Submission: Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times
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Abstract

This submission represents a decade's worth of research on the magisterial tradition of Catholic Social Teaching. The book submitted for consideration [Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times] aims to be a carefully researched and coherently presented account of the evolving papal tradition of social teaching as it has interacted with *both* the shifting social, political, economic, cultural and ecological terrain of the last 150 years *and* with the relevant secular social theoretical and political-philosophical shifts of this same period. The book opens with an exploration of the anthropological and epistemological claims of the papal social tradition, which I argue are the under-appreciated 'foundations' of the encyclical tradition. The proceeding chapters explore the main principles of the tradition, exploring their historical evolution and main influences, and addressing the question of their adequacy for guiding wider inter-disciplinary and practical socio-political engagement today. The book draws the main papal social encyclicals into dialogue with other influential Catholic 'lay' philosophical thinkers of the last seventy years, including Joseph Pieper, Simone Weil, and Charles Taylor. In its concluding chapters, the book attempts to forge new connections in the area of integral ecology – linking and extending what the tradition has to say about labour/work, land and bodies. This seems fertile ground for likely next developments in the tradition. The novelty of this book lies in its attempt to offer a rigorous academic overview of the historical and metaphysical development of the tradition and in its attempt to offer the tradition to current debates in philosophy, social theory and moral economy. Drawing inspiration from Pope Benedict's writings on faith and reason in *Caritas in Veritate* and his Westminster Hall Address of 2010, the book aims at stimulating an *engaged* and *embedded* form of 'expanded reason'.

Justification

> *Secularism and fundamentalism exclude the possibility of fruitful dialogue and effective cooperation between reason and religious faith. Reason always stands in need of being purified by faith: this also holds true for political reason, which must not consider itself omnipotent. For its part, religion always needs to be purified by reason in order to show its authentically human face. Any breach in this dialogue comes only at an enormous price to human development. Caritas in Veritate, 56.*

Not all books are written with a particular kind of reader in mind, but this book was. Firstly, I wrote the book for a secular academic community who often ask me where scholarly studies of CST can be found. They express a desire to be able to understand and engage with the core insights of the tradition and to be able to 'place' these claims historically, politically and philosophically – to be able to engage the tradition as a form of public reasoning and to test the veracity of its claims. This scholarly audience consists of Catholic scholars who operate in the secular academy in disciplines proximate to theology: philosophy, social sciences, economics, history, literary humanities and so forth, and in non-Catholic scholars with an

interest in understanding the Catholic intellectual and political tradition. In a predominantly liberal philosophical context (in Western Europe and North America) the theoretical hinterland that the Popes draw on is not always immediately traceable or scannable to a reader, even a generally well-informed reader. Scholars who work on the CST tradition are at risk of sometimes forgetting this. Those of us who have to explain the tradition to journalists upon the publication of a new social encyclical know this dynamic well. We are often met with confusion and sometimes incomprehension as we try to explain that arguments for tackling inequality or ecological protection do *not* mean that the Pope is a Communist. The heart of this confusion lies in the little understood principles of the universal destination of goods and integral ecology and in the overtly theological roots of the teaching on migration. There is little public understanding (or literacy in) the Biblical and Patristic worldviews that inspire such ideas.

In the second instance, I wrote this book for a group of readers who had roots in the Catholic tradition and whose work lies outside the academy, but is frequently nourished by the academy. When speaking in public about Catholic social teaching I would often come across those with Catholic roots, now working in politics, business, technology, third sector social justice work, education and healthcare and so forth, who felt a sense of affinity for the Catholic social justice tradition but who had often lapsed from practice. Frequently they had been motivated to adopt their chosen career by some sense of Catholic social inspiration, but had lost the connection between their own roots and the ongoing, live and dynamic conversation between the Church and society. I wanted to write a book that would bring those connections back into a living, nourishing encounter. In this sense, the book was intended as formation and a source of reconnection, accompaniment and dialogue.

