This article first appeared in the April 2020 Print Edition of *Catholic Family News* (click HERE to subscribe; current subscribers can access the E-Edition HERE). See here for Part II, here for Part III, here for Part IV, here for Part V, here for Part VI, and here for Part VII of this series.

Editor's Note [April 2020]: In light of the current U.S. election season, with its typically heated and often wrong-headed political rhetoric, *Catholic Family News* is pleased to offer a new series on Catholic Social Teaching (CST) by Dr. Peter Kwasniewski, who has taught this subject at the college level. Over the next several months [in the Print Edition], Dr. Kwasniewski will be covering a wide range of topics that fall under the CST umbrella, including hierarchy vs. egalitarianism, liberty vs. license, the common use of goods, disagreements between Distributists and Capitalists, the incompatibility of Socialism and CST, and more. It is our hope that this series will provide readers with a solid overview of CST and many of its facets, thus imparting a clear vision for human society according to the mind of Christ and His Church.

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Part I: Introduction

In the years when I taught Catholic Social Teaching (in what follows, "CST") to college students, one thing always struck me: my students wanted to hear, at the very beginning, an explanation of why such a thing *even exists*. They wanted to know where it came from—or, to put it more bluntly, why a religion centered on eternal life, obtained through supernatural faith and divinely-empowered sacraments, should be interested in questions of constitutions and laws, labor and wages, ownership and management, and so forth. It's a valid question: Why, indeed, should the Church take an interest in man's social life, including politics and economics?

Thanks to the theoreticians and social engineers of the ineptly-named Age of Enlightenment, and as a result of Protestant errors about the visibility of the Church as a society, moderns are especially prone to think about religion as a "private" affair, something "between God and the soul." In this way of looking at things, the Church has but the business of helping each soul to find its way toward God, the true eternal good, rising above a world of deceptive promises.

In one sense, this is true: it is God who creates each individual soul with an immortal destiny, and Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died for the redemption of that soul. As the priest Caecilius in John Henry Newman's novel *Callista* beautifully says: "There is but one Lover of

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souls…and He loves each one of us, as if there were no one else to love. He died for each one of us, as if there were no one else to die for…. The nearer we draw to Him, the more triumphantly does He enter into us; the longer He dwells in us, the more intimately have we possession of Him. It is an espousal for eternity."

But in another sense, the question posed is odd, if one appreciates the truth first formulated by the pagan philosopher Aristotle in the second chapter of his *Politics*: man is a social and political animal, one who is born into, grows up with, and matures only in, communities—first and most naturally the family, but also the city or state comprising many families in one place that can assist one another in living well. In fact, Aristotle claimed that being social and political was so connected to the nature of man that someone who did not live in society must be either a beast or a god. The Church takes an interest in social life because the human person she teaches, rules, and sanctifies is *social by nature*, and Christ, true God and true man, came to save the *whole* man *in his totality.* Unlike the Enlightenment, Catholics do not bifurcate man into a private religious soul and a public secular body. Man is a unified entity whose social life surrounds and impinges on his interior life, and whose interior life seeks expression and support in relationships and institutions outside of him.

More than that, Christ came to bring about an eternal and perfect society, the Kingdom of God, which would be as much greater than human society as the divine is greater than the human. The preparation of man for this eternal polity—we may call it the City of God or the heavenly Jerusalem—involves his living a good and holy life here below, in the earthly city, along the ways of this world. There is no salvation that bypasses our treatment of neighbor, family, coworker, or fellow citizen. Ethics is not merely an individual science but a social one, with questions of moral good and evil at stake, questions of virtue and vice, actions pleasing and displeasing to God. Man's social life is not only *not* irrelevant to his salvation, it is deeply bound up with it. Hence, CST belongs to *moral theology*: it belongs to that exercise of the Church's teaching office or Magisterium that concerns matters of behavior, as distinct from that which concerns truths to be believed, though inevitably these areas are interconnected. In addition, the Church is the guardian of the natural law, which contains the precepts of justice (the virtue which is most directly engaged in social interactions). Thus, the Church is the infallible authority on what the natural law requires men to do in justice in society. A merely "natural" or "scientific" perspective would inevitably be a darkened perspective, without the illumination of divine revelation and Catholic tradition.

