EX CORDE ECCLESIAE, SOCIAL SCIENCE, AND THE PUBLIC SQUARE
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This essay explores the relationship between Ex Corde Ecclesiae and its application in the United States on the one hand and the practice and teaching of the social sciences on the other. The paper reflects on ways the bishops and laity can advance the social sciences, which provide the current-day lingua franca of public discourse, and expresses the need to invoke social scientific research in the public square.

The social sciences have acquired an increasingly urgent and significant role within current-day debates about public policy. Given the recent review by the U.S. bishops of The Application of Ex Corde Ecclesiae, it is an appropriate time to reflect on how Catholic higher education, with the support and involvement of the bishops, can develop the social sciences and explore their applications in public policy.

SOCIAL SCIENCE IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

To understand the increasingly important role the social sciences play in political discourse, let us consider that the philosophical starting point of many current day academicians reflects a “secular fundamentalism” (to use a phrase that appears in Glendon 2011). This starting point conflicts with the moral theory of natural law, the traditional framework within which Catholic scholars have articulated moral and social claims. Between these two groups there is little accord about assumptions or starting points. Unsurprisingly, philosophical arguments now only rarely create consensus within the public square.

This is by no means to denigrate philosophy. It still has great value in helping to render the magisterium’s worldview comprehensible and internally consistent. It also articulates the tradition’s implications for understanding the moral dimensions of emerging social and technological challenges (e.g., in the area of bioethics).

But while philosophy is valuable in these respects, within public debates, invocations of empirical findings of social science now have greater cachet or sway than resorts to philosophical argumentation about first principles. From this perspective, empirical claims made within the social sciences now serve as the primary lingua franca for discourse about
public policy. To the extent persons outside the tradition take seriously philosophical arguments that support the tradition’s anthropology, it will largely be as a result of challenges to their views that emerge from within the social sciences.

This is unfortunate, but as a result there is great need for even more Catholic scholars to develop the social scientific depth and methodological expertise necessary to be effective in the public square and to do so in ways that draw on the riches of their tradition.\(^3\)

One approach these scholars can take is critical.\(^4\) Another is constructive. These approaches are complementary, since accomplishing the latter is often necessarily intertwined with the task of critiquing opposing views.

The critical approach can take a number of forms. First, it involves offering critiques of empirical studies whose findings are relevant to understanding empirical aspects of natural law moral theory, including putative research findings with public policy implications that might seem to challenge the claims of this moral theory.\(^5\) This involves questioning the assumptions of these studies and their methodologies, as well as exposing the ideological ends to which social sciences may be put. These activities can challenge invocations by secularists of faulty social science to support policies that undermine human well-being.

Second, while model-building and mathematical and statistical analysis can play useful roles in the social sciences, they have limits.\(^6\) The Catholic intellectual tradition, given that it affirms free will and rejects a mechanistic concept of the human person as subject solely to laws like those in the physical sciences, can help deflate the pretensions that can accompany use of these analytical tools, aspiring as they sometimes do to replicate the predictive success of the physical sciences. It is important to realize, however, that social scientific research is no less worthy of pursuit if it does not have the predictive capability of the physical sciences. One is reminded of Aristotle’s dictum not to bring more precision to bear on a subject matter than it warrants (see Aristotle 1975: 1094b, 1098a). Some humble precision is better than no precision, and can be eminently useful.

A second approach for Catholic social science is the constructive one of exploring empirically what human actions conduce to human flourishing.\(^7\) Such empirical work can play a valuable role in recommending public policies that promote rather than undercut human well-being. Part of this work involves developing methodologies and research programs congruent with the philosophical assumptions about the person defended by the magisterium. There is great value in making these assumptions explicit and showing how they may conflict with the assumptions of mainstream social science. Again, this can lead persons to see that the conflicts...
in policy debates are not only over empirical matters, but also conceptions of human nature—to wit, philosophical matters that go to the heart of what type of people we should aspire to be.

