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# *The* FURROW

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Cardinal Michael Czerny S.J.

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# In times of unprecedented crises, how can Catholic Social Teaching [CST] help us to navigate fragility and lead us to local power and global justice?

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Cardinal Michael Czerny S.J.

Dear brother bishops, dear siblings all, it is an honour and a pleasure to address you this evening, even if remotely, to celebrate Trócaire's 50th anniversary under this question which serves as my title. I commend our organizers. The theme is compelling. And, without doubt, the challenge it highlights is urgent. This earth, our common home, and the local and global relationships which nurture and sustain it, are indeed confronted by a time of unprecedented fragility.

This makes the course we are called to navigate today uniquely complex, some might even say treacherous! One wrong move, and the potential for global destruction on a scale even greater than seen in the Second World War, is alarmingly real. At the same time, the failure to build relationships based on deep trust, solidarity and care, both locally and globally, will impede the urgently needed action to address together the existential crisis faced by our beautiful and extraordinary garden planet, with all the teeming life it holds as a gift to us and for us.

But, faced with this 'time of unprecedented crisis', it is worth recalling early in our proceedings, the concluding and hope-filled words of Pope Francis in *Laudato sí*: "God, who calls us to generous commitment and to give him our all, offers us the light and the strength needed to continue on our way... He does not abandon us, he does not leave us alone, for he has united himself definitively to our earth, and his love constantly impels us to find new ways forward. *Praise be to him!*" (LS 245).

And, as *Laudato sí* itself reminds us, one of the key navigational aids the Lord has provided, to help us chart new ways through our current crises, is the rich and dynamic tradition of Catholic Social

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Teaching – sometimes referred to as the “hidden treasure of the Catholic Church.” It is our task, together, to make it less hidden. It is our task to make it the guiding star that charts us to a better future for all, and to care for our common home.

### TRÓCAIRE: TRANSFORMING LOCAL POWER INTO GLOBAL JUSTICE!

Indeed, it is worth recalling that it was precisely the spirit of providence, hope and innovation, rooted in the principles of Catholic Social teaching, which inspired the Irish Bishops 50 years ago to establish Trócaire. Building on the impetus of Vatican II, with its renewed sense of the Church’s call to make its own the “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted” (GS n.1), the Irish Bishops, with their lay collaborators, were visionary in establishing this lay-led, global instrument of solidarity and compassion.

The Irish, of course, were already well known around the world for their extraordinary work as missionaries, as well as for their outstanding empathy and generosity to those in need. But a key part of the success of this initiative was that it brought the link between the local, in fact, between the domestic Church in the home, and the global, to a whole new level. This is no more clearly seen than in the uniquely Irish Lenten phenomenon known as the Trócaire Box!

That this simple idea of a house-shaped box on the family hearth, during Lent, has become so embedded in Irish culture, even among those with no connection to the faith, is an incredible testimony to the pastoral genius of those who founded and continue to develop the work of Trócaire to this day.

Reading the introduction to the Trócaire Strategic Plan 2021-2025, I was particularly impressed by this sentence: “*Our world has changed since our foundation in 1973, and so have we. But we remain rooted in the values that shape us and in our belief that a more just and sustainable world is possible.*”

What a commendable origin and purpose! But let me elaborate some questions: How is it possible, today, to build a world that is more sustainable and just? Moreover, how is Trócaire different from other international agencies that do more or less the same things? How is it different and how should it be different? The short answer is in our title: Catholic social teaching. The longer one is in Dr Sr Ethna Regan’s and my talks.

Allow me to briefly address these questions under *four* headings: listening deeply to others; making the power of the local, global; living CST in a living Church; and building on solid foundations.

1. LISTENING DEEPLY TO OTHERS.

*First*, let us consider the importance of listening deeply to others in our efforts to address the fragility of our present situation.

As we celebrate its 50 years of mission and achievement, it is worth noting that Trócaire's mission is similar in important respects to that of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, that is, to: "promote the development of the human person, particularly the poorest, rooted in the recognition of everyone's God-given dignity". For those of us who seek to serve the local, from the global perspective of the Holy See, this requires us to listen deeply to the local churches and dialogue regularly with bishops' conferences and communities of the faithful around the world, who inform us about their particular circumstances, problems and hopes.

