

# Restoration and Original Justice

Msgr Stuart Swetland

*How does an understanding of Original Justice underpin Catholic social teaching?*

The famous Scottish New Testament Scholar, William Barclay had a knack for describing difficult biblical passages in a way accessible to all. In particular, he could make a gospel passage come to life. In his description of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, Barclay reminds the reader that these teachings of the Lord are meant to be normative for all Christians. They are to shape our everyday lives.

This being said, Barclay also recognized how difficult to understand some of these passages are to modern ears. For example, the profundity of the beatitude, 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied' (Mt. 5:6) can be loss to many of us living in affluence. In Jesus' day, as in today in many parts of the world, extreme hunger was the norm. This beatitude teaches that we ought to desire righteousness – which includes both personal holiness and societal justice – the way that a starving man desires, with his whole being, a crust of bread or a woman dying of thirst in the desert desires a cup of water.

Catholic social doctrine aids us in our efforts to live the Beatitudes. Many years ago, it was popular to call the Church's social teaching the 'Church's best kept secret.' While this is not the case anymore, there are still many difficulties for the catechist when attempting to proclaim this part of the gospel.

## Political platforms

First, many have tried to reduce the Church's social doctrine to the level of a partisan political platform or, worse yet, to a group of slogans that can be hurled about in the give and take of political debate. For example, in the United States, some say that the Church's commitment to a preferential option for the poor makes her little more than 'the Democratic Party at prayer.' Others say that the Church's commitment to protect the life and the dignity of all human beings, born and unborn, makes the Church sound as though she is a wing of the Republican Party. Thus, instead of being seen as an important part of the gospel, some dismiss the Church's social teaching a nothing more than an unwanted intrusion of religion into politics. Others, seeing the potential conflicts that may arise from these teachings, choose either to downplay or ignore this aspect of the gospel.

## Polarization

Second, these teachings can often be controversial in themselves and, thus, a potential source of division. Given that many parishes feel the unhealthy polarization of their community into so-called

'liberal' and 'conservative' camps, some are tempted to avoid any topic that might exacerbate the very real tensions already in the community.

However, the Church's social doctrine is not optional. It is as *Justia in Mundo* stated 'a constituent element of preaching the Gospel'. To fail to teach and preach these truths would be to fail to proclaim the gospel, whole and entire. And as St. Paul said: 'Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!' (1 Cor. 9:16).

## Back to the beginning

So, how does the catechist effectively teach this part of the catechism? One way is to show how the major themes of the Social gospel follow directly from the great dogmatic truths that are summarized in the Creed. In other words, the catechist should imitate a teaching method of Jesus (only steal from the best!) and 'go back to the beginning' (cf. Mat. 19:3-9).

What was 'in the beginning'? Most students will answer 'creation', or 'Adam and Eve', or, for the more scientific among us, 'the big bang.' While these answers are not wrong in their own way, the teacher has an opportunity to emphasize an important truth – that at the beginning of it all, before the beginning of it all, there was and is God. One humorous way of saying this is that if there was a 'big bang' than there was a 'Big Banger.'

Now the catechist is able to teach or remind the students what we believe about God. God is something like this: a Father so perfect and real that His very Thought, His Word, is another Person, the Word or Son of God. And the love relationship between the Father and the Son is so perfect and real that it is another person, the Love of the Father and the Son or the Holy Spirit. But, in a similar way to the fact that my love or my thought is not separate from which I am, neither is the Father's Word or the Father's Love separate from who He is.

## A communion of Persons

Thus, at the heart and centre of the mystery that we call 'God', we find a community, a *communio*, of Persons, full of love and full of life. God is love. This is not a slogan or a feeling, but a great dogmatic statement of how God is in Himself. He is a community of Persons – a subsisting and sustained Relationship of Persons; the Father constantly pouring Himself out to His Son, the Son receiving everything from the Father and reciprocating by a total gift of Himself, and this mutual gift is the Holy Spirit.



Each and every human person is created in the image and likeness of this God, the One living and True God. God freely created to extend His *communio*. He created angels for Divine–angelic communion. He created humans for Divine–human communion. Male and female He created us. In His image and likeness He created us. He created us out of Love for love. He created us out of Communion for communion. He created us out of subsisting and sustained Relationship for relationship. Truly man is, as the Greek philosophers knew, a social being – made for communion with God and all else in God.

## Original Justice

At the beginning, humanity was in harmony with God. In the original condition, before the Fall, there was also harmony between God's human creation and sub-personal creation, the earth. The

(always the 'Hound of Heaven') comes into the Garden searching for His lost creatures, 'Where are you?' He calls. 'Where are you my beloved?'