**EX CORDE ECCLESIAE, ITS U.S. APPLICATION, AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES**

In 1990, John Paul II promulgated *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (*ECE*), the Apostolic Constitution of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on Catholic Universities. In 2001, *The Application of Ex Corde Ecclesiae for the United States* went into effect. The recent aforementioned review by the bishops of the *Application of ECE* (below, *Application*) provides an opportunity to reflect on the current relevance of *ECE* and of the application of *ECE* to the U.S. with respect to the social sciences. Below is a distillation of claims that appear in these documents, and in the *Motu Proprio* that established the Pontifical Academy of the Social Sciences, that bear on the topics addressed later in this essay about the appropriate role of bishops and laity in advancing the social sciences and their invocation in public discourse:

- “Social science research (*Socialium scientiarum investigations*) can effectively contribute to improving human relations, as has been shown by the progress achieved in various sectors of society especially during the century now drawing to a close. . . . Upon examination of these 100 years of history one point stands out clearly: the Church has succeeded in building up a rich patrimony of Catholic social doctrine because of close collaboration, on the one hand, with Catholic social movements, and on the other, with experts in the social sciences” (*Motu Proprio*).⁸

- “Dialogue” between faith and reason is an important area of concern for Catholic universities; “such dialogue concerns the natural sciences as much as the human sciences which posit new and complex philosophical and ethical problems” (*ECE*, no. 46).⁹

- Theology and philosophy have an essential role within Catholic universities, including in relation to interdisciplinary work with other fields of inquiry (*ECE*, nos. 16, 19, 20).

- The university has a responsibility to the broader society (*ECE*, nos. 30, 32, 36; *Application*, Part I, sections 5 and 7), and “if need be, a Catholic University must have the courage to speak uncomfortable truths which do not please public opinion, but which are necessary to safeguard the authentic good of society” (*ECE*, no. 32). Also: “in col-
laborating with governmental agencies, regional associations, and other universities, whether public or private, Catholic universities should give corporate witness to and promote the Church’s social teaching and its moral principles in areas such as the fostering of peace and justice, respect for all human life, the eradication of poverty and unjust discrimination, the development of all peoples and the growth of human culture” (*Application*, Part 2, Art. 7, 2).

- Doctrinal integrity is critical to the mission of a Catholic university or college. The teaching of theology is to be magisterially sound (*ECE*, no. 20; *Application*, Part 2, Art. 4, 4.d and 5.a). Other relevant passages: “the conference of bishops and the diocesan bishops concerned have the duty and right of being vigilant that in these universities the principles of Catholic doctrine are faithfully observed” (*ECE*, fn. 49, citing invocation of Canon 810, CIC; see also *Application*, Part I, section 7); “the identity of a Catholic University is essentially linked to the quality of its teachers and to respect for Catholic doctrine” (*ECE*, Part II, General Norms, Art. 4, section 1); “the institutional fidelity of the University to the Christian message includes a recognition of and adherence to the teaching authority of the Church in matters of faith and morals” (*ECE*, no. 27; see also *Application*, Part 2, Art. 4, 4.d.). The Church’s expectation of ‘respect for Catholic doctrine’ should not, however, be misconstrued to imply that a Catholic university’s task is to indoctrinate or proselytize its students. Secular subjects are taught for their intrinsic value, and the teaching of secular subjects is to be measured by the norms and professional standards applicable and appropriate to the individual disciplines” (*Application*, fn. 37); “in ways appropriate to the different academic disciplines, all Catholic teachers are to be faithful to, and all other teachers are to respect, Catholic doctrine and morals in their research and teaching” (*ECE*, Part II, Art. 4.3).10

- “Catholic teaching should have a place, if appropriate to the subject matter, in the various disciplines taught in the university. Students should be provided with adequate instruction on professional ethics and moral issues related to their profession and the secular disciplines” (*Application*, Part 2, Art. 4, 5.c).

