

In Memoriam: Rev. Rodger Charles, S.J. (1929–2012) Samuel Gregg

Rodger Charles, S.J., was one of the twentieth century's finest exponents of Catholic social teaching. Born in Leeds, England, on 11 October 1929, he attended St. Michael College, Leeds, and, after working in his father's building business, entered the Society of Jesus in 1953 and attended Campion Hall, Oxford. He graduated with a doctorate in industrial sociology, and thereafter served in teaching positions in Heythrop College, Plater College, the University of San Francisco, and Campion Hall. He passed away on 12 May 2012 at the Corpus Christi Jesuit Community in Dorset.

From a relatively early stage in his academic career, Fr. Charles became very interested in Catholic social teaching, beginning with its roots in the vision of the moral life and human flourishing found in Sacred Scripture. To that end, he wrote a number of books, most notably his magisterial two-volume *Christian Social Witness and Teaching* (1998), which traces the development of Catholic social doctrine from Biblical times to the promulgation of Blessed John Paul II's 1991 social encyclical *Centesimus Annus*. This work, alongside his shorter, subsequent *An Introduction to Catholic Social Teaching* (1999), will form indispensable reference points for students of Catholic social teaching in the English-speaking world for some time.

I first met Fr. Charles when he was appointed as one of the two examiners for my D.Phil. at Oxford while he was living at Campion Hall in the late 1990s. My supervisor, John Finnis, knew and respected Fr. Charles's scholarly work. Thereafter, Fr. Charles and I would often exchange emails, and I would try to visit him whenever I was passing through England. At my request, he agreed to serve on the board of the *Journal of Markets and Morality*.

A quite lively man, Fr. Charles was passionate (occasionally to the point of argumentativeness) for both Catholic orthodoxy and academic precision. Hence, while interested in Catholic social thought, Fr. Charles always observed that this was quite different from Catholic social teaching, the former representing the prudential application of the latter in different times and settings. Few things annoyed him more than scholars apt to confuse the two, or who claimed that "their" particular school of thought was somehow the only possible application of the Church's social doctrine.

Fr. Charles himself had very firm ideas about what he believed to be the proper economic roles of the state, as well as set views on more spe-

cific issues ranging from tax rates to fiscal and monetary policy. He was an old-style Labour Party man who nevertheless understood that the old-style Labour party had not existed for several decades. He never, however, let those opinions cloud or distort his clear presentation of the principles of Catholic social teaching as well as their historical context. That is just one of the reasons why references to his work appear everywhere in the literature on Catholic social teaching and Catholic social thought. Fr. Charles was thus able, for example, to show—*contra* the usual suspects—how the Church’s teaching on a subject like usury had changed along the lines that Blessed John Henry Newman outlined in his idea of development of doctrine, but without contradicting previous teaching.

After the Second Vatican Council, it would not be an exaggeration to say that Fr. Charles’s life as a priest in the Society of Jesus became difficult. In a number of conversations, he expressed his considerable frustrations with the direction of the Society from the Arrupe-era onwards. To mention this involves no breach of confidentiality. Fr. Charles made his reservations about the theology and thinking informing much of the Society perfectly and publically clear on a number of occasions.

In a 2001 open letter to the then Father-General Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, for example, Fr. Charles lamented what he regarded as the Society’s general failure to support Paul VI following the promulgation of *Humanae Vitae*. But this, he thought, was symptomatic of a broader problem. “Since 1965,” Fr. Charles wrote, “four General Congregations have accepted that some of us have been remiss in our duty of obedience to the popes and the hierarchical Church and promised we would change our policies, but we have not.” Naturally, expressing such views did not win him popularity among some of his fellow Jesuits, but Fr. Charles was never one to keep his concerns to himself. That said, when called upon to obey, he did so without hesitation or dissimulation, even when one of his works, *Pope’s Men: The Jesuits Yesterday and Today*, was refused publication by the Society’s Father-General in 2001.

For all that and despite the petty backbiting he occasionally endured, Fr. Charles loved the Society of Jesus and took pride in its history and accomplishments. He once opined that the greatest twentieth-century product of the Society was the English historian of philosophy Frederick Copleston S.J. Copleston’s eleven-volume, numerous re-published *A History of Philosophy* amounted, in Fr. Charles’s view, to the fairest and most comprehensive study of Western philosophy presently available. Fr. Charles also had many friends within and associated with the Society across the world who happily lent intellectual, practical, and moral support during difficult times—the practical assistance being especially important

when he feared the draft for *Christian Social Witness and Teaching* had been lost somewhere in the recesses of his faltering computer.

In 2008, the Society of Catholic Social Scientists awarded Fr. Charles its Pope Pius XI Award for his contributions to building up a true Catholic social science. It was a well-merited honor. By this stage of his life, he was spending most of his time in Bognor Regis and Mount Street in London as his health slowly declined. Fr. Charles had, however, accomplished what he had wanted to do with his scholarly work and was content to invest his remaining energies in praying for the Pope (Blessed John Paul II and Benedict XVI were among his heroes), the Church, the Society of Jesus, and his country.

To pray, Fr. Charles once commented, is to work, and such work, he added, always builds up the Kingdom in unseen ways. His earthly labors have now come to an end. He will be greatly missed. *Requiescat in pace.*