

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING AND OUR CALLING

Jenny Sinclair

*Notes from a short session for [TheAscent](#) leaders' training weekend
10 September 2023, Spec Retreat Centre, Pinner*

WHAT IS Catholic Social Teaching?

- body of thinking rooted in the gospel, intended as a framework for good judgement and gift to all people of goodwill, not only for Catholics
- not intended as infallible, Catholics are obliged to pay attention but not to agree with them
- often called a hidden gem - bit too well hidden - most Catholics are not familiar with it, far too dense for most people
- Many ways to teach CST. Different interpretations, and you should know there are people from a range of different political positions who draw on it, not always faithfully.
- **Its stated purpose is for a civilisation of love.**

THE ENCYCLICALS

- takes the form of a series of long documents "encyclicals" over a hundred and thirty years published by popes, but usually the work of a team of scholars and practitioners working on them too
- The first official document, *Rerum Novarum*, was published in 1891. The reason for it was a concern about the damaging effects of the industrial revolution on human welfare. That response was based on Scripture, but also on the reality of people's lives around the world, including in that case the impact of exploitative practices on poor families in East London. CST is always grounded in real places - and in that way it offers a theology of place.
- not meant to cherry pick our favourite encyclicals but to engage with the whole body of thinking which grows over time (see slide).

- written following deep theological discernment and informed by the learned experience of the church in every nation (it draws heavily on scripture)
- CST is a living tradition. builds on centuries of tradition and natural law
- whilst it emphatically does not propose a theocracy, nor religious triumphalism, CST enables the wisdom of the Old and New Testaments to be interpreted into statecraft
- It's visionary but not utopian.
- sometimes called the theology of the HS in practice
- helps us understand how political and philosophical ideas and policies can affect the human person, and to recognise when social systems and cultural values are dehumanising

THEMES

- See slide. The concerns of CST are always related to human welfare, according to the needs of the times.
- CST is focused on upholding the flourishing of the human being and the natural world. It is concerned with human agency, social organization, true democracy, a healthy political economy, the importance of work, the dignity of labour.

COMPONENTS

- See slide. It identifies the powers - particularly of capital and state - that undermine the integrity of the human person. It calls for a just relationship between labour and capital. It is concerned with a true idea of freedom, and therefore alerts us to false freedoms. It is concerned with bioethics, truth vs relativism, war and peace. It is profoundly concerned with justice, with balance: the just economy, the preferential option for the poor and therefore class; the balance between responsibilities and rights, the culture of life vs the culture of death, our duty to uphold both human being and the natural world, an integral ecology, holding the tension between nature and person; between a globalised migration policy, for example, while affirming the belonging of nationhood. It's concerned with social peace and building a common good between different interests, by building local relationships. It regards families as the fundamental building blocks of society. It emphasises the importance of love and relationships.
- And in recent years, CST has been concerned about the dangers of overly centralised power - state bureaucracies and corporate financial interests - that subordinate communities. Although it is global in its thinking CST guides us to realise that to enable human flourishing, power must be distributed not centralised, through strong, local institutions, so it is not in favour of global governance, but in strong relationships of solidarity between nations.

THEOLOGY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

CST is centred on a theology of the human person, everything about it starts from that position, with an anthropology, a view of what people are really like, that recognises the Primacy of God as opposed to the primacy of self. From this, we understand the Earth and the Cosmos to be God's world, His domain. And that our identity as human beings is in God. From this we get the *Imago dei* - that we're made in the image of God, the Triune God: Father, Son, Holy Spirit. And from this anthropology we get the transcendent dimension of the human person. And, as in the Trinity, it follows that we are relational beings - we're not atomised individuals. So this relational aspect of our identity is key to CST.

Human beings are in relationship with all of creation and with God. CST has a concept called "integral ecology" - which was set out in the CST document *Laudato Si* just a few years ago - we relate to the natural world as God's gift, but never as an enemy to human flourishing. So for example CST rejects the anti-human tendencies of some environmental activism. That's something to keep in mind when we think about climate change.

This attention to the sanctity of each person in CST is sometimes referred to as personalism. "*Personalism*" said John Paul II, "*states that the person is the kind of good which ...cannot be treated as an object of use....the person is a good towards which the only proper and adequate attitude is love.*" [*Love and Responsibility, John Paul II*]

WHAT CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING IS NOT

It's important to know what CST is not. CST is ambitious and visionary, but it's emphatically not utopian: it recognises human life as messier and more beautiful than any utopia could be. It emphasises the right and the duty of people of faith to take responsibility for their actions. It incorporates a theology of place - it is not abstract: it focuses on real people in real places and practical solutions to human problems.

