This essay examines a revision that took place in the meaning of social justice among commentators on and scholars of papal social teaching from the time of Pope St. John XXIII. The revision occurred under the influence of Marxist ideology over the application of Catholic social thought to questions of reform in society. This essay will argue that there was never any real change in the papal social encyclicals themselves, as evidenced by Blessed Pope Paul VI’s statements in Octogesima Adveniens and by the attempt of Pope St. John Paul II to return the meaning of social justice to its original soil of the Gospel and the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas.

THE VIRTUE OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

What is virtue? Virtue is a habit that, when cultivated, becomes almost second nature to us, like learning to ride a bicycle. A virtue is a skill or particular activity that we learn by practicing it. Chastity, for example, designates the cultivation of self-giving deeds and ways of thinking which promote the full, integral good of body, soul, and spirit together, as distinct from a disintegrating life in the body by reducing human life to one of these dimensions in isolation from the others. Similarly, there is a particular human activity proper to the virtue of justice in general and, what may seem surprising, social justice in particular. The aim of this essay will be to study and outline the meaning of social justice as a virtue. In order to understand this virtue, we shall consult the living body of Catholic social teaching stemming from the papal magisterium and stretching back to the publication of Rerum Novarum (New Things) by Pope Leo XIII on May 15, 1891.

Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical has given rise to a body of Catholic social teaching on faith and morals emanating from later Popes through writings, speeches, and addresses on the political, economic, social, cultural, and religious dimensions of modern life. As a result, Rerum Novarum became a benchmark for subsequent Popes who took up the “social question” as presented by Leo XIII in 1891 and updated it to include the “new things” arising in their own time. Thus Pope Pius XI wrote Quadragesimo Anno (On the Fortieth Year) on the fortieth anniversary of Rerum Novarum in
1931. Pope Paul VI wrote an Apostolic Letter to Cardinal Maurice Roy, then president of the Council of the Laity and of the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace, on the eightieth anniversary (Octogesima Adveniens, 1971) of the publication of Rerum Novarum. Pope St. John Paul II in 1991 wrote the encyclical Centesimus Annus (The One-Hundredth Year) and reflected on the “new things” and circumstances added to the “social question” in his day, which included the collapse of the Soviet Empire and subsequent fall of the Berlin Wall. In our day a similar trajectory within the papal magisterium began forming on the anniversary of yet another encyclical, this time one promulgated by Pope Paul VI on March 26, 1967 entitled Populorum Progressio (On the Development of Peoples). Both Popes John Paul II and later Benedict XVI published encyclicals on the anniversary of Populorum Progressio, namely, Solicitudo Rei Socialis (The Social Concern of the Church) on the twentieth anniversary (1987) and Caritas in Veritate (Charity in Truth) (2009) near the fortieth anniversary.¹

Pope Leo XIII, therefore, inaugurated a series of papal writings and addresses that have come together to form a body of living doctrine resulting from understanding the “social questions” we face in the light of faith and reason, revelation, and natural law. But Pope Leo XIII is also known for encouraging the study of St. Thomas Aquinas, the Angelic Doctor, with the publication of an earlier encyclical, Aeterni Patris, on October 15, 1879. The Holy Father addressed certain “false conclusions concerning divine and human things, which originated in the schools of philosophy”² and as a remedy called for a restoration of “the renowned teaching of Thomas Aquinas.”³ The result was a resurgence in the study of St. Thomas’s teachings.

In 1891, therefore, Leo XIII developed his own approach to the “social question” in consultation with the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas when he published Rerum Novarum. In it the Holy Father developed doctrine related to private property, labor practices, and wages among others. For example, he developed the notion of a “just wage” as opposed to a “wage of consent.” Wages of consent were being used by factory owners at the time to keep wages so low that if a worker complained, the owner would simply let him go and hire someone else since the labor pool was so large. These circumstances forced laborers to consent to low wages, since they would rather have a low paying job than no job at all. Against this practice Pope Leo XIII formulated the concept of the “just wage” which should be sufficient for a laborer to live reasonably well while adequately providing for his family. It was Pope Pius XI, however, who formally introduced the term, “social justice” into papal social doctrine in 1931 when
he published, *Quadragesimo Anno*. In order to understand what it means, we need briefly to study the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas on the virtue of justice.