- “Bishops have a particular responsibility to promote Catholic Universities, and especially to promote and assist in the preservation and strengthening of their Catholic identity, including the protection of their Catholic identity in relation to civil authorities. This will be
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achieved more effectively if close personal and pastoral relationships exist between University and Church authorities” (ECE, no. 28, see also Application, Part 2, Art. 5, section 2).

- “A responsibility of every Catholic university is to affirm its essential characteristics, in accord with the principles of Ex corde Ecclesiae, through public acknowledgment in its mission statement and/or its other official documentation of its canonical status and its commitment to the practical implications of its Catholic identity” (Application, Part Two, Art. 2), and “the university shall develop and maintain a plan for fulfilling its mission that communicates and develops the Catholic intellectual tradition, is of service to the Church and society, and encourages the members of the university community to grow in the practice of the faith” (Application, Part 2, Art. 5, 1.a).

- “The National Conference of Catholic Bishops, through an appropriate committee structure, should continue to dialogue and collaborate with the Catholic academic community and its representative associations about ways of safeguarding and promoting the ideals, principles and norms expressed in Ex corde Ecclesiae” (Application, Part 2, Art. 5, 2.g).

- “It is . . . my desire to express my pleasure and gratitude to the very many Catholic scholars engaged in teaching and research in non-Catholic Universities. Their task as academics and scientists, lived out in the light of the Christian faith, is to be considered precious for the good of the Universities in which they teach. Their presence, in fact, is a continuous stimulus to the selfless search for truth and for the wisdom that comes from above” (ECE, no. 2).

- “The world is no longer split into two hostile blocs and yet it is facing new economic, social and political crises on a global scale. Although the Church is aware that her task is not to offer technical answers to all these problems, she still feels obliged to make her contribution to preserving peace and to building a society worthy of man. To this, however, she needs constant and more extensive contact with the modern social sciences, with their research and with their findings. In this way she ‘enters into dialogue with the various disciplines concerned with man, assimilates what these disciplines have to contribute, and helps them to open themselves to a broader horizon’ (Centesimus annus n. 59)” (Motu Proprio).
THE BISHOPS AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Given the role social sciences now play in public debates, it is critical that the bishops—in accord with ECE and its Application—promote magisterially-informed social scientific work in Catholic higher education. While the actual conduct of such work is the purview of professors and researchers, the bishops can play important inspirational, leadership, and facilitating roles.

1. In their ongoing discussions with universities, bishops can inquire about the status of work in the social sciences and encourage teaching and research programs that deepen our understanding of human anthropology, in light of both natural law moral doctrine, as well as the magisterium. Bishops can also encourage Catholic universities and colleges to incorporate in their mission statements an explicit recognition of the value of the social sciences (taught and practiced in accord with Catholic doctrine) and their relevance to public policy issues.

2. The Pontifical Academy of the Social Sciences, which John Paul II established on January 1, 1994, by a Motu Proprio, explores insights that can be incorporated into the social teachings of the Church; the Academy “has the aim of promoting the study and progress of the social, economic, political and juridical sciences, offering the Church the elements which she can use in the study and development of her social doctrine. The Academy also reflects on the application of that doctrine in contemporary society.”12 The Academy also holds conferences about timely topics, for example, religious liberty, a topic that is not only of global importance, but is emerging as a theme of critical importance in the United States.13 USCCB, and bishops acting individually, can disseminate information about the Academy’s activities and deliberations and how these bear on public policy. Also, bishops can provide feedback and comments to the Pontifical Academy about its published works and on relevant topics for future discussion.

3. Bishops can encourage Catholic college and university administrators and faculty to create courses of study that foster a critical understanding, informed by Catholic social and moral thought, of the methodology and assumptions of prevailing paradigms in social science. It is important, in good Thomistic fashion, to train students to learn the tenets of prevailing social science thoroughly and responsibly before going on to critically discuss those tenets from a Catholic perspective, especially those tenets with clear normative dimensions.

