

# Life Before *The Common Good*

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## I. Introduction

Simplifications are dangerous at the best of times and the same may be said of applications of general principle to particular circumstance. In this vein it seems appropriate to offer some thoughts on the recent document of the Episcopal Conference of England and Wales entitled *The Common Good*<sup>2</sup>. A document which purports to offer a moral diagnosis on a specific socio-economic context is, like a surgeon, heavily dependent on antecedent data in arriving at that diagnosis and thence at a remedy for ills detected. In this short study we cannot hope to conflate the entire *corpus* of Catholic Social Teaching into a few words but it may be helpful to focus on the diagnostic aspects of the recent document of the Conference, viewing it as essentially applicative of previous interventions of the Roman magisterium, and thus be able to discern some possible avenues of interpretation for the future.

## II. The Catholic Social Contribution

Diagnosing the problem, especially with regard to socio-economic conditions, must offer the ecclesiastical spectator the most challenging of tasks, given the shifting and undulating nature of the economic landscape. The historio-genesis of the first official contribution to the problem, Leo XIII's *Rerum novarum*, bears this out, and yet there are a number of observations from that document which would resonate well with even the most sceptical of economic analyses of our time. Thus Leo XIII observed:

A tiny group of extravagantly rich men have been able to lay upon the great multitude of unpropertied workers a yoke that is little better than that of slavery itself (RN 2).

This astute observation of the encyclical marked *Rerum novarum* out as the product of acute powers of observation and lifted it above criticism that it amounted to ideology super-imposed on the Gospel by ecclesiastics who had allowed social democratic theory a foot in their ecclesiological doors. Its language is accessible to all but modernist economists who adopt a mechanistic view of socio-economic interrelationships:

By nature, the right of the unpropertied to citizenship is equal to that of the wealthy owners of the means of production, for they through their families are among the true and living parts which go to form the body of the State (RN 34).

This extract would find a favourable resonance among post-modernists who would see it as a prophetic signal to move from a determinist or mechanist paradigm of the economy to a bionomic one. The application of biological images to economic realities, coming easily from obvious scriptural provenances, is a useful optic for viewing the complex set of relationships which pervade the economy. The key components are producer-consumer—when the producer meets the consumer he offers certain goods and services in return for some gain. The traditional formula adopted by economists to describe this equation was C-M-C though Keynes more realistically amended it to M-C-M, where C is commodity and M is exchange value or money<sup>3</sup>. So what kind of *force* does this equation make of the consumer-producer relationship? This is not a market force as such, this is a relationship which is governed by that key factor of the post-modern economy, so elegantly described in *Rerum novarum*, namely *incentive*. Thus in his critique of state ownership of the means of production, or real socialism, Leo XIII identified its essential economic weakness in the denial of a place in the economy to incentive:

All incentives for individuals to exercise their ingenuity and skill would be removed and the very founts of wealth dry up. The dream of equality would become the reality of equal want and degradation for all (RN 12).

In this extract, the results of real socialism are glimpsed many years down the line. Socialism in fact, working itself out in macro-economic plans, led to a concept of the good which was state-devised and state-regulated. We can see today, with the benefit of hindsight, that the identification of the public good with collectivism effectively led to wholesale dehumanisation. The corrective to socialism as a philosophical system lies in a reaffirmation of the dignity of the individual and as an economic system lies in a renewed concept of the public good. The public good can only be equated with the sum of individual flourishing—anything else is corrupting.

Subsequent to *Rerum novarum*, Pius XI produced *Quadragesimo Anno* which took up the tools of the Church's intuition that the economy was not a moral free zone and applied them to the new circumstances as they then presented themselves, particularly with regard to the international character of capital transfer:

The concentration of power and might, the characteristic mark, as it were, of contemporary economic life, is the fruit that the unlimited freedom of struggle among competitors has of its own nature produced, and which lets only the strongest survive, and this is often the same as saying, those who fight the most violently, those who give least heed to their consciences (QA 107).

