Beyond Distributive Justice

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The "development of doctrine" debates of the nineteenth century culminated in the now classic "Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine," first published by John Henry Newman in 1845. Drawing on the writings of the Church Fathers, Newman sought to lay out stable guidelines to distinguish between the authentic development of doctrine and its corruption. For Newman, such arguments held more than academic interest. They provided assurance that the Roman Catholic Church (into which he was in the process of incorporating) with its centuries-old structures and doctrines was indeed the same Church founded by Jesus Christ upon the Apostles.

Newman set out to explain certain difficulties and apparent historical inconsistencies in Catholic belief and practice, but in so doing he also produced an *apologia* for the necessity of the development of doctrine. Not only is development a historical fact, but also a requirement of doctrine. In the first place, this development burgeons, as Newman realized, as an essential fruit of theological study. Theology, in its classical sense as *fides quaerens intellectum*, seeks an ever deeper understanding of those truths embraced through faith, and in so doing offers the Church new ways of understanding and formulating her beliefs. As Newman wrote, these truths "from their very depth and richness cannot be fully understood at once, but are more and more clearly expressed and taught the longer they last." Secondly, the emergence of variant theological opinions and heterodox beliefs also stimulates the development of doctrine by prodding the Church's Magisterium to clarify the Church's stand on questions heretofore undefined. Though not a good in itself, heresy yields the positive byproduct of more precise expressions of the Church's beliefs. Finally, from a more pastoral angle, the development of doctrine also issues from efforts to make the deposit of faith intelligible to people of different historical and cultural milieus, through the adaptation of its language and explanations to changing situations.

The doctrines considered by Newman in his Essay dealt principally with articles of faith and sacramental discipline. Among these figured topics such as

the Canon of the New Testament, the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son, the Eucharist, original sin, and infant baptism, all of which form part of what we would now call dogmatic or systematic theology. Yet a case can certainly be made that where the development of doctrine in the area of *dogmatics* inevitably occurs to accommodate new historical situations, the Church's *moral* doctrine necessarily develops at a faster pace still.

Advances in the medical and genetic sciences, for example, necessitate a permanently updated response from the Church to guide and form the consciences of the faithful. Complex ethical issues of recent vintage such as cloning or stem cell research have arisen because of scientific progress that opens up whole new areas of moral concern. Yet nowhere is the need for ongoing development more acutely felt than in the area of the Church's social teaching, that branch of moral theology that deals with the ordering of social, political, economic and cultural realities according to the exigencies of the Gospel.

The foundational principles underlying Catholic social doctrine, based as they are on human nature and Christian revelation, do not change. Therefore, the centrality of the human person and his inviolable dignity, concerns for justice and charity, and attention to the common good, will always form the base of the Church's social thought. Yet many other corollary judgments require an ongoing adaptation.

A recent case in point is Catholic just war theory. Originally articulated by St. Augustine and restructured by Thomas Aquinas, Catholic understanding of conditions for waging war justly continues to undergo needed development. The fact that such doctrines develop does not necessarily mean that our predecessors got it wrong, or that the Church is simply changing her mind regarding prior teaching, but rather that major shifts in geo-political structures and military practice have radically altered the character and moral makeup of human warfare. Reacting to the emergence of weapons of mass destruction and the horrors of World War II, the Vatican II Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, called for a reevaluation of the conditions for war. Recent development of more precise, guided weaponry and the emergence of new forms of terrorism have led to further study, debate and reelaboration of ethical

conditions for engaging in warfare, and this discussion will surely continue in the years to come.

The Case of Distributive Justice

Another area of Catholic social thought requiring serious study and development revolves around the age-old concept of distributive justice. The hundred years of social Magisterium spanning from Leo XIII's *Rerum novarum* to John Paul II's *Centesimus annus* were marked by a concern for the growing divide between rich and poor. Though the Church steadily steered Catholics away from the socialist reading of the class phenomenon and the solutions offered by the Marxist school, she nonetheless called attention to the gulf between wealth and poverty as a scandal to be remedied. As just one example, in his 1961 encyclical *Mater et magistra,* Pope John XXIII declared that in certain lands "the enormous wealth, the unbridled luxury, of the privileged few stands in violent, offensive contrast to the utter poverty of the vast majority." Not only does such disparity exist within nations, however, but it is even more acute on a global scale. Paul VI noted that wealthier nations were progressing "with rapid strides," while poorer nations moved forward at a slow pace, and Pope John Paul II has decried a widening gap between "the so-called developed North and the developing South."

