

**“From *Rerum Novarum* (1891) to *Laudato si’* (2015) –**

**Catholic social teaching as a reference to social and ecological welfare”**

**Keynote speech on the Occasion of the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Rerum novarum*.**

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It is a particular honor for me to address you at this important event and I thank the COMECE secretariat for organizing it. 125 years of Catholic social teaching is an excellent occasion to ask: What can and indeed should the voice of Catholic Church stand for and engage herself in the complex political and civil processes of our time, at the global, the European and national levels and how this can be achieved?

This central question is worth intensive reflection not only at this Jubilee occasion. The Catholic and other churches are – after – all despite shrinking processes mainly in Europe - large and potentially influential actors in the public sphere in many countries and – as the present papacy shows – also at the global level.

Having said this, I have to admit, that I am somewhat apprehensive to talk to you at this late hour, many of you having already participated in a study day on this topic where many issues will have been raised. Moreover, to start all over with theory after two prominent politicians with great practical experience in building Europe is also a challenge.

On the other hand in an overly pragmatic age with a high degree of scepticism vis-à-vis theory, to which Catholic social thought obviously belongs, it is good to remember the word of an exceptional thinker, the great British economist John Maynard Keynes, who stated, that those you look down on (despise) theory as unpractical people tend to hold some outdated ideas they never reflected on and therefore did not put to the litmus test of a rapidly changing reality.

And indeed: 125 years is a long period of time, particularly under the conditions of modernity, which – as the name already indicates – is striving towards the new because of its deeply inbuilt notion of progress. Thus, social realities have indeed changed considerably since the publication of *Rerum novarum* in 1891: Globalization, pluralisation of societies, processes of secularization in Europe but also de-secularization in other parts of the world, powerful emancipation movements of workers, women and emerging nations (the tree are named in

*Pacem in terris*), political and economic liberalism as well as its adversary Marxism, were either in an embryonal state or took different forms at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. What is fascinating, however, that a philosophically well trained mind with a good common sense of reality could already discern the trends.

This holds true for Catholic Social Thought in general and therefore the practical “truth” enshrined in the documents has not lost its topicality – though sometimes one has to be able to discern it behind the dust of time and language.

What makes it special in an age of positivism and overspecialization is, that it gives an overview from – what may be called - a bird’s perspective (as one of my teachers said) of the day’s social realities in a second step assessing them in the light of ethics and of the gospel, as *Gaudium et spes* states. This is a formidable task that cannot be carried out with any claim to perfection, but it is justified insofar we need some kind of overview for orientation in a world that is growing more complex every day, to take political decisions . In this sense Catholic Social Thought can fill in of what I and others perceive as a potentially dangerous (?) void.

Even though this raises quite a number of questions, which cannot be discussed here (is CST another ideology?) from my research experience I am actually impressed how much can be learnt from these documents when confronted with the problems of the day as well as research in human sciences.

Catholic Social Thought starting with *Rerum novarum* does two things which complement each other: first, it speaks up strongly against the social and recently also ecological injustices of. To give but one example: *Rerum novarum* criticizes right in the beginning in paragraph 1 “the enormous fortunes of some few individuals and the utter poverty of the masses”. To allow myself a side remark: the criticism directed against the “radicalism” of Pope Francis is thus completely unwarranted, he follows the path of his predecessors.

This social criticism, is accompanied by an ideological criticism, that de-masks the shortcomings and intellectual pitfalls of the social ideologies of the day, thus economic liberalism and Marxism in the age of *Rerum novarum* whereby after the fall of Marxism in Europe the former remains throwing its long shadows into our time.

This double criticism aims to contribute to a more humane society, nationally, in Europe and globally and it carries a prophetic warning that political decisions based on wrong ideas can cause seriously harm to justice, peace and welfare. It is highly topical in a time when the

traditional ideologies have lost much of their clout and we are indeed lacking effective and inspiring visions which path to take at a time when more is at stake than at any point of the post-war period. In a run-away world – Anthony Giddens – of immense complexity the practical consequence of this lack of theory is that political decision making is largely paralyzed. So we have to devote time on reflection which type of society we want to leave to coming generations. What should Europe and the world and our lands look like socially and ecologically in 2050? Despite all imponderabilities Catholic Social Teaching can, I believe, give impulses, for an in-depth reflection on central issues so as not to be sucked in by a purely technocratic and strategist mentality which is the big temptation of our time, *particularly in politics, where the social realities are to be influenced with – as Max Weber said - “with a sense of proportion and persistence”*.

