



CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT AND THE MOVEMENTS

Towards Social Discernment and a Transformative Presence in the World¹

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This article discusses the role of the proliferating Catholic social movements in the development and interpretation of Catholic social thought. Engaged as they are with the world of the poor, the author argues that the Church can only become a transformative presence when it accepts other voices in dialogue with the Roman Magisterium: the voices of local episcopal conferences, the social movements and the grassroots communities in the spirit of Gaudium et Spes' injunction "to scrutinize the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel" (GS, 4).

Catholic social thought is more than merely an official and papal social doctrine. It is a complex and living tradition of practice and thought, a continuing learning process at the point of intersection between gospel and life. In this learning process catholic movements play a crucial role. Before principles are proposed or applied, they already embody at grassroots level and as mediators between the grassroots and global institutions, a commitment to life and justice. They are engaged in a discernment process about responding to social, political and economic problems in the light of the gospel.

Consequently, any project aimed at understanding the role of Catholic social thought must start from the historical presence of an

¹ This article is a revised version of my lecture at the St. Vincent School of Theology on 28 October 2009. I made use of both my position paper for the expert seminar on Catholic Social Thought and the Movements (Leuven, October 2011) and my article "Towards Interpreting Signs of the Times, Conversation with the World and Inclusion of the Poor: Three Challenges for Catholic Social Teaching," *International Journal of Public Theology* 5 (2011): 314-330.



Catholic Social Thought and the Movements

amazing diversity of movements in different contexts around the world. In this article I will map them and suggest how their social discernment can be inspired by *Gaudium et Spes* and the option for the poor.

AN AMAZING DIVERSITY

Despite the fact that Catholic movements are sometimes reduced to the so-called '*movimenti*', they are much more than that. Catholics are involved in at least five different sorts of movements:

(1) The 'classical' international catholic movements such as the Christian worker movement and its sub-movements, Catholic farmers leagues, Catholic organisations of employers, *Caritas* International, *Pax Christi*, *Pax Romana*, and others. These movements are officially represented at and acknowledged by the Vatican as 'international catholic movements'. Some of them are quite secularised and in exceptional cases they even do not refer to their Christian identity in their name (In Belgium, for example, the organisation of Catholic Women of the Middle Classes [CMBV] is re-baptised into 'Markant' and the Catholic Working Class Women into 'Femma'). To the group of the classical movements belong also the local committees of *Justice and Peace*. Their influence on the development of catholic social thought should not be underestimated and they publish often documents with an excellent analysis of local situations or problems. Very important for the peace agenda is the mediation between Christian inspiration and political decision making in *Pax Christi*. Its radius of action is both global and local. *Pax Christi* is very efficient and succeeded, for example, in mobilising support for the International Mine Ban Treaty. Other Catholic social movements, such as *Caritas* International, are very professional in mobilising funds and aid in case of disasters or famines.

(2) Some catholic movements are the spinoff of religious orders and congregations such as, for example, the Jesuit Refugee Service, the Vincentian Family, the Dominican Family and many others. They are good examples of an integral ecclesiological commitment of religious, priests and laymen and women. They constitute not only efficient networks in response to specific needs, but they also contribute



Johan Verstraeten

to reflection and institutional change. Inspired by the spirituality of the religious order or congregation from which they originate, they practice social discernment in the spirit of Vatican II (“scrutinizing the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the gospel”).

(3) The ‘*movimenti*’ or spirituality movements are cherished by the hierarchy. They occupy a prominent place in the Catholic Church since the Synod on the Laity in 1987. Despite their focus on spirituality and charity, they are often engaged in political, economic or social action. The ‘economy of communion’ of the Focolare movement is explicitly acknowledged by Pope Benedict XVI in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*. The former *Movimento Popolare* (part of *Comunione e Liberazione*) has played a direct political role in Italy. The Community of Sant’Egidio has developed innovative practices in diplomacy and plays a crucial role in interreligious dialogue. The *Communauté de l’Arche* (founded by Jean Vanier) has created alternative care centres for people with a mental handicap.

A characteristic of most “new” *movimenti* is a remarkable loyalty to the pope and sometimes they even function as an instrument of centralisation by the Vatican. In some cases they cause conflicts with the local bishop; in other cases they support the policy of conservative bishops. They are very professional in raising funds. They are well connected with political and economic elites and have collaborators in powerful administrations (such as the European Commission). They are very efficient in networking with the Church hierarchy. To mention only a few examples: the secretary of the former Pope Benedict XVI is also professor of canon law at the Opus Dei University Santa Croce and the sisters who take care of his household are members of *Comunione e Liberazione*.

