

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING IS OUR DISTINCTIVE FEATURE: A CHALLENGE FOR CATHOLIC INSTITUTIONS IN THE ASIAN CONTEXT

Dr. Stephan Rothlin S.J.
Fu Jen University, Taiwan
Stephan.rothlin@gmail.com

Abstract:

Although Catholicism constitutes a minority in Asia with the sole exception of the Philippines, Catholic institutions for higher learning exert considerable influence in some layers of Asian societies. The paper argues that a more explicit integration of principles of Catholic Social Teaching along the lines of “Gaudium et Spes”, the Pastoral Constitution of the Second Vatican Council, into the curriculum, especially in the area of Professional Ethics, could significantly enhance the distinctive identity, as well as the academic and scientific excellence of Catholic institutions in Asia. Special attention should be paid to find appropriate methods to introduce staff into the main insights of the Social Teaching of the Church, in close connection with case studies and a thorough social analysis. Such a move would offer a unique chance for a number of institutions whose profile and style might still be qualified as “parochial” to become truly “catholic”; i.e. that the insights and social analysis from all related institutions all over the world could better be shared and woven into a coherent world view which inspires to a commitment of service.

“In the socio-economic realm, too, the dignity and total vocation of the human person must be honored and advanced along with the welfare of society as a whole.”

Gaudium et Spes, Chapter III, No.63

Introduction:

The landscape of institutions of higher learning is changing dramatically. There seems to be a consensus from across different borders that the education and formation provided so far, including the top institutions, does not equip students well enough any more for the upcoming challenges they will face in a most complex and ever changing work environment. Catholic institutions of higher education not only strive not to be left behind

in terms of academic excellence but increasingly ask themselves what should be their distinctive sign in the competitive landscape of similar institutions.

In Asia the Catholic Church constitutes, with the sole exception of the Philippines, a minority. However, Catholic schools and Colleges have undoubtedly a significant impact in some layers of Asian Society. In a competitive environment they have to discern their specific niche and “core product”. As the respective cultures are highly complex it requires a lot of understanding of local cultures and practices in order to convey a distinctive message which could be accepted to be integrated into the curriculum.

While there will always be a need for courses on theology and catechesis, such courses of explicit evangelization cannot be conceived as the binding and integrative element of all the seminars and courses offered within Catholic institutions as they would be rejected by a good number of students and professors as inappropriate indoctrination.

However the present deep crisis within different professions marked by professional negligence and abuse of power could challenge the leadership of Catholic institutions to seek for appropriate ways to introduce or further develop courses on Professional Ethics as a required course.

In our paper we argue first on the line of epistemological insufficiencies in the area of education: major areas of vital learning, including the introduction to solid social analysis and to moral codes is often left out or considered as secondary matter. Great attention has to be paid to updated and well accompanied methods to guide staff and students into a more accurate awareness of social reality. Only from such a realistic perception of present realities main features of the teaching of the church on social matters should be explained as a convincing and coherent answer to the most urgent dilemmas and problems.

1) Overcoming Epistemological Insufficiencies

The criticism about insufficient formation and training in institutions of higher learning stems from a certain number of epistemological insufficiencies: as the world shrinks more and more to a Global Village a largely narrow minded parochial view on social realities still persists. This refers not only to inadequacies in reporting and analyzing what is supposedly going on at different levels in societies, but applies as well to a number of ideological premises built into certain views of the world. Professional Ethics which is inspired by the Catholic Teaching of the Church, especially in the document of the Second Vatican Council “*Gaudium et Spes*” (1965)¹, has to strive to open minds to the wide range of realities of the modern world with the goal that “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted” (*Gaudium et Spes* No.1) would be truly understood. Given that a good number of students and professors from Catholic Institutions of higher learning come from privileged social classes they sometimes by and large ignore the brutal social reality that surrounds them.

