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**The Development of Catholic Social Teaching: Papal and Conciliar Documents**

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On May 15, 1891, Pope Leo XIII, who was Bishop of Rome from 1878 to 1903, issued the landmark encyclical *Rerum novarum*, (TheCondition of Labor*)* inauguratinga series of official documents, known as Catholic Social Teaching (CST), which apply religious and moral principles to contemporary social concerns. There is no official listing of these documents, but American theologians generally agree on which papal encyclicals and conciliar documents should be included.

We can get a better sense of the importance of *Rerum novarum* (RN) by noting some of its important contributions. It offered encouragement and support to working class families suffering economic and social disruptions caused by the Industrial Revolution. By supporting the labor movement urged by the American bishops, it won the gratitude of American Catholic workers and secured their fidelity to the Catholic Church, the “Friend of the People.” It brought the Church into constructive dialogue with the modern world after Pope Pius IX issued the 1864 “Syllabus of errors” which was commonly considered a condemnation of the whole modern project including political democracy, individual rights and religious freedom. Most importantly, the encyclical modeled and inspired the long history of Catholic Social Teaching that has continued up to today.

On May 15, 1931, Pope Pius XI published the encyclical *Quadragesimo anno* (QA) honoring the fortieth anniversary of R.N. Pius, who served as pontiff from 1922 to 1939, responded to a world in the midst of a worldwide depression and a growing disparity between the wealthy minority and the marginalized majority burdened by poverty. While Pope Leo strongly condemned socialism and defended private property, Pope Pius not only condemned communist collectivism but also liberal individualism. To reconstruct a more just social order, Pius insisted on renewal of Christian beliefs and morals. He also proposed the principle of “subsidiarity,” which holds that political and economic decisions should be made at the lowest governmental level possible and that higher levels should intervene only when necessary.

John XXIII who was elected pope in 1958 at the age of 76, expressed his open, optimistic spirit in his encyclical *Mater et magistra* (On Christianity and Social Progress) published on May 15, 1961 honoring the seventieth anniversary of R.N. It analyzed the growing complexity of social relationships in the modern world, including the distinctive concerns facing the developing nations. The encyclical invited lay Catholics to employ the “See, Judge and Act” method of “reading the signs of the times” in putting Catholic social teaching into practice.

Pope John’s second encyclical *Pacem in terris* (Peace on Earth) was published in 1963 during the Cold War shortly after he assisted in the peaceful resolution of the Cuban Missile crisis between the U.S. and Soviet Union. The encyclical envisioned a world community working together for the “universal common good” based on upholding and protecting personal, religious, economic, social and political rights, the first affirmation of wide-ranging human rights in the CST tradition.

In calling the Second Vatican Council, Pope John prayed for a “New Pentecost “that would address the problems of the day from a pastoral perspective. The pope’s prayer found expression in the conciliar document *Gaudium et spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), which has special prominence as the product of a long conciliar process. The pastoral constitution developed during the council addressed pressing concerns of the modern world by drawing not only on natural law norms but also on explicit Christian principles, a more persuasive approach that became standard in subsequent CST documents. The final draft of *Gaudium et spes* kept alive the spirit of Pope John by insisting that the joys and hopes of the people of our time are the joys and hopes of the followers of Christ.

The American Church through the persistent theological work of the Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray (d. 1967) played a major role in passing *Dignitatis* *humanae* (Declaration of Religious Freedom) after a prolonged contentious conciliar debate. Against those who objected to religious liberty on the grounds that “error has no rights,” Murray argued that religious liberty is best rooted in the dignity of human persons that can be known by reason and revelation. He reinforced his argument by pointing out that the Catholic Church in the United States has flourished under the First Amendment that prohibits the establishment of a state religion and guarantees free expression of religious beliefs. In a great irony, Murray who earlier was forbidden to write about religious liberty was subsequently invited to concelebrate the Mass celebrating the promulgation of the “Declaration of Religious Liberty” that enshrined his successfully argued position that every person has the right to religious freedom.

Shortly after Vatican II ended, Pope Paul VI, a trusted colleague and successor to Pope John, published *Populorum progressio* (On the Development of Peoples) that recognized the problem of worldwide underdevelopment and poverty and proposed Christian humanism as a solid basis for creating a more just and humane economic and social order. The pope insisted that “the spirit of solidarity” is essential to the complete development of individuals and the whole human family and added a practical application that rich nations should show concern for developing nations by offering direct aid and fairer trade relations.

On May 14, 1971, Pope Paul published his apostolic letter Octogesima adveniens honoring the Eightieth Anniversary of *R.N*. It moved beyond previous documents by insisting that creating a just social order requires empowering the poor politically so that they can be active agents in their quest for justice. Empowering the poor and marginalized, especially through the fundamental option for the poor, became a major theme in CST.