Is this not amazing? The God who created everything that is and holds it in existence desires a relationship with us. God desires a real, intimate, passionate, personal relationship with each and every human person.

God searches for humanity! Much more important (and wonderful) than our search for God, then, is God's search for us. All of



original human community ('Adam and Eve') lived in harmony with each other. There was also internal harmony within each person – the mind, will and emotions 'lined-up' in a way that they currently do not. The condition described by these four harmonies – harmony between God and man, harmony among humanity, harmony between man and earth, and harmony within each man – is called *original justice*.

The loss of these harmonies is the result of the Fall. God offered humanity a true friendship with Him based on freedom. But mankind rejected God's offer. Seduced by Satan, the Father of Lies, into believing that God was a tyrant holding them back from becoming like onto God, Adam and Eve grasped for equality with God on their own terms destroying the trust and friendship upon which their relationship with God was based. By destroying the harmony that existed between themselves and God, humanity also disrupted the other harmonies that had been part of original justice. No longer did they experience harmony between themselves and creation. No longer did they experience harmony between themselves. No longer did they experience harmony within.

## Finding harmony

But God did not leave us in this condition. Rather, he continues to try to establish a genuine relationship with us. When humanity fell, we hid from God and from one another. But God comes in search of His human creation. In a most wonderful and beautiful passage in Genesis 3, God

salvation history can be seen as a playing out of God's search for humanity. In the fullness of time, God's search for us was consummated in the person of Jesus. God becomes one with us in the Incarnation. By His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus re-established harmony between God and man. In Jesus Christ, this new harmony is established as our liturgy puts, 'by a bond that can never be broken.' And through our new harmony with God, through the grace won for us by Christ on the Cross, all the other harmonies can be re-established. We can truly live in harmony with one another again. We can again live in harmony with sub-personal creation, the earth. We can allow God's grace to penetrate and possess us so totally that the internal disharmony caused by sin, actual and original, can be healed.

## Keeping both/and

Through an authentic relationship with Jesus we can be made whole. We can begin to live justly again. But here it is important to step aside for a moment to comment on a real problem in our community alluded to above – the so-called liberal/conservative divides. This divide is not healthy for our community and is not intended by God. One group, so-called ‘liberals’ or progressives, tend to emphasize the importance of our relationship with each other and our responsibility to the earth. And they are right to do so. Another group, the so-called ‘conservatives’ or traditionalists, tend to emphasize our need to be in harmony with God through prayer and sacraments and our need of internal spiritual healing and transformation. And they are right to do so. Both groups emphasize two of the four harmonies discussed above. But what both ‘camps’ are wrong to do is to exclude or downplay the importance of the other two harmonies. Our Catholic faith is almost always a ‘both/and’ type of faith. It rejects most ‘either/or’ type of solutions. Authentic faith values all four relationships or harmonies, recognizing that in the Kingdom all four must be found and perfected.

There is, of course, a certain priority to our relationship with God because as Jesus teaches: ‘Apart from Me you can do nothing’ (John 15:5b). But, that being said, authentic Catholic faith compels us to a deep and abiding love of God *and* neighbour, a desire to serve Him by living according to His word and will. Catholic social doctrine is part of that word.

## Seven Categories for presenting

There are several ways of summarizing the main themes of Catholic Social Teaching (CST) but I find quite useful the seven categories used by the U.S. Bishops’ Conference in their various publications on Catholic political responsibility, such as *Faithful Citizenship*. These themes flow directly from the theological vision described above.

### THE LIFE AND DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

The first and most basic theme of CST is the dignity of each human person. There is always the temptation for the powerful to divide humanity into two groups: persons and non-persons. This is done so that the powerful can exploit the weak for their own purposes. Romans did it to non-Romans. Owners did it to slaves. Men did it to women. Europeans did it to Native Americans. Today, governments and peoples are doing it to the unborn, the elderly, and the handicapped. The ideology is striking similar. The powerful arbitrarily define part of humanity as non-persons. Those thus defined can then be exploited or killed without concern. The teaching of the Church is that all living members of the species *homo sapiens* deserve the status of persons because all are created in the image and likeness of God. Any attempt to divide us into persons and non-persons must be avoided.

### THE CALL TO FAMILY, COMMUNITY, AND PARTICIPATION

We are social beings. We were created to live in communion with one another. The most fundamental community in which we live is the family. The family, a communion of life and love, images, in a way, the Triune God. It is the fundamental building block of any healthy society. As the domestic Church, it is also essential to the worshipping community. There are other communities that we are called to participate in as well. Our city, county, region and state correctly demand our allegiance in serving the common good. Also, those vast armies, ‘little platoons’, of voluntary groups are essential to societal health. Each person should fully participate in the building of healthy families, parishes, and civil societies.

### RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The third theme of CST is rights and responsibilities. Notice the very Catholic word ‘and’. Rights are codifications of moral truth. They express for us some aspect of human flourishing. Thus, with rights come responsibilities. For example, parents have a fundamental right to educate their children. With this right comes the responsibility to ensure proper intellectual and religious formation. Each Christian, and the Church as a whole, ought to be on the frontline of the battle to ensure a proper understanding of and protection of basic human rights.

### THE OPTION FOR THE POOR AND VULNERABLE

The Church has a special concern for the poor. All else being equal, our first concern must be for those who are most in need. This includes not only the spiritual and corporal works of mercy to meet immediate urgent needs, but it also includes the more difficult work of addressing the deeper reasons and pathologies that are at the root of much of our social disorder. In this work, we must always remember that poverty is not a problem to be solved but, rather, poor persons who need to be loved and served.

### THE DIGNITY OF WORK AND THE RIGHTS OF WORKERS

The Church also champions the rights of workers and values the dignity of work. Through work we help build up the common good and provide the ‘raw material’ for the Kingdom. Through labour we continue the work of creation and imitate the creative activity of God. Everyone is called to work and as workers we have both rights and duties. We have the right to unionize, to a safe and healthy workplace, to a living wage, and to reasonable working hours. We have the duty to work well in a spirit of service and love, to care for the poor, and to refrain from misusing our place and power in the marketplace.

### SOLIDARITY

The theme of solidarity emphasizes that we are all in this together. Everyone counts and we are, in a way, united to every person. Efforts on behalf of solidarity seek to heal our broken world and unite those who are estranged. In solidarity, wealthy nations should work to help aid poorer nations to develop. With solidarity one ought also to emphasize subsidiarity. Subsidiarity is the principle that teaches that what can be done on a lower level of society ought not to be usurped by a higher level of social organization. Thus, a federal government ought not to do what can be effectively done on a regional or state level and local government ought not to do what the family can effectively do. The principles of solidarity and subsidiarity are in a healthy tension with each other. Each corrects the excesses of the other and both are necessary for a just society.

### CARING FOR GOD’S CREATION

Last, but not least, is our commitment to be good stewards of the earth. God created us to husband and care for the rest of creation. We have the responsibility to hand on to subsequent generations an environment that is at least as healthy and vibrant as the one we received. As John Paul II said in his World Peace Statement of 1990, *The Ecological Crisis A Common Responsibility*: ‘The commitment of believers to a healthy environment for everyone stems directly from their belief in God the Creator, from their recognition of the effects of original and personal sin, and from the certainty of having been redeemed by Christ. Respect for life and for the dignity of the human person extends also to the rest of creation, which is joined to man in praising God (cf. Ps 148).’

Catholic Social Teaching is not a partisan political platform or ideology. The glossary of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines it as ‘the teaching of the Church on the truth of revelation about human dignity, human solidarity, and the principles of justice and peace; the moral judgments about economic and social matters required by such truth and about the demands of justice and peace.’ As such it is a constituent part of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and part of the Good News leading all towards salvation. We are called to be peacemakers. We are called to hunger and thirst for justice. The Church’s social doctrine aids us, through the grace of God, to help heal a world fractured by sin and division.

## Notes

- 1 William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew (Volume 1): Revised Edition* (Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1975), pp.99–102.
- 2 *Justice in the World*, issued by the Synod of Bishops in 1971.

### MGR STUART SWETLAND

Msgr. Stuart W. Swetland, S.T.D., was ordained a priest in 1991 for the Diocese of Peoria, IL. He received his undergraduate degree in Physics from the U.S. Naval Academy. Elected Rhodes Scholar in 1981, he entered the Catholic Church while studying at Oxford. He has a B.A. and M.A. in Politics, Philosophy and Economics from Oxford; a M.Div. and M.A. from Mt. Saint Mary’s Seminary; and his S.T.L. and S.T.D. from the Pontifical Lateran University where he studied at the John Paul II Institute in Washington, DC. He currently serves as Director of Homiletics and Pre-Theology at Mount St. Mary’s Seminary in Emmitsburg, Maryland. He also currently serves as Theological Advisor to the Catholic Conference of Illinois and is the Executive Secretary for the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars. Msgr. Swetland was named a Prelate of Honor in 2000 by His Holiness John Paul II and is a Knight Commander for the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre and is a 4th Degree Knight of Columbus.