St. Thomas’s teaching on the virtue of justice appears in several places within his writings, but his more mature thought on the subject occurs in his *Summa Theologica* (IIa–IIae, qq. 57–122). There he expounds justice as a virtue governing our acts in relation to others: “It is proper to justice, as compared with the other virtues, to direct man in his relations with others.” If the Angelic Doctor were pressed for a definition of justice, he would say: “And if anyone would reduce it to the proper form of a definition, he might say that ‘justice is a habit whereby a man renders to each one his due by a constant and perpetual will.’” Justice here designates more than an occasional, isolated act of a man or woman rendering to another what is his or her due; rather the aim is to acquire a disposition wherein one renders to others their due with constancy and determination. The aim is not simply to perform individual, occasional acts of justice as much as actually to be and become just in our relations with others. St. Thomas then proceeds to develop three forms of justice, namely, commutative, distributive, and legal justice.

Commutative justice is the act of one person rendering to another person what is his or her due. Commutative justice, therefore, is the virtue governing acts of one person in relation to another. Distributive justice, on the other hand, designates those acts whereby a group renders to an individual or smaller group what is due. In this case we speak of what a larger corporate body owes to an individual or corporate body smaller than itself. The State, for example, owes its citizens access to clean water. Distributive justice was also the basis for what Leo XIII called a “just wage.” The factory owner, representing the larger corporate body, owed his laborers a wage sufficient for a reasonably comfortable life for himself and his family. Given the acquisitive spirit among owners of capital and the desperation shared by most laborers in 1891, a wage of consent violated the requirements of distributive justice. Finally, legal justice governs acts of individuals or smaller groups in relation to larger groups or corporations. A rather famous appeal to legal justice occurred in the *Inaugural Address* of President John F. Kennedy who, on January 20, 1961, said: “And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.” Here President Kennedy exhorted his fellow citizens to legal justice when he called on them to ask what each of them could contribute to the good of the whole country.

What St. Thomas called “legal justice” was what Pope Pius XI understood when he used the term “social justice” in his encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno*.
esimo Anno. The term “social justice” first appeared in a papal encyclical written by Pope St. Pius X entitled Jucunda Sane, dated March 12, 1904. It was a passing reference, receiving little or no development at the time, but this changed in Quadragesimo Anno where Pius XI developed the term in consultation with the teaching of Aquinas. A resurgence in the study of St. Thomas’s writings was in full swing by 1931 in response to Leo XIII’s, Aeterni Patris, but the term “legal justice” had already suffered misinterpretation in the late nineteenth century. This was due in part to the growth of positive law tradition and the concept of justice meted out by the State within a court of law. As a result, Thomistic scholars began to untangle the Angelic Doctor’s concept of “legal justice” from justice served in a court of law by referring to it as “social justice.” “A clear notion of social justice, which was very close to the Thomist concept of legal justice, had begun to form from about 1880.”7 This trend continued and was an integral part of Catholic social and political thought among academicians by 1931, especially those scholars in Germany who greatly influenced Pius XI’s use of the term in Quadragesimo Anno.

“Social justice,” therefore, was chosen to designate what St. Thomas understood by the term “legal justice” in his Summa Theologica. Perhaps there is no better place to turn for evidence of this equivalency than Pius XI himself who later promulgated the encyclical, Divini Redemptoris (March 19, 1937), within which he wrote:

Now it is of the very essence of social justice to demand for each individual all that is necessary for the common good. But just as in the living organism it is impossible to provide for the good of the whole unless each single part and each individual member is given what it needs for the exercise of its proper functions, so it is impossible to care for the social organism and the good of society as a unit unless each single part and each individual member—that is to say, each individual man in the dignity of his human personality—is supplied with all that is necessary for the exercise of his social functions.8

Just as the whole of a human organism suffers impairment if and when an individual member of the organism becomes functionally deficient through neglect or injury, so it goes for the social organism. This is what Pope Pius XI means when speaking of social justice, namely, a virtue which aims to serve the good of the whole society in and through proper care and provision for the individual members who make up and contribute to it.

Take, for example, the notion of a just wage developed above. An individual’s contribution to the good of society is impaired, not only by an insufficient wage, but also by unemployment. Thus, the requirements of social justice call not only for a sufficient wage paid to workers, but
also a sufficient wage for the greatest possible number of workers at a
given factory. The good of the whole society is best served by a wage that
secures *both* reasonable comfort in living conditions for laborers and their
families *and* the employment of the greatest possible number of people
at a decent wage. This would be called a “just” wage in keeping with the
requirements of social justice which serves, not only the personal good of
laborers, but also the total good of the corporation and society. The virtue
of social justice aims to serve *the good of the whole* or what is called the
“common good” which is distinct from, though intimately related to, the
personal good of individuals who make up society.

