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ARTICLES

FRAMING THE PRINCIPLES OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT

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Catholic educators received an invitation in 1998 from the National Conference of Catholic Bishops to help forge a working partnership between Catholic education and the tradition of Catholic social thought. Listed are 10 principles that condense the content of Catholic social thought and package it in a way that can be more easily and effectively communicated at all levels of Catholic education.

Before principles can be committed to memory, they must be framed. Catholic social principles are surely suitable for framing; regrettably, they tend to get lost or remain hidden in files, footnotes, and lecture notes before such framing occurs.

Educators know that principles, once internalized, can prompt activity, impel motion, and direct choices. Educators are well aware that principled persons are committed in action and word to what they believe. Therefore, it was good news for Catholic educators when the National Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a report last year (United States Catholic Conference, 1998) to call to the attention of all U.S. Catholics the existence of Catholic social principles with which, the bishops say, “far too many Catholics are not familiar” (p. 3). In fact, they add, “many Catholics do not adequately understand that the social teaching of the Church is an essential part of Catholic faith” (p. 3). Strong words, but music to the ears of Catholic educators who now have an invitation from episcopal leadership in their Church to do what so many of them want to do, namely, contribute to the Church’s social mission by communicating an understanding of the principles that drive that mission.

The bishops are saying that far too many Catholics do not realize that they are ignorant of an essential part of their Catholic faith—Catholic social principles. Some do not want to know the principles because of the demands they make on conscience; others are simply unaware that they have missed something important for living their Catholic faith.

The bishops point out a gap between Catholic social thought and Catholic education. The body of Catholic social teaching is under-appreciated, under-communicated, and insufficiently understood. Why? One of the reasons lies in the fact that the principles underlying the doctrine are not clearly articulated or conveniently condensed for consumption. They are not “packaged” for catechetical purposes like the Ten Commandments and seven sacraments. While most Catholics can recite the eight beatitudes and some may attempt to list the four cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude), few, if any, can respond to the following catechetical questions. First, what are those Catholic social principles that should be accepted as an essential part of the faith? Second, how can these principles best be internalized so that they lead to action? Once that happens, significant advances will be noticeable on the social justice front.

There are 10 Catholic social principles (Byron, 1998), but there is nothing official about this count. Some future *Catechism of the Catholic Church* may list more or fewer than these 10 if compilers of that teaching aid find that Catholic social teaching is suitable for framing in this fashion. In any case, the list is offered for three reasons: (1) a reasonably complete list is needed if the ignorance cited by the bishops is going to be addressed; (2) any list can invite the hand of both editors and teachers to enhance clarity and facilitate memorization; and (3) a widely circulated list will stimulate further thought on the part of scholars, activists, and parishioners regarding what is appropriate in a set of principles that can serve as a blueprint for the larger body of Catholic social teaching. The list of principles follows.

1. THE PRINCIPLE OF HUMAN DIGNITY

The Church teaches that every human being is created in God’s own image and is redeemed by Jesus Christ. Hence every person, regardless of race, sex, age, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, employment or economic status, health, intelligence, achievement, or any other differentiating characteristic, has inherent dignity and is worthy of respect. This is the bedrock principle of Catholic social teaching. It is not what we do or have that gives us a claim on respect; it is *being* human that establishes our dignity. If afforded that dignity, the individual is, in the Catholic view, never a means, always an end.

The body of Catholic social teaching begins with the human person, but does not end there. Individuals have dignity; individualism has no place in Catholic social teaching. The principle of human dignity grants membership in the community of the human family.

2. THE PRINCIPLE OF RESPECT FOR HUMAN LIFE

From the moment of conception until death, individuals have a right to life consistent with that dignity. Human life at every stage of development and decline is precious and thus worthy of protection and respect. It is always wrong to attack or destroy human life. The Catholic tradition holds the sacredness of human life as part of any moral vision for a just and good society.

3. THE PRINCIPLE OF ASSOCIATION

Our faith tradition views the person as not only sacred but social. Accordingly, we recognize that how we organize our society economically, politically, and legally and how we structure all human relationships will directly affect the capacity of individuals to grow in community.

The centerpiece of society is the family, whose stability must always be protected and never undermined. By association with others in families and in other social institutions that foster growth, protect dignity, and promote the common good, humans achieve their fulfillment.

4. THE PRINCIPLE OF PARTICIPATION

Everyone has a right to participate in society. Moreover, each participant should seek the common good, especially for the poor and vulnerable.

