

2021 CAPP International Convention – Contribution from Malta FCAPP Chapter

Covid-19 Recovery: The Significance of the Principles of Catholic Social Teaching in the Struggle to End the Coronavirus Pandemic and the Inequalities It Has Exacerbated

Abstract

The Catholic Social Teaching (CST) principles of the inherent dignity of the human person, the pursuit of the common good and solidarity, subsidiarity, and the preferential option for the poor are key themes and instruments to overcoming the Covid-19 pandemic. Vaccine rollout in all countries and distribution to poorer countries needs to be encouraged and ascertained, and ‘human-centred’ economic recovery and labour market stabilisation needs to be encouraged locally and worldwide. On the health side of the problem, there is no sure way out of the pandemic unless all countries are included in vaccine distribution and other stabilisation initiatives, otherwise mutant variants of Covid-19 threaten the road to stability. The development of vaccines for the poor should be encouraged. In all of these challenges, we are called to utilise our ‘creative courage’, our ‘creative faith’, to surmount that which at times seems insurmountable.

Introduction

As the world continues to struggle against the weight of the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic, themes of the promotion of the common good and the protection of the vulnerable continually rise to the surface, even among secular circles. These themes or principles which are fundamental to Catholic Social Doctrine lie at the centre of the fight against this new threat to the wellbeing of humankind – and academics, policymakers, and the mainstream media have often clung to these same principles. *Gaudium et Spes* teaches: ‘Let everyone consider it his sacred obligation to esteem and observe social necessities as belonging to the primary duties of modern man. For the more unified the world becomes, the more plainly do the offices of men extend beyond particular groups and spread by degrees to the whole world. But this development cannot occur unless individual men and their associations cultivate in themselves the moral and social virtues, and promote them in society.’ As a Malta group, we thought it would be appropriate to emphasise and highlight the universal validity of CST principles as has been demonstrated in the struggle against this international threat. Furthermore, as Morabia has pointed out in the American

Journal of Public Health, 'This pandemic shines a spotlight on the ways injustices intersect and channel the brunt of the burden to low-wage earners, those discriminated against, the poor, and the marginalized' (Morabia, 2020). Injustices often plague our societies and our world, and they are especially evident, as Morabia has stated, during this time of crisis. In order to fully defeat this current threat to our wellbeing, humanity is going to have to fight together, in solidarity, taking care of the poor and the vulnerable, respecting the inherent dignity of all, or else no one will fully be free from this plague.

Catholic Social Teaching, Human Dignity, the Common Good, Solidarity, the Preferential Option for the Poor, and Subsidiarity and How They Apply to the Ongoing Pandemic

The principles of the inherent dignity of the human person, solidarity, and the pursuit of the common good are deeply entrenched in Catholic Social Teaching.

The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church states (#145) that: 'Only the recognition of human dignity can make possible the common and personal growth of everyone (cf. Jas 2:1-9).'

John Paul II wrote in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, "On social concern": 'It is above all a question of interdependence, sensed as a system determining relationships in the contemporary world, in its economic, cultural, political and religious elements, and accepted as a moral category. When interdependence becomes recognized in this way, the correlative response as a moral and social attitude, as a "virtue," is solidarity. This then is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.' (John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, "On social concern," #38)

The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (#164) asserts: 'Belonging to everyone and to each person, [the common good] is and remains "common", because it is indivisible and because only together is it possible to attain it, increase it and safeguard its effectiveness, with regard also to the future.' Johnson further elucidates that the "'the common good" is different from "the greater good," which implies that some individuals' well being should be sacrificed for the sake of a larger number.' (Johnson, 2020)

The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (#195) also states: 'The principle of solidarity requires that men and women of our day cultivate a greater awareness that they are debtors of the society of which they have become part. They are debtors because of those conditions that make human existence liveable, and because of the indivisible and indispensable legacy constituted by culture, scientific and technical knowledge, material and immaterial goods and by all that the human

condition has produced. A similar debt must be recognized in the various forms of social interaction, so that humanity's journey will not be interrupted but remain open to present and future generations, all of them called together to share the same gift in solidarity'.

Pope Francis has penned in *Fratelli Tutti*: 'This summons is ever new, yet it is grounded in a fundamental law of our being: we are called to direct society to the pursuit of the common good and, with this purpose in mind, to persevere in consolidating its political and social order, its fabric of relations, its human goals. By his actions, the Good Samaritan showed that "the existence of each and every individual is deeply tied to that of others: life is not simply time that passes; life is a time for interactions"'. (#66) *Fratelli Tutti* also tells us: 'Consumerist individualism has led to great injustice. Other persons come to be viewed simply as obstacles to our own serene existence; we end up treating them as annoyances and we become increasingly aggressive. This is even more the case in times of crisis, catastrophe and hardship, when we are tempted to think in terms of the old saying, "every man for himself". Yet even then, we can choose to cultivate kindness. Those who do so become stars shining in the midst of darkness.' (#222)

These principles of CST all call us to face the pandemic not only as individuals looking out for our own needs, but also with 'kindness' and compassion and with a sense of solidarity, looking out for the needs of those around us and those far away from us.