"Give someone a fish," the saying goes, "and you feed them for a day. Give them a fishing-rod, and they have food for a lifetime." But what if they prefer chicken? Or what if, worse, our lifestyle actually owes them a fully equipped trawler? We need to understand the different realities (including our own) we are facing, to appreciate the seeds of hope that the poor cultivate (and we lack), and open our hearts to the unique experiences (unlike our own) that they trustingly share with us. We cannot make the mistake of believing that we already know what others need, or what is the proper way to respond to their needs, without first listening - until it hurts. For "it is impossible to imagine a future for society without the active participation of great majorities as protagonists."<sup>1</sup> Yes, to let them be protagonists is truly strange and even painful for us.

Moreover, the local perspective needs to include the much wider "whole". *Laudato si* reminds us several times that "Everything is connected" and this means that it is essential to look realistically at the dialectical relationships between local and global. A dialectic framework helps us to explore our relationships as complementary in some cases, largely different and in creative tension in others, and sometimes – even as oppositional, but different is not necessarily oppositional, and certainly not in every case.

In a similar way, Pope Francis recalls in *Fratelli tutti* that: "A 'local narcissism' instead frets over a limited number of ideas, customs and forms of security; incapable of admiring the vast potential and beauty offered by the larger world, it lacks an authentic and generous spirit of solidarity" (FT 146).

1 Pope Francis to the *World Meeting of Popular Movements*, Old Synod Hall. Tuesday 28 October, 2014.

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### 2. MAKING THE POWER OF THE LOCAL, GLOBAL.

This brings us now to the task of making power at the local level, a dynamic and powerful resource for global justice!

Indeed, Trócaire's Strategic Plan 2021-2025 is titled "*Local power, global justice*" and such a title well describes the two-fold approach that CST tells us should lead our action: extend our hand to the person who comes before us, while aspiring to the common good of the whole human family, including our common home and future generations.

As Pope Francis observes "*It should be kept in mind that an innate tension exists between globalization and localization. We need to pay attention to the global so as to avoid narrowness and banality. Yet we also need to look to the local, which keeps our feet on the ground. Together, the two prevent us from falling into one of two extremes*" (FT 142).

In every charitable action, as well as in our daily lives, there are at least two risks: the first is that of losing the importance and relevance of the person in front of us while we pursue an idea of "global justice" detached from local reality and imposing our own culture's idea of development or justice. At the core of Pope Francis pontificate is his appeal: "*Please, let us look into the eyes of the discarded people we meet ... Let us allow ourselves to be moved by their suffering in order to react to our indifference.*"<sup>2</sup>

The second risk is to get so caught up in a single issue as to sacrifice the whole for the part. Catholic Social Teaching helps stay on the right track, always seeking to enhance the dignity of the human person and the common good through subsidiarity and solidarity. Solidarity is the golden rule of CST, treating others as you wish to be treated yourself, and subsidiarity is respect for the freedom and responsibility of the local, rather than imposing from above. One cannot be too careful, for both charity and development can be highly profitable for their practitioners. Subsidiarity is the essential antidote to such a risk.

### 3. LIVING CST IN A LIVING CHURCH.

However, we must also recognize that Catholic Social Teaching, as an expression of a living Church, is something that needs to be understood, interpreted and updated to better respond to the needs of the times. Like all Church theology, CST has always been a *dynamic* reality, and never static.

<sup>2</sup> Angelus, 8 December 2021.

Throughout his pontificate, and especially now via the synodal process, Pope Francis aims at this goal. Everyone associated with Trócaire, and all of us in the Roman Curia, are called to be active participants in refreshing the social teaching of the Church today.

How can this happen today? I would like to give you a practical example that comes from our experience in the Dicastery in which I work of applying CST in an attempt to integrate local realities and partners with a global perspective. Consider the *Catholic Response for Ukraine Working Group*.

As soon as the invasion took place, the Migrants & Refugees Section of DSSUI invited Catholic organizations to reflect together on the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Ukraine and neighbouring countries, to take stock of the networks and aid that the Church was already deploying in the different countries, and to enhance synergies within the group and with additional actors.