Pope St. John XXIII more precisely defined the common good in 1961,
capturing this twofold meaning of social justice. The common good, he
wrote, refers to “all those social conditions which favor the full develop-
ment of human personality,” which is to say, the full development of the
human person. Thus, the common good refers to those conditions within
society (the greater whole) wherein human persons flourish and prosper as
persons. Social justice as a virtue aims to cultivate both of these, namely,
the human person and those conditions within society wherein persons
may flourish and prosper.

Thus, social justice aims to cultivate the common good, that is, those
conditions within society wherein human persons flourish in keeping with
their nature as given and created by God. In other words, the common
good is the proper object of those human acts issuing from the virtue of
social justice. This means that in acquiring the virtue of social justice, we
aim to cultivate deeds which will help establish, maintain, and promote
conditions in society wherein human persons may flourish in body, soul,
and spirit (cf. 1 Thess. 5:23), rather than diminish and suffer undue harm.
Social justice guides and directs even the acts proper to the other virtues
toward accomplishing this same goal. For example, in the parable of the
talents in Matthew’s Gospel (25:14ff.), the servant who received one tal-
ent went off and buried it, thereby suffering the atrophy of his own person
while withholding his contribution to the building up of conditions that
contribute to the well-being of others. When the Master returned for an
account of the talents, he called the servant who buried his talent “wicked
and lazy,” took it away from him and gave it to another. The servant given
one talent violated the requirements of social justice by burying it. He
could have invested the talent whereby both he and his neighbor might
prosper, but instead out of fear he refused. Social justice is the virtue that
would have enabled him to see and serve the greater good within and be-
yond himself and his fears.
Social justice as a virtue may sound foreign to some readers of today, due in part to how the meaning of the term began changing with Pope St. John XXIII’s encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*. The term “social justice” in papal literature was never altered, but the interpretation of it by commentators and academicians studying Catholic social thought did move it away from its Thomistic roots.¹¹ This reinterpretation and attempts made to return social justice to its original meaning as a virtue will occupy the remainder of this essay.

We know that the sole editor for St. John XXIII’s encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, was Msgr. Pietro Pavan.¹² He was an Italian priest from the diocese of Treviso who taught at the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome. His area of expertise was Catholic social doctrine, and after St. John XXIII called for the Second Vatican Council in 1959, Pavan was invited to assist with the work of the Preparatory Commission for the Council and later also served as a *peritus*¹³ during the Council.

*Pacem in Terris* was promulgated on April 11, 1963. But a month earlier, on March 7, the Holy Father received in private audience the son-in-law and daughter of Nikita Khrushchev, Communist Premier of the Soviet Union, who in October of 1962 was confronted by President John F. Kennedy for placing nuclear weapons in Cuba. John XXIII “unexpectedly” invited Alexei and Rada Adzhubei to meet with him in private audience at the conclusion of a routine meeting with the press core. Alexei Adzhubei was then editor of the Soviet government newspaper, *Izvestia*, and the Associated Press (AP) reported that it was “the first meeting between a Roman Catholic pontiff and a leading figure from the Communist Soviet Union.”¹⁴ In the same article, the AP stated that the meeting came after “indications of improving relations between Moscow and the Vatican” and then speculated that Alexei Adzhubei “possibly” gave the Holy Father “a message from Khrushchev.”¹⁵

Previous popes were fairly critical of socialism in general, and communist socialism in particular, and so had never dealt directly with the communist regime of the Soviet Union; they didn’t really believe that it would last. By 1963, however, the Soviet Union was a world power and as a result it became apparent to the Vatican that the Soviets had staying power and so needed to be engaged in some way. St. John XXIII seized upon the opportunity of a meeting with the press core to take the first step which, given his affability, was a very friendly first step.

The meeting raised some eyebrows at the Vatican, as elsewhere to be sure, but it also signaled a change among some Vatican officials on how to approach communism. Fr. Yves Congar, OP, himself a *peritus* of the Sec-
Social Justice and Catholic Social Thought

ond Vatican Council and in Rome at the time, wrote an entry in his journal dated Tuesday, May 14, 1963:

At this moment in Rome, there is a wave of opposition against those responsible for the new policy of an opening to the left and in favour of peace with Communism, against Dell’Acqua, Capovilla (the Pope’s secretary), Toniolo Ferrari, Pavan: the authors of *Pacem in terris*. The results of the Italian elections are not welcome and the slide to the left is blamed on the said opening to the left.  