With regards to the preferential option for the poor, the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church states (#182) that 'The principle of the universal destination of goods requires that the poor, the marginalized and in all cases those whose living conditions interfere with their proper growth should be the focus of particular concern. To this end, the preferential option for the poor should be reaffirmed in all its force. "This is an option, or a special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity, to which the whole tradition of the Church bears witness. It affects the life of each Christian inasmuch as he or she seeks to imitate the life of Christ, but it applies equally to our social responsibilities and hence to our manner of living, and to the logical decisions to be made concerning the ownership and use of goods. Today, furthermore, given the worldwide dimension which the social question has assumed, this love of preference for the poor, and the decisions which it inspires in us, cannot but embrace the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without health care and, above all, those without hope of a better future"'.

This principle especially urges us to look out for those in need, and during the pandemic 'those in need' has increased to include those vulnerable to the health effects of Covid-19 and those affected economically by Covid-19, especially those who are bound to leave their families and country in pursuit of a better life.

With regards to subsidiarity, the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church iterates (#186) that: 'Subsidiarity, understood in the positive sense as economic, institutional or juridical assistance offered to lesser social entities, entails a corresponding series of negative implications that require the State to refrain from anything that would de facto restrict the existential space of the smaller essential cells of society. Their initiative, freedom and responsibility must not be supplanted'.

This principle encourages policymakers to offer assistance to social entities below one's command during the Covid-10 pandemic such as economic support, health leave, and Covid-19 vaccines, but also to offer freedom, control, and self-determination.

Vaccines Crucial in the Fight Against Coronavirus

Vaccines have proven to be instrumental to the swift and successful fight against the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Although controversy has swirled around vaccine safety, ethics, and efficacy concerns, especially through social media, countries which have rolled out efficient Covid-19 vaccination programs have seen considerable improvements in the Covid statistics.

The Catholic Health Association of the United States has offered six useful guidelines based on Catholic Social Teaching to address the issues of safe, equitable, and efficacious distribution of the Covid-19 vaccines (Colina, 2021). These six guidelines are: (1) 'Vaccines should be demonstrably safe and ethically tested', (2) 'Vaccines should be demonstrated to be scientifically effective', (3) 'Vaccine development must respect human dignity', (4) 'Vaccines should be equitably distributed with priority to those at most risk', (5) 'Efforts to develop and distribute effective vaccines should emphasize the principle of Solidarity', (6) 'Consistent with the principle of Subsidiarity, the distribution of effective vaccines should involve local communities' (Colina, 2021). Significantly, these guidelines stress that 'once there is assurance that safe vaccines are available, distribution should first consider populations identified as most at risk for suffering negative health outcomes from COVID-19' (Colina, 2021). This call to especially vaccinate at-risk populations is an international appeal, not a demand of countries with the capacity to do so, and this is increasingly becoming an imperative issue as poorer countries continue to fall behind. In line with the principle of the preferential option for the poor, Pope Francis has repeatedly called for speeding efforts to distribute Covid vaccines 'especially in the poorest countries' (2021h) 'based not on purely economic criteria but on the needs of all, especially of peoples most in need' (Gomes, 2021).

Reflective of the general inequality in the world, vaccine distribution and rollout has been heavily skewed towards the wealthier countries. Given that the wealthier countries have developed many of the existing Covid-19 vaccines and have the funding to pay for them, this disparity makes sense strictly economically at first

glance. When it comes to a worldwide pandemic, however, with the continuing threat of new strains that could evade existing vaccines, this vaccine inequity will rend itself ineffective and counterproductive in the long run. Not only does the heavily skewed distribution of vaccines go against the CST principles of pursuit of the common good, solidarity, and the preferential option for the poor, but it is not ultimately an effective strategy in the fight against this common adversary. UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore and WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus in a joint statement in February 2021 concluded that: 'Of the 128 million vaccine doses administered so far, more than three-quarters of those vaccinations are in just 10 countries that account for 60 percent of global GDP. As of today, almost 130 countries, with 2.5 billion people, are yet to administer a single dose... This self-defeating strategy will cost lives and livelihoods, give the virus further opportunity to mutate and evade vaccines and will undermine a global economic recovery' (Gomes, 2021). On April 27th 145 religious leaders from around the world including Cardinal Peter Turkson issued a joint statement calling for an end to 'vaccine nationalism' and a more equitable distribution of vaccines globally (2021i).

