



## Catholic Social Thought (CST) and Subsidiarity

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“Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do.”

—Pope Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*

In 1931, in the encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, Pope Pius XI introduced a critically important Catholic social teaching concept, one which has remained current in political debates today. In his discussion of the social order, he stated the principle:

*As history abundantly proves, it is true that on account of changed conditions many things which were done by small associations in former times cannot be done now save by large associations. Still, that most weighty principle, which cannot be set aside or changed, remains fixed and unshaken in social philosophy: Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do. For every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the body social, and never destroy and absorb them.*<sup>1</sup>

The principle, known as *subsidiarity*, recently has been invoked—wrongly—to advocate federal block grants to states, slashing welfare programs for needy families, and unregulated free markets.

Pius specifically applied subsidiarity to political authority and thus interpretations have focused on the political sector. Instead of being for or against “big government,” however, Catholic social theory has stressed

through subsidiarity that larger political entities should not absorb the *effective* functions of smaller ones. This was in part a reaction against the centralizing tendencies of socialism at the time. However, if smaller, more localized entities cannot or will not cope adequately with a problem, then larger entities—the state, for instance—have a responsibility to act.

The principle, however, is not just political. Warning against the overbearing action of any large social actor—including large corporations—the principle “also demands that they render assistance, *subsidium*, when problems are too large to be handled by smaller, local actors.”<sup>2</sup>

The U.S. bishops later related subsidiarity to “institutional pluralism” providing space “for freedom, initiative, and creativity on the part of many social agents.”<sup>3</sup> Subsidiarity insists that all parties contribute to the common good and do so in ways true to their capacities. Families, neighborhood groups, small businesses, professional associations, unions, community organizations, and local, state, and national governments are all important to subsidiarity, as are international organizations to meet international needs.

Misusing subsidiarity to advocate small government and unrestrained free markets, Catholic conservatives ignore the fact that Catholic social thought always has been critical of both excessive state power and unrestrained economic power. Pius wrote that, “...the right ordering of

economic life cannot be left to a free competition of forces. For from this source, as from a poisoned spring, have originated and spread all the errors of individualist economic teaching.”<sup>4</sup> In 2009, Pope Benedict further clarified:

*The principle of subsidiarity must remain closely linked to the principle of solidarity and vice versa, since the former without the latter gives way to social privatism, while the latter without the former gives way to paternalist social assistance that is demeaning to those in need.*<sup>5</sup>

Ultimately, subsidiarity is rooted in human dignity, providing that we are most truly human in making decisions and solving problems as close to those affected by them as possible.

### ENDNOTES

- 1 Pope Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno* [On Reconstructing the Social Order], No. 79, emphasis supplied.
- 2 Vincent J. Miller, *Saving Subsidiarity*, in *America*, July 30, 2012, p. 15.
- 3 *Economic Justice for All*, No. 100.
- 4 *Quadragesimo Anno*, No. 88.
- 5 Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 2009, no. 58, emphasis in original.