Life in Abundance

Jesus Christ came that men might have life, and have it *abundantly* (cf. Jn 10:10). Our Lord does not save *every* good thing for Heaven, even if He does reserve the best. The family, the

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neighborhood, friendships, cultures, even states—all of these can be *more or less* sanctified, more or less imbued with divine truth, goodness, and beauty. This will make them more or less perfect occasions for experiencing the joy and peace of God. Putting the same truth negatively, man cannot develop well as a child of God if his social nature is handicapped, or his social life is poisoned or paralyzed. Pope John Paul II wrote:

> "When, under the influence of the Paraclete, people discover this divine dimension of their being and life, both as individuals and as a community, they are able to free themselves from the various determinisms which derive mainly from the materialistic bases of thought, practice, and related modes of action. In our age these factors have succeeded in penetrating into man's inmost being, into that sanctuary of the conscience where the Holy Spirit continuously radiates the light and strength of new life in the 'freedom of the children of God.' [cf. Rom. 8:21] Man's growth in this life is hindered by the conditionings and pressures exerted upon him by dominating structures and mechanisms in the various spheres of society. It can be said that in many cases social factors, instead of fostering the development and expansion of the human spirit, ultimately deprive the human spirit of the genuine truth of its being and life—over which the Holy Spirit keeps vigil—in order to subject it to the 'prince of this world.' [John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11]" (*Dominum et Vivificantem*, §60)

On the other hand, as we know, the Catholic Faith always rightly *relativizes* earthly happiness. We must never be allowed to forget (as unfortunately current Vatican policy seems hell-bent on forgetting) that this world is not our intended permanent home and that we are created for the face-to-face vision of God, the Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, in festal communion with the saints and angels, in a "new heavens and a new earth according to His promises, in which justice dwelleth" (2 Pet. 3:13). Our Lady said to St. Bernadette Soubirous: "I do not promise you happiness in this life, only in the next." St. Teresa of Avila had a famous bookmark in her prayer book:

> "Let nothing disturb you,
> Let nothing frighten you,
> All things pass away:
> God never changes.
> Patience obtains all things.
> He who has God
> finds he lacks nothing;

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> God alone suffices."

Man cannot be and was not meant to be perfectly happy in this life, in this world; yet he *is* called to share, even now, in the superabundant life, yes, the *joy*, of Jesus Christ, through belonging ever more intimately to His Mystical Body. Because the mystery of Christ is truly present in this world in His Church, she has the permanent mission and imperative to make of human life *in all of its dimensions* a gift that is worthy of God, and to foster a human environment that promotes in every way this gift of self to God and to one's fellow man. Society of all kinds—the family, the clan or tribe or ethnic community, the nation—is the ground in which the individual's response is rooted. This ground can be more or less rich, moist, and fertile soil. The individual can transcend the "social garden" in which he has been placed, but he has a certain dependency on it and a responsibility for cultivating it to the extent he can.

Defending the Church's Involvement in Society

There are many superficial notions of what CST means. For some, it means vague sentiments in support of mutual goodwill among classes and nations; for others, it spells out dreamy ideals about economic prosperity for all. But such views are too narrow. As Pope Leo XIII said in 1901:

> "We have designedly made mention here of virtue and religion. For, it is the opinion of some, and the error is already very common, that the social question is merely an economic one, whereas in point of fact it is, *above all*, *a moral and religious matter*, and for that reason must be settled by the principles of morality and according to the dictates of religion. For, even though wages are doubled and the hours of labor are shortened and food is cheapened, yet, if the working man hearkens to the doctrines that are [typically] taught on this subject, as he is prone to do, and is prompted by the examples set before him to throw off respect for God and to enter upon a life of immorality, his labors and his gain will avail him nothing." (*Graves de Communi Re*, §11, emphasis added)

The same pope writes in 1895 that "the social question"

> "cannot be regarded from one standpoint only. It is indeed concerned with external goods, but it is preeminently concerned with religion and morals. It is also directly connected with the civil constitution of the laws, so that in the last

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> analysis, it has a broad reference to the rights and duties of all classes." (*Permoti Nos*, §5)

