Toward a Genuine Catholic Social Science

This first issue of The Catholic Social Science Review inaugurates not just the only scholarly Catholic social science journal in America which is fully committed to the orthodox teaching of the Church, but also the most ambitious project of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists to date. Just like the Society itself, it is an attempt to respond to the challenge Pope Pius XI issued to scholars sixty-five years ago to “build a genuine Catholic social science.”

What does it mean to build a Catholic social science? It means, first and foremost, to follow the Church in all she teaches in matters of faith and morals. This provides the outer limits for all Catholic scholarly inquiry; if the world were committed to the truth in its fullest, it would recognize that it provides the limits of all human inquiry. We recognize that this is no restraint on legitimate human freedom, for man has no right to embrace that which is untrue and Jesus Christ—for whom the Father made all things—appointed the Church’s Magisterium to be the arbiter of the truths which must guide men.

The second criterion of a Catholic social science, or any scholarly endeavor, is that it must be objective. In other words, it must genuinely be committed to seeking the truth. It must go where its dispassionate investigation leads it. This is not incompatible with loyalty to the Magisterium because objectivity is not the same thing as value neutrality. Scholarly inquiry cannot sensibly proceed if it does not operate by the nature of man and things; one cannot choose to discard reality. Nor is it possible to have a position which does not work from certain premises or principles. Value neutrality, then, is a falsehood. Pope John Paul II has said the Church is not afraid of the truth; she will not hesitate to subject herself to serious, searching inquiry. Indeed, it is because she so subjects herself that we can have such confidence and faith in her. There are none of her moral teachings, for example, that are not fully established by sound philosophical reasoning and have not proven to be the right course for man from the experience of human affairs and history.

Particularly central for the building of a Catholic social science is the social teaching of the Church, as set out primarily in the modern world in the social encyclicals. No approach to the study of social life and problems, or any social theory which seeks to address those problems, could call itself truly Catholic if it did not follow fully all the social teachings of the Church. Indeed, one of the unfortunate spectacles of the contemporary world, especially in the West, is of Catholic thinkers, writers, commentators, activists, public officials, and even Church operatives claiming to be taking “Catholic” positions on questions when upon close examination it is apparent that they are glossing over or paying no attention to certain parts of that teaching or really allowing secular ideologies to shape their thinking.
Next, a Catholic social science should be built on a foundation of realist philosophy. It cannot be impervious to the fact that the social sciences are built on philosophy; there is no such thing as an empirical science off by itself which does not operate from some philosophical premises. Nor can just any philosophical system be adequate. A Catholic social science can only embrace the perennial (i.e., realist) philosophy.

Fourth, it is because a Catholic social science relies upon the perennial philosophy, which shows that men have ends, and Church teaching—built as it is upon Divine Revelation—must operate from the assumption that everything has a purpose under heaven. All of man’s actions, including his social ones, and all the actions of societies—which, after all, are agglomerations of men—must be understood in light of God’s purposes and must be evaluated in light of whether they further those purposes. Social realities and problems must be seen as, at their core, a main part of the great battleground of the “powers and principalities.” In this struggle, we must either decisively stand with the Church or we are against her. A central figure in instructing us about this is the great Catholic sociologist, Monsignor Paul Hanley Furfey.

A fifth point in the endeavor to build a Catholic social science is that we must not automatically eschew the methods, approaches, or procedures that the secular social sciences use. We should always faithfully follow the highest, most rigorous standards of scholarship and practice. This is essential if we hope to make an effective case for whatever position we take before both our secular compatriots and our coreligionist colleagues. We should look to the secular social sciences where we can. Vatican II told us as much. However, we should be completely knowledgeable about our Catholic social science traditions and try to discern the roots of what appear to be the acceptable and successful aspects of the secular disciplines. We may be surprised to find that these roots are in Catholic Christianity itself. Moreover, we should always be wary of the various secular formulations and theories which purport to explain man and society. The Church does not need to be lectured by the secular social sciences, grounded as they are to varying degrees on modern philosophical errors and deficiencies, about human nature or the proper association of men in society. She has a two thousand year old tradition, which has featured people of great intellectual prowess, intellectual and moral virtue, and holiness who reflected at length and assiduously worked through the same basic problems. As moderns, for all practical purposes, we stand on the shoulders of giants.

