A MODEL OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING: ASSESSING POLICY PROPOSALS*

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Human Dignity is the preeminent goal and principle of Catholic Social Teaching. However, there does not appear to be any systematic way of evaluating the effectiveness of proposed social actions or policies for their effectiveness in upholding Human Dignity. Social Doctrine identifies three additional permanent principles: the Common Good, Solidarity, and Subsidiarity; and, Human Dignity is upheld best when these other three are each fully and equally met. The resulting “triad stool” model proposed here which upholds Human Dignity offers the faithful a powerful means of understanding and evaluating social actions for their advancement of Human Dignity.

Introduction and Assumptions

Catholic Social Teaching is rich and deep, reaching back to Judaic teachings. In the last century Catholic teaching on the subject has been developed and taught mostly through a series of papal encyclicals, which have presented numerous complex and interrelated concepts. At times, however, these writings have lacked an explicit, cohesive presentation of how these concepts relate to each other, or how they are to be applied in a unified fashion. Thus, there is a need for a comprehensive model of Catholic Social Teaching that unifies various principles, which at times may appear to be in conflict, into a more cohesive systematic relational process that has as its ultimate objective the defense of Human Dignity.¹

In initiating such a model, the following assumptions are made. The protection and advancement of Human Dignity is the summit of Catholic Social Teaching.² In addition, the principles of the Common Good, Subsidiarity, and Solidarity are the three mutual and symbiotic pillars of Catholic Social Teaching, each equally necessary for upholding Human Dignity and each required for mutual, synergistic shaping of all efforts to uphold Human Dignity.³

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Without a cohesive relational model, Catholic Social Teaching is often advocated and implemented by intuition, using a type of partial analysis, with specific actions supported by well-intentioned policymakers keying off of one or two principles (typically Solidarity, Common Good, or Preferential Option for the Poor) without a systematic assessment of how well the policy accomplishes other aspects of Catholic Social Teaching. This less-than-best approach often results in advocacy for actions that may actually undermine Human Dignity because the resulting policies neglect the implicit underlying relationships with other pillar principles required for upholding Human Dignity.

Policies such as farm subsidies, increased taxation for social programs, and minimum wage legislation, increase the role of government, decrease individual freedom, and often undermine one of the primary principles of Catholic Social Teaching, that of Subsidiarity. The proposed relational model presented here would allow for a more thorough and accurate assessment of how well any given action upholds Human Dignity.

It should be noted that there are a few moral absolutes within Catholic Social Teaching. The best known of these is the right to life, including opposition to abortion, embryonic research and manipulation, and euthanasia. However, the vast majority of issues, including many of an economic, social, legal, or political nature, are not as clearly addressed. Most questions about how Human Dignity is to be upheld fall within the arena of prudential judgment, within which Catholics of good conscience and within certain limits can disagree.

It is precisely within this area of prudential judgment that the proposed model would be most useful. Such a model would provide a tool to enable common ground in discussions of alternative social policies. However, disagreements about how best to uphold Human Dignity would certainly remain, as such issues of prudential judgment are an area of disagreement among many good and well-intentioned policy analysts of faith who work for social justice. One important source of disagreement that would inevitably remain is the differing impact of policies over time. In the short run a policy could be designed to benefit a particular group, but over a longer term that same policy may hurt other groups or even harm the targeted group itself. Thus, to uphold Human Dignity, a proposed policy would have to be analyzed in a general equilibrium setting, i.e., the question must be asked, “What are the effects of the policy on all groups affected and over a longer time period?” Most likely, any proposed policy can be shown to benefit some sub-group of the population for some limited period of time. But to
ensure the Human Dignity of all the policy has to be studied closely to see who might be harmed over a longer term. In fact, it would seem that almost any policy could be supported if a small enough segment of the population is only considered over a brief time period, perhaps even abortion itself!