The representatives of these organizations decided then to establish a joint Working Group to coordinate their actions in the affected region. The guiding principle for the coordination efforts is based on cultivating dialogue with the first-line actors as well as central level organizations. With the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) serving as convener, the group's strategy is to coordinate the Catholic response for displaced people in Ukraine and its neighbouring countries and carry out a coordinated and collaborative response.

At least *two* CST principles can be seen at work here. *First*, solidarity with those who are suffering, leaving no one behind. *Secondly*, subsidiarity, not to displace local knowledge and energy or duplicate what was already in place, but to supply what was really lacking. For without deep and respectful bonds with those we seek to assist, without recognizing them as siblings through whom we encounter the face of Christ, no real justice or development is possible, neither local nor global.

In this regard, may I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the Irish Bishops and the Irish people, through Trócaire and other agencies, for their generous solidarity and support to local church and non-state actors on the front line of humanitarian aid in Ukraine. I was privileged to witness this at first hand during my visit to Ukraine, on behalf of the Holy Father. I also want to pay tribute to the Irish Government and Irish people for their outstanding welcome, generosity and support to the thousands of refugees who have come to Ireland from Ukraine, in search of safety and hope. Your proud reputation as a land of a thousand welcomes, remains justly intact. Creating a safe and welcoming space for the stranger who is in need, is not a romantic or an easy

ideal, especially when housing and other resources are already so stretched. But this has not prevented the Irish Church and the Irish people from doing precisely that, with extraordinary empathy and compassion. Thank you.

May I also take this opportunity to emphasise, however briefly, the urgency of building relationships at the local and the global level which, as a core part of integral development, generate a practical and comprehensive ecology of peace. Ireland has much to offer the world in terms of its experience of building a process of peaceful resolution of historic political conflict, in spite of current difficulties. *Fratelli tutti* provides extraordinary reflection on the civil and political importance of our being friends and siblings. This, and maybe this alone, has the potential to unlock some of the most deeply ingrained reflexes of self-interest and fear at the root of conflict – and of mal-development and non-development – in favour of genuine freedom, trust and generosity.

#### 4. BUILDING ON YOUR SOLID FOUNDATIONS

In conclusion, let me say a word about the importance of building the future of Trócaire on solid foundations. Those foundations were, and continue to be, the dynamic, lived and living principles of CST.

CST has life and transformative power only because it is firmly rooted in the Gospels, the lived experience of the early Church, and two millennia of history. This is the community of believers who “were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common” (Acts 4:32). This is a Church excited and animated by the vision of what Catholic Social teaching, in more recent years, has described as the ‘civilisation of love’.

So, in returning to the question in our title: *In times of unprecedented crisis, how can CST help us to navigate fragility and lead us to local power and global justice?*

The answer lies in the Good News, which the Church’s social teaching helps us to grasp, assimilate and practice. We need to acknowledge that “God, in Christ, redeems not only the individual person but also the social relations existing between [people].”<sup>3</sup>

No one reaches salvation by their own effort alone, much less saves the world. And since 2013 – we are celebrating 10 years! – the vigorous, joyful, challenging and fundamental teaching gifted to us by Pope Francis. This gives us a common outlook shared throughout the universal Church, while being supple and precise

3 Compendium of Catholic Social Doctrine, #52.

for articulation according to local conditions and the signs of the times.

For another 50 years, may Trócaire continue to walk in the presence of the Lord. May you serve within a synodal Church, which walks together with the people of this time. I am sure that, if you keep firmly attached to the origins and roots that are yours, you will always be able to grasp the deepest needs of those in front of you, and none of your efforts will be lost. Thank you and happy 50th anniversary!

**Loneliness.** The Covid-19 Crisis, with its preventive measures of self-isolation on a massive scale, has called attention to another contemporary scourge – the epidemic of loneliness. In this case, isolation imposed not by health-care guidelines but by dysfunctional cultural conditions. ‘Social distancing’ has been underway on another front and with increasing intensity. It is my hope that the coronavirus crisis will sensitise people to the presence and characteristics of this parallel plague. However, this essay (indeed a manifesto) has roots that go back before 2020 and is the result of many years of troubled thought about the epidemic of loneliness in various forms that is sweeping through Western societies. We are now faced not so much with ‘liquid modernity’ as ‘lonely modernity’.

- MATTHEW FFORDE, *Pastoral Care for Loneliness*, U.K.: Gracewing, 2023, x.