Though a little international travel suffices to bring home the truth of these observations, proposals for solutions vary considerably. Here the task of Catholic social thought does not lie so much in engineering the most apt tactical remedies to the problem, but rather in providing a moral analysis of the situation and indicating possible paths to a solution. The Church sees it as her duty to exhort the faithful and all "men and women of good will" to the practice of virtue, and in this case to the social virtues that form the necessary groundwork for the reform of social and economic structures. This is where the concept of distributive justice comes in.

Following Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas divided justice first into general (or legal) justice and particular justice, and then further divided particular justice into two types, commutative justice and distributive justice. Whereas commutative

justice regulates exchange and aims at maintaining a just balance between individuals, distributive justice would be the virtue by which "a ruler or steward gives to each what his rank deserves" and represents the proper order displayed in ruling a family or any kind of social grouping. The one who has responsibility for the common good ought to practice justice in the distribution of the divisible goods of the community.

Two major socio-economic changes of the modern age have made necessary a serious reconsideration of this virtue, both in its formulation and in its application. In the first place, the agents directly responsible for the common good have multiplied exponentially. In the past, this responsibility was seen as the nearly exclusive domain of public authority or those who held political office. Thus, relatively few concerned themselves with practicing distributive justice, which was the task of state authorities. While politicians clearly continue to exercise this responsibility, they share it more and more with businesses and private individuals who act as stewards of common stock. According to Catholic social teaching, property bears a double dimension, private and social. The use of possessions exceeding one's personal and family needs should be ordered to the common good. In the past when most people lived at subsistence levels, few needed to concern themselves with the responsible stewardship of common goods, since their duty was limited to the sphere of their own families. Now, with steadily increasing numbers of people and groups who possess goods in excess of their actual needs, the virtue of distributive justice has become ever more relevant on a broad scale. The virtuous administration of wealth has come to the fore as an important issue for Christian conscience.

The second socio-economic change affecting distributive justice has been the evolution of principal forms of wealth and the accelerating process of wealth creation in determined sectors of society. Up until just prior to the industrial revolution wealth was properly measured in durable goods such as land, livestock and gold. While still important, these indices of wealth have ceded more and more ground to less tangible riches, such as technology, know-how, and education. In past centuries, basic productive know-how such as agricultural techniques was handed on from generation to generation and incremental

advances were relatively small and infrequent. Since the time of the industrial revolution, however, rapidly changing technology has played an increasingly central role in the productivity of nations and peoples. One of the key factors behind the dramatic material development that certain countries have experienced in the past century has been technological progress allowing for the production of a superfluity of goods and the consequent possibility of a diversification of trades and professions. In this regard, Pope John Paul II wrote in his 1991 encyclical *Centesimus annus*:

> In our time, in particular, there exists another form of ownership which is becoming no less important than land: *the possession of know-how, technology and skill*. The wealth of the industrialized nations is based much more on this kind of ownership than on natural resources.

And a little further along he adds:

> Whereas at one time the decisive factor of production was *the land,* and later capital C understood as a total complex of the instruments of production C today the decisive factor is increasingly *man himself,* that is, his knowledge, especially his scientific knowledge, his capacity for interrelated and compact organization, as well as his ability to perceive the needs of others and to satisfy them.

These two phenomena—the multiplication of subjects of distributive justice and the evolution of wealth—underscore certain shortcomings of appealing to distributive justice as the proper category for understanding and solving modern problems of poverty and development. In the first place, problems plague the very concept of distribution itself. The first definition of the word "distribute" offered by the Random House-Webster's dictionary reads: "to divide and give out in shares; allot." According to this definition, wealth distribution would refer to the allotment of resources according to a given proportion. In fact, Aristotle specified that those in charge of common stock should dole out divisible goods by a "geometric proportion" according to each one's rank. The whole idea of distribution, and consequently of just or unjust distribution, may bring to mind an enormous warehouse of resources controlled by a central power structure.

