

The Fundamental Principles of Social doctrine  
The Issue of their Interpretation  
(Archbishop Minnerath)

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I. Human and social sciences are sciences of interpretation. The physical world can be observed and described with some objectivity. But as soon as a question of finality or meaning arises, the part played by the observer in what is going on becomes always bigger. Some scientists go so far that they deny scientific character to human and social sciences. They strongly distinguish between scientific data and its interpretation. They leave interpretation to philosophers or theologians.

Our Academy is very much aware that social sciences are subject to uncertainty, even if their results are critically elaborated. Social sciences build on models which presuppose anthropological paradigms.

If we leave now social sciences and jump to social ethics, we clearly stand much more on the side of interpretation. The social doctrine of the Church is very much aware that it proposes a vision of man in society that is based on values and principles suggested by the Jewish-Christian tradition. Yet it strongly claims that its interpretation of the human being as a social being living in society can be shared by anyone. Our social doctrine is not a catalogue of quotations from the Holy Scripture, but an organic vision of man and society elaborated in rational way open to discussion and improvement.

The Church in elaborating its social doctrine is used to work with the categories of Greek philosophy, because it offers anthropology and a cosmology available to a Christian reinterpretation.

To put it shortly, our social doctrine uses mostly the material of Greek philosophy under the control of the Jewish-Christian revelation. The Church fathers in the six first centuries have reinterpreted the best of Greek philosophy and offered concepts like the human person, substance, common good; solidarity, justice, truth, natural law which are no longer those of Plato or Aristotle. Other concepts like subsidiarity have remained close to their original context.

In modern time, Enlightenment has evacuated the core of Christian thinking namely the relationship of all beings to a Creator and the fulfilment of all that exists in the Spirit of the Redeemer. Having no more any foundation in creation or a divine plan of salvation, the human being has begun to disintegrate. Law has turned to be the mere expression of human will and society a place where individuals play their strategies of winners and losers. The ground on which social ethics could be built has given way. The concepts set up by Christian thinking have been emptied but their frames remain. Nietzsche was proud to call for the *Umwertung aller Werte*, which meant for him and many others the annihilation of Christianity. The project was to cut off our culture from its Christian roots.

Nevertheless we have been witnessing a short revival of the Christian anthropological paradigm in the *Universal Declaration of human rights* of 1948. Here the concept of human dignity plays the role of a transcendental horizon of values which is not negotiable.

Now with globalization in a post-modern context, the very contents of the *Declaration* are interpreted by UN instruments and national legislations as well in a way which goes in a quite different direction than the post war vision.

In this context, the effort of the social doctrine of the Church consists precisely in inviting people of all cultures to consider a line of interpretation of social ethics which does not fall under the determination of preformatted categories. In a word, it endeavours to be aware of self involvement in ideological approaches, either scientifically coloured or simply individualistic and pragmatic.

The social doctrine of the Church is based on what resists to all ideological reductions: it starts from a twofold row material: the human being and the resources of the universe. It states that human beings among themselves and in relation with the universe interact according to an order which is not arbitrary. In others words, this order which founds all ethical principles is given with creation itself. It has not to be invented, but discovered. This order is not cosmologic or biologic, but human. It is rooted in the very humanity of man. It expresses the structure of the human person who needs recognition, freedom, justice, love and peace. This natural moral order discloses itself to our mind through the efforts of rational knowledge.

We say that the foundation of all social setting is the human person, which is an infinite value. Society is made for man and not the contrary. This principle is the key of the whole construction. Having a centre with the human person, society has a horizon to which it tends: this is what we call the common good. The intertwining structures of society at the level of the family, the city, the labour community, the state, the community of nations are aimed to supply a common good. To achieve the common good some fundamental conditions have to be implemented: freedom, truth, justice and solidarity. Where these values are respected society tends to help humanisation, which is its highest goal. In organizing social interaction, subsidiarity comes into play as the right way to allow participation and efficient government.

II. This construction is obviously the rational counterpart of a vision which comes from elsewhere, from the biblical revelation which implies that the world has been created by a loving God who displays in it a design. The extreme value accorded to the human being comes from the biblical teaching of the image of God and still more from the incarnation of the Word of God. The idea of the universal destination of earthly goods comes from the assumption that human kind is a whole, that all human beings are equal by creation and that the same God has put the whole of creation at the service of man and has entrusted them its fair and intelligent exploitation and sharing of its goods. Moreover, the view that social ethics are founded in the very nature of the human being, which we call natural law, is also related to our view according to which man is prior to society; man is a substance, and society is not.

The vision of man and society suggested by the biblical revelation has obviously inspired the social doctrine of the Church. We even say more. In the biblical teaching, faith is not opposed or alien to reason. We do not share the rationalistic ideology which does not recognize faith as a source of knowledge. Faith gives material to reason to work on. The basic principle of the dignity of the human person and the natural solidarity of the human race are challenges to reason, but not something irrational. We say that the natural order of the world becomes fully intelligible only through the inspiration received from God's revelation and the order of grace.

III. So we must recognize that having proposed a social doctrine in terms of natural law, we interpret its principles in categories which resort to the biblical vision of man and society.

Our interpretation is conflicting with interpretations coming from other philosophical or anthropological backgrounds. The Catholic understanding of social ethics is challenged by the post-modern understanding as expressed in contemporary philosophical trends, public opinion and national or international legislation. At a first glance, the challenge is hermeneutical. Both sides use the same terminology but give it a different meaning. It is easy to identify the anthropological principles that make the difference.

When we speak of the human person, they generally refer to the individual. We say the person is a social being by nature; they say the individual is totally autonomous and self-determined.

We say there exists a natural law, which is a moral law rooted in the very humanity of man. They say law is what is discussed and established by vote. They say there is no transcendent horizon supporting norms of conduct.

We say that the common good is the aim of all social structures. It is understood as the set of conditions that enable human beings to become more human through their participation in the common endeavours. They speak only of public interest.

We say that solidarity is anchored in the very structure of life in society. Elsewhere solidarity is absorbed in the welfare state which ignores subsidiarity.

We consider that social ethics are grounded on values binding for all. They say everything is negotiable.

So the question of interpretation is at the heart of the social ethics. The social doctrine of the Church only tries to make clear that interpretation cannot be arbitrary, following the will of the more powerful, but should take as its object of investigation the very humanity of man.

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