

Glimpse of light, sign of contradiction: Catholic Social Teaching in today's globalized world

By Daniel Saudek

The documents of Catholic Social Teaching provide much-needed wisdom for understanding and solving today's social and environmental challenges. However, the Church's voice on these issues often meets with the resistance of otherwise markedly orthodox groups. In particular, a strange alliance between the think tank "Acton Institute" and Opus Dei's main university PUSC has emerged as a focal point of contemporary opposition to Catholic Social Teaching.

An earlier version of this article appeared in German in the journal *Furche* (25. May 2016, p. 14) and subsequently in the *Schweizerische Kirchenzeitung* (4. August 2016, pp. 408-409).

The socio-environmental crisis of the 21st century is multi-faceted and complex, requiring a profound reflection which is able to connect the social and natural sciences with philosophy and ethics. The social teaching of the Church, while it clearly has no interpretative monopoly, in my view offers some valuable resources for meeting this task: In our day of massive global inequality and continuous redistribution of wealth from the bottom to the top, this teaching insists on the necessity of just wages¹ and recalls the need for government redistributive measures according to the principle *suum cuique*.² In doing so, Catholic Social Teaching (CST) clearly acknowledges – unlike its critics allege – the indispensable contribution of markets and entrepreneurship to the common good,³ nor does it burden the state with the solution of problems which can also be solved at a lower level of social organization. In times of anthropogenic global warming and loss of biodiversity, the Church reminds us of the duty of preserving creation and leading sustainable lifestyles,⁴ but without succumbing to the kind of misanthropic attitude which, failing to recognize the value and dignity of humanity, reduces it to a mere problem, a passing virus of which the planet would need to be cured. Since today's global problems, from international migration to unregulated finance markets, cannot be solved on the level of the nation state, but require a global political response, CST has called for a reinforcement of global governance.⁵

It is striking, however, that these elements of Church teaching are so little known in the public at large, so that CST has rightly been termed "our best kept secret".⁶ Whence this state of affairs? CST has often been put under the bushel and thus kept from spreading its light throughout the house. Surprisingly, when the Pope speaks on social justice issues, criticism and rejection often stems from groups and media who self-identify as markedly Catholic. Thus, as Andrea Tornielli and Giacomo Galeazzi illustrate in their book *Questa Economia*

¹ E.g. *Rerum novarum*, 44-5; *Centesimus Annus*, 8.

² *Caritas in Veritate*, 32; *Rerum novarum*, 33.

³ *Caritas in Veritate*, 36.

⁴ *Laudato Si'*, 217.

⁵ Cf. *Caritas in Veritate*, 67; *Laudato Si'*, 175.

⁶ E. P. Deberri, J. E. Hug, P. J. Henriot, M. J. Schultheis, *Catholic Social Teaching: Our Best Kept Secret* (2003).

Uccide,⁷ Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* met with attempts of rejection of large parts of its content, wherever the encyclical contradicted the unbridled freedom of the market. The article 'Caritas in Veritate in gold and red' by George Weigel⁸ offers, as the name implies, an illustrative example of such a selective reading of Benedict XVI's social teaching.

But one of the most outspoken proponents of connecting the Catholic faith with a marked economic libertarianism is undoubtedly the "Acton Institute", a think tank which promotes the view that "free-market capitalism is not only the best way to ensure individual success and national prosperity but is also the surest route to a moral and socially-just society."⁹ The Actonians likewise find it hard to accept the Church's social teaching. For example, the spokesman of the think tank's Italian section, Kishore Jayabalan, sees the "dominant tendency of postmodern thought" at work in Pope Francis' social magisterium.¹⁰ The Acton Institute, supported financially by the influential Koch-brothers,¹¹ regularly voices its reservations against climate science and international efforts towards the protection of the global climate.¹² Thus, in a conference held by Acton in December 2015 at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross (PUSC), Rome's Opus Dei university, the "unfoundedness of the environmentalist theses of *Laudato Si'*" was "denounced", as Vatican specialist Sandro Magister reported at the time.¹³

Said conference is not the only instance of the strange alliance between Acton and PUSC, as can be easily verified through an internet search. The two institutions have been working together for years, the professors of the pontifical university, Martin Schlag and Martin Rhonheimer, regularly write articles for the think tank,¹⁴ and events organized by the latter have repeatedly been hosted by the pontifical university. An illustrative example is the "Calihan lecture" of 2014, organized in cooperation between both institutions and assigned

⁷ Piemme (2015). See esp. chap. 7.

⁸ *National Review Online* (2. July 2009).