These UNICEF and WHO leaders have called for a vaccine strategy that 'can actually end the pandemic and limit variants' (Gomes, 2021). UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres addressing the World Economic Forum this January called Covid-19 vaccination the 'great moral test before us' labelling vaccines as 'global public goods' (Gomes, 2021). To this end a global initiative called COVAX, the abbreviation of Covid-19 Vaccines Global Access – introduced by the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI), the WHO, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) and others – is aimed at increasing access to Covid-19 vaccines globally. Countries that have already vaccinated their at-risk population are encouraged to share their vaccines with other countries through COVAX.

The UN has also encouraged vaccine manufacturers to equitably allocate the vaccine supply and to transfer their technology to other manufacturers where possible to help increase supply worldwide with the COVID-19 Technology Access Pool (C-TAP) being set up in 2020 as a platform for technology sharing (2021b). The UNICEF and WHO leaders have stressed that 'Covid-19 has shown that our fates are inextricably linked. Whether we win or lose, we will do so together' (Gomes, 2021).

In May WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus called on wealthier countries to divert vaccines from lower risk groups in their countries to higher risk groups in other countries through the COVAX program (2021c). This has also included assertions in August by the WHO that booster shots are not required as some wealthier nations are claiming, but rather that these injections should be diverted to the vulnerable globally who are yet unvaccinated (2021g). The Executive Director of the WHO Health Emergencies Programme Dr. Michael Ryan stated in June that higher global vaccination coverage would be required in order to bring an

end to the pandemic and to stop the threat of variants (Keaten, 2021). WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus urged G7 countries to take the responsibility to provide vaccines for less developed nations demanding hundreds of millions of doses by September (Keaten, 2021). In response, the G7 pledged during its 2021 summit to provide over 1 billion vaccines to poorer nations by 2022, but some observers including the WHO and the IMF say this is not enough (2021e), and some are concerned about the lack of vaccine delivery infrastructure in many countries which the G7 has failed to address (Peel et al., 2021). Kristalina Georgieva, the managing director of the IMF, has stressed that 'This is a moral imperative, but it is a necessity for the economic recovery to stick because we can't have the world split into two tracks without negative consequences' (2021e).

In a further push to quash injustices magnified by the pandemic, Caritas Internationalis has called on G7 countries to provide debt relief to countries that desperately need it to strengthen their health systems in order to fight the pandemic and to jumpstart economic recovery due to the other ruinous side-effects of the pandemic (2021a). Caritas has cited as an example Zambia where '45% of the government's annual budget services the country's massive debt', money it desperately needs to be able to store and distribute vaccines (2021a).

All ethical initiatives and researchers in the Covid-19 vaccine field should also be encouraged and supported. One such example is Filipino Catholic priest Fr. Nicanor Robles Austriaco who is working at MIT in the US to develop a vaccine for the poor (Picon, 2021). Fr. Robles Austriaco is a yeast molecular biologist with a PhD from MIT who is trying to develop a 'yeast vaccine delivery system' that would be 'cheaper and easier' to implement than other vaccines (Picon, 2021). Fr. Robles Austriaco has a heart for the poor and is also inspired by concern for the Philippines saying, 'The poor are beloved of the Lord. We should make COVID-19 vaccines available to them at no cost. This is both the ethical thing to do, because we should provide for those in need, and the scientific thing to do, because the poor often live in densely populated areas that tend to harbour the virus. If we want to eradicate the virus, then we have to vaccinate everyone, especially those most vulnerable to getting sick' (Picon, 2021).

Stabilisation of Economies and Labour Markets

Aside from the obvious global health effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, some of the key sectors most affected by this crisis have been the economic and labour markets as countries have cycled through lockdowns and closures. The ILO has declared in its latest report that 'COVID-19 has resulted in the most severe crisis for the world of work since the Great Depression of the 1930s' (2021f) and that 'five years of progress

towards the eradication of working poverty have been undone' (2021d). Many businesses have had to completely close as the pandemic and its effects have lingered, leaving workers and the self-employed either dependent on state aid or completely helpless, depending on their country and their situation.

According to a 2021 ILO report this destabilisation in the economy and labour market has followed mostly an uneven, inequitable pattern where certain sectors and the young, women, and the medium to low-skilled have been the worse-affected (2021f). Although many anticipate a recovery on the horizon, the ILO anticipates that the recovery will exacerbate inequalities, with some fearing a 'k-shaped recovery' with some parts of the economy being left behind as others benefit. 'Overall, losses in post-support labour income were relatively larger for young workers, women, the self-employed, and low- and medium-skilled workers. Often, job destruction has disproportionately affected low-paid and low-skilled jobs. All this points to the risk of an uneven recovery, leading to still greater inequality in the coming years' (2021f).

