

Mid-century Catholic social teaching 1930-1958.

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I want to start my comments in the middle of the period I have been given to talk about, in the spring of 1937. Within the space of just eighteen days in March 1937, Pope Pius XI had issued three letters to a world in turmoil. The first letter issued on the 10th March was written in secret and smuggled from Rome into the heart of Nazi Germany. *Mit Brennender Sorge* (With burning concern) was to be read from the pulpit of every German Catholic Church on Palm Sunday. Pius denounced the appeal to false forms of order, the dark impersonal destiny that lay at the heart of National Socialism, and the exaltation or divinising of race, “the people” or the state “above a standard value.” Pius, alarmed at the denial of the personal dimensions to justice and dignity in Germany, wrote: “Our God is the Personal God, supernatural, omnipotent, infinitely perfect, one in the Trinity of Persons, tri-personal in the unity of divine essence.”

Divini redemptoris (Of the divine redeemer), issued just a week later, was intended for a different audience, one that the Catholic Church had perhaps been more consistent in criticising. Written as a condemnation of atheistic Communism and Bolshevism, the text outlines the Church’s objection to Communism’s suppression of natural rights in favour of collectivism. Rejecting both liberal individualism and atheistic Communism Pius used *Divini redemptoris* to call for a reset of modernity in favour of a Christian civic humanism. This humanism would root the social order in respect for individual self-determination brought about “by means of an organic union with society and by mutual collaboration.”¹

The final letter, *Nos es muy conocida*, issued on 28th March was addressed to the bishops, priests and laity of Mexico. Following the deaths of around 5,000 priests and Catholic laity and the exile of many more, Pius wrote to the Catholics of Mexico to set out his condemnation of their persecution and to outline a set of principles that could be drawn on to inspire legitimate resistance. He argued that Catholics had a right and a duty to take their inspiration from the imitation of Jesus Christ and to be inspired by the call to a life of prayer, love and sacrifice. Such an imitation and pattern of life would naturally produce a form of social renewal, a form of Christian citizenship focused on the needs of the poorest and resistance to all injustice including injustice that refuses the right to religious expression and education.

During the course of the mid and late 1930’s Pius had written on a dizzying range of social challenges: nativism in Germany and France, anti-Semitism in Europe and North America, economic injustice, migration, and religious persecution. Yet, what connects these three letters are not only a particular set of social issues but also the attempt by the pope to address the realm of ideas. What do I mean by this? Pius is clear that the Church must challenge not only the material circumstances that shape the lives of faithful but also the realm of ideas. In the realm of ideas we see that religion does not die but rather is endlessly reinvented in secular form: as political and economic ideas. Pius was addressing “secular” ideas that contained rival or pseudo-theologies. To imagine that the public square was simply atheistic was to

misunderstand the ideas at the heart of fascism or communism or liberalism or capitalism. Each system of ideas tells contrasting stories (in the plural) of human nature and social order and each sells its own idea of sin, purity, sacrifice and salvation – often only loosely disguising such language. Pius was clear in his letters that the draw to Nazism and Bolshevism was not merely economic or social, but in the view of the papacy it was also ‘theological’. Pius viewed each of these movements as determined to erase the personal Trinitarian God of Christianity and to propose to its people a “false messianism” and “deceptive mysticism” (to quote him). As *Mit Brennender Sorge* argued, fascism identified divinity with the state and a single race. Whilst German fascism and Russian Bolshevism were criticised for the denial of material justice to their members, Pius believed that it was incumbent upon the Church to demonstrate that such movements perpetrate their injustice in theologically resonant language. Pius believed that they present fundamentally unchristian notions of purity and salvation. And they mock the truly Christian practices of humble service of the weak and despised in justice and charity. Criticism of euthanasia and attitudes towards disability emerge for the first time, alongside criticism of racism. Such false theology Pius teaches in his letter to Mexico is all the more dangerous when the theology and worship of the Church itself is limited or suppressed.