This adroit analysis of one of the more destructive features of unbridled capitalism amounts to the most enduring critique of deregulated economies. While it cannot be doubted that state ownership of the means of production leads to the strangulation of the sources of wealth-creation and a sort of ossification of the consumer-producer relationship, a deregulated economy where consumers are unprotected from the pursuit of profit and from the market's inherent tendencies toward cartel and monopoly clearly poses just as great a threat to the essential component in the marketplace—the human being. For this reason John Paul II, in his encyclical *Centesimus annus* developed a philosophical critique of capitalism:

There are many human needs that find no place in the market. It is a strict duty of justice and truth not to allow fundamental human needs to remain unsatisfied (CA 34).

This critique rests on the Pope's own project, namely the development of an expansionist anthropology against the reductionist projects of market capitalism and real socialism:

In his desire to have and to enjoy rather than to be and to grow, man consumes the resources of the earth and his own life in an excessive and disordered way. At the root of the senseless destruction of the natural environment lies an anthropological error, which unfortunately is widespread in our day. Man, who discovers his capacity to transform and in a certain sense create the world through his own work, forgets that this is always based on God's prior and original gift of the things that are (CA 37).

What then is suggested is an authentic *human ecology*, i.e. a theology of the environment which sets mankind at the heart of the socio-economic world. In this context the right to life becomes a necessary prerequisite for the guarantee of other rights such that threats to this right must be regarded as an attack on the human person. To initiate a discourse about other socio-economic rights while ignoring this right, therefore, is at best an exercise in the art of selective blindness, and at worst an exercise in the art of dissembling. Some prioritisation of rights according to a consistent ethic of the human person then becomes an urgent imperative before one can open a discourse about the protection of socio-economic rights in a given society. Indeed only when the right to life is recognised as a social right, involving three human persons, can one establish a solid ethical platform for a hierarchy of rights:

The first and fundamental structure for "human ecology" is the family, in which man receives his first formative ideas about truth and goodness, and learns what it means to love and be loved, and thus what it actually means to be a person ... It is necessary to go back to seeing the family as the sanctuary of life (CA 39).

As the family constitutes the primary unit of the sets of relationships which make up the socio-economic equation then its priorities must be protected in any economic policy since the stability of the economic relationship, producer-consumer, is surely built on the stability of the fundamental complexus of relationships in society. Moreover increasingly as post-modern economists move away from mechanistic to bionomic models of the economy the family constitutes the stable referent for such a model, built as it is on a convergence of the biological and the social. In this scenario, however, *Centesimus annus* is not advocating the creation of new collectivism. Indeed it arrives at a qualified endorsement of the free economy:

Can it be said, after the failure of Communism, that capitalism is the victorious social system, and that capitalism should be the goal of the countries now making efforts to rebuild their economy and society? If by capitalism is meant an economic system which recognises the fundamental and positive value of business, the market, private property and the resulting responsibility for the means of production, as well as free human creativity in the economic sector, then the answer is certainly in the affirmative though it would be more appropriate to speak of a business economy, market economy, or simply a free economy (CA 42).

The key expression in this passage is *free human creativity* for it is human beings that create, sustain and ultimately modify economies. Economic policies need to respect this creative drive in the human person. This said, such a freedom cannot be considered an absolute, since it requires, for its coherent functioning in favour of the public good, some regulation that is fundamentally ethical. No entrepreneur is legitimated to create if his product does not respect the natural moral order:

If by capitalism is meant a system in which freedom in the economic sector is not circumscribed within a strong juridical framework which places it at the service of human freedom in its totality, and which sees it as a particular aspect of that freedom, the core of which is ethical and religious, then the reply is certainly negative (CA 42).

