Human Transcendence: The Principle of Subsidiarity and the Role of Authority

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Intellectual Creativity

Paul Kennedy’s Preparing for the Twenty-First Century, as well as its counterbalance, The Nine Lives of Population Control, brought back to my mind what I expressed more than ten years ago in Work, Culture, Liberation: The Social Teaching of the Church. Every time I hear or read to my discomfort the pessimistic remark of the prophets of doom that “every newborn baby is another mouth to feed,” my Christian love for humanity prompts me to counter that “every newborn baby is another intelligence to produce.” It is with his intelligence that man comprehends and dominates the world and expands continually the area of his creative discoveries.

The materialist naturally thinks about man in economic terms alone, with the perpetual fear of the consumer outweighing the producer, and the consequent Malthusian dirges about population and anti-life propaganda. One who, on the other hand, perceives the power of human intelligence to subdue the world (cf. Gen 1:28), which is what technology means, is not afraid of alleged population pressures, but rises to the challenge by ever new techniques of recycling and augmenting the incalculable resources of the universe.

There is no limit to what man can produce, and the point is that it is precisely by producing, by working, that man fulfills himself and thereby contributes to the construction of earthly society.

Man’s Capacity for Self-Determination and Self-Transcendence

Man enjoys freedom of choice, and hence responsibility or accountability for his deliberate or intentional decisions. As we read in Gaudium et Spes:

Only in freedom can man direct himself toward goodness . . . Authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image within man. For God has willed that man be left ‘in the hand of his own counsel’ (cf. Sir 15: 14) so that he can seek his creator spontaneously, and come freely to utter and blissful perfection through loyalty to Him. Hence man’s dignity demands that he act according to a knowing and free choice. Such a choice is personally motivated and prompted from within. It does not result from blind internal impulse nor from mere external pressure. Man achieves such dignity when, emancipating himself from all captivity to passion, he pursues his goal in a
spontaneous choice of what is good, and procures for himself; through effective and skillful action, apt means to that end.\(^6\)

But through this freedom, man also enjoys the capacity to enrich his own being indefinitely, and thereby to enrich reality or the world that surrounds him. Man can always surpass or transcend himself, as Pascal put it so strikingly.\(^7\) With his receptive intellect, he increases both the quantity of his knowledge and the quality of his wisdom as long as his will or the fundamental thrust of his being points to the good. And then, through his practical intellect he enriches the world, as long as his will remains committed to the good. Again Gaudium et Spes:

Man judges rightly that by his intellect he surpasses the material universe, for he shares in the light of the divine mind. By relentlessly employing his talents through the ages, he has indeed made progress in the practical sciences, technology, and the liberal arts. In our times he has won superlative victories, especially in his probing of the material world and in subjecting it to himself."

"Still he has always searched for more penetrating truths, and finds them. For his intelligence is not confined to observable data alone. It can with genuine certitude attain to reality itself as knowable, though in consequence of sin that certitude is partly obscured and weakened.

"The intellectual nature of the human person is perfected by wisdom and needs to be. For wisdom gently attracts the mind of man to a quest and a love for what is true and good. Steeped in wisdom, man passes through visible realities to those which are unseen.

"Our era needs such wisdom more than bygone ages if the discoveries made by man are to be further humanized. For the future of the world stands in peril unless wiser men are forthcoming.\(^8\)

Human creative energy remains in a potential state\(^9\) in the bosom of humanity. It must be allowed freedom for full expansion so that mankind can enrich itself culturally, i.e. in a full flowering of both material and spiritual values, and society can pursue a common good immanent to it which can enable every individual person to attain his or her own ultimate perfection in the transcendent common good.\(^10\)

The Principle of Subsidiarity

This transcendence is the basis of the principle of subsidiarity or supplementary assistance,\(^11\) which consists in recognizing this power of man and therefore allowing him freedom of self development, and refraining from paternalistic spoon-feeding. Man is not just “a mouth to feed”—a dreadful economic reduction, but above all an incalculable source of productive energy. “Post-Christian anthropologies tend by their very dynamics to reduce man to one of his aspects
only: from *homo sapiens* to *homo faber*, as if the whole being of man were reduced to his work and activity. From *homo faber* to *homo politicus*, as if the whole being of man were reduced to his being-in-society without anything beyond it. And finally, from *homo politicus* to *homo oeconomicus*, as if the whole being of man were reduced to his materiality, the most abject of these reductions: if man does not come from God, he must come from matter, and ultimately go back to it without anything personal and transcendent."