Correctly understood, this tradition is non-partisan. If it is to retain its integrity it should not be hitched to one party or another. It transcends the old categories of left and right. There is a lazy tendency to assume that it is all about solidarity and is basically left wing, which it isn't. Parts of it are radical, other parts are socially conservative.

CST is not anti-capitalist and it is not pro-state or anti-state: what it does is criticise all social systems that subordinate the human spirit.

It requires us to exercise conscience. It offers a set of principles, a framework for good judgement. And it calls us to work for justice and it rejects the "political quietism" of calm acceptance of things as they are.

But CST is not proposing a return to some past Christendom, let alone a theocracy. We live in a pluralist society and CST is clear about the role of the Church in the world: it upholds principles but is not prescriptive about policy: lay people are responsible for matters of statecraft, not the Church.

And CST's conception of justice is different from the contemporary meaning of "social justice". CST takes the biblical approach, which starts with building "just" relationships – where we treat our neighbours as persons in the image of God, based on the equality of human beings under God. So this is quite different from demands for forms of justice - for example in terms of race or gender - that are defined by "equity", or "equality of outcome" based on identity politics. This approach can only be delivered by centralising more power to the state: the state has a role, but so do we - a solely coercive approach is incompatible with the personal responsibility, and the exercise of conscience at the core of CST.

So we should be extremely cautious of those who dream *"of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good."* (TS Eliot). The call for rights without relationships or responsibility can lead only to coercion, and then division and resentment, and eventually a battle of all against all, threatening social peace.

This route does not lead to a civilisation of love.

Right relationships and righteousness come before justice.

HOW IS IT DIFFERENT FROM COMPETING IDEOLOGIES?

- CST is most helpful now because it helps us to be politically literate in a way that is aligned with our faith, to avoid the risk of mission drift and give us a firm foundation to understand competing ideologies
- See slide of competing ideologies. We don't have time to dwell on this but this is just to remind you there are many philosophies out there, especially at the moment in this time of confusion.

KEY PRINCIPLES OF CST

- The common good
- The human person - human dignity human equality, respect for life, the dignity of work
- Social relationships - solidarity, subsidiarity, association, participation, reconciliation
- Stewardship and integral ecology
- Preferential option for the poor - everyone is included, no one is left behind

READING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Seven years ago Pope Francis said, *"We are living not through an era of change, but a change of era."* If we are to respond effectively, we need to understand the nature of that new era. Catholic social teaching (CST) can help us read the signs of the times, avoid the risk of mission drift.

So the era of individualism - what we might call the "me" culture - which has manifested on both the left and the right - has been hostile to human beings and now it's unravelling.

We can see this unravelling in multiple sectors which often are regarded as disconnected but in fact stem from the same source. Here are just some:

We see it in unstable financial systems, in a low productivity, low wage high welfare economy, in extreme inequality, in massive public and private debt, in governments failing to curb financial power. We see it in the collapse of trust in traditional institutions, in the disconnect between the managerial class and the governed, in the weakening of democracy, the subordination of the local by digital culture, in degraded local infrastructure, in the atrophy of local forms of human association. We see it in climate warming driving displaced persons, we see it in the liberalising of abortion and euthanasia, in the commercialisation of surrogacy, the promotion of transgender medicine and new pathologies needing lifetime medications, in the normalising of cosmetic surgery, in organ harvesting, sexual exploitation, human trafficking. We see it in the erosion of social trust, in social fragmentation, in culture wars, and the emergence of political extremes on the right and the left. And not least, we see it in symptoms of human distress - like rises in loneliness (in fact more prevalent among the young than the old), in rises in addiction, self-harm, depression and nihilism, in the tyranny of social media culture which sells a false idea of freedom and self-actualisation through a competitive and dehumanising matrix of likes and image manipulation.

Now most of these signs accelerated during the pandemic but were not caused by it: they are part of much longer trends. But in the last fifteen years we've seen a period of intensified crisis going back to the 2008 banking crash.