⁹ <http://blog.acton.org/archives/81860-is-free-market-capitalism-moral.html>

¹⁰ "All'inizio del pontificato pensavamo che il Santo Padre volesse incoraggiarci, volesse spronarci a comportarci in modo più etico nell'economia, come avevano fatto Benedetto XVI e San Giovanni Paolo II prima di lui. Il Papa emerito e il suo grande predecessore avevano più volte contestato un certo modo immorale di fare economia. Invece Papa Francesco è sempre più chiaro nella sua contestazione, anche in questa enciclica: attribuisce la responsabilità dei problemi dell'ambiente al sistema in quanto tale. Dunque: al commercio e alla sua globalizzazione, al fatto che anteponiamo il nostro interesse economico e il profitto a tutto il resto, al consumismo, al super-sviluppo e a quello che intende come un gioco a somma zero: se ci sono dei poveri, è perché sono i ricchi a sfruttarli, dunque anche il benessere che noi abbiamo è ottenuto al prezzo dell'immiserimento di altri popoli. Questo pensiero non è esclusivo del Papa, ma è la tendenza dominante nel pensiero post-moderno..." <http://www.lanuovabq.it/it/articoliPdf-jayabalan-cattolico-e-capitalista-si-puo-ancora-13096.pdf>

¹¹ "IRS filings show that the [David H. Koch Foundation](#) has given at least \$313,000 to the Acton Institute since 2003." http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Acton_Institute

¹² See e.g. C. Snow, 'Unholy alliance: who is advising Pope Francis on global warming?' (17. June 2015), <http://www.acton.org/pub/commentary/2015/06/17/unholy-alliance-who-advising-pope-francis-global-w>; M. V. Maas, 'Global warming consensus alert: walking back the consensus' (11. April 2008), <http://blog.acton.org/archives/2289-Global-Warming-Consensus-Alert-Walking-Back-the-Consensus.html>

¹³ "gli economisti e studiosi che avevano denunciato l'infondatezza delle tesi ambientaliste della "Laudato si'", in un convegno promosso dall'Acton Institute nella pontificia università romana della Santa Croce." <http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/1351226>

¹⁴ See <https://actonkreis.wordpress.com/category/martin-rhonheimer/> and <https://actonkreis.wordpress.com/category/martin-schlag/>

the “Novak Award”.¹⁵ In this lecture, a vision of a society was advocated in which the solution of social problems is left to free entrepreneurship and private charitable initiative.¹⁶ The role of the state, in this model, is merely to protect private property and enforce contracts.¹⁷ On the other hand, laws protecting employees and state-organized redistribution are deemed unnecessary.¹⁸ It was claimed that such a vision takes Pope Francis’ “moral message” seriously, whereas “technical questions” such as the role of the state were declared as beyond the Pope’s competence.¹⁹

Ideas such as these traditionally enjoy support at PUSC. “The economy alone – neither governments nor global political structures – can solve the problem of poverty in a sustainable way”, as Martin Schlag claims.²⁰ According to Martin Rhonheimer, respecting the autonomy of the free market means that there is no necessity of a living wage for an employee. The latter deserves “precisely the market wage”, even when this is not sufficient for sustaining a living, and *a fortiori*, the right to a family wage is rejected.²¹ In a similar vein, Rhonheimer claims that it is “difficult to reasonably hold that less well-off people and those in real need have properly a *right* to corrections of the outcome of market processes by redistributive measures.” Instead, there is merely a “moral obligation of solidarity of the better-off toward the needy”.²² And finally, “measures of redistribution through the taxation system” are qualified as “nothing else than compulsory expropriation”.²³

Given this, it is hardly surprising that Rhonheimer recently stated that the Church should not have developed a social teaching at all.²⁴ The above ideas, however, contradict not only the core of CST, but also the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.²⁵ Neither of these sources

¹⁵ O. Juurikkala, ‘Virtuous poverty, Christian liberty: a free-market appreciation of Pope Francis’, Calihan lecture at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross (4. Dec. 2014), <http://www.institutoacton.com.ar/articulos/198art040115-c.pdf>

¹⁶ pp. 8-9.

¹⁷ p. 12.

¹⁸ pp. 8-9.

¹⁹ pp. 4-5, 7, 13-14.

²⁰ „Allein die Wirtschaft – weder die Regierungen, noch globale politische Strukturen – kann das Problem der Armut auf nachhaltige Weise lösen.“ <http://www.mceproject.it/it/ricerca/271-papst-franziskus-m%C3%B6chte-eine-arme-kirche-f%C3%BCr-die-armen-wohin-f%C3%BChrt-er-die-kirche.html>