I’ve opened this talk with Pius’ three letters not because they are definitive texts or the ones that most people go to when they think of Pius – that honour goes to *Quadragesimo Anno* - but rather because they illustrate something important and not always well understood about the core of Catholic social teaching. In the first instance they illustrate the fact that Catholic social teaching in its modern form is as much a tarrying with the *ideas* that constitute modernity as with the concrete *practices* it wishes to challenge or uphold. In the second instance, Catholic social teaching is both uniquely modern in its form – it gradually comes to accept the separation of church from state at the end of this period, and the de-facto independence of social, political and economic questions from direct church competency – but in this period is also a social philosophy that refuses to fully accept a liberal settlement. The documents issued by popes and bishops’ conferences do not view any of the major thought traditions of the last three hundred years as fully compatible with the revealed truth of the Gospel concerning human nature and the transcendent purpose of the social order. Neither does the church hierarchy view such systems of ideas, despite their claims, as fully ‘secular’, that is to say, devoid of their own religious or ‘theological’ claims. The modern state still seems to trade in its own version of notions of sin and salvation. Thus none of the major ideologies that have formed the post-Reformation world are seen as neutral ideologies for Christians. And part of the task of Catholic social teaching is to train the eyes and ears of Catholics and “all people of goodwill” to see the presence of these ideologies, systems and structures that shape everyday realities.

The papacy comes over the course of the mid twentieth century – a movement that is over half a century in the making - to accept that the church can operate in a liberal democratic era and does praise some of liberal democracy’s achievements, but the Church makes clear in this mid century period that it is not a fundamental believer in the underlying (multiform) belief system of liberalism itself. What does it select for criticism?

- It is critical of the tendencies of some forms of liberalism towards pantheism. A pantheistic liberalism does not pay proper attention to the meaning of history and to time. It over-identifies man with God. It elevates rationalism with its denial of the personal experience of faith as well as a transcendent or eternal reason.
- Catholic Social Teaching remains suspicious of a doctrine of the individual that does not give weight to the vulnerable, interdependent, self-determining, narrative character of the human person.

Through the upheavals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the idea of “society” as something distinctive and meaningful beyond and between the state and church took shape. The Church defines itself as having a duty not simply to be a pastor or shepherd to their own flock but to address a series of distinctive “social” questions that shaped the goods of human living in an era.

In this period these social questions were most urgently questions of:

- Order, peace and security
- Race and nationalism
- Migration
- New economic models to broker greater economic equality
- The role of civil society and limits of the state
- The possibilities of democracy and human rights

There are also continuing themes from *Rerum novarum*:

- The shifting relationship between the state, market and civil society. Letters and encyclicals issued between Vatican I and Vatican II tend to lament the growth of industrial, technocratic and transactional forms of social organisation that seem to bring in their wake an inherent, inexorable drive towards centralisation and the suppression of local, diffuse, plural and more organic forms of social cooperation. The popes perceived these tendencies to lie, in different form and degree, within modern Liberal as well as totalitarian states and at the heart of modern capitalism – no form of modern social organisation was free from these temptations. The encyclicals point to the shrinking space for rich civic association and a lack of interest by modern states in nurturing the development of localised forms of social virtue.
- The second discernable and recurrent social theme concerns the changing nature of the state itself. Whilst Catholic Social Teaching is often referenced primarily for its economic teaching, in fact, much of the tradition is taken up with themes of social and political governance.

Perhaps the major innovation in *Quadragesimo anno* (1931) is the development of the principle of subsidiarity. This principle is often misunderstood – perhaps killed by its use by the European Union! At heart the principle of subsidiarity focuses on people and their relationship to – and participation in – social, political and economic groups and associations. Such groups include everything from trade unions,

local government, faith organisations, craft associations, football clubs, political parties, professional bodies of nurses or business entrepreneurs, women's institutes, social enterprises and charitable bodies. These intermediary associations, groups and institutions Pius XI refers to as the vital organs of "social governance." Governance doesn't just happen through the state – it is a profoundly *social* matter for the *whole* social body. The social bodies he has in mind are the bodies that lie between the level of the family – the first social and political community – and the state and market. They are viewed as the contexts in which we first learn social virtues. The encyclical describes such groups as "the original expression of social life" and the realm in which the "creative subjectivity of the citizen" is expressed.

On the basis that these groups occupy such a central place in achieving the common good of a society, all "higher" level organisations ought to adopt an attitude of "*subsidiium*," service or assistance with respect to the development, protection and promotion of such groups. Such service ought to be economic, legal and institutional where necessary.