Recently a tragic incident caused much outrage all over Taiwan but has been largely ignored outside the island. Here are just some facts:

A four-year old girl with the name “Chiu” was beaten up by her drunken father. As the brain damaged girl was rushed to Taipei’s well renowned hospital “Renai” on January 10, 2005, the doctor in charge, Dr. Lin, refused to treat her claiming that no beds would be available right then and that she should be transferred for emergency treatment to another city, Taichung, situated more than 100 kilometers away from Taipei. At that time the authorities of Renai Hospital claimed that there was no other choice than to transfer Chiu to another hospital since no beds were available. Dr. Lin claimed at that time that he did check the report about Chiu and that based on this report he suggested the transfer to Taichung. On January 14 however the authorities at Renai Hospital began to admit that their previous claims were not true, as in fact there were hospital beds available at that time. Only on the following day, on January 15, did Dr. Lin also admit that he lied and that he did not see and check the report about the girl. It became thus clear that he committed forgery. Lin admitted also that on the day in question he was actually relaxing in his dormitory and did not fulfill his duty. On January 23 Chiu died. (Compilation from local newspapers such as China Times and United Daily News).²

This tragic incident is just one among many other examples of gross professional neglect. The story stands as a tragic reminder that in fact the life of a four years old girl apparently doesn’t count at all; that very high salaries for medical doctors does not give any guarantee at all that professional duties for the health of their patients will be respected. It seems to be a significant fact that in the follow-up Dr. Lin has not been punished and continues to act as a medical doctor at the Renai-Hospital in Taipei. The positive aspect we might get from this extremely sad story is the fact that due to modern means of reporting and communication such abuse of power, professional neglect and shameless lies cannot easily be hidden any more. And it could therefore be expected that appropriate legislation should be geared to such cases. In our opinion it would be necessary to severely punish a medical doctor who like Dr. Lin committed such a serious crime by removing him forever from his or her profession.

Another vast area which seems to be insufficiently treated in Catholic institutions is the appropriate introduction into true pictures of history. A widespread ideological fiction depicts prostitution as inevitable part of different layers of Asian cultures. This implies for example the belief that it was justified to supply, say, Japanese soldiers with so called “comfort women”. Only in relatively recent history has the truth began to surface about the most subhuman and brutal situations these women from Korea and China endured as sex slaves. And until quite recently it has been rather easy for governments to sweep these uncomfortable truths under the carpet. In each country there might always be a tendency for a bias, such as in Japan, to the consistent refusal from government (with the sole exception of the former Prime Minister Miyazawa in 1995) to appropriately apologize for wartime atrocities committed by the Imperial Japanese Army.

Professional Ethics courses should very carefully analyze such historical events and ask repeatedly how well behaved fathers of families all of a sudden, wearing a uniform, have been turned into monsters with an absolute disregard of the most common human values. It can by no means be taken for granted that students from Catholic Institutions would have a glimpse of the untold horror remembered recently by the 60th. anniversary of the liberation of the camps of Auschwitz, Birkenau, Bergen/ Belsen and Dachau. At the root of these devastating and truly demonic breakdowns of modern history lies a distorted understanding of professional duties: “I just followed the orders from above” was a common reply from former Nazi officers when they rejected their responsibility concerning the crimes they committed.

Another example which shows the significant shift in ethical perceptions is the crisis inside the Church due to sexual abuse committed by priests. While until quite recently safeguarding the reputation of the Church has been considered as the highest value, justifying attempts to cover up serious crimes, say, from the side of bishops is now brandished as absolutely unacceptable neglect of professional duties. It should be at least worth the cost of so many sex scandals that it should be clear to everybody that it is an urgent duty for a bishop to intervene and remove a priest from his office when the priest continues to commit crimes which are all the more serious as they are committed by someone who is expected to act as a moral authority.

The first distinctive feature of integrating Catholic Social Teaching is therefore to form students and professors in this ongoing search for truth in historical events. It would offer the chance to get an understanding of the “Mysterium Iniquitatis”, this coexistence of the good with the bad³. It could help to shape the *purifying memory* not just in the sense of mastering some kind of knowledge, but as a constant dialogue and ongoing attempt to understand.