St. Pius X commented on the above idea in an encyclical to the German bishops in 1912:

> "These are fundamental principles: No matter what the Christian does, even in the realm of temporal goods, he cannot ignore the supernatural good. Rather, according to the dictates of Christian philosophy, he must order all things to the ultimate end, namely, the Highest Good. All his actions, insofar as they are morally either good or bad (that is to say, whether they agree or disagree with the natural and divine law), are subject to the judgment and judicial office of the Church. All who glory in the name of Christian, either individually or collectively, if they wish to remain true to their vocation, may not foster enmities and dissensions between the classes of civil society. On the contrary, they must promote mutual concord and charity. The social question and its associated controversies, such as the nature and duration of labor, the wages to be paid, and workingmen's strikes, are not simply economic in character. Therefore, they cannot be numbered among those which can be settled apart from ecclesiastical authority." (*Singulari Quadam*, §3)

The Church's traditional corpus of social teaching addresses every fundamental question of social significance, both political (the origin, nature, and purpose of civil government; its relationship to the Church and her mission; its role in protecting persons, ensuring rights, fostering virtue) and economic (the generation of property, its ownership and distribution, the rightful place of material goods, international trade, monetary issues, and so on).

In the final analysis, CST is the articulation of what *consistent Christian witness to the Gospel and social action on its basis* must be, with the goal of reforming the social order according to Catholic truth. It recognizes that, without grace, the life of societies, as of individuals, is, and cannot but be, deeply disordered, lacking mutual harmony, peace, joy, festivity, and meaning. It is a vision of reality emanating from Christ the King and embracing all human reality in communion with the Trinity.

Who Inaugurated Social Teaching?

Some would claim that the Church had no social doctrine prior to recent centuries. Others might push the line back a few centuries. But the Fathers of the Church, such as St. Basil

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the Great and St. John Chrysostom, already discuss the essential social questions in the early centuries of Christianity and trace them back to Our Lord, the Apostles, and the Old Testament Law and Prophets. The medieval schoolmen such as St. Thomas Aquinas and the broad Thomistic tradition, especially in Renaissance Spain, dedicate many important discussions to economic and political matters. Catholic theologians and philosophers in the modern period have contributed in major ways, as well (e.g., Joseph de Maistre, Juan Donoso Cortés, Louis Billot).

Most of the famous papal documents on social questions are from the "modern" period, which might be dated from the Enlightenment, which gave rise to the Age of Revolutions, realized or threatened, against ecclesiastical and civil authority. During the 18th century the Church was forced, by attacks against her and for the good of souls, to speak out against new errors that had never been entertained before, such as the total derivation of political authority from "the consent of the governed" or "the will of the people," as in the social contract theory in its various permutations.

A certain amount of historical background is helpful here. For over 1,000 years, the basic social reality of the world, the foundation of the social order including its political elements, was the visible Catholic Church—what Cardinal Charles Journet dubbed "consecrational Christendom": a body of peoples, cities, states, united into an international federation by a common faith in Christ and obedience to the hierarchical Church. An enormously complex and diversified network of "intermediate" institutions having genuine social power and position, such as guilds, religious orders, principalities, feudal domains, and universities, provided for a densely textured and locally-based civic and cultural life, in which the individual was not standing in isolation over against an all-powerful state or at the mercy of an economy dominated by giant corporations. It was a world in which to be a citizen and to be a Catholic were one and the same in practice, although not necessarily in theory.

As this order was challenged or repudiated in the revolutions of the late 18th century and their aftermath, we find a surge of papal interventions on particular circumstances, but nothing that would deserve to be called a systematic response to Enlightenment political theory until the early part of the 19th century, about 40 years after the French Revolution, with Pope Gregory XVI's encyclical *Mirari Vos* of 1832. We might date the modern social Magisterium from the reign of this pope (1831–1846) for two reasons: first, he attempted a refutation, *on doctrinal grounds,* of certain trends of modern liberalism; second, his positions were adopted and built upon by subsequent popes. In a message for Italian Catholic Action Family Day on March 23, 1952, Pope Pius XII adverted to the "new needs" of modernity:

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> "The divine assistance, which is intended to preserve Revelation from error and deformation, was promised to the Church and not to individuals. This also was a wise provision, because the Church, as a living organism, can thus with certainty and ease either explain or examine deeply into moral truths along with others; or, while maintaining their substance intact, can apply them to the changing conditions of places and times. As an example, we might cite the social doctrine of the Church which, having arisen in answer to new needs, is basically nothing more than the application of undying Christian morality to present-day economic and social circumstances."