The Three Pillars Upholding Human Dignity

Catholic Social Teaching, as discussed above, has four permanent principles: Human Dignity, the Common Good, Subsidiarity, and Solidarity. These are the very heart of Catholic social doctrine, with Human Dignity serving as the foundation of all other principles of the Church’s social doctrine. Thus, any systemic approach to Catholic Social Teaching must have Human Dignity as its goal and any proposed social policy must have the upholding of everyone’s Human Dignity as the measure of its goodness. Understanding how the three remaining principles of the Common Good, Subsidiarity, and Solidarity relate to each other and to Human Dignity is the next step in creating the desired systematic model.

These three remaining principles are often discussed in ways that imply their independence from each other; however, it appears that they are all essential to the upholding of Human Dignity. Similar to the three legs of a stool supporting the seat upon which a person sits, these three pillars supporting Human Dignity are each required if a particular social action is to uphold the dignity of the human person.

Respecting the principles of the Common Good, Subsidiarity and Solidarity forms a type of Trinitarian means of assessing a social policy’s ability to uphold Human Dignity. The more fully each is satisfied, the more Human Dignity is upheld. Each principle is its own element in upholding the goal of Human Dignity, yet each interrelates with the other two. One principle cannot be addressed in a vacuum; it must be considered along with the others. However, in practice it appears all too common that the principle of Subsidiarity is not considered an equal to the other two, as will be discussed below.
If one of the three pillars is neglected, Human Dignity is compromised.
However, unlike the Triune God, in Whom the presence of one Person means the presence of the others, it is possible to have a social action that appears to meet one or two of the three principles. In such cases an unstable two-legged stool results, a stool that may appear to uphold Human Dignity from a non-systemic perspective. This, perhaps, is a weakness that plagues many current social policies. In contrast, a systemic analysis using the principles of Catholic Social Teaching is necessary for upholding Human Dignity and for providing a common process for assessing proposed social policies.

In order to understand better what is required to satisfy each of the three principles upholding Human Dignity, a closer look at each is required.
The Common Good

The Common Good is the mutually shared responsibility of all individuals to corporately realize society’s full human potential as individuals and as a unified society. It is generally understood that this principle captures “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.” It is not merely the sum of the individual or specific goods, and it is indivisible and thus common in that it is the property of all in the community. It may be thought of as the social and communal dimension of the moral good. The responsibility for achieving the Common Good is shared jointly by individuals and by the state, which of course derives its authority from the individuals.

Assessing a proposed social policy to see if the Common Good is being met, a series of questions such as those shown below could be posed.

Figure 3 Test for the Common Good

Does this action contribute to the fulfillment of individual and collective human potential, especially among the weakest and poorest?

Yes

Is there any way in which this action diminishes the current fulfillment of individual or collective human potential?

No

Yes

Does this action exempt, prevent, or result in anyone being less obligated to contribute to the common good, the fulfillment of individual and collective human potential?

No

Yes

Does this action contribute to the coherency, unity, and organization of civil society, corporate right relationship?

No

Yes

Passes Common Good Test

Fails Common Good Test
Solidarity

Solidarity is the responsibility of individuals to realize their obligations to fellow members of the human family and the acknowledgement that a bond exists among all members of the community. One member of the human community is affected by what happens to other members and thus they stand together; there is interdependence among them. Often, this requires that stronger members help weaker ones, each thus realizing his or her full human potential. While this concept calls each member to be available to assist others, individuals should not be forced to do so; otherwise, aspects of Human Dignity are undermined. Similarly, one member of the community should not become unduly dependent on others; otherwise, the individual’s dignity is jeopardized.8

A specific policy may be assessed for Solidarity by asking questions such as those shown below.

Figure 4 Test for Solidarity
Subsidiarity

Subsidiarity is the principle that assigns the ownership for an action to the lowest level of social responsibility, e.g., individuals, families or intermediate groups. By doing so, this principle protects individuals in a society “from abuses by higher-level social authority” and thus allows individuals and families to realize their fullest potential while protecting their dignity. In so doing, Subsidiarity often opposes forms of centralization or bureaucratization. Thus it is the responsibility of these lower-level groupings to claim and act upon their authority, and it is the responsibility of higher-level groupings to encourage and support ownership at the lower levels.