Without participation, the benefits available to an individual through any social institution cannot be realized. Each person has a right not to be shut out from participating in those institutions that are necessary for human fulfillment.

This principle applies in a special way to conditions associated with work. It is through work that the individual participates in God's creation. If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers—the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to organize and join unions, to private property, and to economic initiative—must be respected.

5. THE PRINCIPLE OF PREFERENTIAL PROTECTION FOR THE POOR AND VULNERABLE

The story of the last judgment (Matthew 25:31-46) is an important part of the Catholic faith tradition. From its earliest days, the Church has taught that we will be judged for what we do or fail to do for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger seeking shelter, and the naked seeking clothes. We will be judged for our success or failure in visiting the sick and prisoners. In particular, we will be judged for what we did or failed to do to help “these least ones” that are represented in Matthew 25.

Faith tells us that we touch Christ when we touch the needy, and our Catholic faith instructs us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first. A quotation from the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* emphasizes this important point; the words are taken directly from an instruction issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith:

In its various forms—material deprivation, unjust oppression, physical and psychological illness and death—human misery is the obvious sign of the inherited condition of frailty and need for salvation in which man finds himself as a consequence of original sin. This misery elicited the compassion of Christ the Savior, who willingly took it upon himself and identified himself with the least of his brethren. Hence, those who are oppressed by poverty are the object of a preferential love on the part of the church which, since her origin and in spite of the failings of many of her members, has not ceased to work for their relief, defense, and liberation through numerous works of charity which remain indispensable always and everywhere. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994, #2448)

Why preferential love? Why put the needs of the poor first? Because the common good, the good of society as a whole, requires it. The opposite of rich and powerful is poor and powerless. If the common good is to prevail, preferential protection must move toward those affected adversely by the absence of power and the presence of privation; otherwise the balance needed to keep society in one piece will be broken to the detriment of the whole.

Parents know what it means to exercise preferential love, to provide preferential protection, from time to time. The vulnerable three-year-old child gets preferential protection over his or her older sibling under certain circumstances. For example, if the toddler runs out into the path of an oncoming automobile the older child will be left to fend for him- or herself on the sidewalk as the parent runs out to protect the vulnerable child. So the modern Church is asking nothing unusual, unfamiliar, or extraordinary when it calls for a preferential love of the poor and vulnerable. Educators will discover, however, that it is sometimes a struggle to get this point across!

6. THE PRINCIPLE OF SOLIDARITY

We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers. We are one family. The virtue of solidarity translates the familiar "love-your-neighbor" commandment to global dimensions in the interdependent world that each of us inhabits.

The principle of solidarity functions as a moral category that leads to choices that will promote and protect the common good.

The following words from Pope Pius XII, speaking in 1939, are instructive:

[An error] today abundantly widespread, is disregard for the law of human solidarity and charity, dictated and imposed both by our common origin and by the equality in rational nature of all men, whatever nation they belong to. This law is sealed by the sacrifice of redemption offered by Jesus Christ on the altar of the Cross to his heavenly Father, on behalf of sinful humanity. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994, #1939)

The reader will notice that the quotations cited from Pius XII and from the Roman Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith make mention of a law of charity, an obligation to act out of a motive of charity. Justice, particularly social justice, is also involved here. The educator must make the point in explaining these principles that it is not simply personal or individual misfortunes that call for a response, but rather societal issues that require more than charity; they call for a response in justice.

7. THE PRINCIPLE OF STEWARDSHIP

Our Catholic faith tradition urges us to show both gratitude and respect to the Creator by exercising proper stewardship of creation.

The steward is a manager, not an owner (Byron, 1975). In an era of rising consciousness related to issues of the physical environment, our tradition is calling us to a sense of moral responsibility for the protection of the environment. Stewardship responsibilities also look toward our use of personal talents and property and our attention to personal health.

8. THE PRINCIPLE OF SUBSIDIARITY

This principle puts limits on government and points to the importance of private voluntary associations.

The principle of subsidiarity puts a proper limit on government by insisting that no higher level of organization should perform any function that can be handled efficiently and effectively at a lower level of organization by persons who, individually or in groups, are closer to the problems and closer to the ground. Oppressive governments are always in violation of the principle

of subsidiarity, while overactive governments frequently violate this principle.

