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Ethna Regan

The Global and  
the Local in  
Catholic Social  
Teaching

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# The Global and the Local in Catholic Social Teaching

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Ethna Regan

Thank you for the invitation to speak this evening marking the 50th anniversary of the founding of Trócaire. My brief is to say something about the relationship between the global and the local in Catholic social teaching.

## I. CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING AND LOCAL CHURCHES

*The Bishops of Ireland on Development*, the 1973 pastoral letter of the Irish bishops' conference, then relatively new – at least as a formal body as envisaged by Paul VI – is an excellent example of Catholic social teaching at the local level.<sup>1</sup> Addressed broadly to the Christian people of Ireland, it is outward and forward looking, not just a response to a particular national crisis. It is global in perspective, and reflective of how the work of aid and development was understood at that time. It is also reflective of how the Church was moving after the Second Vatican Council, and of documents emerging from meetings like that of CELAM (Episcopal Conference of Latin America and the Caribbean) in Medellín in 1968, and the Synod of Bishops in 1971. However, what is remarkable from an Irish perspective is that this letter emerged in the year following 1972, the worst year, for killings, in the conflict on our island. It not only challenges the people of Ireland to action in response to hunger and injustice, but it also institutionalises Catholic social teaching in a foundational organization, Trócaire.

1 <https://www.trocaire.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/pastoral-letter-of-the-bishops-of-ireland-establishing-trocaire.pdf>

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Ethna Regan CHF is Associate Professor of Theology and Ethics, Dublin City University. This is the text of her address at the Annual Trócaire Lecture which she co-delivered with Cardinal Michael F. Czerny, Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.

In Ireland, we are a long way from the times in the 1930s when historian Diarmaid Ferriter tells us that it was common for government ministers to suggest that their policies were in line with Catholic social teaching as endorsed by the Vatican<sup>2</sup> – nor would we wish to return to those times – but looking back now we see this 1973 pastoral letter as a progressive expression of Catholic social teaching that has been largely forgotten in all that has overshadowed us in recent years.

If there is an image that captures the spirit of episcopal conferences responding to Vatican II it is the cover of one of my own favourite documents, *Justice and Peace in the New Caribbean*, a pastoral letter of the Antilles Episcopal Conference written in 1975.<sup>3</sup> The bishops are pictured on the cover in a simple drawing, each with lenses or a magnifying glass scrutinizing their region with great intensity, scrutinizing the signs of the times in keeping with the call of *Gaudium et Spes*, and seeking to interpret specific regional issues, such as racial tensions then in Guyana, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago, in the light of the gospel.

We see from this period onwards the development of an amazing body of work. The fecundity and the variety of Catholic social teaching that has emerged from the local churches across the world is very striking. Themes addressed include tourism, governance, drug cartels, free elections, culture, climate change, prisons, domestic violence, tribalism, unemployment, poverty, democracy, and migrants and refugees. There has been increased intercontinental collaboration on statements, for example, between the German and the African episcopal conferences.

Terence McGoldrick has conducted an extensive study of the theory and practice of Catholic social teaching of episcopal conferences worldwide. The *first* part was published in 1998 and showed that there was ‘a veritable explosion’ of social justice documents from the bishops worldwide between the 1970s and the 1990s, with human rights, poverty, family, and justice as common themes.<sup>4</sup> Across the differences of culture and geography, the three pillars of Catholic social teaching most appealed to by the conferences worldwide, when exploring responses to the variety of injustices they addressed, were *solidarity, responsibility, and participation*.<sup>5</sup>

2 Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London: Profile Books, 2005), p.155.

3 Pastoral Letter of the Antilles Episcopal Conference, *Justice and Peace in a New Caribbean*, Martinique, November 21, 1975.

4 Terence McGoldrick, ‘Episcopal Conferences Worldwide on Catholic Social Teaching’, *Theological Studies* 59.1 (1998) 22-50, 28-29.

5 Terence McGoldrick, ‘Episcopal Conferences Worldwide on Catholic Social Teaching’, 37-45.

The *second* part of the study, published in 2014, concluded that the number of episcopal conference statements on Catholic social teaching significantly decreased since 1998, with fewer statements and more activism.<sup>6</sup> McGoldrick argues that the bishops have generally adopted a new and more effective model aimed at structural social transformation that combines theory and praxis.<sup>7</sup> The impact of this shift remains to be assessed, but what is clear is that there is a focus on a model that draws from the voices and practices of communities committed to the pursuit of justice in their own particular contexts, what we might call today a more synodal approach. The influence and impact of these documents certainly varied in different countries and continents, and what remains unexamined is what injustices were *not* addressed, but the richness of the emerging body of literature from episcopal conferences cannot be disputed.