In many cases, the principle of Subsidiarity seems to be the least respected of the principles of Catholic Social Teaching, while its rightful place is as an equal member of the three pillars upholding Human Dignity. In practice, when a given policy neglects Subsidiarity, Human Dignity is jeopardized and the policy is on unstable ground. Frequently, if a needed responsibility is not being met by society, then the state, as owner of last resort, is seen as having permission and the moral mandate to take ownership of satisfying the need. However, adherence to the principle of Subsidiarity would seem to require the state to take measures to encourage and support ownership at a lower level. An example of the results that can occur when this principle is neglected is seen in many social assistance programs that can stifle human initiative and increase government bureaucracies. Instead of creating large state-run programs, the principle of Subsidiarity would most likely be honored through market-driven programs that would allow individual choice within the free market. The state has at its disposal a variety of tools that could support efforts such as tax incentives and voucher systems.

A misconception that often arises from the misunderstanding or neglect of the principle of Subsidiarity presumes a false dichotomy: either society’s needs are met by the state, or they are left to individuals to provide for themselves. This erroneous dichotomy has led to the common perception that those who oppose, say, social welfare programs, lack compassion and are crudely saying, in effect, that the poor and downtrodden “should pull themselves up by their own boot straps.” However, there are many unexplored possibilities for meeting society’s collective responsibilities that can be found somewhere between the state and the individual. Privately-run, non-profit, and faith-based institutions have great potential for satisfying many of the needs that the state addresses or that some would assign to the state.
Some of these functions, while not being “pure” public goods (which are non-rival and non-excludable) do have significant externalities or neighborhood effects and thus may be underproduced from society’s standpoint when left solely to the free market. The free market functions best when goods are rival and excludable and when externalities are absent, since these goods provide the best profit-and-loss motive and best reflect the costs of production and the benefits received. Government provision of goods or services that have externalities is one option but certainly not the only nor necessarily the best option. Charitable organizations, including church-run activities and other non-profits, are almost always more local and thus able to be more responsive to specific needs, and may well be more efficient in meeting them. Keeping the decision-making in the local communities would eliminate large, impersonal and distant state-run or national bureaucracies. Local options could include, for example, individual churches or groups of churches in a local area.

Hospitals and schools are examples of functions or goods that are often cited as having extensive externalities and which have historically been successfully provided, and in fact started (both conceptually and specifically), by people of faith. Providing needed social services through these local non-profits or faith-based institutions would respect the principle of Subsidiarity while meeting the needs most efficiently. Perhaps, society has all too often neglected this critical avenue of meeting social needs, instead relying too much on central government. By failing to see if some combination of the free market and charitable activity can address a need, society inadvertently undermines Human Dignity by giving government power and authority that more rightly belongs at a more local level. The resulting unintended consequences, including atrophy, disempowerment, and disenfranchisement, are reasons to be vigilant in choosing solutions which meet Subsidiarity.

Another misconception arising from the misunderstanding or neglect of Subsidiarity results from the confusion about applying Subsidiarity to the method of selection versus applying it to the potential solutions themselves. For example, in an election where an issue of, say, a tax increase to support new social welfare programs is placed on the ballot, then the method of selection (voting by the people) has passed the test of Subsidiarity, but the potential solution (the specific program to help the needy) has not. Otherwise, in the extreme, any measure on a ballot, including a shift to totalitarian dictatorship, could be seen as satisfying the principle of Subsidiarity. Confusing the process of selection with the proposed action itself must be avoided.
When studying the overall model and seeing how the key principles interact, it should be clear that adhering to the principle of Subsidiarity has much to contribute to the search for best solutions. It appears that in some cases solutions that have been supported as socially just violate aspects of Subsidiarity and may even undermine Human Dignity. The model encourages policymakers to take a fresh look at social issues, questioning solutions that had previously been accepted. For example, some of the potential solutions to addressing poverty are to be found in the application, support, and safeguarding of the free market. The free market is the most efficient and effective means yet known for generating wealth, and for allowing the voluntary redistribution of that wealth in free exchanges of goods and services, while respecting the freedom of the participants. While the state has the responsibility of providing and protecting the “playing field” used in voluntary exchanges, it is normally beyond the state’s role to control who the players are and their goals. Often, when the state oversteps its role, not only is Subsidiarity violated but Human Dignity is harmed. Some examples where this may occur are in the areas of minimum wage legislation, and in certain subsidy and social welfare programs. The bottom line is that a better understanding of Subsidiarity and the identification of programs that are consistent with it, would likely uphold Human Dignity better than some of the previously attempted solutions.

