



Catholic Social Thought and Freedom

In Catholic thought, “authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image” within the human person.¹ Created in God’s image, every person has “the natural right to be recognized as a free and responsible being.”² We have a duty to respect each one’s right to exercise freedom as essential to human dignity.³

“Freedom From” or “Freedom For”?

Notice the language “free and responsible being.” Unlike some philosophies, Catholic thought does not consider freedom purely from an individualistic perspective “reducing it to the *arbitrary and uncontrolled* exercise of one’s personal autonomy.”⁴ It is not just “freedom from.” Our theology views the human person as essentially social—both sacred and social. Christian anthropology sees freedom, then, as one of four social values “inherent in the dignity of the human person, whose authentic development they foster.”⁵ These four social values are truth, freedom, justice, and love, and they are very interdependent. Our freedom, then, is “freedom for”—for the purpose of seeking what is true and loving, ultimately seeking God.

Freedom and Social Justice

This freedom is protected by social justice and the common good, which demand respect for the dignity and freedom of others and that society be organized to promote individual freedoms, optimal social well-being, and proper group and individual relationships. As ethicist David Hollenbach, S.J., explains:

*This self-limiting concept of the common good and the role of government in protecting it shows that, for Pius XII as well as for the entire tradition, human rights cannot be understood apart from social interdependence, nor can social well-being be understood apart from personal rights.*⁶

Freedom, then, is circumscribed by the social nature of the person and the common good, as well as our Christian understanding of love as mutuality and the Gospel’s preferential love for the least among us. For example, the “free” agreement between employer and employee to “the amount of pay to be received is not sufficient for the agreed-upon salary to qualify as a ‘just wage,’ because a just wage ‘must not be below the level of subsistence’ of the worker: natural justice precedes and is above the freedom of the contract.”⁷ The Catholic “family wage” principle also insists that “such a wage must also allow for savings that will permit the acquisition of property as a *guarantee of freedom*.”⁸

Wages are only one example of how certain economic, social, political, and cultural conditions “are needed for a just exercise of freedom.”⁹ These may include private property and other private ownership of goods that “assure a person a highly necessary sphere for the exercise of his personal and family autonomy and ought to be considered as an extension of human freedom...”¹⁰ It also means that, facing growing income and wealth inequality, “*The fundamental task of the State in economic matters is that of determining an appropriate juridical framework for regulating economic affairs*, in order to safeguard ‘the prerequisites of a free economy, which presumes a certain equality between the parties, such that one party would not be so powerful as practically to reduce the other to subservience.’”¹¹

Ultimately, contemporary Catholic thought positions freedom in the context of the doctrine of solidarity—recognizing the human, practical, and spiritual ties uniting people and social groups and calling for “a *firm and persevering determination* to commit oneself to the common good” because “we are all really responsible *for all*.”¹²

ENDNOTES

- 1 Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes (The Church in the Modern World)*, 1965, no. 17.
- 2 Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004, no. 199.
- 3 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1738.
- 4 *Compendium*, *op. cit.*, emphasis in original.
- 5 *Ibid.*, no. 197.
- 6 David Hollenbach, S.J., *Claims in Conflict: Retrieving and Renewing the Catholic Human Rights Tradition* (Paulist Press, 1979), p. 61.
- 7 *Compendium*, *op. cit.*, no. 302.
- 8 *Ibid.*, no. 250, emphasis added.
- 9 *Catechism*, *op. cit.*, no. 1740.
- 10 *Compendium*, *op. cit.*, no. 176.
- 11 *Ibid.*, no. 352, quoting St. Pope John Paul II in *Centesimus Annus* (1991), emphasis in original.
- 12 *Ibid.*, no. 193, quoting St. Pope John Paul II in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1988), emphasis in original.