(4) The radical Christian movements and basic communities play mainly a role in the South, but they are also present in the North (for example, Christians for Socialism, or ATD Quard Monde). They play a crucial role in detecting social problems and they develop challenging instruments for analysis and action with regard to the poor. They advocate for the rights of undocumented people, refugees, urban poor, domestic workers, etc., and they inspire local church leaders to write innovative documents on the problems they have detected. Despite their direct contact with the poor, they do



Catholic Social Thought and the Movements

not reduce their action to mere charity. They combine their immersion with the poor and their participation in the struggle against injustice with critical analysis and reflection.

(5) There are Christians who actively participate in secular social movements, for example, Christian militants in secular trade unions and socialist parties, members of Amnesty International, members of Doctors without Borders, members of Greenpeace, etc. They cope with the tension between their ‘secular’ commitments and sometimes the disturbing lack of attention for or understanding of their organisations by the Church’s hierarchy.

The living presence of these movements or individual Catholic members of secular movements is a clear testimony of the insertion of the Catholic Church in the world. They “wrestle with the meaning of Christian faith amid turbulent social times,”² and their reflection as “non-official Catholic social thought” constitutes together with the official teaching the social tradition of the Catholic Church.³

THE MOVEMENTS AND THE CONFLICT OF INTERPRETATION IN OFFICIAL CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

Despite Benedict XVI’s claim in *Caritas in Veritate* that there is a ‘single teaching’ and a completely coherent ‘doctrinal corpus’ (CV 12), Catholic social thought is confronted with a fundamental conflict of interpretation. The problem is not the encyclical’s denial of a shift from the pre-Vatican II to the post-Vatican II social doctrine, but a conflict of interpretation in the post-Vatican II social thought itself with regards to the acceptance or the rejection of the theological legacy of *Gaudium et Spes*. While the pastoral constitution of Vatican II articulates a theology that acknowledges God’s presence in the

² Marvin L. Krier Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements* (Mystic, CN: Twenty-Third Publications, 2000), 1.

³ For an elucidation of the relation between catholic social thought and catholic social teaching see Johan Verstraeten, “Rethinking Catholic Social Thought as Tradition,” in *Twilight or Renaissance?*, eds. Boswell, McHugh, and Verstraeten (Leuven, Peeters, 2000), 59–78.



Johan Verstraeten

concrete history of humankind, Benedict XVI supports a theology based on an image of God as mediated by the Church, whereby the Church is interpreted as a distinct sociolinguistic reality that brings God's love to the world via an application of the truth propositions of the *magisterium* by individual Catholics.⁴ Benedict XVI even implicitly suggests that non-Christians who participate in the life of the *polis*, have an inadequate understanding of what is good and just; that without the truth propositions offered by the Church, a 'correct' understanding of charity, justice and development is impossible. The encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, in some ways reflecting a Protestant two-kingdom-theory (or at least an Augustinian distinction between *civitas Dei* and *civitas terrena*), separates in a quite un-catholic way the *opus proprium* (proper work) of the State from the *opus proprium* of the Church, and justice from charity – a contention which is corrected later on in *Caritas in Veritate*.

In such a perspective, the role of movements is to propagate the official doctrine and to 'humanize' the world via the commitment of individual Catholics to comply with the official 'doctrine' in their social, political or economic life. They are not really 'subjects' and co-authors of Catholic social thought, unlike in the perspective opened by Vatican II and particularly by the theological intuitions of *Gaudium et Spes*. For a majority of Council fathers the Church was not a 'societas perfecta' or preaching entity separated from the world, nor a container of truths acting in the world via individuals who apply them, but a community "linked with humankind and its history by the deepest bonds". According to *Gaudium et Spes* "the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted" are also the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ..." (GS, 1)

From the perspective of *Gaudium et Spes*, God is not only operating in the world via the applied truth propositions of the church, but He is also present and acting in the concrete history of humankind. Eric Borgman contends that the awareness of a profound link between the Church and the world reflects the device

⁴ This is also the thesis of Bernard Laurent, "*Caritas in Veritate* as a Social Encyclical: A Modest Challenge to Economic, Social and Political Institutions," *Theological Studies* 71 (2010): 544.