There is, of course, a reciprocity between papal statements and local social teaching. *Firstly*, papal social teaching can encourage local churches that are struggling with particular issues of injustice and inequality. I offer one small example from my own experience. When the death penalty was reintroduced in Trinidad and Tobago in 1994 after a moratorium of 15 years, with the government, and those of other Caribbean states, arguing for its deterrence capability in the face of escalating murder rates, many Catholics were stout defenders of capital punishment in a context where there was mandatory imposition of the death penalty for murder. Working to stop the hangings and reform the law was deeply unpopular. The following year, John Paul II's encyclical *Evangelium vitae*, with its reference to growing opposition to the death penalty as a sign of hope (27), and to the growing demand 'that it be applied in a very limited way or even that it be abolished completely' (56), was a source of great encouragement for us to persevere with seeking the abolition of the death penalty, a campaign that was unsuccessful.<sup>8</sup> It took five more years after *Evangelium vitae*, and ten hangings in Trinidad and Tobago in 1999, for the Antilles Episcopal Conference to produce a pastoral letter on capital punishment, so contentious was the issue in the region.<sup>9</sup>

*Secondly*, as with *Rerum novarum* which was preceded by nineteenth century social Catholicism in Europe, papal documents

6 Terence A. McGoldrick, 'Episcopal Conferences Worldwide and Catholic Social Thought, in Theory and Praxis: An Update', *Theological Studies*, 75.2 (2014), 376-403.

7 McGoldrick, 2014, 377.

8 John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, March 1995: [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_25031995\\_evangelium-vitae.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html)

9 Antilles Episcopal Conference, *Pastoral Letter on Capital Punishment*, Port of Spain, 2000.

respond to and build on the work of prophetic individuals and movements. *Laudato si'*, while offering amazing and influential leadership on caring for our planet, is not just an encouragement to all of us to seek climate justice, but it is also a validation and vindication of many Catholics and others who have worked tirelessly for many decades on environmental issues without official recognition.

A *third*, developing, aspect of the reciprocity between the global and the local in Catholic social teaching is evident in how Francis cites the documents of episcopal conferences in a way his predecessors have not. *Fratelli tutti*, for example, has an eclectic set of references, including one from the Babylonian Talmud, but Francis particularly weaves the social teaching of local churches into the encyclical with quotations from documents of the bishops of Australia, Columbia, India, Portugal, South Africa, South Korea, the United States, and the latter jointly with the bishops of Mexico. The same range of voices from episcopal conferences worldwide is found in the citations in *Laudato si'* and in his other major documents. When writing on the priority of unity over conflict in *Evangelii gaudium* (no. 230), Francis leaves the final word to a citation from the bishops of the Democratic Republic of the Congo who write about the priority of unity over conflict, not in a theoretical framework, but in a context where over 5 million people have died since 1998 as a result of conflict and the resulting humanitarian crises.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, while the social documents of episcopal conferences are often presented as applied Catholic social teaching, Francis' citation of these documents is, I think, indicative of a reciprocity of teaching and learning, and the ongoing refining of the heart of this social teaching.

## II. THE ETHICS OF LOCALISATION

In her analysis of some of the shifts in modern Catholic social teaching, Anna Rowlands argues that the papacy of Francis 'has emphasized the localization of peace, aid and development agendas, and the renewed role of civil actors alongside national and international bodies'.<sup>11</sup> This shift is a significant theological contribution to the broader debate about localisation that is taking place. The issue of localisation is a key ethical question in our world today, even more important in the light of lessons learned from the pandemic.

10 See (Comité Permanent De La Conférence Épiscopale Nationale Du Congo. 2012. *Message sur la situation sécuritaire dans le pay*, §11).

11 Anna Rowlands, *Towards a Politics of Communion: Catholic Social Teaching in Dark Times* (London: T & T Clark, 2021), p.43.

A report jointly published in February 2023 by CAFOD (Catholic Agency for Overseas Development) and Development Initiatives called *Food insecurity in South Sudan: Financing to local actors* shows that South Sudan is experiencing the most severe food insecurity crisis in the world due to ongoing conflict, and to drought and floods resulting from climate change. The report states that despite the fact that local NGOs – or local and national actors (LNAs) – are the most effective at tackling hunger, and have remained in areas of conflict which many international agencies have withdrawn from, only 0.4% of food funding is directly channelled towards them.<sup>12</sup> These findings reflect a broader concern about a lack of follow-up on international commitments to both increase funding to local groups and increase transparency around such funding.<sup>13</sup>

Dennis Dijkzeul, an expert on humanitarian studies, writing on how localization works, asks ‘How can this acknowledgement of the importance of localization be reconciled with this extremely low level of funding?’<sup>14</sup> While the issues of localization are indeed complex, Dijkzeul highlights *time* and *trust* as the crucial dimensions for developing capacities: fostering trust, having shared project goals and objectives, understanding localisation as an ongoing process, building good relationships between international donors and NGOs and local actors, and building critical management capacity in all projects.<sup>15</sup> Catholic social teaching has much to bring to this dialogue about localisation, and the praxis of Catholic agencies like Trócaire can shape and refine Catholic social teaching’s theory on this matter.

