

UNCERTAINTY, ANXIETY, AND CATHOLIC SOCIAL DOCTRINE
THE CURRENT STATE OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, THE EMERGING INTERNATIONAL ORDER AND
THE NEED OF POLITICAL ETHICS
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“Gaudium et spes,” Latin for “joys and hopes,” are the opening words of the only pastoral constitution of the Second Vatican Council and are memorable for the hopeful tone of the conference and its initial sponsor, Pope John XXIII. Those two words, however, are immediately set against “luctus et angor,” the Latin words for “griefs and anxieties,” the “griefs and anxieties,” the document states, of the men of this age. Ours is an uncertain age; in Europe for instance, people face enormous difficulties associated with paradigmatic shifts in economic and labor markets, great political flux verging towards instability in some parts of the continent, and grave cultural and demographic challenges. Disagreement over economic paths out of the financial crisis now expresses itself in political turmoil in France, Spain, Hungary, and elsewhere. Whether we might call ours “an age of anxiety” is unclear, in as much as that suggests there is something particular about our age distinguishing it from other ages. All times are marked by anxieties and grief and while ours are our own and strike us as unprecedented, in many ways they are not. Every age has its challenges and it might be an impossible and even fruitless task to wonder which age is more or less plagued by anxiety. Instead we should note that man, as a being that ponders his future in terms of his past, opens himself uniquely to concerns that do not plague other beings. In my comments today I shall make two points: first, I shall look to the Catholic social tradition to show that anxiety is a common theme within the tradition based upon claims about the kinds of beings we are. Anxiety is, as it were, a thread running through and holding together certain aspects of this tradition; it connects closely to claims about private property and political organization. Second, by looking at anxiety – identifying what it is in relationship to CSD, we’ll be able to make some claims about proper political organization in general and in our age. For the first part of the essay, I shall draw on *Rerum Novarum*; for the second part, I shall draw on *Caritas in veritate*.

One of the unique – and challenging – features of the human being is the capacity to plan for the future. I say “challenging” because the capacity to plan for the future creates much of the drama of human living. Anxiety grows out of the drama created by our awareness of both our urgent need to plan and our awareness that despite (and sometimes because of!) our planning those plans are fragile, subject to things far beyond our control. One thinks of the famous Scots language poem by Robert Burns, “To a Mouse” and its doublet, “The best laid schemes of mice and men/go often awry.” No matter the care with which we plan, often our planning is thwarted by things unforeseen. At a fundamental level, we understand that our futures are uncertain; that securing them eludes our control, and yet our understanding does not prevent our acting as though nothing eludes our control, that our future depends on our activity. Hence, our anxieties: by our planning we seek to secure what cannot be secured – at least cannot be secured by us. The Gospel of Luke speaks to this when it recalls the words of Christ to his disciples: “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat, nor about your body, what you shall put on. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And which of you by being anxious can add a cubit to his span of life? If then you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest?” (Lk 12:22-34, RSV) We are warned here of the very drama of which we are speaking. As men we are tempted to project a future onto our lives and yet the most important thing in the context of our lives, their very duration, utterly eludes our control. If we cannot by our planning add to the length of our lives, why would we become anxious about things of lesser significance?

Anxiety, then, is built right into our being: we are beings conscious of having a future; we don’t live in the present in the way other beings do. The human’s unique place in time is remarked upon in the earliest moments of the Catholic social tradition. *Rerum novarum* (1991; hereafter, “RN”) speaks of how reason allows man to “fathom matters without number, linking the future with the present.” (RN #7) Our gift of reason is the very source of the anxiety we speak of. By its use we are able to “link the future with the present”: we apply ourselves in the present through our activity that is ordered towards our future. We do this in very concrete ways. Continuing with RN #7, we read, “it is in [man’s] power to exercise his choice not only as to matters that regard his present welfare, but also about those which he deems may be for his

advantage in time yet to come. Hence, man not only should possess the fruits of the earth, but also the very soil, inasmuch as from the produce of the earth he has to lay by provision for the future.” Unlike the rest of Creation, we cannot simply “possess the fruits of the earth”; we must, instead, possess the soil as well, the basis for our caring for our future. We must project our plans into our future; indeed, we must project plans beyond our future, to the future of our children, of other people’s children, and of the society we will depart. This is the extension of our moral responsibility into and in some ways beyond time. “Man’s needs do not die out,” RN continues, “but forever recur; although satisfied today, they demand fresh supplies for tomorrow.” Ravens have ongoing needs of course; we humans know this. But they do not know their needs forever recur; they have no need of planning to alleviate the anxiety that arises uniquely among human beings who can see that the taste given today lasts only for a moment and must be sought again tomorrow and indefinitely.

