

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TRADITION: TEACHING, THOUGHT, PRACTICE

BY MICHAEL J. NAUGHTON

Catholic health care is embedded in a moral tradition that has been formed by a profound dynamic between word and deed, thought and action, theory and practice. The ministry's words, thoughts, and theories have been informed by a larger faith tradition encompassing the Scriptures; the official teachings of the church; reflections and ideas of theologians; and the insights of philosophers, economists, scientists, and others. Its deeds, actions, and practices have been lived out by the sacrifices and witnesses of religious communities and the laity.

As leaders in Catholic health care, an important part of this tradition is what we call the Catholic social tradition. In particular, this tradition provides a vision about our work in terms of its meaning, how we organize it, what it does for the community, and how we are affected by it. We are both receivers of and contributors to this tradition. As receivers of this tradition, we stand on the shoulders of those who have built this unique ministry to the world. We owe a debt of gratitude to those who have paved the way with their sacrifices and contributions. As contributors to this tradition, we need both to embrace these past contributions and to face with courage and creativity the new and unique challenges of today and tomorrow. As leaders in Catholic health care, we have a calling not only to understand the principles of human dignity, participation, subsidiarity, common good, universal destination of material goods, etc., but to live them in a way that these principles can come alive organizationally. Applied in this way, our tradition gives rise to a practical theology of institutions capable of informing the way we hold our organizations in trust.

To do this successfully, we leaders need to familiarize ourselves with three important dimensions of the Catholic social tradition: teaching, thought, and practice. It is the dynamic of these three dimensions that make the Catholic social tradition a rich and powerful reservoir for building strong communities of work and ministry in Catholic health care.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHINGS

Through encyclicals, pastoral letters, and conciliar and other official documents, the social teachings of the Catholic Church seek to provide an "accurate formulation of the results of a careful reflection on the complex realities of human existence . . . in the light of faith and the Church's tradition."¹ These teachings seek to clarify and deepen our commitment to the common good by rousing deliberation over both what we are called to do and how we are called to think. The social teachings draw upon the long and varied tradition of Catholicism as well as from

"scientific studies promoted by members of the laity, from the work of Catholic movements and associations, and from the church's practical achievements in the social field."² While the social teachings of the church serve as a basic orientation to the good informed by faith, they do not and cannot detail specific answers to every economic, organizational, and political problem.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT

The church's social teachings inform and are informed by the various disciplines of knowledge. Theologians, philosophers, economists, political scientists, management theorists, educators, sociologists, and others have throughout the years developed a tradition of thought, which extends the church's social teachings into the specifics of the economic, organizational, and political worlds. This thought provides a vitality to Catholic social teaching by testing out its general orientation in the specifics and complexities of modern life. This is why Catholic education and in particular Catholic universities are so important to Catholic social thought. The Catholic university is the place where, as Fr. Theodore Hesburgh* pointed out, the church does her thinking.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL PRACTICE

Catholic social teaching and thought will not develop without managers, peace activists, politicians, farmers, unionists, and the various organizations of such practitioners (Catholic health care, Catholic Worker, International Christian Union of Business Executives, Catholic Peace Fellowship, Thomas More Society, Catholic Charities USA, Catholic Relief Services, etc.). John Paul II has strongly pointed out that more than ever, "the Church is aware that her social message will gain credibility more immediately from the witness of actions than as a result of its internal logic and consistency."³ Catholic social teaching and thought as messengers of the Gospel cannot be considered mere theory, "but above all else a basis and a motivation for action."

A LIVING TRADITION

The Catholic social tradition, then, is a comprehensive term that captures the dynamic between teaching, thought, and practice. This dynamic tradition includes a rich history that helps us to see our social responsibilities in the world-Scripture, the early church fathers, medieval experience, the various theologians, philosophers, economists, political thinkers, and the countless witnesses throughout the ages. Thus, we need to remind ourselves that the Catholic social tradition did not begin in 1891, but brings us back to the Old Testament and draws upon everything in the life and thought of the church. The social tradition, therefore, is broader and older than the formal social teachings of the church. It provides an intellectual framework and legacy informed by practice and experience from which the more recent (1891 to the present) social teachings draw.

This dynamic among the teachings, thoughts, and practices of the tradition points to another important dynamic in the church: the different but complementary roles of its members. While the popes and bishops reserve to themselves the teaching authority of their office (magisterium), they nonetheless look to others, and in particular to theologians and the laity, to bring social

questions and problems to the fore, examine the social teachings, build upon them, develop their significance, and at times readjust them in light of changing circumstances. The laity especially are called to implement the church's teaching and thought in the social structures in which they most immediately participate. The social teachings of the popes, bishops, and councils suppose appropriation by a laity whose faith-filled and imperfect engagement in the concrete, day-to-day complexities of human existence alone can turn the Gospel values into renewing action.

Finally, while we stand on the shoulders of a great tradition, it is not a perfect tradition, just as we are not a perfect people. The Catholic social tradition is a developing tradition that is always in need of renewal. But it is a living tradition, and what we do today will affect future generations. Catholic health care is an important part of the Catholic social tradition, since it is both an actor and a thinker in bringing forth God's kingdom. Our actions in the facilities we work in will not only affect those within the walls of those facilities, but will reverberate throughout the church.

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* Fr. Theodore M. Heshurgh is president emeritus of the University of Notre Dame.

NOTES

1. Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 1987, section 41.
2. Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 1991, section 4.
3. Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, section 57.

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