This constructive or "positive" understanding of the principle of subsidiarity was necessarily balanced by a more "negative" emphasis on the need for subsidiarity as a brake or limit on unhealthy state and market powers. We have noted that Pius believed that the Liberal AND totalitarian states showed themselves to have a tendency to squeeze out the traditional role of professional bodies, craft and trade associations, guilds and cooperatives. The decline of such bodies had not, Pius argued, resulted in an improved politics or a more efficient and humane economy but in an increasingly bloated, inefficient state, and in a market that dehumanised its workers and generated worrying forms of social fragmentation and apathy:

- So its worth paying attention to the very careful wording in *Quadragesimo anno*:

"When we speak of the reform of institutions, the State comes chiefly to mind, not as if universal well-being were to be expected from its activity, but because things have come to such a pass through the evil of what we have termed 'individualism' that, following upon the overthrow and near extinction of that rich social life which was once highly developed through associations of various kinds, there remain virtually only individuals and the State. This is to the great harm of the State itself; for, with a structure of social governance lost, and with the taking over of all the burdens which the wrecked associations once bore the State has been overwhelmed and crushed by almost infinite tasks and duties." (#78)

Pius' introduction of the concept of subsidiarity was therefore preceded by a critique of state and market. Making room for this concept required the Church to elbow the bloated state and market out of territory it had wrongly colonised. The principle of subsidiarity thus functions "negatively" to remind us of the need to restrain and limit power, and "positively" to suggest ways that limited power - rightly used - can foster participation and social creativity.

Having established in the preceding paragraphs of his document both the importance of associations to the common good and a critique of the state and market, Pius offers the following definition of subsidiarity:

“Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do. For every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the body social, and never destroy and absorb them.” (QA79)

The third connecting and continuous social theme concerns the constantly shifting relation of labour to capital, creature to the material world and the dignity of work. Catholic Social Teaching teaches the absolute moral priority of human labour over capital as well as the basic creativity core to the experience of human work or labour. It discerns in capitalism a constant tendency to reverse this priority and to exploit and oppress the productive capacity of the human person. It seeks to trace the reinvented forms of this dilemma. Again, the letters, addresses and the single social encyclical of this era challenge both the ideas and the practices connected with capitalism and communism. They rejected the doctrine of the survival of the fittest, of competition as the basis of economic exchange, of the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few OR the communist idea that the community owns ALL goods.

In Pius XI's 1931 *Quadragesimo anno* he addresses this theme in two ways: firstly as a challenge to social unity. Pius begins with a reminder that *Rerum Novarum* was concerned with a world where the basic economic model had left a world divided into two classes. Catholic Social Teaching, Pius reminded us, decries this social division (although not necessarily all inequality it should be said!) and speaks out against vast inequalities in the distribution of goods. Charity, he tells us, is no substitute for justice withheld. However, it is not only a concern with unity that drives the document. Pius teaches that the doctrines of the free market themselves act as a poisoned spring at the heart of the modern social order: “Just as the unity of human society cannot be founded on an opposition of classes, so the right ordering of economic life cannot be left to a free competition of forces. For from this source, as from a poisoned spring, have originated and spread all the errors of individualist economic teaching.”

The theology that underpins the letters and texts of this period centres on a cosmic Christ encountered throughout the created order. It portrays a whole created order that has a purpose and which is encountered through the structures of social life. Social life is (prior to Vatican II) hierarchically ordered towards specific goods. The Church has a duty not only to care for its own sheep but to tell the story of the whole cosmic order and the hierarchy of goods it reveals.

Wartime addresses of Pius XII

I want to take us in a slightly different direction now, to a series of talks that were given on the radio between 1939 and 1945 by Pope Pius XII. Pius XII issued no social encyclicals during his pontificate but he did issue numerous letters and his wartime messages are a substantial contribution to the development of the Catholic Social Teaching tradition, indeed these messages were crucial to the development of European politics immediately after the war. Nonetheless Pius' own reputation

concerning opposition to the Holocaust became a matter of argument, so his messages were largely forgotten, and the seismic shifts in social teaching of Vatican II eclipsed this moment. However, in forgetting to see them as part of the body of Catholic Social Teaching we lose sight of some of the most influential papal social leadership in the 20th Century. The ideas that we shall look at on dignity, social order and democracy became part of the theoretical backdrop to the formation of new post-war state constitutions, and also played a role in the development of notions of human rights. Pius was no Liberal, but his conception of dignity was widely deployed by Liberals. Given we live in unstable times ourselves, I think now is a good moment to revisit Pius' wartime broadcasts and to think again how we build just and dignified social order in unsettled times. I also think it's interesting to note that in a time of deep crisis and fundamental instability Pius opted for a different way to produce his social teaching. He offers not a single systematic encyclical, but a gradually unfolding analysis for each year of the war.