If the whole being of man is taken into consideration, any endeavor at educating man must respect his transcendent dynamics by: (a) allowing him freedom of self-development; and (b) exposing him to the full expanse of being—the real actual world of material and spiritual values, the fullness of unity, truth, goodness and beauty, perceived in and through his sensibility, but transcending these through the intelligence which grasps the permanence of values. These are the two main ends of education.

The principle of subsidiarity is thus a solid Christian principle, “for by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man,” as Vatican II stated and Pope John Paul II commented on extensively in his first encyclical. And so like all Christian principles, it is in total harmony with human nature, which Christianity does not come to destroy but to fulfill. That is why it has always proved successful for a wise regulating authority in both education and socio-economic progress.

**Freedom, Education, and Progress**

In his encyclical *Mater et Magistra* (1961), Pope John XXIII, quoting his predecessor Pius XI, explains the principle of subsidiarity as it works in civil society:

This intervention of public authorities that encourages, stimulates, regulates, supplements, and complements, is based on the principle of subsidiarity as set forth by Pius XI in his encyclical Quadragesimo Anno: "It is a fundamental principle of social philosophy, fixed and unchangeable, that one should not withdraw from individuals and commit to the community what they can accomplish by their own enterprise and industry. So, too, it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and a disturbance of right order, to transfer to the larger and higher collectivity functions which can be performed and provided for by lesser and subordinate bodies. In as much as every social activity should, by its very nature, prove a help to members of the body social, it should never destroy or absorb them."

Jacques Maritain has also formulated the same principle with depth and lucidity, focusing on the dynamics of freedom, and balancing delicately the transcendence of the person and his vocation to the common good. Maritain:

Personal freedom itself is at the core of social life, and ... a human society is veritably a group of human freedoms which accept obedience and self-sacri-
fice and a common law for the general welfare, in order to enable each of these freedoms to reach in everyone a truly human fulfillment. The man and the group are intermingled with each other and they surpass each other in different respects. Man finds himself by subordinating himself to the group, and the group attains its goal only by serving man and by realizing that man has secrets which escape the group and a vocation which is not included in the group.¹⁷

Christopher Dawson, for his part, brings in the witness of history to show the harmful effects of neglecting this principle: “No civilization,” Dawson wrote, “hitherto has been able to resist the destructive effect of urban and bureaucratic centralization. It has been well said that the great city is the grave of a culture, and in the same way the substitution of a centralized bureaucratic control for the spontaneous activity of normal social life involves a process of ossification and senile decay of the whole social organism.”¹⁸

The Role of Authority

The principle of subsidiarity is best grasped when it is set in relation to the role of authority, understood as a service to the common good, that is as the assistance to be given to individuals for them to be able to attain their own end by themselves. As I wrote in Christian Philosophy:

“To provide” means to foresee the future and supply what is needed for it. God is “provident” with His creatures in that He gives them what they need in order to attain their end. For instance, He gives us our intelligence and our will, and all our bodily powers, for us to supply our needs and thus reach our goal. In other words, God governs His creatures. “To govern” means to direct things to their end. But He directs His creatures in accordance with their nature, since every being acts according to its nature. Therefore, God directs men to their end respecting their freedom, since this is their nature... Divine government (directing to the end, but respecting freedom) is the model for all those who share in it, i.e. those who share the authority of God: religious authorities, parental authorities, civil authorities, academic authorities... The model is His principle of subsidiarity, whereby what can be done by the smaller body should not be done by the bigger one: the child must be taught how to walk, so that he can do it by himself; without overprotection.¹⁹