Our knowledge of our dependence on temporal goods produces an anxiety that cannot be dissipated except through faith in God; that he will provide for us just as he provides for all of Creation. But the Catholic social tradition does not leave it at that. The tradition presupposes that our recognition of our dependence upon God for all that we have frees us to attend to the goods of the world properly. Recognizing that God provides for us does not cause us to be indifferent about our temporal needs – ravens are not indifferent about their food! Recognition of our dependence upon God allows us to turn towards the care of temporal goods in hope and justice. We are capable of genuinely serving these goods as stewards, attending to them on analogy to our attention towards God. They do not save us, but they help us; they are not ours to misuse, but gifts given by God for us to use well.

Rerum Novarum thus connects the justification for the right of human beings to private property to human anxiety about the future. Thus, in paragraph 13 of the document we read:

That right to property, therefore, which has been proved to belong naturally to individual persons, must in likewise belong to a man in his capacity of head of a family; nay, that right is all the stronger in proportion as the human person receives a wider extension in the family group. It is a most sacred law of nature that a father should provide food and all necessities for those whom he has begotten; and, similarly, it is natural that he should wish that his children, who carry on, so to speak, and continue his personality, should be by him provided

with all that is needful to enable them to keep themselves decently from want and misery amid the uncertainties of this mortal life.¹

In this passage the charter document of the Catholic social tradition connects the “uncertainties of this mortal life” to man’s right to property. As we saw above the document recognizes that a solicitous parent’s concern does not end with his own life. His concerns stretch into his children’s future. Any good parent thinks not merely of his own good, but of the goods of his children. He thinks, in other words, of the world he lives behind, of the gift given him by God and which he passes along in good care to his children. The natural right to private property connects closely with the understanding of man as a being uniquely capable of concern about the future. Because of reason, man requires private property: the possession and disposal of property as he wishes within the boundaries set by the common good. “... - that man alone among the animal creation is endowed with reason - it must be within his right to possess things not merely for temporary and momentary use, as other living things do, but to have and to hold them in stable and permanent possession; he must have not only things that perish in the use, but those also which, though they have been reduced into use, continue for further use in after time.” (RN 6) The parent must provide for his children. The Catholic social tradition is not diminishing human responsibility here; it acknowledges its full extent – bringing children into the world requires responsible planning on the part of parents. Our anxiety about our own mortal lives is extended in uncertainty about the lives of our children. But this is always done within the horizon of a future secured not by that planning, but by Christ.

As we know from our reading of the tradition, however, the “right to private property” is not merely about our possession of things for the care of ourselves and our families. The tradition’s understanding of private property includes important claims about right use of that property. The key to understanding this has already been suggested by the passages in *Rerum Novarum* I have quoted and which relate the right to property to man’s anxiety. In all these cases, solicitousness, or care, is emphasized. The care that draws us out of ourselves into concern and even anxiety for our children extends ultimately to our care of all things, including Creation itself. We are thus drawn to the way the Church has spoken of Christ as the solicitous shepherd. In other words, the model for our care of our families (and thus our possession of our property) is

¹ My Italian is not good, but I think the English version paragraph 13 begins at the Italian version’s paragraph 9 and extends into 10.

Christ, of whom St. Bonaventure writes, “How great was this devoted shepherd's solicitous care for the lost sheep and how great his mercy, the Good Shepherd himself indicates with an affectionate metaphor in the parable of the shepherd and the hundredth sheep that was lost, sought with much care, and finally found and joyfully brought back on his shoulders.”² No person is outside the concern of Christ. Bonaventure continues, writing of the difficulties our Lord faced, “In order to do this he endured toil, anxiety, and lack of food; he travelled through towns and villages preaching the kingdom of God in the midst of many dangers and the plotting of the Pharisees; and he passed nights in watchful prayer.”³ Bonaventure thus reminds us of something we can often forget: in the Incarnation, God subjected himself to the same anxieties we face out of the love upon which we draw in our concern for others. This is the model of our stewardship: it is not a lording over others as “fathers” or “parents”, but as shepherds, as servants of the weakest and most vulnerable among us.