To connect this point to the justice dimension of so many of these societal problems, mention must be made of taxation. Individuals often feel helpless in the face of daunting societal problems, even when those problems are encountered in their local manifestations as, for example, the spectacle of homeless people sleeping on grates, standing in bread lines, or begging on street corners. To the extent that the problem has societal dimensions, no one person or group can do much about it. Individuals do, however, pay taxes; they do so not out of charitable motives but because both the virtue of justice and civil law compel them. With all due regard for subsidiarity, the government entity that collects the taxes helps the conscientious individual or smaller community do something about the social problems that confront them by applying government resources to meet problems that would otherwise go unattended.

9. THE PRINCIPLE OF HUMAN EQUALITY

Human equality derives from the principle of human dignity. Differences in personal talents are a part of God's plan, but discrimination at the level of fundamental human rights is not part of God's plan.

Treating equals equally is one way of defining justice, which is also understood classically as rendering to each person his or her due. Underlying the notion of equality is the simple principle of fairness; one of the earliest ethical stirrings felt in the developing person is a sense of what is fair and what is not.

10. THE PRINCIPLE OF THE COMMON GOOD

Vatican Council II, in its *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, explained the common good as "the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment" (Abbott, 1966, p. 225).

Respect for the person is part of this. Also included is the promotion of conditions that encourage the development of full human potential, as well as the maintenance by public authority of peace and security. Today, the principle of the common good takes on global proportions by reaching across regional and national boundaries.

What constitutes the common good is always debatable. The absence of concern for or sensitivity to the common good is an indication of a society in need of help. As a sense of community is eroded, concern for the common good declines (an obvious danger in an age of individualism). A proper communitarian concern is the antidote to unbridled individualism, which, like

unrestrained selfishness in personal relations, can destroy balance, harmony, and peace within and between groups, neighborhoods, regions, and nations.

Nothing prevents the articulation of additional principles, for example, a separate principle of justice and another that would affirm the right to private property and demonstrate that the goods of this world are intended by God for the benefit of everyone. Because they are implied in what is already listed, the list ends at 10. The door remains wide open, however, for educators to generate additional themes, theses, or principles.

What is the difference between a value and a principle? These terms are often used interchangeably. There is a “leads-to-something” implication of principle, while acknowledging that values, once internalized, will prompt people to act consistently in relation to what they cherish and consider to be valuable. Neither principles nor values necessarily lead anywhere if they remain abstract, embalmed in print, or not internalized by persons or carried in their hearts. Encouraging internalization of these principles is a pedagogical challenge of no small proportion.

By including Catholic social teaching in the essentials of the faith, the bishops reaffirmed in 1998 the existence of a creed that becomes a basis for the agenda the believer must follow. Thus Catholic social action flows from Catholic social doctrine. Bringing the social portion of the doctrine of the faith to the attention of believers is the challenge the bishops have now put before Catholic pastors and educators.

By the arrangement attempted here, this agenda rests on 10 building blocks:

- Human person
- Human life
- Association
- Participation
- Preference for the poor
- Solidarity
- Stewardship
- Subsidiarity
- Equality
- Common good

Those who enjoy acronyms might rearrange the order to construct an easily memorable set of capital letters. Regardless of the order and labels, this set of principles might constitute 10 topics for an adult education lecture series, 10 segments for a semester-long college course, 10 chapters in a book, 10 offices or sections in a research center, or simply 10 “bins” for gathering the collected wisdom drawn from scripture; patristic literature; scholastic, conciliar, and papal teaching; Church history; systematic, moral, and pastoral theology; and the ever-developing body of social reflection coming from

episcopal conferences and other sources.

Not to be overlooked is the possibility of 10 biographical essays focusing on persons such as Dorothy Day, Joseph Bernardin, and Mother Teresa who embodied one or more of these principles in a significant way. In addition, a collection of excerpts, organized under these 10 headings, from Chrysostom, Ambrose, Aquinas, and other great social voices from the Catholic past would be possible. If they are to be taught, the principles need a human face, and the lessons must be conveyed in words and images that move the heart.

These 10 organizational categories can accommodate every conceivable social issue; they can provide any social problem with an analytical home. Analysis and reflection targeted on this material can become the base for moral instruction and formation of conscience, which is the whole point of bringing Catholic education and Catholic social teaching into a new working partnership.

If anyone wonders why the Catholic bishops reflect and write occasionally about war, peace, nuclear weapons, the economy, abortion, euthanasia, and a wide range of other topics that have a clear social and moral dimension, these 10 principles can provide the necessary interpretative framework for understanding the significance of the bishops' pastoral letters. Those important letters cannot be dismissed out of hand as political tracts; they must be held in respect as important instruments for teaching the Catholic faith.

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