Trócaire, in line with the shift to localization that Francis has brought to Catholic social teaching, has adapted their modus operandi of partnership – there from the beginning – with an intentional shift, the shifting of power to local partners. We all know that sharing and shifting the balance of power is one of the most challenging but significant methods of transformation and development in any organization. This shifting of power

12 CAFOD and Development Initiatives, *Food insecurity in South Sudan: financing to local actors*, February 2023, [https://assets.ctfassets.net/vy3axnuecuwj/4NOemEHM8Mz7CasKRBUc/338a9b25b003a222b7f9d5f200f0b946/Food\\_Sector\\_Financing\\_to\\_Local\\_Actors\\_in\\_South\\_Sudan.pdf](https://assets.ctfassets.net/vy3axnuecuwj/4NOemEHM8Mz7CasKRBUc/338a9b25b003a222b7f9d5f200f0b946/Food_Sector_Financing_to_Local_Actors_in_South_Sudan.pdf)

13 Development Initiatives, ‘Tracking Humanitarian Funding to Local Actors: what we’ve learnt’, December 15, 2022, <https://devinit.org/blog/tracking-humanitarian-funding-local-actors/>

14 Dennis Dijkzeul, ‘Making Localization Work: The Everyday Practice of Three NGOs in South Sudan and Northern Uganda’, *Frontiers in Political Science*, 3:716287 (October 2021), 1-15, 2.

15 Dennis Dijkzeul, ‘Making Localization Work: The Everyday Practice of Three NGOs in South Sudan and Northern Uganda’, 11-13.

enriches our understanding of the principles of Catholic social teaching: the dignity of the local; reimagining the practice of appropriate subsidiarity in decision-making and planning; a disposition of solidarity that is not just about standing with people in a humanitarian crisis, but an accompanying solidarity that empowers local partners, foregrounds local voices, and fosters local leadership.

Working on the ground in response to disaster, or in the longer-term work of developing agriculture, education, and healthcare, necessitates working with people of other faiths, and with people of secular conviction, that is, the men and women of good will whom the church addresses in social documents. Trócaire expresses this with great clarity:

Our work is grounded in Catholic Social Teaching and is in line with the teachings of the Catholic Church. We work with people of all faiths and none, and with a wide range of organisations. We don't endorse all the positions of our partners, but we believe in working collaboratively with others in areas where we share the same objectives for change.<sup>16</sup>

This kind of intentional and reflective position on collaboration is dismissed by some theologians as merely an accommodation to the secular world, as if Christian collaboration with the secular were a new development. As far back as the fifth century, St. Augustine in his reflections on the two cities, the City of God and the Earthly City, explores something of the collaboration across the cities.<sup>17</sup> The Church, he reminds us, is tinged with sin and contains elements of both cities. The distinction between both cities is ultimately eschatological, but there are ethical possibilities within the overlapping space shared by both cities wherein we try to make it the best city possible. In the real world of disaster response and development work, in the defence of civil and political as well as social and economic rights, the universal principles of Catholic social teaching are translated into the particular and implemented in real time, in concrete situations marked by cultural, religious, and political diversity, real world decisions that are both principled and provisional. In the midst of this, Catholic social teaching must develop a future-oriented ethic of localisation.

<sup>16</sup> Trócaire, <https://www.Trócaire.org/about/values/>

<sup>17</sup> Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. by R.W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

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### III. TURNING THE PRINCIPLES OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING INWARDS: THE IMPACT OF THE ABUSE CRISIS ON CREDIBILITY

We cannot, of course, celebrate the contribution of Catholic social teaching at this moment in the history of the church without continually acknowledging the reality out of which the church endeavours to speak to the world on matters of justice.

