

Perspectives

in Catholic Higher Education

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Catholic Social Teaching at the Catholic University

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An insistence on spreading the Church's social doctrine among all Catholics, especially by educational programs for the laity, runs throughout the modern papal Magisterium, beginning with Leo XIII's exhortations to the laity of the late 19th century. At that time, it was indeed somewhat unusual for a pope to appeal directly to the people and to ask them to acquire the intellectual and moral training required to confront successfully the ever-growing challenges of the modern world. Yet by the time we reach Pius XI and Pius XII, it is taken for granted that the main audience for papal teachings on economics and politics must be Christ's lay faithful, who are striving to impress the divine law upon and apply the natural law to the changing situations of their temporal life.

Thus, while even the forward-looking Leo XIII addressed his celebrated 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum* on labor and capital (or the rights and duties of workers and employers) to the bishops of the world, Pius XI, commemorating the 40th anniversary of the same with his 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* on the reconstruction of the social order, added to his addressees "likewise all the faithful of the Catholic world." This is only to be expected, for while the clergy have as their primary task the internal governance and strengthening of the Church, believers living in the world have the corresponding task of purifying and sanctifying secular realities with a view to leading souls to salvation in Christ.

If there is a definite Catholic doctrine on social, political, and economic life – and of course there is just

such a thing: a rich and detailed *corpus* of teaching rooted in Scripture and Tradition, refined by centuries of experience – then it only stands to reason that educating the Catholic faithful in this body of doctrine is of paramount importance, a basic and necessary component of their ongoing catechetical and theological training.

Along these lines, Blessed John XXIII's great encyclical *Pacem in Terris* of 1961 stated (and these words are representative of many other papal documents that might be cited):

We must reaffirm most strongly that this Catholic social doctrine is an integral part of the Christian conception of life. It is therefore Our urgent desire that this doctrine be studied more and more. First of all it should be taught as part of the daily curriculum in Catholic schools of every kind... Our beloved sons, the laity, can do much to help this diffusion of Catholic social doctrine by studying it themselves and putting it into practice, and by zealously striving to make others understand it... It is vitally important, therefore, that Our sons learn to understand this doctrine. They must be educated to it.

The natural conclusion is that Catholic colleges and universities (or chaplaincies connected with non-Catholic ones) must make room in their curricula for mandatory instruction and optional specialized work in this crucial area of the Magisterium.

Many schools that once offered sound instruction in the area of social ethics abandoned it together with much else that was jettisoned in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. This is particularly ironic, since the Council contained the strongest endorsement to date of the apostolate of the laity and emphasized the pervasive role Catholic social teaching must play in the modern world, if our world is to be saved from every-growing futility and violence. Worse still, the academic milieu and campus lifestyle at many Catholic colleges and universities contradict the Church's social teaching on nearly every head. Courses in social ethics may inculcate distorted and refuted models such as Marxist-liberation theology or feminist theology. It is not hard to imagine that students might end up worse off than they began, like the clean-swept room in which seven demons settle down (cf. Lk. 11-24-26).

Today Catholic educators have the opportunity to make needed changes with the support of interested students. Young people today are encountering elements of Catholic social teaching, albeit often by chance and in an over-simplified form, and they find it exciting, because it offers a genuine alternative to the stale, predictable "solutions" of analysts and politicians. This small but robust vanguard of what we will soon be calling the "Benedict XVI generation" surely affords educators a providential opportunity to follow up with programs offering solid, orthodox instruction and campus support systems for those who are called to dedicate themselves to applying the Church's social doctrine to the enormous problems facing us in the Church, in the nation, and in the world.

We are already seeing this occur at some of the small, staunchly Catholic institutions of higher education. Although on a worldly scale of values their influence would seem a whisper behind the roar of contradiction, graduates of these colleges will to one degree or another have engaged authentic Catholic

social teaching, at very least by gaining an acquaintance with some of its major sources and themes. Their minds will have been opened to the massive political and economic problems of modernity, problems to which the Catholic Church alone, in her divinely-guided wisdom, offers sane, reasonable answers that comport with human dignity and man's ultimate end.

Students who attend a more traditional Catholic liberal arts college will learn firsthand, usually by discussing influential Great Books, the decayed roots and fatal consequences of self-destructive ideologies. If the program is well designed, it will not fail to include something of the Church's own Magisterium, whether it be a selection of social encyclicals of the modern popes from Leo XIII down to Benedict XVI, the excellent summary offered in the relevant portions of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (nn. 1961-2557), or the synthesis given in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*.

I am reminded of Fr. James Schall's wonderful book from 20 years ago, *Another Sort of Learning*, the subtitle of which begins with this phrase: "How finally to acquire an education while still in college or anywhere else." It is possible, even if not ideal, for a student to educate oneself in Catholic social doctrine. One can find good resources on the internet, sometimes one can find a good discussion group in one's area; best of all, one might reach out to like-minded Catholics and start such a group. The reading list is obvious: the aforementioned documents of the Magisterium, above all the papal encyclicals. To commit some free time to working through this material is far better than remaining in the dark. But it would be even better, of course, if Catholic colleges and universities would seize upon the opportunity to provide coursework in authentic Catholic social teaching for students who are hungry to learn. In this way Catholic schools can rediscover their birthright and offer it generously to their students.

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