Here we touch on the negative side of the Catholic contribution to the socio-economic world, but in as sense, the interventions of magisterium must necessarily adopt something of a *via negativa*, since it does not pertain to ecclesiastical pastors to positively propose specific models of the economy as such a function lies outside their competence:

The Church has no models to present: models that are real and truly effective can only arise within the framework of different historical situations, through the efforts of all those who responsibly confront concrete problems in all their social, economic and cultural aspects as these interact with one another (CA 43)

There is also the question of application. Given the very general nature of papal social teaching since *ex ipsa natura* it is orientated toward a universal audience, local situations will mean local applications. In this light it seems fair that as England has been at the forefront of the development of economic theory and experiment since 1979, then its pastors should have something to say to the technicians of development and to the guinea pigs who have to live with the effects of their experiments. The episcopal statement, *The Common Good*, amounts to a courageous attempt to introduce an ethical component into the laboratory. It may not change what is in the petri-dish but it can certainly affect the conclusions which the technicians would draw from their tests and the models which they subsequently apply to society.

### III. The Common Good.

In calling their contribution, *The Common Good*, the bishops of England and Wales have decided to set it within a specific theological framework (CG 69). The concept of the common good is one of the main buttresses of the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas on authority, law and the exercise of virtue (ST 96, 3, ad 3). The key thing to remember about Aquinas' teaching on the common good is the distinction he makes between the act of a virtue and the virtue itself. The one may be the subject of a human law, the other not so; thus a legislature may order sobriety while driving or while acting in public but not sobriety for its own sake. The principle is that human law can only order the external act not the disposition. Similarly the bishops set forth the concept of the common good as a central one for regulating external conduct as expressed in Catholic Social Teaching but are loath to offer a definition, except that its meaning is close to the traditional term *common weal*. The problem with the concept is that it is a prey to misunderstanding. It assumes that society has arrived at a consensus as to what the good is that is common, that society has arrived at a consensus as to its values, and that these values are as transparent and as accessible as Descartes' *clear and distinct ideas*. Without doubt such a consensus does not exist in Britain. Values presuppose goods which they enshrine but here we touch on one of the central problems of the document—its invocation of *common values* in the face of the conflicting theories as to what consists in the good. In the diagnostic part of the document (CG 33-40) an attempt is made to address a question which in another historical epoch has posed some difficulties for the Church, that of democracy and human rights, and the bishops conclude:

- Democracy is not a self-sufficient moral system. Democracy, if it is to be healthy, requires more than universal suffrage: it requires the presence of a system of common values (CG 34).

This statement echoes another according to which democracy

presupposes high ethical dispositions in order for it to flourish<sup>4</sup>. Such dispositions the bishops would like to see constellate around the idea of the common good. This way the tyranny of the majority is avoided and the greatest good of the greatest number is edged a little closer to the sphere of the possible:

Every member of the community has a duty to the common good in order that the rights of others can be satisfied and their freedoms respected (CG 37).

Here the document makes its first foray into controversy for it alleges that there is an ideology abroad which would have the good of the many subverted to the interests of the few who are wealthy<sup>5</sup>. The more acceptable face of this ideology is found in the assertion that the benefits of wealth creation by the few will inevitably trickle down to the many, as was apparently propounded by Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776). In fairness to context, it must be said that Smith was writing against the background of mercantilism and was seeking to liberate the consumer from an oppressive system. Adapting the only theory of the world which was then intellectually respectable, in Newton's model of discoverable laws of the universe, he naturally developed a theory that today would appear to labour from an exaggerated optimism in the merits of unrestrained market forces. His intent, however, was to free the individual not enslave him. The bishops rightly point out that a belief in the automatic beneficence of market forces is rejected by Catholic Social Teaching and add that even Smith had not envisaged that markets would operate in a value-free society but had assumed that individual consumer choices would be guided by moral considerations, not least the demands of justice (CG 77).

