

Poverty and Development: a Catholic Perspective

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Fraternity and Solidarity:

Without which “it is impossible to build a just society and a solid and lasting peace”¹

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Introduction

I stand before you a true “miserable servant”. This final block was not intended as a “presentation” but, rather, a meditation, offered by a prelate, on what Pope Francis means when he tells us: “Without fraternity it is impossible to build a just society and a solid and lasting peace”.²

That you now have me in front of you may serve as penance -- for both us.

However, as it is the laity who are called upon to implement the gospel in the world, perhaps it is fitting that one of its members makes an attempt to unlock what Francis is telling us.

So, with that in mind, I beg your forbearance.

No Fraternity – No Development or Peace

The Holy Father tells us that without fraternity (which I will use as synonymous with the CST principle of *solidarity*) all our responses to immediate emergencies and efforts towards integral development are “impossible”.

Is this rhetoric – a mere device to make a point? Or, are we being called to something quite different --- and special?

It is exactly here, in grasping this point, that we – whether business people, military leaders or NGO workers – often stumble. We fail to comprehend that fraternity/solidarity is fundamental to the Christian view of social and political organization; that “action” without solidarity can be futile.

Each person is connected to and dependent on all humanity, collectively and individually. As Pope Francis says, “[A]ll men and women are called to live as one, each taking care of the other”.³ We are all interdependent. We are “our brothers’ keeper”.

¹ Pope Francis, *Message for the World Day of Peace*, 1 January 2014, 1

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 2

“In fact, it is quite impossible to separate the response to people’s material and social needs from the fulfillment of the profound desires of their hearts...It is clear that no economic, social or political project can replace that gift of self to another through which charity is expressed...He who does not give God gives too little”.⁴

Fraternity Flows From Faith and Fatherhood

And we should remember that solidarity flows from faith: “Love of neighbor...consists in the very fact that, in God and with God, I love even persons whom I do not like or even know.”⁵ How is this possible? “This can only take place on the basis of an intimate encounter with God.”⁶

This encounter with God as the basis of fraternity is a key point because, “[t]rue brotherhood among people presupposes and demands a transcendent Fatherhood.”⁷

Why? Because: “a fraternity devoid of reference to a common Father as its ultimate foundation is unable to endure.”⁸ “[T]he love of God, once welcomed becomes the most formidable means of transforming our lives and relationships with others, opening us to solidarity and to genuine sharing.”⁹

Note the syllogism the Holy Father creates: without fraternity our efforts at development and alleviating poverty are “impossible”; without God, fraternity cannot “endure; therefore: without God, our efforts to create a better world are futile.

“In the final analysis, if creatures are deprived of their reference to God as a transcendent basis, they risk being at the mercy of the will of man who, as we see, can make an improper use of it.”¹⁰

Catholic Social Theory

This makes it clear that what the Church proposes is not just an alternative sociological, economic or anthropological view of the world, albeit a prescriptive one.

What our Church offers stands in marked contrast to the social theory of Hobbes and Locke. Church teaching assumes we are inherently social – reflecting our Trinitarian God, in whose image we are created, and whose own being is irreducibly social.

By contrast, social contract theory assumes we are inherently autonomous, committed to no higher moral grounding than our own self-interest.

⁴ Benedict XVI, *Message for Lent*, 2006

⁵ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*, 25 December 2005, 18

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Francis, *op. cit.*, *World Day of Peace Message* 2014, 1

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3

¹⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, *Homily at Parish of Saint Anne*, Vatican, 5 February 2006

In fact, I would posit it is in this inherently social versus autonomous anthropology that Church teaching provides such a compelling answer to the multiple problems of modernity, many of which were discussed during this conference.

So, while it is quite useful as a guide for living in and creating a civil society – it should be remembered that Church teaching on poverty and development is, first and foremost, Christian teaching.

This is ‘signature point’ and one that has received a great deal of attention by Popes Benedict and Francis.

Solidarity -- What does it *mean*?

Let’s try to better understand this key precept: *Solidarity*.

Solidarity is not “a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of others. It is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good”.¹¹ It implies a dedication to the poor and disadvantaged through individual actions and collective initiatives to make social, political, and economic structures more just and fraternal.

And, the same duty of solidarity that rests with individuals exists for nations:¹² “Peace and prosperity, in fact, are goods which belong to the whole human race”,¹³ and; “Concern for our neighbor transcends the confines of national communities and has increasingly broadened its horizon to the whole world.”¹⁴

Who is Solidarity ‘for’?

Perhaps, more importantly, we should note that Solidarity is for our own good -- and is a necessary component of our faith. As Pope Benedict explained, “love of neighbor is a path that leads to the encounter with God, and that closing our eyes to our neighbor also blinds us to God.”¹⁵

And later, “Only my readiness to encounter my neighbor and to show him love makes me sensitive to God as well.”¹⁶

That papal statement probably is the best “definition” of Solidarity – That love of God and love of neighbor are, in fact, linked and form one, single commandment.

¹¹ Saint John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 30 December 1987, 38).