Congar here states that the “slide to the left” amid the Italian elections was being blamed on the “opening” to the left at the Vatican, especially among the authors of *Pacem in Terris*. Socialism for the most part existed primarily in theory within European universities up until the Russian revolution of 1917 when the theory became applied and gave rise to a society organized according to the principles of Marxism. This historical organization of society became a particular form of socialism, namely, communist socialism or just “communism.”

In hindsight, there was nothing more than an “opening” to the left in 1963 which, more precisely, meant continuing to censure erroneous elements of theoretical socialism, but raising the possibility of good in its practical application within communism. It was an opening inasmuch as it signaled a more nuanced approach to communism than had previously been the case. Pius XI, for example, while admitting that “Socialism, like all errors, contains some truth (which, moreover, the Supreme Pontiffs have never denied),” stated in the next sentence that “no one can be at the same time a good Catholic and a true socialist.”  

St. John XXIII restated Pius XI’s position, but he did so with a more pronounced distinction between theoretical socialism and its historical iteration within communism. He stated in article 159 of *Pacem in Terris*:

> Again it is perfectly legitimate to make a clear distinction between a false philosophy of the nature, origin and purpose of men and the world, and economic, social, cultural, and political undertakings, even when such undertakings draw their origin and inspiration from that philosophy. True, the philosophic formula does not change once it has been set down in precise terms, but the undertakings clearly cannot avoid being influenced to a certain extent by the changing conditions in which they have to operate. Besides, who can deny the possible existence of good and commendable elements in these undertakings, elements which do indeed conform to the dictates of right reason, and are an expression of man’s lawful aspirations?

There is no explicit reference to socialism or communism in the above text, but there would soon follow some commentary by Blessed Pope Paul
VI on this text from *Pacem in Terris* in order to clarify its meaning. During the pontificate of Paul VI, the opening “to the left” provided by this text became an open door through which a good deal of Catholic social thought would soon travel.

Blessed Pope Paul VI published *Populorum Progressio* on March 26, 1967 and conservative commentators on the encyclical called it “warmed over Marxism,” while the French communist newspaper, *L’Humanite* claimed that the encyclical denounced the same evils “Marxists have been calling attention to for more than a century.” In support of their claim, conservative commentators quoted from article 31 of *Populorum Progressio* where the Holy Father warns against “revolutionary uprisings—except where there is manifest, longstanding tyranny which would do great damage to fundamental personal rights and dangerous harm to the common good of the country.”

Is this a limited endorsement of Marxist-style uprising and revolution? Some commentators took it that way, even though such an interpretation is hard to defend for a number of reasons. First, there is no mention of Marxism in the text of Paul VI, and second, Paul VI explicitly warned against enlisting Marxist ideology in the service of Catholic social thought and reform when he wrote *Octogesima Adveniens* a few years later. There were some theologians, especially in South and Central America, who understood Paul VI to be friendly toward the development of Catholic social thought in consultation with the writings of Karl Marx.

*Octogesima Adveniens* was written by Pope Paul VI on the occasion of the eightieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*. It was an “Apostolic Letter” sent to Cardinal Maurice Roy and dated May 14, 1971. In it Paul VI explicitly cautions against, and even condemns Marxist ideology by name. After quoting article 159 of *Pacem in Terris* cited above, Paul VI goes on to warn against a full embrace of Marxist revolutionary principles when seeking the renewal of society:

> While, through the concrete existing form of Marxism, one can distinguish these various aspects and the questions they pose for the reflection and activity of Christians, it would be illusory and dangerous to reach a point of forgetting the intimate link which radically binds them together, to accept the elements of Marxist analysis without recognizing their relationships with ideology, and to enter into the practice of class struggle and its Marxist interpretations, while failing to note the kind of totalitarian and violent society to which this process leads.

