



Catholic Social Thought and Government

In 1986 the U.S. Bishops summarized Catholic teaching on government: "...the teachings of the Church insist that government has a moral function: protecting human rights and securing basic justice for all members of the commonwealth."¹ The bishops explained that, while all people have responsibility for the common good, government's role is to guarantee the minimum conditions for rich social activity, namely "human rights and justice."

Governmental responsibility includes assisting and empowering the poor and disadvantaged, generating employment and establishing fair labor practices, guaranteeing the economy's infrastructure, regulating trade and commerce, and levying "the taxes necessary to meet these responsibilities."² All are elements of government's responsibility for the common good.

Catholic thought also frames government's role as the second of three major sectors of the good society. The economic marketplace is the first sector, described by Pope Benedict XVI as the institution "that permits encounter between persons, inasmuch as they are economic subjects who make use of contracts to regulate their relations as they exchange goods and services of equivalent value between them, in order to satisfy their needs and desires."³

As the second sector, government has responsibility for directing the economic activity of the first sector toward the common good.⁴ This includes creating the juridical framework necessary for an effective and efficient market; protecting the rights of all those involved, including workers, businesses, and consumers; and cushioning the market's worst aspects. Grave imbalances are produced, Benedict wrote, "when economic action, conceived merely as an engine for wealth creation, is detached from political action, conceived as a means for pursuing justice through redistribution."⁵

Pope Benedict and his predecessors emphasized the importance of a third sector—civil society—which St. John Paul II saw "as the most natural setting for an economy of gratuitousness and fraternity..."⁶ In this country, in addition to individuals, families, and groups, civil society includes the "voluntary" or "nonprofit sector."

With regard to civil society, subsidiarity should circumscribe government action. This means encouraging voluntary and cooperative endeavors in the cultural, social, religious, artistic, and intellectual spheres and their impact on the social dimension of persons, without absorbing their functions. Civil society, in turn, provides a powerful counterweight to the centralizing tendencies of government.⁷

International Political Authority

Catholic social thought also addresses the role of governments in an increasingly globalized world. Pope Benedict acknowledged that, "the State finds itself having to address the limitations to its sovereignty imposed by the new context of international trade and finance, which is characterized by increasing mobility both of financial capital and means of production, material and immaterial."⁸ This has altered states' political power and calls for a re-evaluation of state roles. Rather than "being too precipitous in declaring the demise of the State," however, Benedict suggested that, after the recent great recession, the state's role seems destined to grow in working toward resolution.⁹ Moreover, governments must collaborate more to deal with a transnational integrated economy¹⁰ and support a stronger and reformed United Nations and other international institutions.¹¹

ENDNOTES

- ¹ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All*, 1986, no. 122, citing Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, 1963, nos. 60-62.
- ² *Ibid.*, no. 123.
- ³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 2009, no. 38.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 36.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 38.
- ⁷ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 2007, no. 419.
- ⁸ Pope Benedict, *op. cit.*, no. 24.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 41.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, no. 67.