Now the era of individualism and the globalisation it generated is coming undone. The Ukraine war exposed its inherent instability. Disturbance to precarious global supply chains caused inflation, and the "cost of living crisis" is just the latest in a succession of crises generated by this fundamentally unstable financial system. So that era is now giving way to a new world order, whose character is yet to fully emerge but which so far could be termed an era of tragic realism.

CST helps us see that the forces at work were unleashed by a hyper liberal philosophy. This views human beings as isolated individuals rather than social beings, a false anthropology. It had catastrophic effects not only through the economy but also on our institutional and social relationships and our sense of belonging. The family, community and place were all undermined. A narrow economic logic, while enriching the already wealthy, led to the degradation and abandonment of whole communities. This was a long way from a civilisation of love.

Over four decades, parties of all types pursued the neoliberal economic model which left many places behind, and so we see a loss of trust in the whole political class. Indeed, the politics of pretty much every country that adopted this form of hyper-liberalism is facing a similar situation.

None of our political parties are showing the vision or guts necessary to mount the reforms needed. The gulf between the professional managerial class and the majority of the population is huge. People feel a loss of agency - many, especially the young, do not even know what agency should feel like.

Over recent years too much power has become overcentralised in the state which protects the interests of the big international corporations. Since Covid we have a more intensified collusion between state and the financial system. These are the pharaohs of our time. This is our modern Egypt. Some are calling this collusion "the machine".

We are in the middle of a very deep spiritual malaise. These forces have been corroding our civic life for over forty five years. But the roots go back deeper at least two centuries, to the Enlightenment, which despite its many benefits, heralded an inversion: putting the Self above God. We got things the wrong way up. And that generates a system that works against creation.

The human spirit is beautiful and incredibly resilient, people were made for goodness, and we see people bravely coping with all kinds of adversity all the time. We see signs of the kingdom where people care for each other. But this new reality is real. I'm sorry to break the bad news to you. Like an Old Testament prophet I have to tell you that before things get better, they are likely to get worse.

And this situation cannot be tackled solely by conventional means.

Now, one of the tools that CST gives us is a way of conceptualising power in relation to human beings. CST is always concerned to uphold the agency of ordinary people and communities. In simple terms CST identifies three kinds of power: the two earthly powers of money and the state, which if not constrained have a tendency to dominate and dehumanise. And the third is a relational power, which has a transcendent nature, because it relates to human beings who are themselves partly transcendent, made and loved by God.

The churches should be at the heart of relationships that generate that transcendent, relational power, to resist the dominance of money power and state power, so as to uphold the human space. And we can do that by intentionally building local relationships where we live. By building common good.

This is how we build a counter cultural insurgency against individualism. It's how we create the conditions for civic and spiritual renewal. People are right to expect the Church to be more assertive in this area, to offer some resistance, to uphold the human person in the face of dehumanising forces. To defend the sacred.

OUR RESPONSE

What does that mean, to uphold the human person? Well, the CST way of thinking gives us a vital starting point to understand God's worldview - who we are, our identity. It's radically different from the current secular worldview which is so dominant. My identity can't be reduced to an intersectional category such as "straight, white woman", that doesn't describe me: I'm a daughter, a mother, a neighbour, a friend, I have a history, a story. No, my identity and yours is as a transcendent human being in the likeness of God. This is who we are - before we're born, after we die, while we live our mortal life.

We need to get things the right way up again.

There are two realms, the earthly and the heavenly. We have become used to the earthly machine and it may be efficient, but it atomises, divides, and creates hostility. Meanwhile, God builds relationships, covenantal relationships that last, that bear fruit, they're characterised by loving kindness.

Meanwhile, God is at work and because He loves human beings, how we respond to and resist individualism really matters. The CST tradition offers us practical and constructive ways forward.

In the short time we have, let's look at two of the key principles, common good, and subsidiarity.

COMMON GOOD

I want to clarify what I mean by the common good: it is often misunderstood. People project onto it what they want it to mean: 'social justice', 'fairness', 'solidarity', 'equality', or some kind of utopia. It's none of those things.

And common good is not the same as 'social action' - unless it is reciprocal, enables, empowers and involves - the "service provider" or "doing to" posture is not common good. It is about building a shared life.

We describe the common good like this:

"the shared life of a society in which everyone can flourish - as we act together in different ways that all contribute towards that goal, enabled by social conditions that mean every single person can participate. We create these conditions and pursue that goal working together across our differences, each of us taking responsibility according to our calling and ability." (T4CG)

It's about upholding the human space. It's about agency. It's about balancing people's interests without excluding anybody. It's the recognition of a settled pluralism of identities and interests.