4. Bishops can encourage the development of magisterially sound philosophy and theology departments and interdisciplinary work between these fields and the social sciences.14 A restoration of a solidly Catholic
theology and philosophy in historically Catholic institutions can help give rise, through interdisciplinary work, to teaching and research in the social sciences that advances Catholic moral and social thought.

5. Within pastoral letters, bishops, with the assistance of academicians, can publicly invoke social science that challenges views contrary to those defended in the magisterium.

6. In conjunction with these pastoral statements, bishops can support publicly accessible lectures and symposia, held at Catholic universities and colleges, that explore contested social issues from the standpoint of the tradition’s moral and social doctrines. There is value in making recordings or transcripts of these talks accessible over the Internet.

7. In general, academicians experience strong pressures to conform their teaching and research to fashionable agendas and trends. To counter these tendencies, bishops can call on Catholic social scientists to exercise bold independence of thought and to play constructive roles within their professional associations as promulgators of alternative perspectives. Catholic scholars associated with secular universities face particular pressures in the current day; the bishops can support them, as well as the work of writers and researchers not associated with universities (e.g., those persons at think tanks and advocacy organizations).

THE LAITY AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Lay professors who do teaching and research in the social sciences have their own distinct roles. Through their teaching and research, laity can help articulate and defend, on an empirical level, claims made in natural law moral theory. Contributing to public discourse is essential, especially in a way that appeals to reason—in accord with the aspiration of natural law moral theory—and without invoking theological premises.\(^{15}\)

The following are some specific ideas about lay involvement in the social sciences.

1. The social sciences are imbued with often-unacknowledged philosophical assumptions.\(^{16}\) Rather than accept prevailing assumptions willy-nilly, Catholic social scientists should be acutely aware of the philosophical backdrop of mainstream social scientific theorizing. Again, either in teaching or research, a critical first moment is to achieve a thorough understanding of these theories, before embarking on the second moment of critical discussion. One rich resource for the second moment is now largely unread work about the social sciences done in the twentieth century when Thomism and scholasticism still served as a framework of philosophical discourse within Catholic academia.\(^{17}\) Such work can be extended and deepened in light of developments within the social sciences.
2. There is great need for continued interdisciplinary teaching and research conducted jointly by philosophers and social scientists working on issues related to the practice and methodology of the social sciences—in other words, the sorts of topics taken up by the discipline of “philosophy of social science.” Overall, it is not possible to do social scientific research well—and without self-delusion—without a conscious effort to address the following sorts of issues, which pertain to approaches and methodologies that social scientists adopt in practice.

The number of relevant sub-topics worthy of interdisciplinary research in philosophy of social science is enormous; the following list is intentionally long to convey a sense of the wide field of inquiry. In addition to the old chestnut, the fact/value distinction, a few equally interesting issues are the nature of causation (e.g., in econometrics or psychometrics) between empirical variables and how this topic bears on statistical studies relevant to public policy; how to characterize human action, including its normative dimensions; alternatives to so-called methodological individualism vs. holism; the proper role of mathematics; what metrics are appropriate to assessing human happiness; the limitations of such metrics; how to demonstrate empirically the value of subsidiarist approaches to social structures; and the nature of social explanation. In investigating these philosophical issues, there is a need to understand—from a history of ideas perspective—how the social sciences have historically tracked the course of philosophy. Paradigms in the social sciences have long historical pedigrees that bear close parallels to the development of ideas within philosophy. Catholic philosophers have long appreciated the historical development of ideas and so are well-positioned to develop the necessary understanding of how social science paradigms have evolved.

In addition, professors serve students greatly when they encourage them to think critically about philosophical issues in the social sciences, whether the topics are those above or others. In this task, it is important to use such teachings as a way to introduce students to general themes in Catholic philosophy, as well as more specific ones like those above.