In a sense the episcopal comment on one of the founding fathers of capitalism amounts to a very ambitious attempt to grapple with the philosophical underpinnings of modern economics. Much of the neo-classical economics which we have inherited today owes just as much to David Hume whose theory of the fact-value gap has had profound ramifications for discourse about the ethics of the marketplace. The distinction effectively eliminated metaphysics from respectable philosophical enquiry, dissolved substance and nature as essential categories of the same, and separated ethics from reason, attaching the former to the realm of mere sentiment. Thomas Gradgrind's homily on *fact vs fancy* in Dickens' *Hard Times* is very much the social articulation of Hume's distinction. The divorce of modern economics from ethics is still regarded today as something of a truism. This is the philosophical legacy with which we have to deal, evidenced in the subjection of "human resources" to exchange value, and much of it will govern our reception of the episcopal document, this even before we have bought a copy and turned its introductory pages. Consequently, the idea of a

value-free society is not altogether the reality which most consumers experience—there can never be a value free society, but what the bishops are perhaps articulating is the fact that the consensus that formerly existed about ethical choices no longer exists. We now live in a society where different value-systems compete with one another presided over by a political and economic establishment that does not wish to engage in a serious debate about determining which value system is to be preferred among others<sup>6</sup>. Such a determination is essentially ideological and we are historically inclined to pragmatism. It is no surprise then that in Britain we find ourselves trying to grapple with the shards of competing value systems some of which are mutually contradictory. While pluralism then is a feature of ethical and religious life in the nation, economic theoreticians oscillate between modernism and post-modernism in their struggle to deal with economic innovation that is technology-led rather than labour-friendly. It seems pragmatism must triumph over mere ideology particularly where ideology assumes something which is no longer constant or secure, namely the stability of wealth-creation. Britain has a stall on the global market and is too busy selling its product and its labour force to foreign investment to worry over higher ethical considerations. This then would appear to be the picture we are in fact addressing as we approach the end of the millennium. As Scott Meikle ably puts it:

Since economics is the theory of the operations of market economy, and since market economy is the systematic pursuit of exchange value (or money), in which use value is merely a means, it cannot in principle have any connection with ethics<sup>7</sup>.

The displacement of economics from ethics, the bishops argue, is a feature of a system that has ceased to be a technical method for achieving wealth and instead has become something of a world view (CG 79). This is how they explain one of the principal features of British life, namely a newfound cynicism as regards the possibility of unselfish action and a loss of faith in the motives of the politician and the public servant (CG 80). They pose the question:

Those who advocate unlimited free-market capitalism and at the same time lament the decline in public and private morality, to which the encouragement of selfishness is a prime contributing factor, must ask themselves whether the messages they are sending are in fact mutually contradictory (CG 80).

The charge of selfishness would appear rather lame if we did not keep in mind that it is the basis of a general critique of the *effects* of the free market world view which tends to reduce the person to the status of “an isolated economic agent whose life has meaning only as a consumer” (CG 84). Those most likely to suffer from such an ideology are those that

do not have the means to arrive at self-sufficiency, namely the poor, the dependent, the vulnerable, the powerless and the defenceless. Similarly if our society is defined in terms of maximising one's choices and choice is the reward of monetary status then clearly the less well-off will suffer a contracting circle of possibilities—a situation which itself will breed crime as the last desperate act of those who experience the determinisms of such a decreasing set of choices in a society which will accord them no dignity without the wherewithal for maximising their options<sup>8</sup>.

In the section entitled *The World of Work* the bishops specify a number of rights that are guaranteed in Catholic Social Teaching, namely, the right to decent work, to just wages, to security of employment, to adequate rest and holidays, to limitation of hours of work, to health and safety protection, to non-discrimination, to form and join trades unions, and, as a last resort, to go on strike (CG 91). These rights of course need to be understood against the backdrop of their evolution in the different stages of the development of the Catholic Social Response. What constitute the substantive rights which are the focus of that teaching and what may be considered the historical packaging in which those rights are expressed remains to be clarified. Certainly the right to join a trades union is an expression of the fundamental right to associate. Whether this may mean the right to join *any* trades union, particularly say one which in practice may be working against the common good, is another matter<sup>9</sup>. Similarly the judgment to go on strike is not thereby guaranteed to be a right judgment just because a trades union committee invokes it. Clearly concrete determinations as to the rightness and wrongness of such actions are best left, as in the Catholic moral tradition, to those involved to decide guided as they must be by the virtue of prudence. All the bishops can do is to interpret the doctrinal deposit ... it is left to those involved in the world of work to decide on the specifics. The list above then can be considered as a non-taxative and essentially abstract list of those rights which are traditionally deduced from the substantive *corpus* of Catholic social doctrine<sup>10</sup>.