On the morning of Christmas Day 1944 Pius XII issued perhaps the most substantive in his series of Christmas messages. It is here, building on his message of 1942, that he first deploys the language of human dignity as a category of defining importance for official Catholic social teaching. Of course, the idea of human dignity can be seen as a crucial hinge for earlier Catholic social reflection, and it had become an emerging watchword for lay Catholic intellectuals and political activists on Left and Right in the 1930's. Nonetheless its more systematic articulation as a principle and norm of the Church's social doctrine begins in earnest in the context of responses to the rise of the ideologies of fascism and communism and the devastation of war.

Pius' message, read from the balcony of St Peter's on Christmas morning 1944, included this remarkable section:

The holy story of Christmas proclaims [the] inviolable dignity of man with a vigor and authority that cannot be gainsaid – an authority and vigor that infinitely transcends that which all possible declarations of the rights of man could achieve. Christmas, the great feast in which heaven stoops down to earth with ineffable grace and benevolence, is also the day on which Christianity and mankind, before the Crib, contemplating the “goodness and kindness of God our Saviour” become more deeply conscious of the intimate unity that God has established between them. The Birth of the Saviour of the World, of the Restorer of human dignity in all its fullness is the moment characterised by the alliance of all men of goodwill. There to the poor world, torn by discord, divided by selfishness, poisoned by hate, love will be restored, and it will be allowed to march forward in cordial harmony, towards the common goal, to find at last the cure for its wounds in the peace of Christ.

In this passage Pius XII outlines three of the essential theological hallmarks of a Catholic interpretation of dignity. Firstly, he connects the doctrine of the Incarnation with the notion of human dignity; secondly, he argues for the important role that a theological account of dignity can play as a discourse that grounds claims for the rights of man; and thirdly, he indicates the dynamic way in which upholding human dignity pulls us through history towards the peace of Christ.

In his Christmas message two years earlier, Pius had structured his message around a Catholic vision “The Internal Order of States and Peoples.” One of the most striking things about Pius' war messages is that he does not focus on the immediate

and devastating suffering of the war so much as he determines that this is the moment to imagine a world beyond the war – a new Europe. He calls the search for this new order a search for “integral peace.” One of the most interesting features of this idea of integral peace is that it concerns a peace *within* nations as the basis also for a peace between nations. Divided nations that lack real social unity or communion are not nations at peace. Such a peace requires a determined focus on a plan for social regeneration according to his “Five Points for the Ordering of Society.”

Human dignity emerges as the central idea in this vision of regeneration. Using the analogy of stones laid to create a pathway, Pius identifies five facets of a political culture that builds the dignity of its people and thus enables deep and sustained social renewal:

- a formal espousal or recognition of dignity,
- a movement beyond liberal individualism towards a commitment to the defence of society as an intrinsic social unity,
- action to guarantee the dignity of labour,
- a restoration of judicial order and recognition of a Christian conception of the purpose of the state.
- recognising dignity requires opposition to treating humanity through anonymous group identities: “the herding of men as if they were a mass without a soul;” the recognition of personal rights to maintain and develop one’s bodily, spiritual and moral life, a right to worship and to carry out religious acts of charity, to marry (or not) and to maintain family life, a right to work, and a right to the use of material goods. Pius is critical of impersonal mass responses – social “herding” - which he notes both fail to see the particularity of the individual person and also fails to see the intrinsic cohesion of the whole. As Christians we are called to follow Christ in seeing the multitude and having pity upon them, however, Pius emphasises that truly seeing the multitude requires a capacity to see and hear the unique, unrepeatable person, an absolute in his/herself. Elsewhere he sees this intrinsic unity-in-plurality in providential terms.

Any reader schooled in the Catholic social movements of the 1920’s and 30’s will know that these ideas were not in themselves new to Catholic thought. Pius emphasises themes that would have been familiar to his hearers: the paternalist idea of an inherent organic social unity, and the dignity of labour and family life. Nonetheless, Pius’ messages represent something of a watershed moment in Catholic reflection on the modern social order. Pius’ Christmas messages are the moment when these innovations in mid-century Catholic social thought become more clearly the basis for a major strand of the twentieth century Catholic papal tradition. It is thus arguably in the foment of the immediate pre-war years and into the early post-war phase, rather than with the later Second Vatican Council, that Catholic thinking on dignity as a key social principle for political modernity comes to take its place centre stage.