Catholic Social Thought and the Movements

of Marie Dominique Chenu and the priest-worker movement according to which “presence in the world is presence with God”.⁵ It is *via* this presence in the world, and not only as intra-church instruments of the hierarchy, that the movements respond to the task of evangelizing and humanizing the world.

Given the conflict of interpretation, the question is how the tension between two fundamentally different theological interpretations of the relationship between the God/church and world can be resolved. The solution cannot be the sort of dichotomized thinking that would be alien to the complexity of the Catholic tradition. The challenge is to value both the theological legacy of *Gaudium et Spes* (which as the pastoral constitution of an ecumenical council has an epistemological priority over papal encyclicals) and to take seriously the genuine concerns of Benedict XVI with regard the distinctiveness of the Christian contribution to the humanization of the world – and this without falling into the pitfall of easy harmonization which would deny the hermeneutical tensions.

I will try to articulate my answer by way of revisiting the crucial definition of the task of Catholic social thought as “scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in light of the light of the gospel’ (*GS*, 4).

The first component here is “scrutinizing the signs of the times”. This is not merely a matter of social analysis but also a truly theological task based on the presupposition already mentioned above: that God is at work in this real history of humankind and that movements respond to it. *GS* 11 articulates the task of scrutinizing as “to decipher authentic signs of God’s presence and purpose in the happenings, needs and desires in which this people [the people of God] has a par along with other men [the language is not yet inclusive!] of our age”. Such deciphering presupposes, as Erik Borgman highlights, that “God’s transcendence cannot be discovered in the exaltation and distance with respect to the concrete and laborious life, but precisely in connection with it.”⁶

⁵ Erik Borgman, *Want de plaats waarop je staat is heilige grond. God als onderzoeksprogramma* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2008), 64.

⁶ Erik Borgman, *Metamorfosen. Over religie en moderne cultuur*, as quoted by Christophe Brabant, in *Tertio* (19 September 2007), 14.



Johan Verstraeten

However, this discovery is also a difficult process since it confronts the movements when discerning about what to do with the real ambivalences of history and the structures of evil that pervert the process of humanization. There are both life-giving developments and destructive tendencies, processes of authentic human liberation and processes of human destruction. Both have a theological significance. The positive realizations can be theologically interpreted as traces of the original blessing, as signs of the times and manifestations of God's in-breaking in history. Yet the negative tendencies can also have a positive meaning as contrast experiences, or as what Borgman describes, as the discovery of "traces of longing for wholesomeness that are hidden in the [already present] resistance against all that in the existing relationships imprisons and humiliates human persons and which influences their experience of God as such that they experience him often as absent."⁷ In either case, the starting point of both the social discernment of the movements and Catholic social thought should be the world rather than the Church. Yet, despite the fact that scrutinizing the signs of the times is a theological hermeneutic, it must also include (or more precisely, be mediated by) social analysis and ethical reflection. Judgements on the world cannot be merely made on the basis of faith propositions.⁸ Without social and ethical analysis, the faith perspective loses touch with reality or leads to the construction of a world of pious ideas which would be more an expression of social alienation than a solution to it. Hence a well-intended spiritual attitude is not sufficient. Any theological interpretation must not forget to "track the contours of reality; it has to have accuracy, and not simply imagination or appeal."⁹ The problem is that all too often encyclicals lack analysis and particular references to the social, economic and political analyses conducted by prominent scholars. According to Bernard Laurent there is in the encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* even a "refusal to deliver any form of

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ For a reflection on this problem see Johan de Tavenier, "Eschatology and Social Ethics," in *Personalist Morals: Essays in Honor of Professor Louis Janssens*, ed. Joseph Selling (Leuven: Peeters/University Press, 1988), 279–300.

⁹ Cf. Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994), 24.



Catholic Social Thought and the Movements

analysis of the structures.”¹⁰ That view should be nuanced, however, since the encyclical contains at least some hints as to the structural dimensions of problems. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that the focus is either on individual conversion or the changing personal relations and ‘fraternity’. Although this approach opens new perspectives and enables us to discover in business transactions human relationships, it is insufficient for the full realization of the ‘good life’ which, according to Paul Ricoeur, is always lived “together with others, in the context of *just institutions*”. These institutions cannot be developed without a thorough and adequate analysis¹¹ and this is impossible without a conversation between several dialogue partners, including the critical movements as I explain below.