The third audience I had in mind is a little harder to describe. It is perhaps close to the audience Pope Benedict has in mind when he frames his encounter between faith and reason in *Caritas in Veritate* that I quoted at the top of this paper and which he repeated in his 2010 Westminster Hall speech to the British parliament. Benedict implies that faith needs reason, and communities of reason need engagement with religious faith. Religion needs, he writes, '*to be purified by reason in order to show its authentically human face. Any breach in this dialogue comes only at an enormous price to human development.*' This is a rich statement that can lead to fruitful reflection developing in a number of directions. Just one of these directions concerns me here: that we think of the engagement of reason with faith in an embodied form as it comes to us in the curiosity of the secular person (who does not belong to the Church formally nor have Catholic roots) who approaches the Catholic social tradition searching for spiritual and intellectual nourishment in very dark times. These are loosely speaking the 'people of goodwill' John XXIII added to his addressee line at the start of social encyclicals from 1960's onwards. The searching questions asked by those who are looking for words and visions that inspire, and most importantly truly humanise our age, are vital to the life of the tradition. Here faith and reason can refine each other in the deepest of human existential encounters. Just as the Scriptures demonstrate the importance of the encounter with the liminal person to the work of God's disclosure and revelation in the world, so social teaching knows that it is in the encounter with both the faithful and a world of others who are drawn to the life-giving water of the tradition that it finds its fullest expression in the life in the world.

To make this entirely concrete, in response to public engagement work I have done I have increasingly frequently been contacted by people who tell me that they are not Catholics but hear in the words of Pope Francis speaking about politics, the planet, economics or

migration, the elderly or disabled, and hear in the social teaching of the Church something they long to hear from political leaders and social movements and feel they do not. As one man put it to me recently 'How strange that the one person on the world stage who speaks for me is the Pope, this has given me, an agnostic, a lot to think about!' The role of the engaged person of reason seeking a coherent response to a seemingly incoherent cultural moment, is crucial to the vitality and 'human face' of the Catholic social tradition.

For this reason, I have not assumed the reader of this book already 'thinks' Catholic but I have assumed that they have a curiosity to explore the tradition and understand it as one formed from particular epistemological and narrative sources which reward engaged reading. In this sense it is intended as a firmly rooted but entirely open engagement in the field of public reason. The book does not tie up all the 'loose ends' – at the end of each chapter it notes honestly where further work is required and invites interdisciplinary collaboration in this task. The book seeks to both model expanded reason and invite further practices of expanded reason at the 'site' of Catholic social thought.

Questions anthropological and epistemological

The book begins with three often overlooked papal letters from the mid-twentieth century. These letters, issued three days apart in the Spring of 1937, address three different anthropological and epistemic threats to a Christian way of living under the conditions of modernity.

The first letter, *Mit Brennender Sorge* [With Burning Concern] was issued in Rome and smuggled into Nazi Germany to be read from the pulpit of every Catholic Church on Palm Sunday. It addressed the anthropological and theological problem at the heart of National Socialism: that it created unequal and impersonal human relationships cast in relation to an impersonal God. The document teaches that a political system is at fault when it deifies a race and raises the idea of the nation above 'a standard value'. The second letter issued a few days later, addressed itself to atheistic Communism, especially in Russia. The letter, *Divini Redemptoris*, aims to expose political systems that refuse an account of the unique historical purpose of every human life, and absorb the particular freedom and excellence of the person into the life of the collective. The suppression of the transcendent and the homogenisation of persons in society are seen as connected phenomenon. To maintain a collective impersonalism requires, arguably, the suppression of the transcendent. The final letter of March 1937 was addressed to the people of Mexico, and focused on the right to religious expression and practice and the harm of anti-clerical and anti-Catholic persecutions. The letter notes that a transcendent Christian practice is not a threat to social renewal but arguably a condition of its sustainable possibility. The letter concludes with a call for a new humanism, and offers the Catholic tradition as foundational to that task.

I began my book with these three letters, rather than the usual beginnings of an account of CST with the newly industrialising context of *Rerum Novarum,* for three main reasons. The first and most significant was to foreground the strength of the *anthropological* contribution that the social letters and encyclicals seek to offer. It is often wrongly and superficially assumed that CST is little more than opportunistic and reactive commentary, often unsystematic and highly generalised, on world events. I wanted to make clear that the tradition offers something more profound, more constant and compelling than this to the intellectual and practical task of seeking human flourishing under the conditions of modernity. It offers the grounds for an ongoing, historically developing anthropological and

epistemological critique of our times, and offers an invitation to develop more adequately 'truthful' accounts of our human and planetary life. The three letters from 1937, when read together, make clear the distinctive anthropological gaze of the tradition, and the ways that this gaze provides a way of attending to, of seeing, modern conditions and the repeated cycles of anthropological risk we have lived through.