It's important to say that the common good recognises the reality of class. We must be honest about the consequences of globalisation and the dominance of middle class culture that now pertains. Some working class communities - in our post-industrial towns for example - have been abandoned and dishonoured, marginalised. This is a breach of common good.

Reconciliation is possible - not through class warfare, but by negotiating just relationships.

THE BREACH

There is a passage in Isaiah which describes this so well:

"Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in" (Isaiah 58:12)

That's not abstract, that's very specific. Christians are called to stand in the breach.

Without a class analysis we get the wrong conclusions. The identity politics version of "social justice" built around gender and race is a divisive distraction, shifting our attention away from a shared injustice affecting everyone, an economy that, in keeping wages low, works in the interests of big corporations.

The CST principle of the preferential option for the poor is very important to keep us focused. Just now in the UK, 5.2m people are on out of work benefits and over 14m people are recognised to be living in poverty. That's a lot of people. A lot of struggling families. That's a very dysfunctional economy.

We are not to abandon people. We are to build reciprocal, mutually respectful relationships, and develop forms of local association, where people can find agency. Common good is about building coalitions and relationships in real physical places with real people. It's not abstract. When you hear the word diversity, make sure it is genuinely inclusive - remember that Catholic social teaching is in favour of true diversity, which means not only race and gender, but diversity of class, educational background and crucially diversity of opinion.

When people live in separate worlds, they don't get to know each other, so they care less, then things get unstable, and we get what Pope Francis calls a culture of indifference. So he calls for a culture of encounter. Common good means enabling a shared life, where we realise everyone values similar things: family, work, belonging, love. Everyone is worthy of love and affection.

SUBSIDIARITY - THE LEVELS

So at this stage I'd just like to talk about responsibility. I'd like to propose to you the principle of subsidiarity, which helps us place responsibility at the appropriate level.

This is a key principle in CST and its definition is that "decisions should always be taken closest to those they affect, and a central authority should not do things that can be done at a local level."

It requires *distribution* of power and careful discernment about what decisions should be taken at what level. This is especially relevant at a time when central governments are becoming more authoritarian, colluding with big corporations to consolidate centralised power.

LEVELS OF RESPONSIBILITY

While government and policy change have their place, the common good requires responsibility being taken at all levels. It requires each of us - as individuals and as organisations, businesses, institutions - contributing freely according to our unique vocational responsibility. This element of human freedom is important.

So we get this multiple layering. It requires the ability to act, top down as well as bottom up.

At international level it requires solidarity between nation states, through institutional relationships, not through global government. Different nations have different histories and characters and CST does not support imposing one system on all, which would be imperialist.

And at **national level**, CST would call for conditions in which state power is limited and distributed regionally. In practice this would require a national industrial strategy, a true levelling up, where capital is constrained and decentralised, enabling communities to flourish.

And at the **regional and local level**, this vocational responsibility is focused on local institutions with real autonomy.

At **regional level** it would mean regional banking and energy providers - not international banks/energy providers - so these services can be accountable to local people. It would also mean greater collaboration between local education institutions, colleges, employers, dioceses, religious associations, chambers of commerce – all working together towards the flourishing of their region, each taking their distinctive vocational responsibility.

At a more **local level** CST would lead each local institution to ask if they are fulfilling their vocation for the common good. For example if a business pays its employees fairly, are jobs stable, fulfilling, dignified, do the CEOs and cleaners know each other by name?

LOCAL INSTITUTIONS

In *Laborum Exercens*, John Paul II talks about the need for "*a wide range of intermediate bodies with economic, social and cultural purposes... enjoying real autonomy with regard to the public powers, pursuing their specific aims in honest collaboration with each other.*"

What he's talking about here are those institutions between the person and the state, like sports clubs, businesses, associations, regional banks, mutuals, charities, places of worship, employers, guilds, hospices, unions, universities, community trusts, schools. All those bodies that are not part of the central state or global business. They should collaborate as neighbours and this is what leads to a rich local ecology.

In some neighbourhoods this ecology is thick and thriving. But in others it's so thin as to have been almost completely eviscerated. There are some high streets where all you have is a betting shop, a chicken shop, a pawn shop.

So a wide variety of thriving local institutions is vital - bodies that bind people together, help people find meaning and purpose. CST sees this layer of institutions - which can be called civil society - as part of that relational power - a resistance against the totalising forces of capital and state.