So what about my claims that these ideas are forgotten but historically important? Samuel Moyn, a US historian of human rights, argues for a direct line of influence from Pius’ Catholic social thought to new constitutional and legal forms. He claims, for example, that the publication of *Divini redemptoris* offered fresh language to resolve dilemmas facing the Catholic drafters of the Irish constitution of 1937 who

eventually proposed the adoption of dignity as a conceptual part of the document's preamble. The 1945 UN Charter and 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights both adopted the language of human dignity as a conceptual cornerstone. Moyn argues that Pius XII's Christmas messages were key enabling texts. In post-war Germany, influenced by both Catholic social thought and by Kantian philosophy, the Grundgesetz or Basic Law gave the idea further liberal democratic constitutional form. Equally striking is Moyn's insight that the appeal of the idea of dignity lay partly in the world of political emotions; that the destruction of civil society and its institutions had produced a kind of political fear that the concept of dignity, articulated by Catholic thinkers amongst others, spoke to.

If the letter of 1944 is important for its emphasis on dignity, and the 1942 letter provides the basis for thinking about integral peace, then the final theme worthy of attention in the letters is the reflections on democracy. In his 1944 letter, building on the idea of integral peace in his 1942 letter, Pius outlines the distinction between "true" and "false" democracy. The Church recognises that democracy can take many forms – monarchy or republic. This is not what makes democracy true or false. Part of the task of a true democracy is to form a people as distinct from simply an inert mass of people who are acted upon by the state. When people remain as a mass category they are easily exploited, turn against each other and develop nativist ideologies. The masses are at risk of descending into the mob. When they become a people they assume both a social energy and an individual character of social responsibility – they become persons capable of judgement, responsibility and real social action. His view of democracy is strongly associational, it is based on the acting person forming real social communion – capable of fashioning unity out of an abiding social difference. Pius argues:

“the state does not contain in itself and does not mechanically bring together in a given territory a shapeless mass of individuals. It is, and should in practice be, the organic and organising unity of a real people. The people, and a shapeless multitude (or as it is called, the ‘masses’) are two distinct concepts. The people lives and moves by its own energy; the masses are inert of themselves and can only be moved from outside. The people lives by the fullness of life and in the men that compose it, each of whom – at his proper place and in his own way – is a person conscious of his own responsibility and of his own views. The masses on the contrary, wait for the impulse from outside, an easy plaything in the hands of anyone who exploits their instincts and impressions; ready to follow in turn, today this way, tomorrow another.”

Reading these letters now?

There is a certain provisionality in these letters – they are not encyclicals and don't have the feel of encyclicals. They are on-going reactive papal reflections over the course of the fast-changing and dramatic events of 1930's and 1940's. For many at the time they were judged insufficient – too neutral in places, not specific enough about the threats faced, not clear enough about evil and its social realities. But for others they inspired a post-war world of reconstructions. The ideas formed in the foment of the 1930's were put to work after the war and we've almost forgotten that this is where they came from. Only *Quadragesimo anno* has the solidity of an encyclical teaching and from it we derive the principle of subsidiarity in its fuller form. But what we gain from taking these texts – *Quadragesimo anno* and the letters

of Pius XI and XII - together is a rich vision of the vital role of an associational civil society, a politics which prizes social communion but does not give in to nativism, which remembers it is a people called and blessed and not a mass to be manipulated, and which becomes alert to the many ways that we tell ourselves stories about human morality and purpose and that we should be able to interpret these and respond to them as people of faith.

Further reading and resources



- *The Major Addresses of Pope Pius XII, V1-2: Selected Addresses and Christmas Messages*. Pope Pius XII, ed. Vincent Arthur Yzermans, St Paul Publishing, 1961.
- Michael Schuck, *That They May Be One: The Social Teaching of the Papal Encyclicals 1740-1989*, Georgetown Univ. Press, 1991.
- James Chappel, *Catholic Modern: The Challenge of Totalitarianism and the Remaking of the Church*
- Kenneth Himes (ed), *Modern Catholic Social Teaching – commentaries and interpretations*, Georgetown Press, 2018 (2nd Edition).