At this point, I think we can see clearly how quickly the Catholic social tradition's grounding of the right to private property in claims about the uniqueness of human anxiety connects to broader claims relating to politics. The two main paragraphs from *Rerum Novarum* I have been reflecting upon both refer to the State. Shortly after connecting man's reason to his need to plan for the future, paragraph seven warns, “There is no reason to bring in the State. Man,” it continues, “precedes the State and possesses, prior to the formation of any State, the right of providing for the substance of his body.” The structure of the paragraph is striking. There is no transition from the discussion of man as a planner to this warning: the reader is struck by how almost clumsily the warning jumps off the page. The transition is smoother in paragraph 13 and taken together, the point of both paragraphs is clear: the family is a genuine society and within it, the father (and parents more generally) are genuine authorities. The common good the parents care for is a genuine good, equivalent in many respects to the good of the wider political community. Thus, Pope Leo writes, “the family has at least equal rights with the State in the choice and pursuit of the things needful to its preservation and its just liberty. We say, "at least equal rights"; for, inasmuch as the domestic household is antecedent, as well in idea as in fact, to the gathering of men into a community, the family must necessarily have rights and duties which are prior to those of the community, and founded more immediately in nature.” (RN no. 13)

² St. Bonaventure, *The Tree of Life*.

³ *Ibid.*

The historical context helps us understand Pope Leo's concern to emphasize the priority of the family: the specter of socialism and the rise of the liberal state threatened the integrity of the family. It was thus necessary to restate the Catholic social tradition understands of the irreplaceable role of the family in the development of society. On the other hand, the passage also widens the scope of concern – of the stewardship – man possesses. Just as man as an individual is called to care for his future within the framework of a providence governed completely by God, as a social being the communities men form must also concern themselves with making provision for the future. In a basic sense, man's corporate concern for the future becomes the ground of politics.

Let us look now at the claims in *Caritas in veritate* to fill out how anxiety grounds the political views of the Catholic social tradition. One of the early claims of *Caritas* is, I think, defensibly understood as the ethos of the document and of many of Pope Benedict's recent interventions in politics. In paragraph seven, the Pope writes, "The more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbours, the more effectively we love them." (CV no. 7) The common good is a concept describing a reality connected to the real anxieties of people. The sentence I quote describes a process of striving towards a common good set by the context of "neighbors" and their needs. The Pope's statement does not presume a notion of a good that sits there, settled, and towards which people move. Instead, the sentence suggests a dynamic notion of the common good framed by the dynamisms internal to human needs and neighbors: these are always moving towards the future; they "forever recur." We are, then, sensitive to how the Pope will describe our neighbors, as that will provide the framework of the common good. What we shall see the Pope describing is "common goods" contextualized by frameworks of different neighborhoods, as it were. That is, there are perspectives that present different groups of people as our neighbors and thus present us with different common goods. There is no single common good that captures all the real needs of all our neighbors.

The same paragraph (no. 7) draws directly on language from St. Augustine to place our temporal striving in a theological context: "Man's earthly activity, when inspired and sustained by charity, contributes to the building of the universal *city of God*, which is the goal of the history of the human family." The point of a claim like this is not to collapse the earthly efforts of men into God's redemptive activity: man's activity contributes to the building of something God alone makes possible. Instead, the point is that man has a role and that role is to attend to the

city of God which is the goal of history and as such the measure of all human politics. Thus, the passage concludes by drawing the two quotations together into one critical claim: “In an increasingly globalized society, the common good and the effort to obtain it cannot fail to assume the dimensions of the whole human family, that is to say, the community of peoples and nations, in such a way as to shape the *earthly city* in unity and peace, rendering it to some degree an anticipation and a prefiguration of the undivided *city of God*.” (CV no. 7) Developments in the world have expanded the “neighborhood”; the theological claim that we are a universal human family has been “anticipated” by temporal developments such that in certain contexts we can speak of all men as our neighbors. Thus, there is a common good at the global level that alone corresponds to certain real needs of our neighbors. As such, our politics and the “complex of [its] institutions” must attend to that common good in justice and charity. This is not optional, but a requirement of an adequate politics today. Like the good shepherd, we are concerned about the lost sheep wherever it may be.

