly acquired? It cannot have been. No, the beginning and root of wealth must lie in injustice of some sort. And why? Because in the beginning, God did not create one person wealthy and another to go wanting ... God gave one and the same earth to all alike. And, inasmuch as the earth is a common possession, how is it that you have acres and acres of land, while your neighbour has not the tiniest fraction of the earth? ... Even if your wealth has been gathered honestly, is wealth something good? Not at all. Nor is it something evil, so long as it is not hoarded and is shared out with those in need. Unshared, wealth becomes something evil, a trap. Is it not evil that you claim sole ownership of what belongs to the Lord, of what is common property? Or do you deny that the Lord’s is the earth and its fullness? Whatever belongs to the Lord belongs equally to all ... Strife comes only when someone tries to gain possession of something and make it his own. It is as if human nature itself grows angry when, in spite of God’s uniting us in every way, we are bent on dividing and standing apart by owning things and using phrases like ‘This belongs to me’ or ‘That is yours’ - chilling words indeed ... Whatever is necessary for life is given to all alike; yet even in the smallest matters we cannot seem to keep things common to all. God has made his great gifts available to all in common so that we might learn to share lesser things. But we have not learned this lesson. How then can a rich person be good? By giving his wealth to others and so by being no longer wealthy. As long as he hoards it for himself, he cannot be good’ (Saint John Chrysostom, died 407).