This could be demonstrated with regard to today’s three megaquestions that are interdependent: the economic and financial crisis, the deterioration of the ecology, particularly global warming, and mass migration, whereby I will concentrate on the first.

*Rerum novarum* with the subtitle “On Capital and Labor” is a topical exhortation on the first one. Its three main arguments against unbridled economic liberalism are as relevant as ever:

- a) it leads to a growing cleavage between rich and poor;
- b) it furthers a competition no longer based on cooperation that leads to social and ecological externalities and an erosion of morals which also harms the economic process itself;
- c) it has anarchistic tendencies in that it minimizes the role of the state and politics and with it their *raison d’être*, the pursuit of the common good as the good of each and every citizen the ideological assumption being that the common good results automatically from the individual pursuit of self-interest, a mechanistic view Pope John Paul II strongly criticized in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*.

With these three the great shortcomings of the present global economic system, of which nobody knows to overcome them, are named. The *laissez-faire* state, the erosion of individual ethics driven by an even fiercer competition and a vastly growing rift between the global very rich, of which 62 own as much as half the world’s population of 7,5 billion. The globalization processes of the past decades have greatly enhanced this process of inequality, weakening even bigger states, which lose their revenues from taxes and with them their financial basis by

tax migration and tax evasion and which can be played out easily when it comes to jobs and business locations by great companies.

Thomas Piketty, the French star economist, has given empirical evidence to the actually obvious fact that who owns more in wealth and power can accumulate even more and strengthen his or her position further. It was only during those periods when fairly powerful opposition groups humanist and also Christian inspiration counteracted this natural concentration of wealth that it was stalled. However, globalization unhinged these mostly nationally based counterforces. The political implications are immense. Lobbying, large sums paid to lawyers etc. to influence politics not to speak of corruption have become endemic. This undermines the social consensus and the democratic system. Remedies can only be found globally or in strong regional associations as could be the European Union.

The second point of *Rerum novarum* the importance of moral, of honesty, a sense of justice and even kindness as the basis of societies is widely – though somewhat obliquely discussed under the title of the need for values, I say obliquely because values are often something others are to follow, but moral behaviour is a demand on each and every person. Here one would hope for more honest discussion because the fine and invisible web of moral attitudes is what creates trust that – as common sense knows and new research shows – has the same function for social as blood has for physical bodies. Even the most abstract economic and also political interactions depend on trust as the result of morality. It is most telling, that the great financial crisis of 2008 was created not by a lack of liquidity but by a lack of trust between the actors.

Questions of the financial system are central for *Quadragesimo anno* written by Pius XI forty years later at the climax of the Big Depression that foreshadowed World War II its criticism being directed against a financial system that destroys the production economy by sucking off its wealth instead of serving it. The past eight years of financial crisis have shown exactly that. The lessons from the 1930's were learned though we cannot say that the fundamental predicaments of a highly instabile global and European financial system have been overcome.

The big ethical theme that starting with *Rerum novarum* runs like a red thread through the texts of the magisterium is that there must be strong political institutions responsible for the common good. To further the well-being of all and not only one's own is in democracies the duty of all citizens not only of politicians, though they are in the front position. This notion of the common good has gone out of fashion and needs revival because it constitutes the basis of

any society that people think not only of themselves but also of others. It is also the basis of the confederation of states as is the European Union. The search for the common good demands an attitude of civility and the insight that is more noble and ultimately more satisfying to care for others and not only for oneself.

The common good according to the social encyclicals is more-dimensional, whereby the different dimensions are interrelated. There is a local as well as a global common good, there is a European common good and each nation has its own common good. The great challenge, it seems to me, is to understand how these are interrelated and interwoven and to communicate this to the public. This is a central question also insofar as nationalists of all colours and stripes today stress the national common good or what they perceive as such above all others, which is not only unsavoury but also shows a frightening lack of realism with regard to global realities.

Catholic Social Thought thereby is global in its outlook, already *Pacem in terris* stressing that a global common good can only be pursued by a world authority, in other words strong global institutions, an notion that was taken up by the *Populorum progressio* by Pope Paul VI. This positive attitude towards international and supranational organisations as those of the European Union for the reason mentioned above is an important characteristic of the social teachings of the magisterium.