One of the major figures of early modern Catholic social thought, Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler, Bishop of Mainz 1850-77, took a radical position on the question of child labour. Twenty years prior to the publication of Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical *Rerum novarum* (On the Condition of Labour), von Ketteler called for the elimination of child labour. In a famous sermon of 1869, he said: 'I regard child-labour in factories as a monstrous cruelty of our time ... Religion in its great love for children cannot but support the demand for the prohibition of child-labour in factories.'<sup>18</sup> *Rerum novarum* did not call for the abolition von Ketteler passionately advocated for but, nonetheless, we can see a relative radicalism in the approach to justice for children in the nineteenth century. Therefore, it is a source of great sadness and shame that the area in which the church expressed relative radicalism at the inception of modern Catholic social teaching, justice for children, has become the *very* area on which the institution has floundered, profoundly damaging our capacity and credibility in the public domain on matters of justice.

In the pastoral letter I referred to earlier, *Justice and Peace in the New Caribbean*, a striking feature was the bishops' inclusion of an apology for the fact that the Church's record in identifying with the poor and oppressed 'has not always been as good as it should have been'. The letter refers to failings both of the colonial church and the post-colonial church, including 'on occasion, acts of racial discrimination' and perpetuating social and class divisions. 'For these sins and omissions of the past and present, we the Bishops of the Antilles Conference humbly beg pardon from God, the Lord and Judge of history, and from you, the people of the region' (13). I was told by one of drafters of the pastoral letter that some in Rome did not view this apology favorably. However, this frank admission of failure was ahead of its time, unaware that apology would become almost a default starting position for the contemporary church.

The ongoing challenge is to make the principles of Catholic social teaching operative in our response to the global sexual abuse crisis, particularly in our engagement with those who have

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18 See Rupert J. Ederer, ed. and trans., *The Social Teachings of Wilhelm Emmanuel Von Ketteler: Bishop of Mainz (1811-1877)* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981).



been abused. Our rich social tradition that has been directed to the industrial revolution, to war and peace, to poverty and to climate justice, must be directed also *ad intra* as we seek a just response to the ongoing abuse crisis. The principle of dignity, founded on understanding the person as *Imago Dei*, must be directed towards restorative dignity and restorative justice. There is a duty of solidarity towards those who have been abused, those falsely accused, and those affected by the ripples of trauma. Social analysis, and the recognition of structural sin, must find expression in an institutional analysis that focuses not just on eliminating risk, but on developing accountability and transparency in relation to information, processes, and structures. Perhaps even the model of public truth and reconciliation commissions, supported by the church in post-conflict societies, might also guide a way forward?

Two of the eight main objectives of the 2023 Synod outlined in the Preparatory Document address the question of justice *ad intra*, and the implications of the internal for external credibility. These objectives apply not just to the abuse crisis, but also to the broader issues of justice in the church, including the role of women in the church, for we cannot be challenging ‘the exclusion of women’s voices and perspectives from decision-making spaces’ in our development work,<sup>19</sup> without considering this exclusion within the church. These Synodal objectives are: (1) “examining how responsibility and power are lived in the Church as well as the structures by which they are managed, bringing to light and trying to convert prejudices and distorted practices that are not rooted in the Gospel”;<sup>20</sup> (2) “accrediting the Christian community as a *credible* subject and reliable partner in paths of social dialogue, healing, reconciliation, inclusion and participation, reconstruction of democracy, the promotion of fraternity and social friendship”.<sup>21</sup>

So, as much as the church guides Trócaire (I know Trócaire is part of the Church, but I am using an internal distinction here), how can the church learn lessons from Trócaire’s engagement with Catholic social teaching, and from their new priorities in terms of shifting the power and sharpening the focus?

Turning the principles of Catholic social teaching *ad intra* is one of the Church’s most pressing responsibilities, to ensure that it is a credible witness and reliable partner working with all people of good will on matters of global and social justice, and,

19 Trócaire, <https://www.trocaire.org/our-work/womens-empowerment/>

20 Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission* (September 7, 2021), §2, <https://www.synod.va/en/news/the-preparatory-document.html>.

21 Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission*, §2. Italics mine.

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fundamentally, our very capacity for authentic proclamation of the Gospel, which is at the heart of our social teaching, is at stake.

### IV. HOW DO WE HOLD FAST TO LOVE AND JUSTICE (HOSEA 12:6)?

Francis' encyclicals, especially *Fratelli Tutti* because it emerged from the Covid-19 pandemic, have captured the moral imagination of people in a very particular way.

I offer this social Encyclical as *a modest contribution to continued reflection*, in the hope that in the face of present-day attempts to eliminate or ignore others, we may prove capable of responding with a new vision of fraternity and social friendship that will not remain at the level of words. Although I have *written it from the Christian convictions* that inspire and sustain me, I sought to make this reflection *an invitation to dialogue among all people of good will* (no.6)

Together with the humility forged in the shame of the abuse crisis, Francis introduces a positive *modesty*. This is an unusual declaration of modesty in papal teaching, but it reflects the way we have become more modest about the contribution of Christianity, more generally, in light of insights from interfaith and interreligious dialogue and, indeed, from dialogue with those of secular conviction on matters of global and social justice. This modesty opens much greater possibility for genuine dialogue and collaboration.