The document *Caritas* thus prepares us for its later claims that there be an economics and a politics structured around (as efficient cause) and ordered towards (as final cause) the global common good. (cf. nos. 41 and 57). The global common good becomes more apparent, according to this logic, because of the “real needs” of men that cannot be served by other levels of political organization. Pope Benedict mentioned two such real needs in *Caritas* and he quite suggestively reiterated them in his Germany and United Kingdom addresses. These needs are the needs of environmental stewardship and global financial coordination.⁴ The ITC document agrees. It states, “Problems like these are bringing people into awareness of theological realities Catholic social doctrine has long affirmed: the unity of the human family and the interdependence of individuals and peoples with each other. Thus,” the document states, “there appears the awareness of a global solidarity, which has its ultimate foundation in the unity of the human race.” (ITC no. 1) The perception is fueled by global social problems, but the reality of a global community is a theological one based upon the unity of all peoples as children of God.

Quite provocatively Pope Benedict claims that the State cannot adequately attend to these (and other) needs because of its built-in limitations. There are two points at least to reflect on in this kind of claim, and only one of these points seems to draw attention from critics of the Pope. The first, and obvious to many, is that there needs to be some kind of global perspective on these

⁴ On the former, cf. *Caritas* nos. 48 forward.

needs and, much more strongly, that the global perspective suggests the need for global political reflection and institutionalization. This strikes many as dangerous, or utopian, or foolhardy, or simply wrong, or perhaps some combination of all those. I find these judgments premature at best and related to the failure to see the second point associated with Pope Benedict's claim. The Pope is not just saying that there needs to be a global government (he may not quite be saying that at all). He is saying instead that attention to the Catholic notion of the common good, to the principle of subsidiarity, and to the emergence of certain needs requires us to note the limitations of the State to attend to man sufficiently. The State has upper limits on what it can do. Over and over he remarks that this is not wish-casting on his part, but simply a consequence of historical developments. Thus, speaking in *Caritas* of economics he writes, "the State finds itself having to address the limitations to its sovereignty imposed by the new context of international trade and finance, which is characterized by increasing mobility both of financial capital and means of production, material and immaterial. This new context has altered the political power of States." (CV no. 24) He makes similar comments about the capacity of any State to address looming ecological crises.

We must be clear: while the Pope emphasizes the limited role of the State in addressing all man's needs, he is not pronouncing the State dead. He counsels against looking for the "demise of the State" and affirms the critical role of the State in helping address these crises. (CV no. 41) The State has been and continues to be a significant political actor, in particular at the international level. Nonetheless, the State is just one actor: it has a discrete role to play, but the idea of a role implies there are other actors, with other roles and that the State would overstep its place when it fails to recognize its real limitations.

A central stumbling block for many hearing recent papal claims about international order seems to concern the shape of the governing authority implicated by these claims. There is good historical reason for their wariness, reasons *ad intra* and *ad extra* to the Church and her history. Some seem concerned that the shape of global political authority presupposes a "monistic" principle, much as was advanced in medieval politics and theology. For the medievals, the alternative models of the "dominus mundi" were either the pope or the emperor. The ontological and theological principles of unity required there to be one head, a monarch, even if theologians, canonists, philosophers, and others might disagree about whether the monarch be pope or

emperor. Terrestrial governance should mirror celestial governance.⁵ In at least two senses, recent claims about the necessity of world governing authority follows the medieval claims, and this is in their shared beliefs in a universal human nature and that the natural law circumscribes earthly politics. The medieval and the claims we saw above share a dynamic view of law that pursues goods held in common by human beings. This frees the political thinking of the Church to acknowledge and esteem the various “common goods” instantiated in different levels of political and social organization. There is no case in Catholic political thought for a settled preference for the arrangement of states. Political forms serve goods. The goods they serve do not themselves change over time so much as the institutions in which those goods are instantiated do.

Likewise, then, and drawing on the conviction that there is a universal human family, Catholic political thought advanced by the medieval tradition and today espoused by Popes John Paul II and Benedict is urging us to recognize the incapacity of the State to serve all man’s goods. As Benedict said in his address to the Bundestag, part of this involves the restatement of the “international responsibility that [the papacy] hold[s].”⁶ Obviously he is not asserting a political or temporal “international responsibility,” much as he explicitly disavowed in *Deus caritas est* and elsewhere. Instead, he is confirming the place of the Holy See “as a partner in the community of peoples and states,” but also, I suggest, the place of the Pope as the spiritual representative of the unity of the human family that needs attending to as a unity.