The violence Paul VI mentions here soon became a reality, as the open letter to Fr. Ernesto Cardenal penned by Fr. Daniel Berrigan, SJ, shows.
During the summer of 1978, Fr. Cardenal expressed in an open letter his support for armed resistance against the oppressive Samosa regime in Nicaragua. Fr. Berrigan responded with his own letter to Cardenal, saying in part: “You discuss quite freely and approvingly the violence of a violated people, yourselves. You align yourself with that violence, regretfully but firmly, irrevocably.” He then continues, expressing how distorted the identity of Christ can become in a world of “might makes right,”

I think how fatally easy it is, in a world demented and enchanted with the myth of shortcuts and definitive solutions, when nonviolence appears increasingly naive, old hat, freakish—how easy it is to cross over, to seize the gun. . . . We really are stuck. Christians are stuck with this Christ, the impossible, unteachable, irreformal loser. Revolutionaries must correct him, act him right. That absurd form, shivering under the crosswinds of power, must be made acceptable, relevant. So a gun is painted into his empty hands. Now he is human! Now he is like us.22

The irony in Berrigan’s letter is poignant. We profess “the Christ, the Son of the living God” along with Peter (Mt. 16:16ff.) and Christ-crucified so ably preached by Paul, “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Cor. 1:23).

It is not difficult to see how Marxist revolutionary tactics fail when placed in the service of justice because such tactics are so contrary to the Gospel of Christ. Jesus did not take up arms against the Romans in an attempt to liberate the people of Israel; neither did He mobilize the masses of oppressed people into large groups whose sheer numbers would translate into political power that He could use to manipulate and intimidate His enemies. This was not His purpose. Jesus’s sole purpose was fulfillment of the Father’s will and good pleasure, which meant embracing the totality of our life on earth, including our death, so that He could destroy it and take us back from the devil, the architect of death. There is nothing gained by adopting Marxist revolutionary tactics in the pursuit of justice, since they are so contrary to “the way” laid down in Jesus Christ. St. Paul expressed it this way: “the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength” (1 Cor. 1:25).

Risks were undertaken by incorporating Marxist analysis into Catholic social thought, not least of which was the risk of distorting the mission of Christ. Another weakness, however, was the dialectical materialism built into Marxist ideology, which viewed society as a theater for class warfare and struggle. Karl Marx observed how the greater share of material prosperity in capitalist societies was held by a few “haves” and his program for economic reform called for the uprising of the property-
less “have-nots” against the owners of capital, that is, the tools used for the production and generation of material goods and wealth. Marx’s program of reform included violence as a way of redistributing wealth and the tools of producing wealth (factories, assembly lines, mining equipment and the like) across the whole of society. The redistribution of wealth would be accomplished through the abolition of private property and new structures put in place whereby all private capital would become public through State-ownership and management. The State would then marshal in a more equitable distribution of the total wealth in society than what private ownership of capital had demonstrated.

It might sound good on paper, but it is utopian. This was another weakness in Marxist ideology mentioned by Pope Paul VI in Octogesima Adveniens cited above. A utopia, as can be gleaned by reading papal social teaching, is any vision of life that excludes the reality of original sin. Marx’s vision for economic reform was utopian. He failed to take into account the greed of the new public owners of capital, that is, the State officials put in place once the masses of poor and propertyless people had forcibly wrested capital away from the private sector. Karl Marx may thus appear to be well-intentioned in his desire to relieve society of poverty, but Jesus saw it this way: “The poor you will always have with you” (Mt. 26:11). Admittedly this is not a particularly optimistic view of our humanity and the division of property among us; the poor shall ever remain among us. Jesus nonetheless spoke the truth in light of the fact that He “did not need anyone to testify about human nature. He himself understood it well” (Jn. 2:25): Human beings are so ill-disposed toward generosity that the poor will always be with us in our fallen world. This accounts for why Jesus frequently called on His followers to deny themselves and care for the less fortunate even to the point of identifying Himself with “these least” in the Last Judgment (Mt. 25:31ff.). St. Paul instructed the Christian community at Corinth in similar fashion about how they were not celebrating “the Lord’s Supper” since no supper identified with Christ would ever permit the poor to go hungry and those with plenty to become filled and get drunk (cf. 1 Cor. 11:17–22).