The ILO recommends that policymakers attempt to guide a recovery that is 'human-centred' focused on 'employment, income, workers' rights and social dialogue' (2021f). The ILO promotes ongoing income support and investment to keep economies, small businesses, and labour markets from completely floundering, and also promotes the support of 'hard-hit groups' which it defines as 'notably young people, women, the low-paid and low-skilled workers' (2021f) and also informal workers (2021d). The ILO also delineates that the 'worst-affected regions in the first half of 2021 have been Latin America and the Caribbean, Europe and Central Asia, all victims of uneven recovery' (2021d).

Overall, ILO Director-General Guy Ryder calls for 'human-centred policies' 'backed by action and funding' stressing the need for 'decent jobs' (2021d). In this call for 'human-centred' policies, the ILO is promoting the Catholic Social Teaching principles of the dignity inherent in the human person, the pursuit of the common good and solidarity, subsidiarity, and the preferential option for the poor.

Aware of the plight that the pandemic has caused to millions of families around the world, Pope Francis in his recently published book *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future*, appealed for a universal basic income as a means to 'reshape relations in the labour market, guaranteeing people the dignity of refusing employment terms that trap them in poverty'.

Creative Courage

As Pope Francis has inspiringly written in his apostolic letter *Patris Corde* during this Year of St. Joseph, 'In the face of difficulty, we can either give up and walk away, or

somehow engage with it. At times, difficulties bring out resources we did not even think we had... God always finds a way to save us, provided we show the same creative courage as the carpenter of Nazareth, who was able to turn a problem into a possibility by trusting always in divine providence. If at times God seems not to help us, surely this does not mean that we have been abandoned, but instead are being trusted to plan, to be creative, and to find solutions ourselves' (Francis, 2021). We all need to use our 'creative courage' and 'bring out resources' we do not know we have as we help to fight this common foe and its effects. Pope Francis further refers to the story of the friends of the paralytic who lowered him from the roof in order to bring him to Jesus, with Jesus rewarding their 'creative faith' by healing the man (Francis, 2021); in the face of the pandemic we must find ways to bring the victims of the pandemic to Jesus for healing and a fresh start and we must use our 'creative courage' to do so.

Pope Francis also mentions specifically that we must pray for the intercession of Saint Joseph the Worker to help us find a new 'normal' where 'no one is excluded' from access to work after the pandemic, saying that God himself in becoming man, being raised by a working man, did not disdain work (Francis, 2021). Pope Francis urges us to 'review our priorities' as we are faced with the unemployment of so many during the pandemic (Francis, 2021).

Conclusion

According to Fr. Nicanor Robles Austriaco pandemics theologically speaking 'can be both a time of chastisement and a time of renewal' (Picon, 2021). Although we should leave the chastisement to God except where obvious legally liable crimes are involved, we can all be a part of the elements of renewal sparked by the pandemic. Aside from aspects of strictly spiritual renewal, this can be an appropriate time to reinforce the principles of the dignity of the human person, the pursuit of the common good and solidarity, subsidiarity, and the preferential option for the poor espoused by the Church in all of the decisions that must be made as the world tries to return to normalcy. This includes the fair distribution of vaccines especially to poor and vulnerable persons and countries, and an equitable economic and labour market recovery that focuses on 'decent work' for all, especially the most 'hard-hit'. As Pope Francis has said: 'The Lord asks us and, in the midst of our tempest, invites us to reawaken and put into practice that solidarity and hope capable of giving strength, support and meaning to these hours when everything seems to be floundering. The Lord awakens so as to reawaken and revive our Easter faith' (Francis, 2020).

Recommendations:

- a. Further the distribution of Covid-19 vaccines to all countries, especially reaching the most vulnerable, the poorest countries and those hardest hit by the pandemic.
- b. Promote the development of vaccines for the poor that may be cheaper and easier to implement.
- c. Promote an economic and labour market recovery that is equitable and robust, focusing on 'decent jobs', not leaving behind the young, women, and low-skilled workers.
- d. Support small businesses, the most poor and vulnerable workers, and encourage social dialogue.
- e. Encourage investment in all sectors as economies and labour markets reawaken, including investment in training and education of low-skilled workers.
- f. Foster and reinforce the Catholic Social Teaching principles in all areas of life and work, especially in the face of the ongoing crisis – seeing it also as an opportunity for renewal.

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