How to make use of Catholic Social Teaching

Bruce Duncan CSsR

I think it fair to say that there is a lot of pious nodding towards social justice in some Catholic circles, especially since Catholic social teaching has been so prominent in official papal statements and activity. Yet this social teaching is often not well integrated into the lives and thinking of many Catholics. We do well with practical, hands-on projects, with our health care, welfare work and education especially, but often perform poorly in debate over the larger issues facing society, and in attempts to inculcate a social justice perspective in the public forum. Yet it is not good enough to let this social teaching sit on a shelf gathering dust, or worse, to think that these ideas are not absolutely integral to the Christian mission today.

These social documents have the potential to fire us with visions of a better world, and inspire us to undertake the arduous task of pursuing their implications through the tangle of urgent social issues facing us. We need to be smart in our exploring of how to live the Gospel message today, and how Christian values should be embodied in our contemporary world. Our Christian vocation today, as perhaps never before in history, is to wrestle earnestly with Gospel values and translate them into practical outcomes to improve human wellbeing for everyone, especially those most at risk.

The first thing to note about Church social teaching is that it emerges as responses to specific social, economic or political developments, and so much depends on one’s interpretation of changing contexts. While the basic moral principles may be unchanging, as in protecting human wellbeing, the ways to do this will vary greatly in different situations.

Interpretations of the social teaching do not claim to belong to the core tradition of faith. They are not like the fundamental doctrines of faith, as in the doctrine of the Incarnation, the Trinity, or the Resurrection. These doctrines are intimately bound up with essential aspects of Christian belief. Social teachings, on the other hand, are based on prudential judgments about promoting human wellbeing within various social and cultural contexts, and the Church cannot automatically demand assent even though it may have definite views, as in Pope John Paul II’s opposition to the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

* Dr Bruce Duncan has lectured in history and social ethics at Yarra Theological Union at Box Hill since 1986. He is one of the founders of Social Policy Connections and Director of the Yarra Institute for Religion and Social Policy.
This is because others may interpret the debates and moral issues involved in the Iraq war differently, and the Church generally *has also to leave room for people to exercise their own conscience decisions* about such matters.

It is conceivable, for instance, that Church officials in Rome may not be well informed about say, the situation in East Timor under Indonesian rule, or that they have been deceived, or that they do not have adequate sources of information, or that Rome officials or local Church leaders are constrained from making a public response. There are judgments to be made about when to speak, how much to say, and avoiding repercussions against other innocent parties. Needless to say, there may be occasions when Church officials need to speak strongly and clearly, as instanced with Archbishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador, who paid the ultimate price.

**The second thing** to note is that the *social teaching has a history as a body of thought*, particularly as reflected in the papal encyclicals. The modern social encyclicals begin with Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* in 1891, in response to the new industrial issues in Europe. The encyclical was very important for validating Catholic social movements in defence of the rights of workers and the need to reform industrial processes. But it came late in the day, 43 years after Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*.1

To put *Rerum Novarum* in context, we need to understand the reactionary political and social thinking of various authorities in Rome throughout much of the 19th century, and particularly under Pope Pius IX. Despite important social reform movements involving Catholic thinkers and activists during the 19th century, many of them had to battle reactionary or conservative ideas among other Catholics and in Rome. It is not fanciful to consider if the history of Europe and the world would have been different had Catholics in France and Rome supported the social reforms espoused by Frederick Ozanam and his colleagues, for instance, in the mid-19th century. Ozanam is revered today because of his founding of the St Vincent de Paul Society, but we must not forget that he was also an outspoken intellectual and writer, one of the leading advocates of social reform and a political activist as well.

Catholic social reform movements existed in various countries of Europe, and particularly in Germany with Bishop Ketteler and the Centre Party. Eventually Leo XIII was able to endorse many of their efforts, but even the elderly Leo was not able to embrace fully the new opportunities opening up in liberal democracy.