But perhaps more subtly, Marx’s utopian materialism represented a reduction of the human person who now became solely identified with his or her material being. In part it accounts for the atheism of Marxist-inspired reform within society; Sunday becomes just like any other day. As a result, the conditions favoring the human person and his or her development in society were exclusively identified with the supply and demand of material goods and the logic of the market. Whatever prospered growth in the production and sale of goods became identified with the highest form of
Social justice became less identified as a virtue cultivated and practiced in the human subject and more identified with the alleviation of material poverty and political oppression as these prevailed in society, particularly those societies in the Third World. But “social justice” on occasion became a battle cry within the Catholic Church as well. As an example, there were women, both religious and lay, who began calling for equal admission to the full spectrum of ministry in the Catholic Church.24 Here social justice became something to work toward “out there,” away from the human subject, and amid the systemic sins of an oppressive institution now understood to be the Catholic Church. The analyses accompanying some of the calls for “social justice,” now meaning ecclesial justice or justice within the institutional Church, were accompanied by anger resulting from feeling slighted by the Church’s practice of only admitting men to the Sacrament of Holy Orders. Scholarly articles have since been published, conferences organized, and ads taken out in major newspapers as ways of protesting against the admission of only men to the Ministerial Priesthood. For many women admission to the Ministerial Priesthood became the necessary social condition for their prospering in the Catholic Church, and in the absence of this condition, some decided to leave while still others remained in order to build consensus for the fight of another day.

But our strength is not in numbers, especially when “strength” is understood as the power needed to stand fast against the more insidious lure and seeming glamour of what Fr. Berrigan called “the myth of shortcuts and definitive solutions.” Whether it be securing food and housing for the poor, equal treatment and pay for women in the work force, or the delivery of innocent children conceived in the womb, violence—whether in or outside of the Church—is not an option. Moreover, we might also conclude, specifically in regard to life in the Catholic Church, that the power of a public will based upon a constructed consensus may actually harm the common good in what the consensus-builders perceive to be their pursuit of “social justice.” Yet, based on what we’ve studied so far, opposition be-
tween the common good and social justice is not possible, since the proper object of social justice is the common good. The ideology of liberation fueled by Marxist revolutionary ideas did occasionally become violent in the 1970s, due in part to the reinterpretation of social justice as that part of justice to be effected “out there” in broader society by whatever means. At the same time, there have been milder problems stemming from the same conceptual shift. For this reason, the term “social justice” would itself be done justice by returning it to its original soil within the papal social encyclicals, where it is rooted, not in the writings of Karl Marx, but in Sacred Scripture and the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas.

Pope St. John Paul II, for example, drew liberally from the thought of St. Thomas within his social encyclicals, and it could even be argued that he contributed his own new term for an older one just as Pope Pius XI had done in Quadragesimo Anno. St. John Paul II gave the common good a new name in what may have been his way of guiding the Church toward a renewed appropriation of the value of justice, especially social justice. The new name given to the “common good” by the Holy Father was “the culture of life” so eloquently laid out in his encyclical Evangelium Vitae (The Gospel of Life, March 25, 1995). What is a “culture of life” if not that set of conditions within culture and society that contribute to the full and complete flourishing and development of the human person in body, soul, and spirit (cf. 1 Thess. 5:23)? Being the proper object for the virtue of social justice, the “culture of life” substituted for the term “common good” effectively renders that object less abstract and so more immediately accessible to our efforts at safeguarding human life and dignity within the Church and society.

Pope Francis has taken up this same theme in his most recent encyclical, Laudato Si (May 24, 2015). When it came to defining the common good in the encyclical, Pope Francis quoted a text from Gaudium et Spes, which itself contains a footnote on the meaning given the common good by Pope St. John XXIII in Mater et Magistra # 65 (quoted above): “The common good is ‘the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment.’” Here the common good is not simply a “good” drawn up by consensus of the governing and the governed within society, and even less a “good” determined by Marxist economic analysis. Pope Francis develops the common good as those conditions now in the “physical environment” that have been given us by our Creator, goods like clean air and water. Whereas Pope St. John Paul II amply developed the theme of the necessary “moral environment” (or ethos) within which human life fully grows and prospers (e.g., Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, Cen-
Social Justice and Catholic Social Thought

tesimus Annus, and Evangelium Vitae), Pope Francis has taken it upon himself to remind us all of the necessary “physical environment” within which human life develops and thrives. At face value these may seem to be divergent, even unrelated strands of Catholic social thought, but the fact that all men and women are composed of body, soul, and spirit (cf. 1 Thess. 5:23) indicates otherwise. Both pontiffs were concerned with the preservation and growth of the full human good in body, soul, and spirit, without reductions.26 Whether it be a compromised physical or moral environment, the primary concern in either case is the preservation of human life and dignity, especially among the poor, the weak, and those who are forgotten or left behind.