²¹ “When teaching about just wages, especially the family wage, not only *PT* [*Pacem in Terris*] but much of Catholic social teaching disregards the tradition of the late scholastics, mainly the School of Salamanca. So Luis de Molina (1535-1600), the Jesuit theologian who studied jurisprudence at Salamanca, wrote that the wage the employer is obliged to pay according to justice is precisely the remuneration for the worker’s “services considering all the attendant circumstances, *not what is sufficient for his sustenance and much less for the maintenance of his children and family.*” Remuneration for one’s services is precisely the market wage determined by the worth of the employee’s *services* and not by his *needs*; it cannot be the task of government to fix or otherwise promote “just wages”... In my view the idea of the “family wage” as an obligation of justice towards employees, as often repeated in the modern social teaching of the Church, is an element alien to this teaching; though based on a sound intuition, in its present form it has no roots in Catholic tradition but rather stems from the modern trade union movement.” M. Rhonheimer, ‘John XXIII’s *Pacem in Terris*: the first human rights encyclical’, In V. Alberti (ed.) *Il Concetto di Pace: Attualità della Pacem in Terris nel 50° Anniversario*, LEV (2013), pp. 103-136, here p. 128. Online at: <https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/23392118/Rhonheimer%2C%20John%20XXIII's%20Pacem%20in%20terris%20%28offprint%29.pdf>

²² ‘Capitalism, free market economy, and the common good’, In M. Schlag, J. A. Mercado (eds.) *Free Markets and the Culture of Common Good*, Springer (2012), pp. 3-40, here p. 16.

²³ M. Rhonheimer, ‘John XXIII’s *Pacem in Terris*’, p. 111.

²⁴ See the interview ‘Barmherzigkeit schafft keinen Wohlstand’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (19.2.2017).

²⁵ Articles 22 and 23; Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1908.

leave any room for doubt that living wages are an ethical necessity, and that the state has the right to intervene in favour of the basic economic needs of its members. However, in the worldview of those who seek to combine neoliberalism with the Catholic faith, the freedom of the market is more important than these fundamental ethical requirements. The primary realities of human nature and dignity, as well as the ancient principle *suum cuique*, are subordinated to the norm of the market price and absolute rights to private property, i.e. to socially constructed secondary realities. In a similar vein, results of science are rejected, since to take them seriously threatens to set limits upon the desired absolute freedom of the market. In short, we are faced with a deeply relativistic “social ethic”²⁶ which fails to acknowledge the nature of things and rejects the ethical imperatives which result from this nature. To leave the satisfaction of basic human needs to the freedom of the market and the whim of the better-off is to attack the right to life, and with it the entire natural law, at its root.

In addition, the evidence for the support which Opus Dei’s main university lends to proponents of such views casts considerable doubt on the claim that Opus Dei is, as its representatives are wont to affirm, politically neutral. Nor are the misgivings against the social teaching of the Church a phenomenon restricted to the PUSC. In 2013, Cardinal Cipriani of Lima, a member of Opus Dei, criticized the head of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Müller, for publishing his book *On the Side of the Poor* together with one of the founders of liberation theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez. Cipriani seemed to find it necessary to remind Cardinal Müller to “defend the sound doctrine of the Catholic faith”.²⁷ However, it is clear from the above evidence that opposition to the social teaching of the Church comes precisely from Opus Dei. One wonders why a lack of appreciation of the Church’s special option for the poor come from such a high level of authority within Opus Dei, whereas, as it seems, the leadership of the organization does nothing to defend CST against the critics within its own ranks.

The ethical relativism at work in the attempts to combine neoliberalism and Catholicism²⁸ illustrates the ongoing relevance of Benedict XVI’s speech before the German *Bundestag* in Berlin, with its appeal to “fling open the windows” and to listen to nature’s “directives”.²⁹ Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si’*, with its clear and realistic view of the social and environmental reality of today’s globalized world, continues this programme. This circumstance enables a different view of Pope Francis’ papacy than is often presented in the public discourse, where it is often viewed as a departure—hailed by some, feared by others—from the course of Francis’ predecessors. I suggest, instead, that the current papacy is best viewed as an affirmation of the whole of Catholic tradition, of which CST is an integral part. Of course, such a reality-centered approach is not something specifically Catholic, but a fundamental option of human reason itself. Nor is this a merely theoretical or academic issue, since whether the next decades will bring peace and development or rather exclusion and violence

²⁶ I follow Josef Pieper in setting the “social ethic” advocated by economic libertarianism in quotation marks. See his *Vom Sinn der Tapferkeit*, Leipzig (1936), pp. 17-18.

²⁷ ‘Liberation theology: Cipriani urges Müller to be more prudent’ (17. Oct. 2013), <http://www.lastampa.it/2013/10/17/vaticaninsider/eng/the-vatican/liberation-theology-cipriani-urges-mller-to-be-more-prudent-XK1awa7u1yTy5FH7Ou0i0I/pagina.html>

²⁸ On this point, cf. *Laudato Si’*, 123.

²⁹ Online at: https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110922_reichstag-berlin.html

can be expected to depend in large part on our reaction to the current social-environmental crisis. The type of skewed research promoted by neoliberal think tanks which profess to promote Christian values, as well as the attempts promoted by Opus Dei to separate the Catholic faith from its social implications, will not help us meet this challenge. Rather, an approach which puts human dignity at its centre and which respects the results of science is needed.