In examining the world of work the document evinces a need in the current situation for some state intervention in order to protect given rights from the encroachments of unscrupulous merchants of capital who may be guided by the principle *divide and conquer*. This has obvious ramifications for trades union membership and wage bargaining, but it may also apply to working relationships that are increasingly characterised by short-term and part-time contracts of employment. Thus where contracts are made between unequal parties, as indeed seems to be so much the case in the present climate, the bishops suggest that this amounts to a recipe for "structural injustice." The concept of "structural injustice" has a pedigree of its own, not least in the evolution of the concept of "structural sin" that appears in Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (SRS 36.1). The expression is guarded though and is not to be interpreted as a papal or episcopal mandate for its very



frequent application to any or all institutions as was sometimes the case in the writings of some liberation theologians of the Sixties and Seventies. In the area of the world of work, perhaps the most controversial aspect of the document appears in its seeming endorsement of a much-vaunted concern of the trades union movement, the idea of a minimum wage. The paragraph in question is a little more nuanced than this and bears reproducing here:

Employers who pay only the level of wage that the labour market demands, however low, are avoiding their moral responsibilities for the welfare of their employees. Where wages fall below the level necessary for maintaining an appropriate standard of living, the state may step in. Nevertheless Catholic Social Teaching, in the light of the principle of subsidiarity, does not regard State welfare provision as a desirable substitute for payment of a just wage. Nor is this an acceptable excuse for employers to pay inadequate wages, thereby adding a further burden to the taxpayer (CG 98).

It is then tied to the idea of a *just wage*, which in the Catholic tradition, amounts to an equitable remuneration of work such that an adult may support himself or herself and dependents. It could be argued that the drive to maximise profits and diminish labour costs, while making the nation's labour force attractive to foreign investment, has contributed to the lack of a "feel-good" that is so necessary a component of consumer-led economies. The very measures designed to make the work-force palatable may in fact be contributing to that lack of confidence which paralyses market economies. Consumers may not spend if they feel that their livelihoods are under threat in the long term, and this is surely one effect of short-term contracts and part-time employment. This lack of long term security engendered by current conditions in the work-place also touches other sets of relationships beyond the economic one, since decisions concerning partnerships and families in practice will often depend on, even if not generated by, economic considerations.

Finally perhaps one of the most interesting analyses of the document appears in the section on *Ownership* and *Property* in which the complex network of interrelationships involved in economic planning suggests that some ethical responsibility is called for along the lines of the biblical injunction to be one's brother's keeper:

Any economic enterprise has a range of "stakeholders": shareholders, suppliers, managers, workers, consumers, the local community, even the natural environment. None of these interests should prevail to the extent that it excludes the interests of the others. A manager in one enterprise may be the consumer of the products of another, the neighbour of a third, the supplier of a fourth, a shareholder in a fifth; and may subsequently become a redundant

ex-employee, the victim of the very policies that as a manager he or she may have helped to create (CG 111).

Clearly the marketplace too is susceptible to the principle *qui gladio vivit gladio morietur*, especially one which involves a constantly shifting kaleidoscope of roles in which one is not always the principal. The consequence of exploitation in one area will almost certainly be felt in another. In this context the document deplores the “dumping of human social capital” that often occurs in company “downsizing” due to takeovers, closures and mergers. This is a prevalent cause of social injustice.