This implies a critical reading of Asian cultures in the sense that each culture has also to be understood according to its positive and negative elements. From such a perspective it is inappropriate and insulting to claim that corruption is an inherent element of Asian cultures.

The problem is not foreign also for Catholic institutions: while until quite recently it would have been accepted as a “common practice” to accept gifts related to certain applications of students from high placed or well connected persons there is sufficient evidence that giving in to such demands can and have severely damaged not only the reputation of a person, but of the whole (Catholic) institution. Again: in close analysis with the wave of corruption scandals it should be analyzed how damaging the consequences of corruption are, especially for the poor, vulnerable and those without rights. A thorough social analysis which attempts to go right to the bottom of such thorny issues such as prostitution and corruption would give a compelling proof that a formation in a truly “Catholic” view of the world implies by no means some sort of indoctrination. On the contrary, the global network of Catholic institutions which is far from being sufficiently exploited would offer truly global insights into many complex issues. Through the modern means of communication this network might become more and

more a platform where the search for truth of many crucial areas of societies could be fulfilled.

2) Basic Insights of Catholic Social Teaching: A Call to Justice, Solidarity and Subsidiarity

Only with a close and constant reference to historical facts and case studies will it be possible that the basic values of the Social Teaching of the Church will be understood and accepted. There must be a constant interplay between theory and practice in order to make inroads into Asian societies.

The main documents of Catholic Social Teaching are available in English under the title of “Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church” (hitherto CSDC)⁴. It is still justified to draw the basic insights from the document “Gaudium-et-Spes” of the Second Vatican Council which remains in the books written by Pope John Paul II⁵ the primary source of inspiration.

As a first principle *solidarity* is underlined in the context of raising inequalities:

“We are at a moment in history when the development of economic life could diminish social inequalities if that development were guided and coordinated in a reasonable and human way. Yet all too often it serves only to intensify the inequalities. In some places it even results in a decline in the social status of the weak and in contempt for the poor.”(Nr.63)

Inspired by the example of God, who is the friend of the poor, the Church continuously deepened her understanding of solidarity as struggle for and with the poor, especially in the conferences of the CELAM, the conference of the Catholic bishops in Latin America in Medellin (1968) whose preferential option for and with the poor has been confirmed by the conference in Puebla (1979). The growing gap between the rich and the poor constitutes an intolerable scandal which cries out for concrete action. A most convincing example in this struggle with and for the poor has been the witness of the bishop of El Salvador, Oscar Arnulfo Romero, who has been killed when he celebrated the mass on March 24, 1980. The murder of his priestly Jesuit friend Rutilio Grande in his parish of Aguilares provoked a deepened commitment in his mission and struggle for Justice which is the gift of faith.

This was the crucial problem according to the words of Pope Benedict XVI in his speech at the Basilica St. Peter on March 18, 2005 (at that time still Joseph Card. Ratzinger) the Pastoral Constitution Gaudium et Spes sought to address:

“the significance of the Christian contribution to the improvement of human welfare, through works of mercy and justice, within the overall mission of the Church(...) justice toward God is what we call the ‘virtue of religion’; justice toward other human beings is the fundamental attitude that respects the other as a person created by God.”

Most significantly this option for justice within the church inspired Catholic Universities to integrate it thoroughly into their profile and turn it into a most efficient instrument to serve society, and especially the deprived and marginalized. The guiding vision is the dimension of solidarity which conceives not only studies, but the human work in general in its “*intrinsic social dimension*”; as “*work with other other and for others*” (CSDC No.273.)⁶ As an outstanding example how seriously this option for justice shaped an academic culture which serves the society, and especially the poor, stands the University of Central America, UCA, which became a major element in the land reform in El Salvador. The brutal murder of Jesuit professors of the UCA on November 17, 1989, including the Rector Ignacio Ellacuria, did never find a fair trial; but their blood as “*semen christianorum*”, as “*seed of and for the christians*” did certainly contribute most significantly to the end of the civil war in El Salvador. In other Catholic institutions there might be still quite a long way to go in order to implement such an uncompromising commitment. This failure might stem first of all of an ignorance from major authorities of Catholic institutions of higher learning into the compelling insights into the urgent need to implement on different levels of research and teaching to respond to the call of Justice.