Author originally means creator, and authority is the power to both create and rule—to direct things to their end, for it is proper to an efficient cause not only to bring things to existence but to assist them on the way to their perfection (perfection, from the Latin perfectere, means literally “the end of the making”). Since God alone is the Creator of being,²⁰ He alone has absolute authority. But just as out of the overflowing abundance of his goodness (bonum diffusum sui), He wants other beings to come into existence by causing them to be or creating them, He also endows them with a share in his authority and rule. As St. Thomas Aquinas writes:

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The rational creature is subject to divine providence in such a way that he is not only governed thereby, but is also able to know the rational plan of providence in some way. Hence, it is appropriate for him to exercise providence and government over other things. This is not the case with other creatures, for they participate in providence only to the extent of being subordinated to it. Through this possession of the capacity to exercise providence one may also direct and govern his own acts. So, the rational creature participates in divine providence, not only by being governed passively, but also by governing actively, for he governs himself in his personal acts, and even others.¹¹

Humans’ active participation in providence is the source of the various types of natural authority: religious, parental, academic, civil, professional.

**Fundamental Equality of All Men**

The fact that authority may sometimes be abused and thus lapse into tyranny does not justify its repudiation by the anarchists of all times, from Diogenes to Rousseau, Stirner and Bakunin. This accidental failure of authority is always due to the failure to understand and observe the principle of subsidiarity. It is only when human authority is seen as a share in divine creation and rule,²² that it can be understood as a service to the common good entrusted to someone who, therefore, is not its absolute owner and has to render an account to the real owner or master, in other words, when it is exercised with personal detachment and fear of God: “If every part of society is ordered to God, no conflict arises: only if one of those parts wants its own good in a disorderly way does conflict arise. If this happens, the damage occurs both in the parts and in the totality, and the more influential the part, the greater is the damage to the totality. That is why the egoism of someone in authority is all the more damaging and has more far-reaching effects.”²³ Woe to those who enact unjust statutes and who write oppressive decrees, depriving the needy of judgment and robbing my people’s poor of their rights, making widows their plunder, and orphans their prey! What will you do on the day of punishment, when ruin comes from afar? To whom will you flee for help?²⁴

No man is by nature superior to others: there is a fundamental equality of all men (the principle of solidarity), based on their common nature (personal, intellectual and psychosomatic), origin (convergently earthly and divine), and goal (perfect human fulfillment in God). This equality is why all men and women have the same fundamental human rights from the moment of conception, and why society must respect them and facilitate their exercise. These human rights are therefore rooted in specifically human psychosomatic and spiritual needs, and they are answered by the orderly acquisition of material and spiritual values. Existentially, however, this fundamental equality, while remaining intact, gives rise to a diversification of roles: people are not mass-produced. If it happens then that some persons are actually better endowed or more responsibly deputed than others, this means first that their authority must come from above themselves,²⁵ and second that their talents or endowments must be intended for the service of others.²⁶ This diversity is the basis of the principle of authority as
a service, a *diakonia*, as it is called in the New Testament.  

**Authority in the Service of Freedom**

The role of human authority must then be to further and carry out the purpose of divine subsidiarity, which is to bring things to their perfection, since, as I said above, it belongs to an efficient cause not only to bring things into existence but to bring them to their perfection or govern them whether by itself or through instrumental causes. Thus, for example, the purpose of marriage is not only the procreation of children through love, but also their upbringing or education, that is bringing them to the perfection of human existence in that happiness which every human being desires, and which is the fullness of freedom in the total possession of truth and the total enjoyment of the good. In other words, the role of parents is to lead gently their children to God. Since freedom is then the goal of authority, authority must be always used through the principle of subsidiarity, namely, not only respecting that freedom (initiatives should not be stumped, but guided and channeled), but actually encouraging it by exposing those under authority to as much knowledge as they need at every stage in order to be able to act with freedom of choice and real responsibility.

The term itself comes from the Latin *subsidium*, meaning “help” or assistance, hence the popular formulation of the principle of subsidiarity, “help people to help themselves” or “educate them for self-reliance.”