#### IV. Conclusion

The negative tone of many aspects of the document *The Common Good* is a feature shared by traditional interventions of central and local expressions of the magisterium which would prefer to operate according to a kind of *via negativa*, precisely in order to limit the scope of its project and to avoid proposing positive remedies that must needs date in the Heraclitean flux that is the contemporary market-place. In any case, if we were to take the interventions of popes in temporal matters as an example, historically justified on the grounds of *ratio peccati*, we would note a similar guarded methodology, in part an expression of the relative rarity of the need for ecclesiastical intervention, in part an inevitable application of the Catholic insistence that the economy cannot be declared an ethics free zone. The document can be welcomed, however, as a helpful foil for diagnostic purposes without prejudicing the individual’s right to proffer his or her own vote for a particular party during the forthcoming general election. In the last analysis it amounts to the first serious attempt by the bishops of the country to get to grips with the socio-economic experiments which have characterised British society now for almost two decades. The spectator may not agree as to its specifics but its general lines seem to be on target. If there is some consolation then that we as guinea pigs in the socio-economic laboratory can take from the bishops, it must surely be—*there is such a thing as society after all*.

- 1 Priest of the Diocese of Northampton.
- 2 Episcopal Conference of England & Wales, *The Common Good*, London, 1996.
- 3 Cf. *The Collected Writings of J. M. Keynes*, (London, 1973), vol. 29, p. 81.
- 4 Cf. Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, n° 70. For the implications of the document in democratic societies, see my article “An Ambrosian Right - Church and State after *Evangelium vitae*,” in *New Blackfriars* 77 (1996) 146.
- 5 There is also the deeper question of the nature of power that becomes unhinged from responsibility (cf. Romano Guardini, *Power and Responsibility*, tr. E. C. Briefs [Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1961], 50-51).
- 6 At present we live with a system that, from the point of view of adopted value systems, is apparently neutral, a “secular” society, but we would do well to take on board the observations of Allan Bloom with regard to what this means for social

- cohesion (cfr. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, [New York: Simon and Shuster, 1987], 87.)
- 7 Cf. Scott Meikle, "Adam Smith and the Spanish Inquisition," in *New Blackfriars* 76 (1995) 78.
  - 8 There is also a price to be paid for the elevation of individual liberty above communitarian restraint. MacIntyre comments: "The democratised self which has no necessary social content and no necessary social identity can then be anything, can assume any role or take any point of view, because it is in and for itself nothing" (A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, [Notre Dame University: UND Press, 1981], 30). For a response to MacIntyre see the collection *After MacIntyre*, J. Horton ed., (Oxford: Blackwells, 1994).
  - 9 This would undoubtedly be the argument of the Government which was elected in 1979. What is the ethical response to a situation in which trades unions no longer hold secret ballots and exercise block votes at party political conferences as well as effectively exercising some power over Government economic policy? Such a scenario is not addressed by an unqualified assertion of the traditional Catholic option in favour of workers rights to associate in trades union movements.
  - 10 Such a distinction was drawn in a response of Cardinal Ratzinger to specific applications of the American pastoral on the economy in which Catholics working on defence contracts *ipso facto* seemed to be the subject of censure by their ecclesiastical pastors.

## Giving the Devil his Due?: St. Anselm on Justice and Satisfaction

Kevin E. Miller

According to the Preface to St. Anselm of Canterbury's *Cur Deus Homo*, the work, among other things, "prov[es] by necessary reasons ... that it is impossible for any man to be saved without [Christ]." In the course of this project, Anselm must clarify what is meant by salvation—without knowing this, we could not know whether salvation could be brought only by Christ. Anselm develops an understanding of salvation involving a deliverance from the punishment that is our due because of our sin, and a correlative restoration to blessedness, which deliverance and restoration are made possible by Christ's "satisfaction" for sin. Hence, the question of the meaning of salvation and the need for Christ as savior includes the question of the meaning of satisfaction. Now, the