Secondly, the letters make clear that modernity faces certain *systemic epistemological temptations* in the way that religion and the political are related. Arguably, modernity is founded on an unstable and incomplete fracture of religion and the political. This unstable new iteration results (amongst other things) in a tendency towards either the adoption but distortion of classical theism into forms of idolatrous political practice (the divinisation of race and nation, a range of fundamentalisms), or the suppression of classical theistic transcendence in favour of a humanism contra religion (atheistic communism or radical secularism). These temptations are structural, built into the logics or cosmologies of modernity. It is not inevitable that they are enacted, but the intellectual settlements that form the basis for modern states, social contracts and economies leave open permanent fault-lines of this kind. The papal letters and encyclicals are vigilant in this regard and provide a grammar for naming these risks and their departure from a Christian view of person and society and a Catholic viewpoint for the healthy relation of religion and the political. (This latter point is itself an evolving Catholic narrative). This forms part of the context for Pope Benedict's call for a faith that purifies reason, and a reason that purifies faith and the threat posed to both by secularism and fundamentalism. Secularity itself is not a threat to this process, but ideological forms of secularism and fundamentalism are.

Thirdly, the constructive narrative that grounds these letters concerns the possibility of a *new Christian humanism* that can contribute towards the renewal of modernity as a more genuinely human and transcendent sociality. In order to illustrate the importance of this final point I turn in the book – in the chapters on human dignity in particular – to a further neglected source produced annually between 1939-45: the wartime Christmas radio addresses of Pope Pius XII. It is fascinating to me that, at the height of the war, Pius used these addresses to develop a resource for the rebuilding of Europe after the war. He offers stepping stones (a phrase he uses in the addresses) towards a new civic European humanism. It is here that the notion of dignity as a fundamental principle of CST is developed in some detail, and it is here that a vision of true and false forms of democracy is explored. Developments often credited to the Vatican II era of 1960's are trailed and the ground laid here in these addresses. The CST tradition of the 1930's and 40's does not merely gesture towards a general call for a new civic humanism, but develops principal insights to guide its development. These texts represented the gradual development of maturing Catholic conversation with the modernity, addressing its major weaknesses and failures, but also noting its potential for forming something genuinely new in proper relationship with the 'old'. This is social teaching unafraid of a new historical moment and clear-eyed about its emergence from violence, genocide and trauma. Two things have prevented a clearer focus on this period in the development of CST: first, the controversy surrounding the role of the papacy and institutional Church more generally in support of the Jews and in a struggle against fascism, and secondly – and more banally – the fact that the major CST contributions of this era were not in the form single systematic encyclicals.

In a short submission of this kind, it is not possible to repeat themes of the whole book, but in what follows I wish to highlight just four themes that the book explores as a contribution to the notion of an 'expanded (and engaged) reason'.

Challenging Individualism: all the goods we strive for we achieve through relationship with others.

In *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis makes a clear distinction between liberalism as a political philosophy (about which he offers reflective critique) and individualism as an ideology (which he opposes outright). The latter he notes is a sinful doctrine: individualism refuses the truth of basic human interdependency and the interrelationship of all things. One of the central anthropological contentions of the CST tradition is that we are created relational, social and interdependent creatures. I note in the book the ways in which all the most important goods that we aim for as humans require relationships with others to achieve and sustain. In other work I have undertaken interviewing refugees about the 'goods' they aspire to and find threatened during migration journeys, this truth has been brought home to me even more forcefully. In the chapters on human dignity in this book I chart the ways in which dignity must also be conceived of in profoundly relational ways: this is most obvious in the case of the nurture of children, the flourishing of those living with certain kinds of disabilities and those facing diminishment in old age. In each case our dignity is something that has to be safeguarded, protected and enacted by others. Recent developments in a range of liberation theologies have noted the importance of dignity through struggle, in the book I note that this struggle needs to be held in communal relation and context. For these reasons one of the central claims that the book makes is that any account of 'expanded reason' in our times needs to be able to talk about the inherent and irreducible sociality of the good. This is of necessity an interdisciplinary conversation and also an intra-tradition and inter-cultural conversation. It is also a conversation that must happen not just in abstract metaphysical terms but also always in continued interaction with the concrete realities of historical lives.