Distribution would involve the apportionment of finite goods, and therefore would demand choices which necessarily benefit some while slighting others. According to this paradigm, the just nation would be the nation that first allocates its material wealth equitably among its own citizens, and then to the rest of the world. The unjust nation would be the one that hoards its riches internally or squanders them on luxurious living while the rest of the world agonizes in its indigence. Of course, distribution can also mean the spread of a determined entity throughout an area, but generally distribution calls to mind the deliberate apportioning of finite, divisible goods among a group. When we add to the language of distribution an accent on reducing the "gap between rich and poor" rather than on alleviating the suffering of the poor, the problem of sustainable development is further muddled. When framed in this way, the central problem would seem to be more one of inequality than of development, and if this were the case, redistribution would indeed be the solution. This is not, however, the Catholic understanding of economic justice.

Secondly, the responsible management of common stock involves much more than how much will be distributed to the poor and how much will be retained for personal use. Ordering property to the common good goes well beyond a restrictive concept of distribution, and involves ethical investment, job creation, and responsible savings for the future. While the ancient custom of almsgiving has lost none of its moral weight, it does not exhaust the ethical responsibilities of the wealthy. Responsible investment and job creation can be explained in terms of distribution in a broader sense, but this is not what springs to most modern minds on hearing the word "distribution."

In the third place, distribution as allotment likewise snags on the question of immaterial wealth. In his *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle already recognized that the object of distributive justice went beyond material riches, and included other divisible goods, such as honors. Yet intangible goods are not distributed in the way that material wealth is, since giving to one does not imply taking from another. A typical zero-sum mentality that still reigns in the minds of many assumes that one man's riches somehow cause another's poverty, and the solution to this inequity would lie in the redistribution of this wealth. Such a redistribution

need not occur, however, in the case of intangible goods, since the communication of knowledge or technology does not impoverish the giver, except perhaps in terms of competitive advantage. In a world where the wealth of nations depends less and less on material resources and more on intangible resources such as technology and know-how, notions of distribution must also be updated.

Moreover, the zero-sum mindset that sees the world's wealth in terms of a fixed, divisible quantity falls short in other important ways as well. Education and technology are not only a form of wealth in themselves, but, more importantly, guarantee the possibility of continued wealth creation for the people that possess them. Immaterial wealth has value precisely because it is a source of renewable wealth. Nations experience "sustainable development," at least in the material sphere, when wealth generation devolves on the nation itself and no longer depends on external subsidies. Modern wealth consists less and less on the possession of golden eggs, so to speak, and more and more on the possession of the goose that lays them. Yet this goose is not a finite, tangible entity that belongs to one and not to another, but the intangible good of know-how, education and method.

Finally, in its strict sense, distributive justice obliges those with responsibility for the common stock to divide this stock among those under their charge, but this vertical obligation would not extend to the transversal interdependence of a globalized world. The idea of distributive justice could be stretched to meet these new situations, but restrictive notions of distribution are certain to persist.

The development of Catholic social thought in the area of distributive justice

Since the time of Leo XIII, most of Catholic magisterial teaching regarding international distributive justice has focused on underscoring the problem and appealing to the conscience of wealthier nations to find ways of assuring a more equitable distribution of goods. Efforts have certainly been made to pinpoint the causes of poverty, and Leo himself emphasized the function of a just wage in building up a middle class capable of economic independence and freedom. With

great realism, Leo also recognized that certain inequalities are inherent to the human condition and that attempts to eradicate them would be both ineffectual and counterproductive. Nonetheless, little was proposed on an international scale besides the need for wealthier nations to share with their less fortunate brethren. Typical is the summons from Pope John XXIII that now is the time "to insist on a more widespread distribution of property, in view of the rapid economic development of an increasing number of States." Pope Paul VI took a significant step forward in Catholic social thought by shifting emphasis to the international scene in an increasingly globalized world and by stressing the importance of education and co-responsibility in working out solutions to economic and social problems.

Pope John Paul II has carried the question of equitable economic development still further, beyond the notion of distribution to a more proactive approach to international economic relations. Especially in his encyclical letter *Centesimus annus* John Paul has offered a helpful appraisal of the causes of wealth in developed nations. For instance, along with the external conditions needed for economic growth such as a stable political environment and favorable tax structures, John Paul indicates the virtues of businesspeople that make such growth possible, "such as diligence, industriousness, prudence in undertaking reasonable risks, reliability and fidelity in interpersonal relationships, as well as courage in carrying out decisions which are difficult and painful but necessary, both for the overall working of a business and in meeting possible setbacks." In this way he holds up an ideal for those engaged in business and signals a virtuous path to those who seek to work toward sustainable economic development.