It is precisely the conditions favoring human life and dignity in body, soul, and spirit that the virtue of social justice aims to cultivate. Social justice as a virtue labors to setup and preserve conditions wherein the first and greatest commandment to love the Lord (Commandments I–III of the Decalogue) and the second one, like it, to love one’s neighbor as oneself (Commandments IV–X of the Decalogue) can be fulfilled. There can be no peace, let alone genuine love, whenever justice is violated, which is to say, whenever God or neighbor or the earth itself become neglected or forgotten. The whole of Scripture testifies that the fulfillment of justice is preparation for the Gospel,27 while social justice is a requisite virtue for sustaining conditions wherein God, neighbor, and the earth can receive their due. The proper object for the virtue of social justice, therefore, is and remains the common good, the “culture of life” and the labors necessary for building it up. Social justice so understood is sorely lacking in today’s society, and yet its achievement remains within reach of everyone who can understand what it means and has meant in the living body of papal social doctrine dating back to Pope Leo XIII and Rerum Novarum. Social justice is a virtue that each of us can cultivate in our attempt to secure for ourselves, our families, our society, and our culture, those conditions wherein human persons will thrive, grow, and develop instead of wilt, die, and atrophy.

Notes

1. Despite missing the actual fortieth-anniversary year of 2007, Pope Benedict XVI nonetheless wrote consciously in reference to Paul VI’s Populorum Progressio and John Paul II’s Solicitude Rei Socialis. Benedict XVI wrote in 2009: “At a distance of over forty years from the Encyclical’s publication, I intend to pay tribute and to honour the memory of the great Pope Paul VI, revisiting his teachings on integral human development and taking my place within the path that they marked out, so as to apply them to the present moment. This continual application to contemporary circumstances began with the Encyclical Sollicitudo
Fr. Dan Pattee, T.O.R.

*Rei Socialis,* with which the Servant of God Pope John Paul II chose to mark the twentieth anniversary of the publication of *Populorum Progressio.* Until that time, only *Rerum Novarum* had been commemorated in this way. Now that a further twenty years have passed, I express my conviction that *Populorum Progressio* deserves to be considered ‘the *Rerum Novarum* of the present age,’ shedding light upon humanity’s journey towards unity.” *Caritas in Veritate* art. 8, June 29, 2009, available at the Vatican website: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate_en.html.


10. The context makes clear that “human personality” means more than simply a psychological understanding of the phrase, “human personality.” John XXIII understands the fuller sense of the phrase as “human person” in view of the fact that he speaks of both the bodily and spiritual conditions within society that must be protected in order for human nature to grow and prosper. This entails both the corporal works of mercy (feeding the poor, housing, mending physical wounds, etc.) and the spiritual works of mercy (education, instruction in the faith, forgiveness, etc.) since man and woman are embodied persons, body, soul, and spirit, and not simply one or the other of these. Such terms, of course, receive ample development during the pontificate of Pope St. John Paul II (1978–2005).

11. As a recent example of this departure, see Thomas Massaro, SJ, *Living Justice: Catholic Social Teaching in Action,* Third Classroom Edition (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016). Massaro gives no particular meaning to the term “social justice,” leaving the reader to glean some understanding of it from its frequent use throughout his text. This already is a move away from the understanding the term received in Pius XI’s, *Quadragesimo Anno* and subsequent papal social teaching. In “Table 3.1” of the text (pp. 38–39), Massaro enumerates
“Major Documents of Modern Catholic Social Teaching” and excludes Pope Leo XIII’s *Aeterni Patris*, which gave rise to a revival in the thought of St. Thomas during the twentieth-century. The absence of this tradition is further evidenced in a chapter entitled, “The Sources and Methods of Catholic Social Teaching” (pp. 57–80). While Massaro mentions Thomas Aquinas as a contributor to the Church’s teaching on private property, and less so to the just war theory, there is no mention of indebtedness to Aquinas’s account of virtue in relation to “social justice.” Gerald McCool, SJ, witnessed to the prominence of St. Thomas in the twentieth-century when he wrote: “Their Thomistic descendants, whose own thought has evolved far beyond the nineteenth-century Thomism of *Aeterni Patris*, still owe a debt of gratitude to the drafters of Leo XIII’s encyclical. For without their confidence in the possibilities of St. Thomas’s philosophy and theology, and without the firm leadership of Leo XIII himself in the Thomistic revival, it is hardly likely that the vast historical scholarship and the remarkable systematic development that characterized the Thomistic movement in the century after the publication of *Aeterni Patris* would have taken place. The twentieth century would not have been the age of Rousselot, Mercier, de Raeymaeker, Grabmann, Gilson, Maritain, Garrigou-Lagrange, Journet, de Lubac, Bouillard, Rahner, and Lonergan.” *Nineteenth Century Scholasticism: The Search for a Unitary Method* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989), 235–36. See also McCool’s companion volume to the above: *From Unity to Pluralism: The Internal Evolution of Thomism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989); and Franz Mueller’s lengthy introductory essay, “The Church and the Social Question,” in *The Challenge of ‘Mater et Magistra’* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963). Massaro’s relative silence regarding such influential developments and their contribution to the “documentary heritage” of the twentieth century is deafening.