Pope Leo XIII enjoys a place of special honor within the tradition, for he towers above all other pontiffs in the breadth and depth of his contributions to social doctrine. For this reason, his encyclicals—rich in wisdom, forceful in analysis, sparkling with insight, flowing with unction—deserve a certain pride of place. In the opinion of many, he is the greatest teacher of the fundamentals of social ethics. A sign of this fact is the frequency with which his encyclicals are quoted by later pontiffs. In *Mater et Magistra* (1961), Pope John XXIII testifies to the *deep roots* of the social teaching as well as the *special position* of Leo XIII as a teacher thereof:

> "6. Small wonder, then, that the Catholic Church, in imitation of Christ and in fulfillment of His commandment, relies not merely upon her teaching to hold aloft the torch of charity, but also upon her own widespread example. This has been her course now for nigh on two thousand years, from the early ministrations of her deacons right down to the present time. It is a charity which combines the precepts and practice of mutual love. It holds fast to the twofold aspect of Christ's command to give, and summarizes the whole of the Church's social teaching and activity.
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> 7. An outstanding instance of this social teaching and action carried on by the Church throughout the ages is undoubtedly that magnificent encyclical on the christianizing of the conditions of the working classes, *Rerum Novarum,* published seventy years ago by Our Predecessor, Leo XIII.
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> 8. Seldom have the words of a Pontiff met with such universal acclaim. In the weight and scope of his arguments, and in the forcefulness of their expression, Pope Leo XIII can have but few rivals. Beyond any shadow of doubt, his directives and appeals have established for themselves a position of such high importance that they will never, surely, sink into oblivion."

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Unfortunately, apart from *Rerum Novarum*—and even then, in a somewhat one-sided way—the directives and appeals of Leo have indeed sunk into oblivion. It is part of our task as faithful Catholics at the start of the third millennium to recover his teaching, which, far from being antiquated or irrelevant, is more timely and urgent than ever.

Where Do We Find Catholic Social Teaching?

The main concentration of CST is to be found in papal documents, especially the type of universal letters called encyclicals. Although these documents are available in more than one place online, I noticed as a teacher that no single published volume contained a judicious selection, with an emphasis on the older and stronger documents. For this reason, I produced one myself: *A Reader in Catholic Social Teaching: From Syllabus Errorum to Deus Caritas Est* (Tacoma, WA: Cluny Media, 2017), which contains all of Leo XIII's greatest encyclicals, including *Diuturnum Illud* (1881) on the origin of civil power, *Immortale Dei* (1885) on the Christian constitution of States, *Libertas Praestantissimum* (1888) on the nature of human freedom, *Sapientiae Christianae* (1890) on the duties of Christians as citizens, and *Rerum Novarum* (1891) on capital and labor. It also has Pius XI's *Quas Primas* (1925) on the Social Kingship of Christ, *Casti Connubii* (1930) on marriage, and *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) on the reconstruction of the social order, and Pius XII's address "On Religious Tolerance" [*Ci Riesce*] (1953), with some of the best writing of John Paul II on moral theology and the family. (In an interview with P. J. Smith at *First Things* on December 18, 2017, I talk about why I included certain things and left out others.)

I am happy to say that the book has been taken up in university courses, adult Catholic education courses, and book clubs. It is quite readable on one's own as a self-study, according to the syllabus provided in the Preface. Take the encyclicals one at a time, and you will soon discover that they make for extremely rewarding reading and provide plenty of kindling for prayer and action. The Catholic Church alone has presented to the world a coherent, complete, and compelling Christian vision of society, the state, and culture, rooted in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, and refined over twenty centuries of meditation and engagement. It is a body of wisdom we ignore at our peril.

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