3. Grounding in Catholic philosophy, which can be pursued informally or at the master’s level, can help social scientists address the interdisciplinary areas of inquiry in philosophy of social science described above. Unfortunately, it is perhaps true that most self-described Catholic universities no longer provide a systematic exposure to philosophy, at least in a way that conveys the riches of the tradition. Lay involvement in restoring the Catholicity of philosophy departments can have important feedback for work in the social sciences, through interdisciplinary research and
teaching done at the interface of social science and philosophy, on the
development of Catholic social science.

4. Professors, in their pedagogy, should be aware of the subtle influ-
ences that mainstream social science can exercise on students. One reason
to train students to think critically about claims in current social science is
characterological. 18

5. Professors can contribute to public policy discussions through aca-
demic or popular writing. 19

6. Laity can provide a countervailing presence within professional as-
sociations in the social sciences and propose for discussion views that may
be contrary to dominant paradigms. Allied to this is the need to challenge
ways in which secular ideology can bias research results. 20

It is important for researchers and teachers not to assume that because
a perspective or paradigm originates in prestigious secular institutions,
that this is a presumption in its favor.

7. There is need for annotated bibliography, preferably openly acces-
sible on the web, of peer-reviewed academic work that reflects the criti-
cal and constructive approaches to the social sciences mentioned above.
A repository of such a bibliography can assist in research, teaching, and
public discussion. Researchers can work with librarians to make use of
e-mail alerting services provided by journals and bibliographic databases
that enable tracking of late-breaking research. 21

8. Researchers may want to consider publishing academic journal ar-
ticles that represent two genres: meta-analyses of research and literature
reviews. These genres provide an opportunity to make explicit and chal-
lenge systematically the philosophical assumptions that appear in social
scientific work.

CONCLUSION

Bishops and laity can play valuable roles, in the spirit of ECE and its re-
cent review by the bishops of its application, in defending and promoting
the magisterium within the public square.

Discussions of ECE should certainly focus on the need for Catholic
theology and philosophy to be taught in a magisterially sound way. How-
ever, the need to understand ECE as extending to work within Catholic
higher education on social sciences, including to interdisciplinary work
between philosophy and the social sciences, deserves far more attention,
especially because of the important role of the social sciences in contem-
porary public discourse.
Notes

1. For an item relating to the review of the Application, see Dolan and Curry 2011. For a very recent dissertation about ECE’s implementation in the U.S., see Caridi 2011.

2. Alasdair MacIntyre famously depicted this phenomenon as an aspect of the “emotivist culture” in his book After Virtue. The title of Robert P. George’s book The Clash of Orthodoxies is also suitable in this context.

3. Some examples are as follows. The president of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, Prof. Mary Ann Glendon, cites empirical studies about the relationship between democracy and religious liberty in her summary of a conference held in May (see Glendon 2011). Another example is the work done by Scarnecchia and McKeegan (2009) in evaluating the United Nation’s Millennium Development Goals. There is a very strong and continued need to address issues of world poverty and the sharp global disparities of wealth and to study how particular international aid and development policies either help or hinder that goal. Finally, the Society of Catholic Social Scientists issued a press release in which Alvare and New, experts on empirical data relating to contraception and abortion, offer detailed discussions about the faulty social science implicit in the recent federal Health and Human Services mandate concerning insurance plans (see Society of Catholic Social Scientists 2011).

4. Cf. here ECE, nos. 48 and 49.

5. An example is research that attempts to deny that abortion has psychological effects.

6. One naturally wonders, for example, how the grand mathematical structures that appear in much economic work contributes to economic insight, as opposed to an approach, adopted by some economists, that begins with economic insight and exercises Ockham’s razor on the use of mathematical apparatus.

7. There is interest in contemporary social sciences for research along these lines in “Happiness Economics,” for example, the symposium in Journal of Economic Perspectives 20:1 (Winter 2006), while in psychology in recent years the field of “positive psychology” (see IPPA) has emerged. Catholic social scientists, drawing on their philosophical tradition, can make their own contributions in these areas.