Another not insignificant reason is that academic excellence and rigor are not always as encouraged as they should be. In particular there should be more clearly spelled out and communicated rules that would allow Catholic institutions to expel students and teachers who repeatedly and knowingly act against the Code of Conduct. Most severely should be discouraged and punished any form of cheating and plagiarism.

Above all, there might a neglect of one of the major principles and constant directives of the Church’s social doctrine: the principle of “*subsidiarity*”. In fact, this term cannot be found in the usual English dictionaries. “*On the basis of this principle, all societies of a superior order must adopt attitudes of help (“subsidium”) – therefore of support, promotion, development – with respect to lower order societies.”...*” 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.”(CSDC No.186) Applied to the deficiencies in the educational sector we might claim that Catholic institutions in a similar way like others become so much absorbed with internal problems that the concern to promote the dignity of the person in cooperation with groups, associations, local territorial realities in order to achieve effective social growth (CSDC No.185) easily tends to fade away.

3) Integrating the Call to Justice into Ethical Codes

There has been and there is still an inappropriate focus on top academic institutions in the United States and Europe which still provokes a significant brain drain from Asia to the so called developed world. With a few exceptions Asian Universities still cannot compete on the same level with their partner institutions in Europe and the US. This seems to be

inappropriate as the most dynamic regions of the world shifted to Asia. As academic institutions often lack the necessary financial resources bright people feel more attracted by a business than an academic career.

As the world is turning truly global such an imbalance might change. The paper is arguing that Catholic institutions could play a major role in this process by making good use of the already existing network that links them with their partner institutions all over the world. However, a major binding element within such a network could be the rational and deliberate choice to inspire professors and students of their Colleges and Schools to use their skills and education in order to make a small, but significant contribution for social justice.

In the plurality of beliefs and religions in Asia such a clear distinctive commitment to implement major elements of the Social Doctrine of the Church would most probably be most appreciated as it clearly does not imply any kind of indoctrination of (divisive) religious contents but is built into an academic culture which puts the scientific search for true facts, for a thorough social analysis first; and promotes from there the crucial values of solidarity, subsidiarity and justice.

Given the differences among Asian cultures it might come to no surprise that each Catholic institution has to make her own specific effort to develop adequate Codes of Conduct along with their mission statement which responds the specific challenges of a given social context.

When we take the example of the business world we can conclude that only through major scandals such the breakdown of Enron/ Andersen, Health South, World Com, Tyco, Parmalat did some companies actually start to be convinced that a sound legal and ethical culture is in their own best interest. Catholic institutions hopefully should not wait until a deep crisis will force them to go over the book. At least in the States the scandal of sexual abuse cases can be considered as one of the most devastating events in recent history which still undermines the credibility of Catholic institutions.

Also the business world provides us with an abundance of case studies that such codes turn out to be ridiculous or cynical when they are not constantly implemented. It is obvious that the credibility of Catholic Schools could also become significantly damaged if the process of developing codes, due to the lack of compliance and constant improving, is regarded as a useless window dressing operation.

¹ Abbott, Walter M. (ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II*, London/ Dublin: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966, pp.183-316.

² www.chinatimes.com.tw; www.udn.com.tw; www.taipeitimes.com.tw.

³ John Paul II, *Memory and Identity*, Milan/ Rome: Rizzoli, 2005.

⁴ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (ed.), *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004.

⁵ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994; Idem, *Memory and Identity*, op.cit.(3).

⁶ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*, 1991, No. 31.