**Unselfish Love for the Common Good**

Authority must then be exercised out of love for the common good, which means love for every human being. Standing against this understanding of authority is Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarian principle—“the greatest good for the greatest number,” which has given a handy justification for the injustices of capitalism, including the anti-life contraceptive outlook.

The love that motivates authority should be expressed in the endeavor to raise those under authority to the latter’s own level, and even higher, for generosity is of the essence of love. Who can fail to feel a deep gratitude for educators and leaders who wielded their God-given authority in this unselfish fashion, as good stewards? How many of us can indeed testify for the profound goodness of a mother or father, or a teacher, or a mentor or a statesman, who did exercise their authority in this creative way, training others for freedom.

**Subsidiarity in Civil Society**

Within the context of civil society, the principle of subsidiarity applies in the various areas of government, education, social, and economic activity, the purpose of all of which is the pursuit of the common good, namely the welfare of man. The danger of overprotection and possessiveness is ever present in the realm of civil society; its consequences are far-reaching. It is necessary to define the common good by way of the primacy of the human person, so as not to fall into a socialism that puts society or the State above the person.
nition of the Second Vatican Council, following that of the Encyclical *Mater et Magistra* of Pope John XXIII, is well known: “The common good embraces the sum of those conditions of social life by which individuals, families, and groups can achieve their own fulfillment in a relatively thorough and ready way.” For my part, I have put it this way: “A juridical order and social situation such that the opportunities for every person in society to develop himself or herself to the full (materially, culturally, spiritually) are maximized.”

It is necessary, in the first place, to avoid a top-heavy organization of the State by minimizing centralization and bureaucracy. “A generation ago,” wrote George A. Kelly in the 1970s, referring to the United States, “the percentage of the population working for government was ten percent; it is now seventeen. Parkinson’s Law—bureaucrats multiply even when the work for which they were invented disappears—operates best in government enterprise for the simple reason that the government can go broke but it never goes out of business.” If this trend is not checked the temptation to “take over” things increases with the consequent damage to the principle of subsidiarity: whatever can be done by the smaller body should not be done by the larger one; whatever can be done by private initiative and enterprise should not be done by the State. The State may of course, if the *common good so requires*, take over or nationalize certain areas of the economy or certain vital services, but the principle of subsidiarity marks the limit, so as not to eliminate the freedom of individual persons, families and other intermediate groups.

The State should in fact be at the service of the Nation, which is the vital, cultural collectivity growing from the grassroots: “The State is firmly sovereign when it governs society and also serves the common good of society and allows the nation to realize its own subjectivity, its own identity. Among other things this involves the creation of suitable conditions of development in the fields of culture, economics and other spheres of the life of the social community. The sovereignty of the State is deeply linked to its capacity to promote the freedom of the nation, that is, of developing conditions that permit the nation to express all of its distinctive historical and cultural identity, being sovereign, that is through the State.”

Here are then the ethical principles that ought to guide public policy, whether national or international, on the issue of population. Human dignity demands respect for man’s incalculable transcendance.

**Notes**

3. (Vera-Reyes, Manila, 1985).
4. The term comes from the Greek, *techne*, which the Latins translated as *ars*, and hence art, and it stands for the intellectual habit of applying reason to the making or production of things (recta ratio factibilium).


8. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 15.

9. The term “energy” comes form the Greek *energeia*: actuality or actuation. And the term “potential” is the Latin version of the Greek *dynamis*, hence “dynamics” and “dynamism”: transformation of potential into actual.

10. See the author’s *The Roots of Society* (Manila: Sinag-tala, 1977), ch. I.

11. Ibid., ch. III.


19. (Vera-Reyes, Manila, 1981), ch. 24, g.

20. Ibid., ch. 24, e.


22. “There exists no authority except from God” (Rom. 13:1).


29. This is the substance of the Beatitudes: Mt. 5:3-12.

30. An enlightening example of the practical application of this norm is found in the work of the American educator Booker T. Washington, explained by himself in his famous *Up from Slavery*, published in and reprinted in many popular editions.

31. See *The Roots of Society*, ch. II.

32. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 74.

33. *The Roots of Society*, ch. III.