A final point that must be stressed is that a Catholic social science cannot take the view that if we just preserve the orthodox teachings of the Church we have done our job. If we do not recognize that many of the nonessentials that are based on them are not also of critical importance, we will shortly find that we have left the teachings themselves subject to attack. The reality is that we must build up
practices, theories, approaches, institutions, etc. that buttress the essential teachings. This is indicated by St. Paul’s admonition that we “re-establish all things in Christ” (Eph. 1:10). It is something that the men of the Middle Ages, imperfect as they were, understood well as they worked to build a Christian civilization in Europe. Unfortunately, too many Catholics in the post-Vatican II Church—including some members of the clergy and hierarchy—have not had the same understanding. American Catholicism in the post-conciliar era has seen painfully that if we do not take a generally critical stance toward the secular culture and its ideas and practices, if we try to simply make our peace with anything which we think can be compatible with the fundamental faith and morals teachings of the Church, great damage can be done. We cannot just build a wall around the fundamental teachings of the Church and let everything else go. Such a fortress mentality is arguably more counterproductive than the old “ghetto Catholicism.” The best defense of the truth is a good offense. As we heed Pope John Paul II’s admonition that the coercion of the twentieth century must give way to persuasion, we must nevertheless also recover the proper notion of the Church militant and deeply embrace the spirit of evangelization that Vatican II desired. The aim of a Catholic social science, then, cannot be anything less than the reconstructing of the social order, in all of its dimensions, along authentically Catholic Christian lines.

It was in the same encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno*, that Pope Pius XI issued his call for a Catholic social science that he also suggested a framework for such a reconstruction. It is a reconstruction that rejects contemporary political and social ideologies—which in the U.S. have boiled down primarily to the two predominant versions of liberalism, the laissez faire and the statist—and seeks a socioeconomic order that stresses cooperation and sees economics (which he especially focuses on in the encyclical) as fully in the service of man to advance his transcendent good. He indicated that, while the most fundamental change to make this possible has to be in the human heart, economic institutions also should be reshaped to accomplish this.

*Quadragesimo Anno*, then, gives us both dimensions of our mission: to build a genuine Catholic social science and to seek to reform society, first, by means of evangelization and, second, by proposing social structures and practices which make it more possible to live the Christian life and which best embody the Christian worldview.

The aim and efforts of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists and this journal are not entirely new to American Catholicism. Before Vatican II, distinctively Catholic social science organizations—in various individual disciplines—existed and in some cases published journals. In the wake of the false renewal after the Council, they either dissolved, became secular or else broadly religious (but no longer Catholic) organizations, or went on calling themselves “Catholic” but no longer retained their commitment to orthodoxy. What we are now doing is a
resumption of both a legacy and a work which they renounced or simply ceased to regard as important.

Let us pray to God, seek the intercession of His Blessed Mother, and turn to the sacraments frequently for strength and fortitude that we might stay the course with Him and His Church where others before us have not.

Let us ask Him for humility, the virtue that is so lacking in the scholarly and professional community. It was said that the early Christians were distinguished by their love. Let us as Christian scholars and professionals be distinguished by that and other virtues, but especially our humility. Let us constantly implore Him that he permit us at least some success in carrying out our mission for Him with this journal and the other efforts of the Society. Faced with the insurmountable problems and obstacles presented by this secular society of ours and the secularist control of the social sciences, let us pray to Him as David did before he faced Goliath and the Philistines. Let us ask Him also, however, for the wisdom which will enable us to constantly realize that our successes are there even if hardly apparent and, indeed, that they may consist in nothing more than our being faithful to Him to the end.

Stephen M. Krason
President, Society of Catholic Social Scientists
Publisher, *The Catholic Social Science Review*