

Introduction

The Roman Catholic church has a rich tradition of social teachings. Some would claim it is “our best kept secret.”¹ When Catholics tell the story of our social teachings we tend to focus on the *encyclicals and pastoral letters*. We point with pride to how Pope Leo XIII broke new ground in supporting the workers’ right to unions, and we celebrate the breakthroughs of the Second Vatican Council on human rights and religious liberty. What is not often told is the story of Catholic social tradition from the “bottom up,” from the perspective of *activists and leaders* who lived out that teaching and, in the process, helped to forge that living tradition.

The purpose of this book is to tell the story of Catholic social tradition “from below” and “from above,” from the perspective of the official teachings and the movements that expressed and shaped that teaching. Our story, our history, is more than a collection of official statements, it includes the prophets and activists, thinkers and analysts who wrestled with the meaning of Christian faith amid turbulent social times. My intention is to offer you an introduction to both parts of the Catholic social tradition—the documents and the movements—in one text. I am not aware of any other introductory text that brings together the encyclicals and the activists in the same book, indeed, in each chapter. It is a risky venture. At times it feels like mixing together oil and water, and at other times it fits like a hand in a glove.

The story of Catholic social teaching really begins in the first pages of the Bible when our religious ancestors struggled to follow God’s invitation to be a people in covenant. The prophets were sent to help focus the

people's attention when they were distracted and sinning. Jesus came to humanity as the justice of God, and he sent his disciples to announce God's liberating and saving message. With the gift of the Spirit the early church continued the work of Jesus. The church wrestled with many social issues—war, wealth, and the use of worldly power—as it spread into the Greco-Roman world. The medieval church emerged with a hierarchical vision of society wherein the church had a role of primacy over other institutions. With the discovery of the New World, another series of questions confronted moralists as did the new religious tensions brought on by the Reformation. The emergence of individual rights in the eighteenth century led to a radically different vision of society and of justice as centered on social contract rather than medieval order, with duty flowing from one's role in society. The political and social unrest that followed reshaped European history with implications for non-European nations as well. It is against this broad backdrop that we take up the story of Catholic social teachings in the modern era.

While there is much to explore in earlier time periods, the modern era holds the greatest interest for us today, for it reveals the church coming to grips with the challenges of industrial capitalism, a challenge that we are still responding to as we move into the third millennium.

The text begins with the Father Emmanuel von Ketteler's Advent sermons in 1848, which were meant to awaken the conscience of German Catholics to the social problems surrounding them. His preaching and writing were sparks that ignited a modest, yet effective, movement in Europe known as the "Social Catholics." The "Social Catholics" had a direct impact on the writing of *Rerum Novarum* in 1891. American Catholics also helped to shape magisterial teaching as they wrestled with the rights of workers in the emerging labor movement (see chapter two).

Chapter three brings us into contact with the vitality of a new breed of Catholics in the United States, people like Dorothy Day and Baroness Catherine de Hueck Doherty who were both radical and Catholic at the same time.

Chapter four looks more closely at the 1950s and 1960s. We examine the contribution of a gifted Jesuit, John Courtney Murray, and the charismatic Pope John XXIII. Both men opened the church to a new understanding of freedom.

In chapter five we examine the revolutionary impact of the Second Vatican Council and the civil rights movement of the late 1960s that

unearthed the explicit and implicit racism in society and the church. Chapter six looks at the organizing efforts and spiritual strategies of Cesar Chavez who lived out his religious commitment in working for justice for America's farm workers. His work is contrasted with the global vision of Pope Paul VI's encyclical "On the Development of Peoples," *Populorum Progressio*.

Chapter seven focuses on the "call to action" that was heard throughout the church from the Synod and the taking up of that call by communities of religious men and women who engaged in social analysis and new forms of social ministry that addressed institutional and systemic injustice.

The vision of the "consistent ethic of life" as articulated by grass-roots groups, Cardinal Bernardin, and Pope John Paul II is the focus of chapter eight. The vision of the consistent ethic of life is very much a "work in progress." The next part of the story takes us to Latin America as we examine, in chapter nine, the implications of the Latin American bishops' preferential option for the poor and the movement of liberation theology.

The next three chapters tell of the U.S. bishops' teaching on the morality of nuclear weapons and deterrence, the U.S. economy, and the role of women in society and the church—as the bishops articulated their thinking in the process of writing their pastoral letters. The bishops' efforts are complemented and challenged by the persistent peace movement, a social ministry that goes beyond charity to advocacy, and the feminist movement in the Anglo, Black, and Hispanic communities. The unfinished pastoral letter on the role of women reminds us that the church has a lot more work to do on these issues.

The final chapter takes us beyond the realm of the human to consider the broader community of the biosphere. Here the spirituality, moral reflection, and theology of Catholicism is put in dialogue with the wisdom of the environmental movement found in the traditions of non-Christian cultures and spiritualities. Catholic social teaching is challenged to live up to its name as a theology and a pastoral ministry that is inclusive and universal, that is, truly catholic.

There are a number of reasons for writing a book that covers both the "official" social teaching and the "unofficial" movements and activists. First, we are only telling half of the story if we focus solely on the magisterial documents—as important as these encyclicals are. "...The non-magisterial contribution to the development of the Church's social

teaching must be actively embraced. For in truth of fact, Catholic social teachings are not shaped by the magisterium alone. This reality must be acknowledged and celebrated."²

A second reason for telling the story of the social activists is to remind us that *we are all responsible* for the shaping of the Catholic social tradition. The church as a whole—activists and theologians, pope and laity, bishops and religious women—is given the task of discerning God's will. As Vatican II proclaimed, "the People of God believes that it is led by the Spirit of the Lord, who fills the earth. Motivated by this faith, it labors to decipher authentic signs of God's presence and purpose in the happenings, needs and desires in which this People has a part along with other men of our age."³ This task of deciphering God's presence and purpose belongs to the whole church. This book tells the story of some of the men and women in the Catholic community in the last 120 years who have taken up that responsibility in creative and bold ways. It is a summons for the church of the present to continue this holy work.

Third, I believe that knowledge of the past helps us understand the present, and it *opens up the future*. I have been impressed with the work of the Dutch theologian Edward Schillebeeckx, who opened up the history of ministry in the church. His books reveal how the church has been creative in the past in responding to the historical circumstances and reshaping ministry to meet the needs of the day.⁴ Knowledge of this history tells us as a church that we can also be creative as we respond to the needs of ministry today. I believe the same can be said in the area of social teachings and social ministry. If we know something of "our collective story" we will be encouraged to respond with the energy of the same Spirit who prompted our predecessors to take bold and innovative steps.