Economic or social analysis alone is also not sufficient. Catholic social thought needs also vision and imagination. In this regard we can understand the genuine concern of Benedict XVI to value the distinctiveness of the Christian contribution to the humanization of the world. But it does not also follow that this should become exclusively a matter of top-down doctrinal truth propositions. A more dynamic approach is proposed by *Gaudium et Spes*—scrutinizing the signs of the times *in the light of the gospel*—a crucial second component.

The reference to the gospel is neither a matter of supplying the world with additional truths nor of using the Bible as reservoir of citations to be used as illustration of moral insights. What matters is the discovery of “the reciprocity of the Gospel and real life” *via* an hermeneutical mediation in which revelation is understood as an “open and ongoing encounter between God and humanity”.¹² When we read the gospel from the context in which we live, when grassroots movements, bishops, the Pope and his advisers read the gospel from

¹⁰ Bernard Laurent, “*Caritas in Veritate* as a Social Encyclical,” *Theological Studies* 71 (2010): 538.

¹¹ During a conference at the Vatican (15-16 October 2010), co-sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and the Institute of Advanced Catholic Studies, several participants have presented papers in which the lack of analysis and institutional focus was criticized (see, for example, the papers written by John Coleman sj, and David Hollenbach sj).

¹² Aloysius L. Cartagenas, “The Challenge of Inter-disciplinarity to Catholic Social Thought,” *Hapag* 4 (2007), No. 1-2: 124.



Johan Verstraeten

the perspective of their different historical and local or global contexts, something fundamental happens in the interplay between, on the one hand, historical experience and context, and, on the other hand, the confrontation with an abundance of meaning generated by the biblical metaphors and stories. In and through a contextual-hermeneutical relation with the biblical text we are enabled to see the world in a new light and to discover new ways of being and acting. Such an hermeneutic relation with the living text of the bible gives movements “new eyes for seeing the ultimate truth of things and new energies for exploring unknown and dangerous paths,” as Jon Sobrino articulates.¹³ According to Anthonette Mendoza it enables to “hear the cries of those who suffer the injustices in a different key within our consciousness” and it enables us “to commit ourselves (...) to alternative actions that will not tolerate the myth of the ‘way things are’.”¹⁴

The plea of *Caritas in Veritate* for the realization of an economy which includes ‘gratuitousness’ and for ‘the economy of communion’ can be considered as such an alternative action. However, more innovative thinking and practices are necessary which require not only an analysis of what is, but also a discernment about what can be disclosed in the present as a precondition for the emergence of a new future.

Here we can refer to the well-understood utopian dimension of our tradition, which Paul VI acknowledged in *Octogesima Adveniens* 37 as “a forward-looking imagination” that enables forward-looking movements “both to perceive in the present the disregarded possibility hidden within it, and to direct itself towards a fresh future.” Such an imagination “sustains social dynamism by the confidence that it gives to the inventive powers of the human mind and heart...” From a totally different perspective, Otto Scharmer calls this ‘pre-sensing’¹⁵.

¹³ Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 151.

¹⁴ Quoted with permission from an unpublished paper, “The Common Good as an Ethical Framework for Development” presented by Anthonette Mendoza at the first social week in the UK organized by the Las Casas Institute for Ethics, Governance and Social Justice (2010), 5.

¹⁵ C. Otto Scharmer, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges. The Social Technology of Presensing* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009).



Catholic Social Thought and the Movements

This engaged hermeneutics has a compelling need, as Anthonette Mendoza argues, for breaking away from the biases and blind spots that have caused so much ill effects on people, communities and societies; biases which Lonergan described as ‘negative spontaneities’¹⁶ deeply rooted in our system, which lead us to “hate the truly good and to love the really evil” (Mic. 3:2). A chance for healing from these biases requires a consistent involvement with God’s-being-in-the-world, translated in our times as God’s being-with-the multitude of people subjected to suffering the prevalent power play in the world. This on-going involvement is the condition of possibility for the release of creative capacities and/or imagination necessary for a truly liberating dialogue concerning the world economy.