**The third point** to note follows on: that the *social teaching develops not in a consistent flow of development, but in fits and starts, with moves forward and sometimes reverses*. With hindsight we can clearly see that there has been significant progress, in the last half century especially; at other times more conservative or even reactionary groups became dominant in the Vatican and elsewhere,

---

1 I detailed the lead-up to *Rerum Novarum* in my book, *The Church’s Social Teaching: from Rerum Novarum to 1931* (CollinsDove, 1991). It is out of print, but can be found online on my homepage at http://www.frbruceduncan.com/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=77&Itemid=29
and took the papacy backwards, notably under St Pius X with the anti-Modernist campaigns early in the 20th century and which had a severe negative impact on Catholic social movements.

In other words, while there are doctrinal elements in the social encyclicals, they must also be interpreted, with due deference undoubtedly, as political documents, against the background of competing groups and issues. The encyclicals do not drop out of the heavens, but result from wider conversations and debates in the Church and beyond. They are the best that various church leaders can produce at particular times. It matters who writes them and why, who is consulted and what is the quality of the research and analysis on which they are based. Moreover the process of interpreting an encyclical is very important in extracting what is of lasting value from the documents.

In short, social encyclicals can be mistaken on specific issues, and it may then be the responsibility of others, including lay men and women, with greater knowledge or insight to try to have errors corrected. Many of our great social Catholic social thinkers had to face strong opposition from other Catholics and church leaders at times, but eventually they were able to change official positions and open up new directions. One can name numerous Catholic thinkers who were regarded as dangerous innovators but whose thinking was endorsed at the Second Vatican Council: Jacques Maritain, Ives Congar, John Courtney Murray, Helder Camara etc.

Much depends of course on the personality and convictions of the pope or of key officials at the time, as well as the circumstances. Pope Pius XI, for instance, was a vigorous and forceful man who developed a response to the Depression in his 1931 encyclical, Quadragesimo Anno. There is much of value still in this document, particularly its critique of the capitalism of the time, though his condemnation of even mild forms of socialism was much too sweeping and ham-fisted, and damaged the efforts of Catholic social movements. In English-speaking countries, including Australia, the bishops had to defend their labour parties against the charge that they had been condemned by the papacy.

It was John XXIII who brought the encyclical tradition into renewed engagement with contemporary issues in a magnificently cogent way, both in his 1961 Mater et Magistra, and Pacem in Terris in 1963. These documents, and the body of commentary around them, expanded the foundations of papal thinking, highlighting universal moral values and how they bore on economic development and world peace especially.

Fourthly, the encyclicals presuppose lively debate and social activism among Catholic and other concerned people. Encyclicals sometimes are written to adjudicate between competing Catholic groups, as Quadragesimo Anno and Rerum Novarum both did. But in doing so, they attempt to give a clearer direction that will help the social activists move constructively with wider Catholic moral and organisational support.

In other words, the groundwork must first be done by lay people themselves, working to improve human wellbeing, and taking an active role in shaping public policy and opinion. This work of social transformation is primarily the vocation of lay people with all the expertise they can bring to these tasks. In this they generally act independently of the Church and on their own initiative, but with the
support of Church personnel and teaching, and perhaps of training and formation in Church organisations, like the Young Christian Workers or the Catholic Worker movement for instance.

We have been especially fortunate with the popes of the late 20th century, and notably John XXIII, Paul VI and John Paul II, that they have been learned men who understood the social debates and were determined to prioritise their encouragement for Catholic social endeavour. Paul VI’s social documents, and especially Development of Peoples, are outstanding. As a university chaplain and supporter of Christian Democrat and student leaders during the Fascist period, Paul was very alert to the challenges and difficulties of the Church supporting movements of social and political reform. He wished to give Catholic activists solid spiritual and intellectual formation, and then leave the social and political decision-making to them, acting on the inspiration of the Gospel but on their own initiative. It still remained the role of the Church to address social issues from a moral perspective, and hence act as a guide or critic if need be, but not claiming to control public policy.