Another reason why this encyclical has captured the moral imagination is because as well as proposing a better, more noble, politics that responds to the many inequalities and injustices that are structured into our societies, Francis also highlights the personal dispositions that each of us are called to in the face of these challenges. The parabolic simplicity at the heart of *Fratelli tutti* contains real, concrete challenges to economics and politics, but Francis also weaves the virtues closely into the fabric of Catholic social teaching.

Implementing this social teaching involves cultivating the virtues of dialogue, social friendship, and an extensive impulse of solidarity. These virtues, for Francis, are both political and personal. In paragraph 77, Francis uses *three* beautiful verbs to describe the desire we as individuals and communities are called to: 'we need only have a simple desire to be a people, a community, constant and tireless in the effort *to include, to integrate, and lift up the fallen.*' These beautiful words can be translated into policies,

into politics, and also made operative in our daily personal lives, a sense that Catholic social teaching is something that can be lived. I would like to end by returning to the 1973 pastoral letter of the bishops of Ireland. The beautiful prayer that concludes this document is striking for its time, but it also has an enduring relevance. With *four* simple elements, it is a prayer for what we need in order to persevere in the work of justice whether on the ground with Trócaire or others, or working here in parishes and communities. It is a prayer for the personal and spiritual sustainability needed in the face of the many social and global injustices that we are called to be attentive and responsive to:

1. We pray the all-merciful God to grant us all *a share in his mercy*.  
This element locates our work as a participation in the mercy and justice of God, and there is something liberating about that.
2. We pray God to *keep our hearts always open* to those in hunger and in need.
3. We pray *above all* that God will *never let us grow accustomed* to the injustice and inequality that exist in this world.

This third dimension of the prayer, the *above all*, has echoes of a more explicit expression of this wish not to become accustomed to injustice and inequality by Martin Luther King (d. 1968), civil rights leader and Baptist preacher, in the decade before this pastoral letter. King expressed this idea of not growing accustomed to injustice using the word ‘maladjusted’. He is cognisant that ‘maladjustment’ is a technical term in psychology, and he recognizes the importance of a well-adjusted life in order to be healthy, but he proposes an intentional maladjustment :

there are certain things in our nation and our world which I am proud to be maladjusted to, and which I hope all people of good-will will be maladjusted to until the good societies realize. I never intend to become adjusted to segregation or discrimination or religious bigotry. I never intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few, leaving millions of God’s children smothering in an air-tight cage of poverty ... I never intend to adjust myself to the madness of militarism, to the self-defeating effects of physical violence.<sup>22</sup>

22 Martin Luther King, lecture at Western Michigan University, December 18th, 1963. <https://wmich.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/MLK.pdf>

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4. We pray that we may never grow weary in the work of setting it right.

It is not just a matter of growing weary in the face of the specific challenges of trying to right injustice, but we all seek to do this in the midst of all the other contingencies of our lives: family concerns, financial difficulties, grief, illness, etc. We need the gift of never growing weary. This prayer is still an exemplar prayer for the documents and practice of Catholic social teaching in our fragile, dangerous, but still hopeful world.

While the world has changed since Trócaire was founded in 1973, and the church's reputation is permanently scarred, what has not changed – and has indeed increased – is human vulnerability in the face of climate change and an illegal war that is causing incredible human damage in Ukraine, with the ensuing global implications for food security and political stability. What is unchanging is the imperative for Catholic social teaching to remain *dynamic* in research and practice, enabling us all to remain open-hearted, hopeful, realists who are maladjusted to the injustice and inequality in our world.

**I'm Spiritual.** I'm spiritual, but not religious' is a phrase that is often heard. It's often expressed by people doing pilgrimages such as the Camino de Santiago, or climbing Croagh Patrick in County Mayo, or other activities with a traditional spiritual content. It's also expressed in a variety of other contexts and especially when the question of religion is raised. Spiritual but not religious often describes the experience of many people. It's a positive expression because it highlights an awareness of the spiritual dimension that is in everybody's DNA. We all have a spirituality. It's what inspires how we relate to each other, to the planet and to what or who we call God, sometimes referred to as the transcendent, describing what is beyond the range of physical experience.

– JIM MAHER, S.J., *Reimagining Religion: A Jesuit Vision*, Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2023, p.17.