Instead of framing the question of underdevelopment in terms of the causes of poverty, John Paul here asks what positive factors have been lacking such that certain societies have not experienced growth similar to their more developed neighbors. In other words, why have certain countries not shared in the same economic growth enjoyed by others? The principal reason he discerns does not rest on an analysis of equitable distribution, but rather on participation and integration into circles of productivity and exchange. *Pace* the no-global movement, isolationism does not benefit the poor. According to the Pope's

analysis, the greatest obstacle to economic development today is marginalization and exclusion from know-how, methods, and international markets:

> Even in recent years it was thought that the poorest countries would develop by isolating themselves from the world market and by depending only on their own resources. Recent experience has shown that countries which did this have suffered stagnation and recession, while the countries which experienced development were those which succeeded in taking part in the general interrelated economic activities at the international level. It seems therefore that the chief problem is that of gaining fair access to the international market.

Often exclusion and marginalization are self-imposed, sometimes out of fear of economic exploitation and sometimes as a means to keep absolute control over the people. Other times marginalization is exacerbated by protective fiscal policy of the wealthier nations, such as high trade tariffs that discourage importation of more economical foreign products. Regardless of its causes, such exclusion from international commerce hampers economic development and needs to be addressed. As Thomas Friedman observed, in his widely heralded analysis of globalization, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, our goal should not be—because, in the end, it cannot be—to stop globalization, but rather, to assist those countries presently on the margins to develop the cultural, economic, and legal "software" necessary to benefit from it.

Beyond distribution: solidarity and participation

For all the reasons enumerated, it would seem that the time has come to rework our moral lexicon. If modern notions of distribution are fraught with misconceptions that no longer reflect today's socio-economic situation, our vocabulary should undoubtedly move towards more appropriate language. A good example of this creative development can be found in John Paul's proposal of the virtue of solidarity. In his 1987 encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis,* the Pope defines the virtue of solidarity as "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good" (n. 38). Despite the novelty of the term, John Paul's definition sounds remarkably similar to a much older virtue which Thomas

Aquinas called "legal justice." Aquinas, again following Aristotle, writes that legal (or general) justice is that virtue "which directs human actions to the common good." Instead of speaking about solidarity, therefore, we could simply speak about the more classical concept of legal justice without introducing new terminology. Yet who would deny that for the modern mind "solidarity" captures far better than "legal justice" the idea that the Pope is endeavoring to express, and skirts some of the misconceptions that "legal justice" could provoke?

Distributive justice must hold fast to its well-earned place in ethical theory. For millennia it has helped humans parse the ethical demands of administering common stock and furnishes an important counterpoint to commutative justice. Be that as it may, Catholic social thought is now in need of new ethical categories to better comprehend and explain the moral requirements of individuals, associations and nations with regard to the sustainable development of peoples and nations.

One possible candidate for such a category is the Catholic understanding of participation as developed so beautifully by Karol Wojtyła in *The Acting Person* and subsequently laid out in the 1992 Catechism of the Catholic Church. If the major obstacle restraining the development of underdeveloped nations is marginalization, then participation in networks of knowledge, education, communications and exchange can provide a viable access ramp to fuller integration in development. This demands, of course, a will to do good and a generosity that exceed purely economic interest, since investment in participation and inclusion in markets may not offer financial advantage, at least in the short run. The virtue of solidarity itself plays a fundamental role in reframing global moral questions, especially since it extends our gaze beyond national borders to embrace the entire human family, as well as transcending the strict demands of justice to include the concept of "social charity."

In analyzing economic problems and possible solutions, oversimplification must be avoided at all costs. The manifold and complex processes at work elude simple diagnosis and quick fixes. At the same time a veritable paradigm shift must occur if we are to escape from sterile models of distribution that threaten to hamstring a Catholic theory of sustainable development. Direct subsidies can

remedy urgent economic crises, but they can never substitute for shared methods and technology or for insertion into networks of exchange and trade. The best aid does not create dependencies, but enables peoples and nations to fend for themselves and to participate fully in the international community.

If it is true that the problem of poverty and underdevelopment requires much generosity on the part of those who possess greater resources, it is equally true that this generosity should be directed in such a way as to genuinely benefit others in the long run. Thinking in terms of participation, solidarity and inclusion can generate creative responses that go beyond distribution in their efficacy, reach and duration.