Following John XXIII, Pope Paul emphasised the right of everyone to participate in appropriate ways in decision-making that affected their lives. This has turned out to be problematical in practice, as we know, and the Church is still struggling to put this into practice in its own structures.

John Paul II was also a forceful advocate for social improvement, and wrote many significant social documents and encyclicals. His speeches in many countries often confronted unjust social and political systems, and he played a key role in the undermining of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe. Less well known are his many hundreds of speeches in developing countries, including in the Philippines, in Latin America and in Africa, where he was a consistent advocate of human rights and social justice. He was also, especially in Centesimus Annus in 1991, a strong critic of liberal capitalism, although this was obscured by the activity of some of the US Catholic neo-conservative writers, Michael Novak, Richard John Neuhaus and George Weigel.

Coming from a tightly cohesive Church in Poland, John Paul supported democratic reform and political participation but was alarmed by dissent within the Church and a loosening of religious adherence after the fall of communism. This affected his response to the liberation theology movements in Latin America and elsewhere. He was very strong in his support for liberation theology in the struggle for social justice and human rights, but he rejected firmly any suggestion of Marxist ideology being incorporated into Catholic movements despite his earlier writings noting positive elements in Marxism. The first Instruction on Liberation Theology in 1984 was exaggerated and clumsy, and apparently written for Cardinal Ratzinger; but to restore more balance on this controversial issue John Paul II directed that a second instruction be prepared, which was issued in 1986.
More difficult to explain are the appointments in Latin America to key clerical positions of leading opponents of liberation theology. The successor of Archbishop Helder Camara in Recife, for instance, systematically demolished Camara’s social initiatives and seminary system. I have yet to see a convincing explanation for the inconsistencies in the debates over liberation theology.

Pope Benedict XVI came to the papacy not well experienced in developing the Church’s social teaching, despite his involvement in the liberation theology disputes and some occasional critiques of capitalism. As head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he was mainly concerned with other doctrinal areas. His first social encyclical in late 2005, Deus Caritas Est, was very well received though it concentrated on the charitable works of the Church, not on social justice. The Vatican nevertheless continued its advocacy on behalf of peace, sustainable development and human rights in international forums, and notably in the World Day of Peace statements which Benedict continued.

Benedict’s major social justice encyclical, Caritas in Veritate, appeared in 2009 as a dense 30,000-word treatise which is in parts impenetrable to a general reader. Its major contribution was to highlight the significance of Pope Paul’s Development of Peoples, as having the landmark significance for our age that Rerum Novarum had for earlier generations (par. 8). Hence the Pope focused attention on the global issues today, especially the issues of hunger, poverty and development, and included also environmental sustainability. Quite critically, Benedict strongly reaffirmed the Church’s duty to engage in social advocacy and promote social justice as an essential part of its mission.

However, as I have detailed in “The puzzle of Caritas in Veritate” in the Australian Journal of Mission Studies, many people lamented that the document did not develop further its critique of the global financial crisis, or of liberal capitalism as found in Development of Peoples.

Despite being two years overdue, there does not seem to have been much consultation about the encyclical, even among the bishops. Though Caritas in Veritate mentions many of the major issues in economic and social development, curiously it does not mention the international campaign of the UN Millennium Development Goals, though the Vatican has in other forums supported them strongly. And on the population issue, it seems to backtrack on earlier documents, especially of Pope Paul VI.

In short, it is a difficult document to work with, unlike Development of Peoples which generated huge

---

momentum among Catholic social movements and more broadly. Nevertheless, there are many valuable elements in *Caritas in Veritate*, and it will be up to Catholic advocates to extract value from them and continue the agitation for more participation in the writing of future documents.

In summary, there is no easy way to make best use of Catholic social teaching or that of other churches. It requires a good understanding of the tradition of teaching, while recognising its limitations as well as its values, skill in interpreting it, expertise in seeing how it may help in current circumstances, and political nous to determine how and when the social teaching may be helpful in practice. ♦