*Issued at a time when the world was at the brink of a nuclear war it may give us orientation at a moment when after a long period of peace in our part of the world, this peace seems to become more fragile and is indeed undermined by European as well as geopolitical changes.*

With regard to Europe this is clearly spelt out in *Centesimus anno* 1991 that addresses the challenges facing Europe after the *annus mirabilis* 1989. Have we learned these lessons? Has the European integration process not been superficially centered on the assumption that economic progress and legal structures alone can realize the European common good? The divergent developments in North and South, East and West show how fragile an integration of the continent based on these alone is and how much it needs deeper bounds to create a common culture. The political problems in post-communist countries and not only there show that there are still big rifts created by history, that need to be addressed in a reconciliatory manner, as well as strong feelings of disillusionment with European structures, that have not been able to capture the minds and the hearts that creates nationalist regressions. It was the great European Jean Monnet who stated, that Europe is not only an economic but a political

and therefore also a moral vision, and – though this is not sure – that we should start with culture and as may be added religion.

So there is much to be learned from Catholic Social Thought, I think, for the present situation. Pope Francis in *Laudato si*, that *has* rightly been compared with *Rerum novarum* has added yet another topic, that was long overdue, forcefully: the ecology combined with an in-depth reflection on the need for and the ambivalence of technical progress. Without it life not to speak of a decent life is not possible for the about 7,5 billion humans inhabiting the planet. At the same time a purely materialistic view of life cannot possibly orient the changes that are necessary to create a new much less resource intensive model of good life. This requires a “cultural revolution” – so the Pope initiated by human freedom which having brought us into the dilemmata we face, also has the power to lead us out of them (LS 112). Such a new view of life and a change of heart is imperative in view of the twofold indeed scandalous injustice of the present global system, where global environmental degradation most harms the poor living in the global South who did not contribute to it and have to carry most of its negative consequences. This “ecological debt” is also one of the reasons for migration and will be so even more in the future.

What is most admirable in *Laudato si* is that despite its realism it does not create an atmosphere of despair. This also because Pope Francis did not only write an excellent document but with it wants the Catholic Church to initiate effective processes of change (one of his favourite notions) through dialogue and the cooperation with all those who possibly can contribute to improvements. The notion of dialogue central for *Gaudium et spes* had been seen with some suspicion thereafter – like compromise in politics. It is now brought back in its right to further the global, European and local common good together with the other Christian Churches (Metropolitan Zizoulas was one of the presenters), with economists and entrepreneurs, with politicians and scientists as well as with other religious leaders through interreligious dialogue. The professionalism with which this was done could serve as a model at local and regional levels. Thus before and after the promulgation of *Laudato si*’ high level international conferences were organized in April and in September, the Pope supported before the UN General assembly the Sustainable Development Goals and all of this might have contributed to better outcome of the COP21 in Paris in December. Now there needs to be a positive follow up at the national and European levels and the churches should use their moral authority together to do so.

A joker once called CST the best kept secret of the Catholic Church. The present pontificate shows that this need not be so and that the Church can use its influence in many ways to drive forward solutions to central social questions as are, besides the ecology, human trafficking, poverty and migration, where the Catholic Church with its broad humanistic, universalist and transcendent agenda and her considerable resources can play the role of a mediator to counteract particularistic and nationalist fragmentations and thus help to further social cohesion.

We are faced with big social and political questions today. In this manifold crisis it is good to remember that this is not a new situation. Therefore I want to conclude with a citation from St. Augustine. He summarized the global drama of his day in the following way:

The name Adam...in Greek signifies the totality of the earth. It is comprised of four letters: A, D, A and M... *Anatole* means the East, *Dysis* the West, *Arktos* the North, and *Mesembria* the South. These together form ADAM. Thus, Adam is scattered over the entire earth. He once was in a single location, but then he fell and broke into pieces... But God's mercy gathered the fragments, melted them in the fire of love and brought together what had been smashed. May nobody lose hope. The artist is capable of finishing this work. Although it is of immense dimensions, think of how great the artist is: he who produced will restore it, and he who formed will reform it (Augustine, *On Psalm 95*, PL 37:1236, quoted in: De Lubac 1970:339).

It is this unity of humanity that has been the deepest concern of Catholic Social Thought in the past 125 years and it continue to serve as a compass to creatively further justice, peace, and the preservation of creation and to help build social ties and cohesion between people of different cultures and creeds.

I thank you for your attention.