8. The Motu Proprio includes a synopsis of the magisterium’s commentary on the social sciences, beginning with Leo XIII.

9. Given the consistency between faith and reason affirmed in the Catholic tradition, it is consistent with the spirit of this section of ECE that the findings of social science will vindicate, or be consistent with, the Church’s moral and social doctrines. This assertion, of course, poses deep questions about the extent to which the methodology and practice of social science is already imbued with antecedent normative commitments, and whether this assertion should rather read “should vindicate, or be consistent with.”

10. Below I suggest an approach to teaching that accords both with the need to convey the “norms and professional standards applicable and appropriate to the individual disciplines” and yet at the same time accords with the Catholic
identity of a university or college, as this goal is understood by both *ECE* and its *Application*.

11. “. . . including but not limited to those specified in Part One, Section 7 of this document.”

12. From website on which appears Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, *Mmotu Proprio*.

13. For a list of publications, see Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, Selected Publications. The conference proceedings of the Academy’s 2011 plenary session, “Universal Rights in a World of Diversity: The Case of Religious Freedom” (29 April–3 May 2011), will become available at this website.

14. This commitment can be explicitly addressed by philosophy or theology departments. For example, see this notable description in CUA’s document about *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*: “The School of Philosophy . . . serves the wider Church and society through its academic programs and initiatives. Pursuing philosophy as a search for truth about ultimate principles and human good, the school stands firm in the Catholic intellectual tradition in contrast to modern philosophical skepticism about the very possibility of those principles. Cultivating an intellectual awareness adequate to confront the anti-philosophical tendencies of the times is a principal goal of the School of Philosophy.”

15. However, just as empirical work can lead individuals to consider the philosophical premises of their views, so too discussions of what is naturally reasonable can lead individuals to consider the framework metaphysics that ultimately renders comprehensible claims about what is naturally reasonable.

16. For example, is the assumption within undergraduate microeconomics classes correct that humans, when they are reasonable, are typically maximizing utility?

17. For example, see Mueller 1961. The WorldCat Database (www.worldcat.org) is just one bibliographic source with which to build bibliography from the period in question, as well as from later periods. For example, someone interested in books or dissertations representing Thomistic perspectives in the field of sociology can try searching WorldCat using the search statement “Aquinas and sociology.”

18. Of interest in this context, if just by way of sparking classroom discussion, is Frank, Gilovich, and Regan 1993.

19. For maximal impact, it is important for Catholic social scientists to prioritize issues and focus on critiques of those claims that appear to have had wide impact. For example, in bioethics as it relates to public policy, an alleged statistical relationship between use of contraception on the one hand and incidence of abortion or “unintended pregnancies” on the other has apparently quite made its rounds, if the following is any indication. Places in which this claim appears are UNFPA (see page 17) and Family Health International 2011. Also, Senator Robert P. Casey of Pennsylvania confidently asserted in an e-mail, without citing any research sources, that he thinks well of “family planning precisely because it reduces the number of unintended pregnancies and abortions.” E-mail communication from Senator Robert P. Casey, Jr., October 6, 2011. Unsupported statements
provided without analytical commentary or citation of source are a particular problem of contemporary discourse.

20. An example of work of this kind appears in American Association of Pro-life Obstetricians and Gynecologists 2008. Given the American Psychological Association’s historical commitment to the pro-abortion agenda (see American Psychological Association, Abortion Resolutions), it is naïve to assume that the APA’s findings about this issue do not run the risk of systematic researcher bias. The task of Catholic social scientists is to scrutinize putative findings with care, objectivity, and diligence, again with an emphasis on understanding, at least as well as those who put them forth, the contested research results before embarking on critique.

21. The APA’s website hosts a news item (Crawford 2003) about a website, the “Pro-Choice Forum Web,” that purports to correct “inaccurate information about reproductive health—abortion, in particular—by featuring research-based literature and scholarly opinions.” Pro-life individuals need to continue developing counteracting information repositories.

References


http://www.usccb.org/about/catholic-education/higher-education-and-campus-ministry/upload/LettertoallBishops011911.pdf


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