¹² Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, 7 December 1965, 86

¹³ Saint John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*, 1 May 1991, 27

¹⁴ Benedict XVI, op. cit., *Deus Caritas Est*, 30

¹⁵ Ibid., 16

¹⁶ Ibid., 18

Solidarity is the 'Solution'

Our Church holds that the cause of the issues that plague man-kind, such as underdevelopment (of all kinds: consumerism, famine, greed, poverty), are found “first of all, in the will, which often neglects the duties of solidarity.”¹⁷ Indeed, “In the last analysis, they are to be found in a current self-centeredness and materialistic way of thinking...”¹⁸

*“The development of peoples depends, above all, on a recognition that the human race is a single family working together in true communion, not simply a group of subjects who happen to live side by side.”*¹⁹

Radical

I’m not sure we have adequately gotten across how radical the principle of solidarity/fraternity really is.

At the Last Supper Jesus said: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.”²⁰

This is a much more radical charge because how does God love us? Unremittingly.

It is no longer love our neighbor as our self but, rather, love our neighbor as God loves us. As Pope Francis says, “What is needed is the willingness to “lose ourselves” for the sake of others”.²¹

Indeed, “[t]ruth and justice must stand above my comfort and physical wellbeing or else my life itself becomes a lie.”²² Think about that for a moment.....If the principles we are describing do not stand above our own comfort – let alone our physical wellbeing – we are told that our life becomes a “lie”!

And a bit later Pope Benedict said, “Let us say it once again: The capacity to suffer for the sake of the truth is the measure of humanity”²³ while Pope Francis says: “I distrust a charity that costs nothing and does not hurt.”²⁴

This also makes it clear that solidarity and fraternity are not ideological or political principles. They are Catholic principles -- based on and emanating from faith.

Absent that, it is not the fraternity of Church teaching.

¹⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas In Veritate*, 29 June 2009, 19

¹⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, *Address to Vatican Diplomatic Corps*, 11 January 2010

¹⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, op. cit., *Caritas In Veritate*, 53

²⁰ John 13:34

²¹ Francis, op. cit., *World Day of Peace Message* 2014, 4

²² Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Spe Salvi*, 30 November 2007, 38

²³ *Ibid.*, 39

²⁴ Pope Francis, *Message for Lent - 2014*, 2

Solidarity – A Path to God

Perhaps even more importantly, Pope Benedict -- and this is very deep insight -- points out that “solidarity has the potential to place men and women on the path to discovering their supernatural destiny.”²⁵

What an amazing insight. Catholic social teaching offers not only a prescription for “living our lives together” in society but, simultaneously, points us to God.

What must I do? Much!

I have begged the question: “What must I, as a lay person, do?”

As we have heard throughout this conference, “[t]he decisions which create a human environment can give rise to specific structures of sin which impede the full realization of those who are in any way oppressed by them”,²⁶ be they children addicted to internet porn or the residents of a 4th world country condemned to poverty and violence.

There are structures of society that need to be destroyed. There are structures that need to be built. As Saint John Paul II said, “[t]o destroy structures and replace them with more authentic forms of living in community is a task which demands courage and patience.”²⁷

This is what CAPP’s efforts in the USA are about: to help lay Catholic leaders form their consciences on Church teaching so they may change their own lives first, and then, change the world. Church Teaching is not a theory, it is “above all else a basis and a motivation for action.”²⁸

Lay Catholic leaders are called to implement Church teachings in the world.

As Benedict asked during his visit to Washington: “Is it consistent to profess our beliefs in church on Sunday, and then during the week to promote business practices or medical procedures contrary to those beliefs? Is it consistent for practicing Catholics to ignore or exploit the poor and the marginalized, to promote sexual behavior contrary to Catholic moral teaching, or to adopt positions that contradict the right to life of every human being from conception to natural death? Any tendency to treat religion as a private matter must be resisted. Only when their faith permeates every aspect of their lives do Christians become truly open to the transforming power of the Gospel.”²⁹

²⁵ Benedict XVI, *Address to the 14th Pontifical Council on Social Sciences*, May 2008

²⁶ Saint John Paul II, op. cit., *Centesimus Annus*, 38

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Saint John Paul II, op. cit., *Centesimus Annus*, 57

²⁹ Benedict XVI, *Celebration of Vespers and Meeting With the Bishops of the United States of America*, National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., 16 April 2008

Our challenge is to develop a strong, committed group of lay women and men, rich in faith and theologically prepared to be present in public life to explain, develop and implement Catholic Social Teaching.

We are “faced with the challenge of recapturing the Catholic vision of reality and presenting it, in an engaging and imaginative way.”³⁰

Conclusion

In a moving and in hind sight last will and testament to the lay organization he founded to help evangelize the world, Saint John Paul II told CAPP just four months before his death:

“I therefore urge the Members to spare no effort to ensure that the Foundation seeks to pursue these goals”³¹

I propose to you that is our common goal.

³⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, *Response to questions from US Bishops*, 16 April 08

³¹ Saint John Paul II, *Address to the Members of Centesimus Annus – Pro Pontifice*, 4 December 2004