But the shape of the Pope’s affirmation does not require a “world monarchy” as so much medieval thought presumed. He is not advocating either for a unitary person, a temporal monarch, nor even some single body of men that oversees global problems. Instead it is the law, natural and positive law, by which Pope Benedict advances his claims. To address contemporary problems, he writes, we need reclamation of the natural law as not some parochial Catholic commitment. The natural law instead is the basis of an adequate politics at every level. There are two points I want to have end my inadequate comments.

The first is that the global problems he mentions do not just serve to show how some issues exceed the capacity of the State. Were that his only point we would have merely one man’s read of empirical issues against another’s and thus we could see why even generally supportive

⁵ Cf. Walter Ullmann, *Medieval Papalism* (1949) 116.

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, “The Listening Heart: Reflections on the Foundations of Law,” paragraph I.

Catholics might resist papal pronouncement on, say, ecological issues. But he connects his reflections on these issues to deeper theological realities: the ecological movement in Germany, he shows, is not to be commended just because it reads the gravity of ecological issues in a superior manner than say, American commentators. No, the Pope ties German ecological awareness to the realization of some of “man’s relationship with nature.” Our “increasing awareness” of problems that surpass the capabilities of States to meet them is not an empirical question first and foremost, but instead a glimpse into the truth of the universal human family which has a genuine common good. There is an opening here, the Pope writes, for that insight to convert into the insight he presses about the relationship of nature to governance, the relationship of natural law, in other words, to the common good. When the Pope provocatively claims “*there is urgent need of a true world political authority*” (CV no. 67 – original emphasis) he is not embracing a kind of political utopianism. I submit instead he here opposes a utopianism about the capacities of the nation-state system. The current political arrangement that relies so heavily on the State to solve problems cannot bear the weight of contemporary global problems – of that we are well-aware.⁷ But, more deeply, any adequate political arrangement must attend to all the levels of goods humans hold in common. It would be a shame if our own ecological reflections disposed us to miss this critical, and I think brilliant, insight.

Second (and related) is that “such an authority would need to be regulated by law, to observe consistently the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity” (CV no. 67) Natural law and the principles of Catholic social doctrine are driving papal analysis. The law is the key element of this analysis: the natural law is the link between the global common good and the politics appropriate to it. The natural law forms the basis of the international law that “regulates the mutual relations of peoples and states,” according to the ITC document on the natural law (ITC no. 28) That document invokes the example of the stirring intervention by Spanish theologians on behalf of the native peoples of the Americas against the “imperialist ideology of some Christian states of Europe.” The natural law is posited as grounding international law, and together they operate to challenge the pretenses and activities of actual states, as they did the Catholic states of Portugal and Spain. Vitoria and other theologians appealed to the natural law to challenge the existing positive laws and defend the rights of the indigenous American

⁷ This seems undeniable, not only theoretically but practically when one calls to mind all the recent military and economic crises that are currently being dealt with or have recently been dealt with at regional and international levels.

populations. Natural right, which anchors human law to the natural law (ITC no. 89) demanded respect for the rights of the native peoples. And, the document adds, “The idea of natural law further allowed the Spanish theologians to establish the groundwork of an international law, i.e., of a universal norm that regulates the mutual relations of peoples and states.”

The project Pope Benedict describes is one, I submit, driven not by a utopian vision of a world political authority, but instead urged forward by his insight, some years ago in his discussion with Jürgen Habermas, that “it is the specific task of politics to apply the criterion of law to power ... the strength of law must hold sway” and not the law of the stronger.⁸ In that discussion he already drew attention to the ways in which changed circumstances (the “rupture”, he called it) pushed the Church – led by Spanish Scholastics like Vitoria – to a “new fundamental reflection on both the contents and the source of law.” We stand in a similar position now. Events are pushing us toward a wonderful opportunity to rethink our relationship with nature, with the natural law, and with the politics adequate to the anxieties of all humankind.

⁸ Josef Cardinal Ratzinger, “That Which Holds the World Together: The Pre-Political Moral Foundations of a Free State,” (Ignatius, 2005) 58.