The gospel enables us to discover in the history of the humanization of the world hidden or unarticulated possibilities which pave the way towards new future. This future is, however, not simply an extension of the present since we are, as Oscar Romero said, “prophets of a future that is not our own.”¹⁷ Or, in the words of Bieringer and Elsbernd: our vision of the future “is not an extension of present possibilities into the future, but rather the future reaching out to meet the present as an annunciation of something more or as a disjunction from what is.”¹⁸ This is not a reference to something completely foreign to human experience since the vision is “already present in human longings, desires, and hopes.”¹⁹

A contextual reading of the Gospel shapes the possibility of a practical and semantic innovation. This semantic and practical inspiration reveals also the paradoxical character of social discernment in the light of the Gospel, that is, the Church functioning as *sacramentum mundi*, as an inspiring and healing force *in* the concrete history of women and men in so far as it is fully *connected* with the world but, at the same time, making a distinction and even a difference by way of *interrupting* time-bound hermeneutic schemes and practices (such as Lonergan’s “negative spontaneities”), as well as by developing new practices.

¹⁶ Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1978).

¹⁷ Mary Elsbernd and Reimund Bieringer, *When Love is Not Enough: A Theology of Justice*, (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 156 note 20.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 156.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.



Johan Verstraeten

In this regard, Catholic movements can indeed be a source of semantic and practical innovation with direct relevance to the world. Insights that are universal and thus valid for each are not ahistorical, as if they were merely a matter of abstract and “thin” principles. The universal gets continuous meaning from particular traditions that provide the thin categories with meaning. What today is not yet considered as “universal,” can become universally acknowledged as reasonable under the influence of an enriched understanding of our own humanity via the semantic and practical innovation stimulated by an hermeneutic relation to narrative texts. In this perspective, it is not only by reading the signs of the times in history but also through the distinctiveness of its social vision that the Church realizes her universality and, movements are carriers of this distinctiveness. This explains their many innovative practices that inspired the secular world, such as the new diplomatic practices by Sant’Egidio or the socially responsible investment initiatives by the religious congregations who created the Interfaith Centre for Corporate Responsibility.

When movements interpret the signs of the times and scrutinize them in the light of the gospel, they contribute in an inspiring, critical and innovative way to the transformative presence of the Church in the world. Since this is not simply a matter of applying top-down proclaimed doctrinal insights, there is thus the absolute necessity of an indispensable dialogue of the Church’s teaching authority with all the actors participating in the discernment process.

CRITICAL MOVEMENTS AND THE CONVERSATION ABOUT THE CONTENT OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT

Pope Benedict XVI is clearly conscious of the need for conversation since in *Caritas in Veritate* 4, he explicitly admits: “Truth, in fact, is *logos* which creates *dia-logos*, and hence communication and communion,” and in terms which reflect almost Habermas’ idea of ‘*Verständigung*’ he continues: “Truth, by enabling men and women to let go of their subjective opinions and impressions, allows them to move beyond cultural and historical limitations and to come together in the assessment of the value and substance of things.” Such a truth



Catholic Social Thought and the Movements

seeking conversation requires openness for the reasonable arguments and insights of all the ‘stakeholders’ of the Catholic social tradition, including movements and Catholic scholars, to whom no reference is made in the footnotes of encyclicals (*‘Populorum Progressio’* being an exception).

The point is that not only the voice of critical movements is neglected in official texts but also that of the bishops, despite the insistence of Vatican II in the collegiality between the pope and the bishops.

Neither *Caritas in Veritate* nor *Deus Caritas Est* contains references to texts from Bishops’ Conferences. This is also the case in the official *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church* (2004), which completely disregards *Justice in the World*, the final text of the general Synod of Bishops on justice of 1971. The *Compendium* makes no reference, either to the epoch making texts of Medellin or Puebla, nor to other influential texts such *Economic Justice for all* issued by the American bishops in 1986 as one of the best articulations of catholic thinking on justice ever written.