The Earth is the Lord's and all that is in it

In the West we live in an age still formed by the Lockean principle that the first form of ownership in a liberal society is ownership of the self: the first thing I should think about being in possession of is myself. This assumption, permeating Western and North Atlantic cultures, presents a significant challenge for the public understanding of CST. The critical difference made by proposing a notion of gift (upon which CST is founded) rather than possession (upon which the liberal tradition is founded) as the basis of social exchange and value can be a challenge to communicate. The book attempts to explain the grounding of CST in the notion of gift, reciprocity and gratuity in an accessible way. This is the form of thinking that enables CST to challenge the logic of possession, mastery and consumption that continues to move markets, shape workplaces and dominate forms of basic social exchange. This logic connects an approach we might make to both political and planetary borders and promotes a truly integral logic of social life. The logic of gift has been shown by a variety of interdisciplinary studies to highlight hidden forms of social exchange that in fact enable economies to work and which facilitate forms of social and political trust. Far from being a naïve or idealistic approach to the social world, these practices are at work constantly as the hidden underbelly of our real lives, but they are often under-theorised and undervalued or even ridiculed in wider public debate. There is a clash between the stories we tell ourselves and how we actually live. Part of the challenge I present in the book is to ask less 'how should the city live'

and more 'how does the city live' in reality: what makes a community work, an economy go round, a political system endure with real achievements? What are the actual practices that enable the goods we say we aspire to – stable and vibrant economies, political participation and virtue, ecological stability – and where do we see these already at work? Challenging the logic of possession and consumption does not involve merely imagining a world from the outside, but looking closely at the world as it in fact *is* in many contexts.

Human and planetary relations: finding a way of thinking beyond mere utility

In the book I draw from a range of thinkers writing on the theme of the common good who help us to see the breadth and depth of a specifically Christian contribution to this theme. It was especially important to me to include the work of Josef Pieper. Writing in the mid-century period, Pieper notes the subtle but important contribution of a Thomist tradition that is able to think of goods in a language beyond mere utility. Pieper notes that thinking about private goods, public goods, individual goods still (necessarily) invoke a world of the utile. What marks out the common good in its Catholic form is that it refers to a way of thinking and being that cannot by its very nature be reduced to a story of utility. Pieper helpfully distinguishes between a world of common need (for food, nurture, shelter, education, decent work etc) and which impel us towards the protection of certain private, public and individual goods, and the common good. The common good, by contrast, refers to a world beyond questions of supply and demand. Sustaining the common good – rather than responding to common need – implies a series of acts of being, gift-exchange and social relations that cannot simply be 'put to use', that do not exist 'in order that…' There is no common good without the meeting of common needs, but meeting of common needs alone does not make us fully human (or humane). The common good requires acts of gratuity in thought, in art, in active resistance and solidarity, as simple expressions of freedom and love. Pieper argues that these are acts that cannot be interpreted or held within the modern economic logic of 'total work'. The danger of narratives of the common good from both the political Left and Right is that they still reproduce society made in the image of a logic of total work. Pieper sees philosophy itself as part of this realm of freedom and gratuity. These practices of the common good help us to 'pierce the dome of transcendence', but they are also matters for exploration as part of an account of 'expanded reason'.

The tree is really rooted in the sky

I close my book with the words of the political mystic Simone Weil. In her notebooks she wrote the following: *only the light that falls continually from the sky gives the tree the energy to push powerful roots into the earth. The tree is really rooted in the sky*. I used this quotation because it sums up in aphoristic form two basic claims I wished to make in the book and which I believe the tradition of CST offers to our times. First, we all trade in forms of transcendence because this gives to us a sense of rootedness, endurance and power. However, not all forms of transcendence are adequate to the task of deepening a genuine humanism and planetary care. Second, the desire of modernity to suppress transcendence is deeply unhelpful. It is unhelpful because it is always resurgent, and its resurgence is often expressed in complicated and not always well-directed forms. Humans are transcendence-seeking creatures and the shaping of our public lives is no exception to this rule. A form of modernity that is founded on an unstable negotiation of religion and the political needs new ways to understand its own

instabilities and potential for better future configurations of this relation. A genuine renewal of civic humanism will almost certainly need to recognise this. The conversation, served by a genuinely expanded reason, is about *which forms of transcendence* enable us to orient ourselves toward the dignity of others, a truly common good, and to root ourselves deeply in the Earth, which is our gift and, for now, our home.