Now the **churches** have a distinctive calling here, to play a key local role in the reweaving, upholding the sacred and the human person, bringing neighbours together.

Then there is the level of **the family** - which CST regards as the fundamental building block of society: vital to enable flourishing of local families and support them when they struggle.

Finally there is **you and me**, the level of the **individual**. We can each play our part as moral actors, through the decisions we take, through our relationships, through putting common good principles into practice in our everyday lives. The proper understanding of evangelization in Catholic doctrine is that it is about the whole of our lives, how we live.

COVENANT and PLACE

It's this holistic understanding of evangelisation that shows us why CST must be integrated into our understanding of discipleship. CST offers a bridge between our spiritual life and everyday life, economy and political reality. Our Christian witness is to be integrated into the way we actually live, the choices we make in the real world.

But sometimes we in the Church forget who we are. In our efforts to be efficient and "relevant", we default to the earthly paradigm, to managerial, technocratic approaches.

We need to listen to what Jesus said to Nicodemus: "*I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?*" (John 3:12). If we ask Him into our lives, then through the indwelling of the Spirit, we will begin to discern between the realms of heaven and earth.

We need to get things the right way up.

The world needs the Church to resist the dehumanising powers and to join with God in building the Kingdom in the places where we live. Place is important because this is where people are. The paradox is that we encounter the heavenly realm in the grounded embodiedness of the neighbourhood - because God works through people.

God is already at work in our neighbourhoods, whether or not we are paying attention, whether or not we are joining in. In fact, in the abandonment of many of our poorest neighbourhoods, there has been a disconnect where the Church is often out of touch with what God is doing. God calls us to listen to our brothers and sisters in the local and to join in with what He is doing.

We are to be personally involved in the local reweaving, the remaking of social life. This means having a covenantal, not a contractual relationship with our neighbours. Contractual or transactional relationships comes from individualistic philosophies. Whereas covenant has an expansive meaning and it can have a transformational effect on our relationships, our churches and our communities. We learn from Scripture that covenant is about God's unconditional promise to us in Christ. Covenant is lasting and durable.

When we make a covenantal commitment with God and with each other, we agree to an accountability earthed in the institutions and the places where we live. Christ himself - in the Incarnation, living under the Roman occupation and in the unjust economy of Galilee - models a covenantal posture that generates that relational resistance against the dehumanising tendencies of money power and state power.

As Pope Francis says in the latest CST encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, we are to be like Jesus, to build local relationships of loving friendship. And in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis says we are to "smell like sheep", to get involved with the lives of our neighbours. He doesn't like it when we get technocratic, arm's length. He says stop outsourcing, no more proxies, "don't delegate", don't just fundraise or be activists or campaign on social media. He says this is personal.

Relationship building is a countercultural insurgency against individualism. And it's gentle. It's about tenderness and loving kindness. It's not a political campaign. It's about spending time with each other.

CST AND OUR CALLING

So CST is a powerful intellectual framework. But it is not to be deployed just on that basis. It calls us to engage very deeply and prayerfully. It's not an add-on, a nice to have option. It's to be integrated in our discipleship.

It integrates a theology of the Holy Spirit and the profound mysteries contained within that.

This is a theology that is grounded in place and shaped around the cosmic truth of what it means to be a human person: transcendent, embodied, embedded - not to be commodified.

Not coercive, it is invitational - proposing an invitation to live in relationship with God and his created world.

And we know why the integrity of the human person must be upheld?

Because, if it is undermined, then God can't work in the world and we cannot truly be in Christ, as Jesus said we would be in John 14:21: "*I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.*"

Our starting point should always be:

- What is God doing in our neighbourhood?
- And then: What is happening to human beings here? What is happening to relationships here?

We can see the breadth that CST gives us to understand the fullness of reality - the life of the Spirit integrated with political economy because this is what shapes people's lives.

How does the Spirit speak to you in this way?

What strikes you about what you've heard?

DISCUSSION

Jenny Sinclair

© T4CG 2023

A set of slides and a handout accompanied this session. If your organisation would value a similar session tailored for your needs please email louise@togetherforthecommongood.co.uk



- Scan QR code to find out more
- Subscribe to the T4CG Newsletter (it's free)
- Resources for churches and schools, stories, essays, training
- Our new podcast *Leaving Egypt* is now live: listen [here](#)