One tool that might help in understanding the concept of Subsidiarity and its proper application is a simple and necessarily generic hierarchy of society’s groupings. The diagram below shows the following, listed from lowest or local (with largest ownership of responsibility) to highest or national (with smallest ownership of responsibility): individual, family, free association by membership or contract (sub-ranked by region of influence), and state (ranked by region of influence). Any given action, effort, or responsibility is presumed to be owned at the individual level unless, and until, that action is reasonably shown to be unworkable at that level, even with encouragement and support from higher levels, at which point the action or responsibility is presumed to be owned at the next higher level.
The state, being the highest level of societal organization and the one most prone to undermine Subsidiarity, and with a propensity to take for itself power and authority, should be scrutinized closely. By the very nature of the state, all other levels of society must have association with it, making various aspects of the interaction involuntary. Because of this unique quality of the state, a moral obligation exists to closely monitor the power of the state. For an action or responsibility to be owned by the state, strict requirements must be met. Besides promoting and supporting ownership of responsibilities at the lowest practical level, actions assigned to the state should be those which safeguard unalienable rights of its citizens, and where possible, all humanity, in a spirit of Solidarity.
Finally, a possible process model—with associated questions to be asked—for assessing whether an action or policy meets the spirit of Subsidiarity is shown below.

**Figure 6 Test for Subsidiarity**
Responsibilities of Society and State: Unalienable Rights

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

(Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776)

These words from the U.S. Declaration of Independence appear to be quite consistent with the principles of Catholic Social Teaching, in particular its emphasis on Human Dignity and the respect for the individual. And, this well-known statement speaks eloquently of every person’s unalienable rights, of the role and responsibility of Government to serve the governed by securing these rights, and the right of the governed to change government should it fail to uphold these rights, statements all consistent with the principles discussed above. Thus the model presented here, designed to apply Catholic Social Teaching to social actions and policies, is consistent with the foundations of the nation.

Many of the concepts and relationships discussed here are in condensed form and much unwrapping of them needs to be done. A richer, fuller, and deeper systemic understanding of Catholic Social Teaching is needed. May this proposed model be another catalyst for movement in that direction.
Notes

1. Pope Benedict XVI, in *Caritas in Veritate*, indirectly highlighted the need for a systematic approach to Catholic Social Teaching when he explained that it is an entire and cohesive body of work, and while we can focus on one aspect in teaching it, what we teach about it cannot contradict the truth of the entire fabric of teaching (no. 12). This paper’s model, in the context of charity and truth, names a systematic approach to Catholic Social Teaching in the hope and prayer of providing workers of charity with tools that help ensure that their actions are upholding the dignity they seek to advance.

2. A detailed discussion of Human Dignity and the other key principles of Catholic Social Teaching can be found in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, English translation, 2004, USCCB Publishing, Washington, DC. Much of the discussion of these principles in this paper is drawn from this document.

3. Other principles of Catholic Social Teaching exist and could be inserted into the framework of the model presented here in their right and proper relationship with the existing principles included.


5. *Compendium*, Chapter Four, Paragraph 164, which in turn quotes other Catholic documents.

6. Ibid.


8. Extensive discussion of Solidarity can be found in the *Compendium*, beginning with Paragraph 192.


10. An interesting observation supporting this statement is that in the index of the *Compendium*, Human Dignity is listed 134 times, Common Good 106, Solidarity 83 and Subsidiarity only 23.

11. See the discussion in *Compendium*, Chapter Four, Paragraph 187, which draws on the 1991 Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*, by Pope John Paul II.

12. These results are discussed briefly in *Compendium*, Chapter Four, Paragraph 187, along with quotes from *Centesimus Annus*. 