12. Fr. Yves Congar, OP, the most influential Catholic theologian at the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), wrote an entry in his journal of the Council, dated Thursday, 16 May 1963, registering his dissatisfaction with early texts of the Council. He, along with many other bishops and theologians, believed them to be “not very Christian” since they were “all philosophical, abstract” instead of theological. Congar then continued: “Fr. Gagnebet, too, complains of the lack of THEOLOGY and a positive Christian tone in these texts. In this connection, he expressed (and I too!) the same criticism about the encyclical *Pacem in terris*. He told me that he had wanted to insert a paragraph on the contribution that the CHURCH as such makes to peace, but Mgr Pavan rejected it. Mgr Pavan is the SOLE editor of the encyclical, he told me: all the corrections suggested, even by Ferrari, Pavan’s friend, were rejected.” Yves Congar, OP, *My Journal of the Council*, trans. Mary John Ronayne, OP, and Mary Cecily Boulding, OP; ed. Denis Minns, OP (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2012), 291. (Capitalized words are in the original.)

13. This is a Latin word meaning, “expert,” used to designate theologians who were invited, usually by bishops, to assist with their work at the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). Fr. Joseph Ratzinger (later Benedict XVI) also served as a theological “expert” at the Council. At the time he was a Catholic theologian.
Fr. Dan Pattee, T.O.R.

in Bonn and then later in Munich (1963), when he was asked by Josef Frings, Cardinal Archbishop of Cologne, to serve as his personal expert beginning with the second session of the Council in 1963.


15. Ibid.

16. Congar, My Journal of the Council, 287. In elections of April, 1963, the Italian Communist Party won 166 seats in Parliament, second only to the 260 seats won by Christian Democrats. In addition, Aldo Moro was later elected Prime Minister and served for four years; he was a Christian Democrat but also represented the leftist wing of the party which had become more closely aligned with the Italian Socialist Party.


23. Pope Paul VI penned Populorum Progressio in 1967 in part as a way of trying to amplify the meaning of “development” beyond the materialist reduction it had received in his own day. This is a theme, as mentioned earlier, now with its own trajectory within the papal magisterium through anniversary encyclicals written by Pope St. John Paul II (Solicitudo Rei Socialis in 1987) and Pope Benedict XVI (Veritas in Caritate in 2009). In this same vein, it is worth mentioning the encyclical written by St. John Paul II, Centesimus Annus (1989) to which much of the previous three paragraphs of this essay are indebted.

24. Sr. Theresa Kane’s speech before Pope John Paul II (October 7, 1979) in the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception on the campus of The Catholic University of America during the Holy Father’s first visit to the United States comes to mind. In her speech, delivered as President of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, Sr. Kane said in part: “As women we have heard the powerful messages of our Church addressing the dignity and reverence for all persons. As women we have pondered upon these words. Our contemplation leads
us to state that the Church in its struggle to be faithful to its call for reverence and
dignity for all persons must respond by providing the possibility of women as
persons being included in all ministries of our Church.” Sr. Theresa Kane, RSM,
“Teresa [sic] Kane addressing Pope John Paul II,” available at the Catherine of
Siena Virtual College website, http://www.catherineofsiena.net/about/kane.asp.

25. *Laudato Si*, art. 156 quoting *Gaudium et Spes*, art. 26, which contains
va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_
enciclica-laudato-si.html.

26. A similar theme began in earnest with Blessed Pope Paul VI’s encyclical,
*Populorum Progressio*, as mentioned earlier. In addition, Pope Francis refers
to “integral ecology” as human life that is “grounded in three fundamental and
closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor and with the earth
itself.” *Laudato Si*, art. 66, in the Vatican website.

27. See Mark 10:17–27, in which Jesus looked on the rich man with love
before telling him the “one thing” he lacked for the fullness of life about which he
inquired.