The *Compendium* tries to justify such omissions theologically by claiming that the bishops should be the “propagators of the Roman social doctrine”. Moreover, while the *Compendium* acknowledges that the bishops bear “the primary responsibility for the pastoral commitment to evangelise social realities,”²⁰ it also proclaims that they *only* have the task of “*promoting* the teaching and *diffusion* of the Church’s social *doctrine* [my italics]”.²¹

This unilateral view on communication is in contradiction with the consensus reached among scholars during the 1993 international Conference at the University of Fribourg, organised on the occasion of the publication and presentation of the *Répertoire des documents épiscopaux des cinq continents (1891-1991)*²² (Directory of the Documents

²⁰ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church* (Rome: Vatican City, 2004), nr. 539

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² The Fribourg conference took place on 1-3 of April 1993. The proceedings were published by R. Berthouzoz, and R. Papini, eds., *Ethique, économie et développement: L’enseignement des évêques des cinq continents (1891-1991)*, *Etudes d’éthique chrétienne*, 62 (Fribourg: Editions universitaires and Paris: Le Cerf, 1995). The Conference was organised on the occasion of a project which



Johan Verstraeten

from the Bishops of the Five Continents on the Economy). During that Conference, Cardinal Etchegaray, then president of the *Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace*, straightforwardly declared, that the time has come for taking the bishops' ministry with regards to the social teaching more seriously. He criticised in clear language the unilateral focus on papal texts.²³ He also declared that the social teaching of the bishops will be "more and more continental and regional," and he suggested the possibility of documents "by both the bishops of the North and the South."²⁴ He moreover explicitly criticized the fact that the social discourse of the Church is "still too much western".

The conversation cannot, however, be limited to bishops. A re-examination of *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971) is instructive in this regard. Pope Paul VI acknowledged that it has become impossible to put forward a solution which would be "in congruity with all local situations" (*qua solutio, omnibus locus congruens, proponatur*). His alternative, if far from doctrinal, states:

It is up to the Christian communities [a clear reference to the integral ecclesiology of *Lumen Gentium* chapter II] to analyze (*perscrutentur*) with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country, to shed on it the light of the Gospel's unalterable words and to draw principles of reflection (*principia cogitandi*), norms of judgment (*iudicandi normas*) and directives for action (*regulas operandi*) from the social teaching of the Church. . . . It is up to these Christian communities [in other words, it is not only the task of the magisterium or of bishops' conferences, although in communion with them], with the help of the Holy Spirit, in communion with the bishops who hold responsibility and in dialogue with other Christian brethren and all men of good will [ecumenical perspective and open attitude towards secular movements], to discern (*discernere*) the options and commitments which are called for in order to bring about the social, political and economic changes seen in many cases to be urgently needed. (*OA*, 4)

was later on published as R. Berthouzoz, R. Papini, C.J. Pino de Olivera, and R. Sugranyes de Franch, eds., *Economie et développement: Répertoire des documents épiscopaux des cinq continents (1891-1991)*, *Etudes d'éthique chrétienne*, 69 (Fribourg, Editions universitaires and Paris: Le Cerf, 1997).

²³ R. Berthouzoz, et al., *Economie et développement*, 257.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 258.



Catholic Social Thought and the Movements

In carrying out this task, Catholic movements can become the critical allies of the bishops, particularly in developing a less ‘western’ or ‘Roman’ social tradition of practice and thought. A crucial component hereby is the option for the poor.

REVISITING THE OPTION FOR THE POOR

The 1968 Conference of Latin American bishops (CELAM) in Medellin proclaimed an ‘option for the poor’, but this option has undergone several revisions. The CELAM Conference at Puebla in 1979 referred to the ‘preferential option for the poor’, while Cardinal Ratzinger as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith used in his second letter on Liberation Theology (1986) the expression ‘preferential love for the poor’. The problem here is not so much the words chosen, but the vision of Catholic social thought with regard to the role of the poor, who must be more than merely the object of care or charity. Any attempt to revisit the option for the poor must, moreover, take into account that this option is not necessarily a specific Christian commitment. It has also an objective dimension, since it refers to a realistic assessment of lifestyles, policies and social institutions in terms of their impact on the poor. Society has the face of its victims and this face is real.

Simultaneously the presence of the poor as the real suffering victims of history has a theological meaning, as Ignacio Ellacuria argues:

“Among all the signs we see—some of them obvious and some barely perceptible— in every age there is always one that stands out, in the light of which we can discern and interpret all the others. That sign is the historically crucified people, which is always present although the historical method of crucifixion constantly changes. This crucified people is the historical successor of the servant of Yahweh, still deprived of human form by the sin of the world...”²⁵

²⁵ Ignacio Ellacuria, “Discernir el signo de los tiempos,” *Diakonia* 17 (1981), 58 as cited in Jon Sobrino, *Where is God? Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity, and Hope*, trans. Margaret Wilde (New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 51.



