



Catholic Social Teaching (CST) and Social Structures

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In 1986, the U.S. bishops wrote:

Whether the problem is preventing war and building peace or addressing the needs of the poor, Catholic teaching emphasizes not only the individual conscience, but also the political, legal and economic structures through which policy is determined and issues are adjudicated.¹

The frequent acknowledgement of the reality of social, economic, political, cultural, and religious systems and structures and the power which they exert over our ability to live Gospel values marks one of the most critical insights in CST in the last 50 years.

Sinful and Graced Social Structures

Theologians and bishops describe “sinful social structures” as those which dehumanize individuals and groups, devalue human life, break up families, alienate races, escalate violence, and spread poverty. These systems and institutions socialize us, promoting and reinforcing values and behaviors that we would call “sinful.”

Theologians also now speak of “graced social structures” as those which promote life, enhance human dignity, encourage the development of community, and reinforce caring behaviors.

More obvious sinful structures have origins tainted with values, intentions, or activities that we call sinful. Consider, for example, child prostitution rings, criminal syndicates, and slavery. The novel development in CST is that even well-intentioned institutions can become sinful when they produce unintended ill effects or slowly become destructive of human values or human life.

Some examples

Consider these examples: we have schools that do not teach; prisons that do not rehabilitate; cities that do not work; governments that are unresponsive to people’s real needs; an agriculture system that pays farmers not to grow while many people go hungry; a health care system that leaves out 44 million people; an immigration system that brutalizes people and tears up families; and an economic system that is making some people very, very rich and billions of other people poorer. The repeated message of the church is that the situation is getting worse, not better. In fact, the social, economic and political systems are working so badly that Latin American bishops have felt compelled to speak of “institutionalized violence” as the end-product of the status quo.

Human Responsibility

In his 1987 encyclical, Pope John Paul at first accepts the analysis of sinful social structures. His term is the “structures of sin”; but his analysis ties these structures much more tightly to individuals “who introduce these structures, consolidate them and make them difficult to remove.”² The pope lays out four ways individuals remain responsible for sinful structures, as:

- (1) creators, supporters, or exploiters;
- (2) accessories through complicity or indifference;
- (3) accessories through fatalistic avoidance; and
- (4) accessories through consecration of the status quo.

Churches, of course, are the most articulate exponents of consecration of social structures, both in the world and within the churches themselves. The pope attributes structures of sin to two powerful forces: “desire for profit” and “thirst for power.”

The Responses

If the systems are not working, then our faith response has to be structural as well as personal. We must do justice as well as charity. Specific action directed toward the injustice of institutions includes reforming existing institutions, strengthening graced institutions, and developing new institutions and structures.

Pope John Paul underscores the urgency of connecting action for justice to faith in a term clearly reflecting his Polish background, the *duty of solidarity*. Solidarity is his term for the structural response demanded by Gospel love and involving fundamental economic and social changes. In a blunt assertion, he says, “Solidarity is undoubtedly a Christian virtue.”³ He explains:

This then is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good, that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual because we are all really responsible for all.⁴

This solidarity takes concrete form, the pontiff says, in personal decisions, decisions of government, economic decisions, public demonstrations by the poor, sacrifice of all forms of imperialism, and in a variety of other concrete actions, both personal and structural.

1 *Economic Justice for All*, No. 259.

2 *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, No. 36.

3 *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, No. 40.

4 *Ibid.*, No. 38.