Pope John Paul II, who served as Bishop of Rome from 1978 until his death in 2008, made important contributions to the development of CST during his long pontificate. His encyclical *Laborem* *exercens* (On Human Work) was planned for publication on May 15, 1981, to commemorate the ninetieth anniversary of R.N. but was delayed for several months as the pope recuperated from a May 13th assassination attempt in St. Peter’s Square. The encyclical which called work the “essential key” to creating a more humane world, celebrated work as the way human beings actualize themselves and contribute to the well-being of society, thereby sharing in God’s ongoing creative activity. The last chapter of the encyclical provides a spirituality of work that remains helpful for people today seeking for greater meaning in their work.

In *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (On Social Concerns), Pope John Paul commemorated the twentieth anniversary of Pope Paul’s *Populorum progressio* by examining the growing economic disparity between the rich nations of the North and the developing nations primarily located in the South. Providing a moral framework for creating a more just world, it expanded Pope Paul’s teaching on solidarity by describing it as a “virtue” that inclines us to see others as neighbors equal to ourselves and moves us to work with them to serve the common good and create a more just and peaceful world. For John Paul, “solidarity” is the path to peace and integral human development, a teaching that has become a fundamental theme in CST.

In his encyclical *Centesimus annus* (The Hundredth Year) published in May, 1991, Pope John Paul honored the centenary anniversary of R.N. by applying CST principles to the new world situation including the collapse of communism in eastern Europe. Pope John Paul refined Pope Leo’s defense of private property and strengthened his critique of social systems by an in-depth examination of communism which, he said, was dying of its own fundamental errors. In a complex argument, John Paul defended capitalistic economic systems, but only if they treated workers justly and promoted the common good.

Pope Benedict who worked closely with Pope John Paul during his long pontificate, wrote his encyclical *Deus caritas est* (God is Love) in 2005 just months after he was elected Bishop of Rome. “In God is Love,” Benedict, considered one of the best theologians to serve as pontiff, responded to the new concerns created by globalization and mass communication that often provides instant information on important events and vivid portrayals of horrendous human suffering. In formulating a moral response to this growing sense of solidarity, the pope recognized that society as a whole has the responsibility to create a more just society, while the Church can contribute to this great cause by its extensive network of charitable organizations and the generous service of its faithful members. Aware of the limitations of his abstract theology to motivate people today, Benedict raised up a number of faithful witnesses to the power of Christian love, including Teresa of Calcutta known around the world for her charitable work.

Benedict published his second encyclical, *Caritas in veritate* (Charity in Truth) in 2009 as a response to problems of global development including mass migrations and food scarcity. The pope admitted the Church has no specific solution to these complex problems, but does offer moral guidance based on charity, which he described as a “remarkable motivating force for good.” However, charity which is at the heart of CST must be informed by truth lest it be distorted by emotional reactions and co-opted by special interests. In “Charity in Truth,” Pope Benedict offered to all people of good will a unified vision that links charity and truth in the pursuit of a just world order, the common good and authentic human development.

In 2013, when the Argentinian Jesuit Jorge Bergoglio replaced the retiring Pope Benedict, took the name Francis and asked the crowd in St. Peter’s Square to pray for him, he brought a different style of teaching to the papacy, less doctrinal and more pastoral. Francis wrote *Laudato si* (On Care for Our Common Home) in response to the environmental crisis threatening the Earth and the very existence of its inhabitants. The pope intended his encyclical to help secure acceptance of the 2015 Paris Agreement on global warming and has since supported a number of organized efforts, including an ongoing seven-year plan, to convince Catholics and others to do their part to control global warming.

Pope Francis wrote his encyclical *Fratelli tutti* (On Fraternity and Social Friendship) in 2020 during the worldwide Covid 19 pandemic to propose ways to create a more just and fraternal world based on the essential dignity of each human person. The encyclical’s second chapter is a profound mediation on the Good Samaritan parable which exhorts Christians to recognize Christ in the face of every excluded person. Recognizing the immense threat of nuclear weapons, Francis insisted that we can no longer think of a “just war” but must reaffirm:

”never again war.” Reversing previous Church teachings on the death penalty, the pope declared: ”it is inadmissible and must be abolished worldwide.” Pope Francis concluded his encyclical with a prayer for peace, justice and fraternity, based on a culture of dialogue, mutual cooperation and reciprocal knowledge.

As this survey suggests, Catholic social teaching is an organic, consistent tradition in which subsequent documents build on previous ones going back to R.N., often cited and commemorated. CST is at the same time a dynamic evolving tradition which has generated a variety of new principles, approaches, concerns and perspectives. As we have seen, this includes the principle of subsidiarity, the virtue of solidarity, reading the signs of the times, incorporating Christian teachings, supporting human rights, attending to the needs of developing nations, responding to the ecological crisis, questioning the just war theory, opposing capital punishment, and offering inspirational prayers in the documents. As an organic and developing tradition, Catholic social teaching can be a valuable resource for creating a more just, peaceful and verdant world.