Johan Verstraeten

However, according to Rolando Tuazon, this theological meaning implies that it is not sufficient to see the face of Christ in the suffering humanity. One must also acknowledge how the exclusion of the poor manifests the limits or sinfulness of the *systems* of which they are the victims. The theological interpretation radicalises it. The struggle of the poor for life, truth, justice and peace becomes a concrete manifestation “of God’s in-breaking into human history”²⁶ whereby the excluded and oppressed “other” enjoys “in an asymmetric way an epistemic privilege”. Consequently, it becomes necessary to adopt the perspective of the poor also “in the (re)interpretation of tradition”. Their experience of the world enables Catholic social thought to unmask oppressive elements in its tradition and to liberate itself from false representations of reality. From the perspective of the poor, the separation of love and justice, and the underestimation of the institutional aspects of social, political and economic problems, becomes highly problematic.²⁷ Hence the absolute necessity to establish better communication channels between grassroots movements who have a direct experience of the real life conditions of the poor and the teaching authorities of the Church. Not taking the critical articulation of this experience seriously leads to dogmatic abstractions which do no justice to both the poor and the theological understanding of God.

In this regard, one can criticize and value *Caritas in Veritate*. On the one hand, the encyclical focuses so much on fraternity and gift that there is a lack of structural and institutional analysis. But, on the other hand, compared with *Deus Caritas Est*, this encyclical is an improvement since at least with regards to the problem of hunger, the need for a structural analysis is acknowledged. According to *Caritas in Veritate*, “hunger is not so much dependent on lack of material things as on shortage of social resources, the most important of which are institutional. What is missing in other words is a network

²⁶ Rolando A. Tuazon, “Narrating Christian Ethics from the Margins. An Interdisciplinary and Liberative Ethical Approach to Narratives,” *Hapag* 4 (2007) No. 1-2, 59.

²⁷ See my article entitled “Justice subordinated to Love? The Changing Agenda of Catholic Social Teaching since *Populorum Progressio*,” in *Responsibility, God and Society: Theological Ethics in Dialogue*, eds. Johan de Tavernier et al, BETL Series CCXVII (Leuven: Peeters, 2008), 389-405.



Catholic Social Thought and the Movements

of economic institutions capable of guaranteeing regular access to sufficient food and water for nutritional needs, and also capable of addressing the primary needs and necessities ensuing from genuine food crises, whether due to natural causes or political irresponsibility, nationally and internationally”. The problem of food insecurity must be addressed within a long-term perspective, “eliminating the *structural causes* that give rise to it and promoting the agricultural development of poorer countries” (CV, 27).

With regard structural changes, the Catholic Church can play the role of a courageous advanced guard, conscious of its duty to become a transformative power in the history of humankind, hence the need to revalue the words of the Synod of Bishops in 1971. The now marginalised *Justitia in Mundo* document proclaims that “action on behalf of justice and *participation in the transformation of the world*” [italics mine] is a “constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.”²⁸ The Catholic Church can become a transformative presence in the world on the condition that it accepts and values the participation of the poor, both in society and in the Church.

CONCLUSION

Catholic social movements are not merely obedient applicators of the official catholic social teaching. They are also active subjects in the development of the Catholic social tradition of practice and thought. As such their role is not to be defenders of the *status quo* (what Mounier described as the ‘established disorder’). As agents of change, the social movements enable the Church to become a *transformative* power in the history of humanity, a history in which the

²⁸ Synod of Catholic Bishops, Justice in the World (1971) section 6. Misunderstandings about these words have led to a reinterpretation of the link between action for justice in terms of “profound links” in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

The misunderstanding was, however, not caused by the original text but by its translation in German and Dutch in which constitutive was interpreted as “essential.”



Johan Verstraeten

poor are not reduced to objects of charity but fully accepted as subjects. Together with them, they read the signs of the times and develop the imagination for the emergence of a common future. In this perspective, it makes sense to remember the words of Pope John Paul II that “[t]he 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,” and that this awareness “is a source of her preferential option for the poor” (CA, 57). This implies more than the heroism of individuals. It must include strategies for change which take into account the interaction between individuals and institutions, inspiration and policy, charity and justice. By inserting itself courageously in this transformative interaction *via* its movements, the Church becomes capable of responding to the yearning of millions for a more humane life.



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