

## THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL DOCTRINE. THE ISSUE OF THEIR INTERPRETATION

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### I. WHY DO WE NEED PRINCIPLES?

Social doctrine is not denominational. It is not about imitating the ideal society either. It is not primarily prescriptive. It does not suggest practical solutions to the variety of situations that people encounter during the organisation and functioning of society. It is not a synthesis of the existing ethos. It aims at highlighting the vital arteries that carry the lifeblood to those societies that claim to be worthy of men. It is aware of each society's different value system and ethical structures, as well as of the difficulty of establishing a dialogue between different cultural paradigms. However, it is convinced of the possibility of identifying, by means of rational analysis, the permanent structures of life in society: the concepts that predate it, its goal, the conditions for its accomplishment and organisation. This set of elements takes on the form of principles. A principle is not an abstraction but the expression of a real relationship, subject to various practical definitions, among the members of society and between them and the whole of society.

The method of social doctrine is inductive. It observes and analyses human behaviour. It draws from it the unchanging elements that come into play within life in society. It presumes an anthropology at the centre of which is the dignity of the human person. Social doctrine consists in discovering the fundamental relations existing among men by virtue of their very humanity. Man and his interhuman relations result from an order that is inscribed within the nature of each being.

Social doctrine is inspired by biblical anthropology and the theology of creation. Its elaboration derives from the rational level, by means of which men of various beliefs can communicate and seek the truth together. Biblical revelation does not consist in a heterogeneous given in relation to rea-

son, but in a dialogue that stimulates reason. The systematic elaboration of a social doctrine is culturally located in the universe of Graeco-Roman thought. The discoveries of reason and the reception of revelation are located within a structuring osmosis, because reason and revelation have the same author and the same goal: the universe, its origin and end. The principles of social doctrine are the rational articulations of the vision of man and society brought to us by biblical thought.

To interpret these principles correctly we must turn to the source that generated them: a biblical anthropology and certain categories of thought drawn from Greek philosophy. Today we can observe a drifting in the interpretation of the notions of dignity, common good, solidarity, subsidiarity, when these are placed within the contemporary context of individualism and legal positivism. The principles recalled here only make sense in the coherence of social doctrine that presumes the existence of a natural ethical order. These principles can inspire all kinds of concrete choices dictated by the circumstances of places and times, without losing their value as constant paradigms of the structuring of life in society.

## II. THE CONCEPTS PREDATING LIFE IN SOCIETY

The principles of social doctrine derive from human nature. This is its source of inspiration. Thus, before proceeding to a vision of the organisation of social life, we must consider the concepts that predate it and that are non negotiable: an anthropology and a natural order. The whole of social ethics concerns man in his irreducible personal dimension and in his social dimension.

1) The first concept is man himself. We grasp this starting from the concept of *person*. The theological origin of this concept is well known. It is the Christological dogma that has highlighted the fullness of the notion of person, Christ being 'one person with two natures'. The notion of person expresses the unity of he who, 'without confusion, without change' is at the same time God and man. Boethius' famous definition: 'a person is an individual substance of a rational nature', contains the idea that every human being, distinguished from the other living beings for his capability to know and understand (reason), is irreducible to his physical component as he is to his psychological one. The irreducible dignity of human beings, which the legal instruments protecting human rights pay homage to, is of an ontological nature. This dignity is given to the human beings themselves, in their diversity. This ontological dignity entails the equal dignity of all

human beings. It is the cornerstone of the entire social edifice. Life in society, which responds to the intrinsic need of the human person, derives from man's social nature. It must therefore enable his complete fulfilment. It is at the service of the human person. 'Man, far from being the object and a passive element of social life, is on the contrary its subject, foundation and end and must remain it...We say that man is free, bound by his duties, provided with unassailable rights, the origin and end of human society' (Pius XII, *Christmas 1944 Radiomessage*, in: AAS 37, 1945, 5).

We might add that no one can dispose of a person. A substance is first in the order of being. The person is intended as such along all the paths of his or her existence that goes from conception to death. Deciding that the person, that is, the humanity of man only begins at a certain time after conception is arbitrary and gives the person over to human powers. Therefore the person is the foundation of all social ethics. The person predates society and society is not humanising unless it meets the expectations inscribed in the person as a social being.

2) Another contiguous concept predating the organisation of social life is the very existence of the universe which surrounds us. This universe was not created by any man. It was given. Believers consider it to be the work of God the Creator. The ethical principle preceding all others, which derives from it for human beings, is that of the *universal destination of earthly goods*. This principle is non negotiable. It affirms that all that exists, exists for the good and for the fulfilment of all men. Natural wealth, such as the cultural goods created by man, knowledge and techniques, once patented and put on the market, cannot be confiscated by a minority of people or states, but must serve for the progress of all men.

This principle underlies that of solidarity and justice. It also presupposes considering the human race in its unity, which transcends its cultural diversity and political boundaries. From an ethical point of view, if the goods of the world were to be considered the absolute property of those who exploit them or have them available, access by all to these same goods would be compromised. The basis of the right to development and to the access to material and cultural goods lies in the principle according to which no one must be excluded from these same goods. Every human being has the right to access the goods of creation by the very virtue of his or her dignity. This principle does not invalidate the necessary mediations, which are education and economic relations, trade exchanges and technology transfers among people and states. It only sets the goal which humanity must pursue, in a spirit of justice and solidarity, on its way to globalisation.

3) The third element predating social organisation is what we call *natural law*. Natural law governs the relations among people and between people and the universe that surrounds them. It has its roots in the very humanity of man. It is the expression of the structure of the human person who needs recognition, freedom, justice, love and peace. Natural law is an ethical law, not a physical or biological one. It is inscribed in all the dimensions of the human being who reacts on the basis of his or her biological, psychological or social conditionings, but also as someone capable of passing his or her own judgement and therefore of doing a moral deed.

Natural law originates from anthropology. It derives from the inclinations that men have towards what is good and fair. These inclinations are perceived and processed by reason, which is capable of discerning between good and evil by noticing the objective order of things. The morality of a deed presumes an element of free will. Ethics is involved where there is freedom. Natural law is the convention proposed to human freedom. It has yet to be discovered and chosen. It is not of the order of determinism. Natural law inspires natural right, which is the part of natural law that governs relations among people and between people and the community.

### III. THE COMMON GOOD AND THE CONDITIONS FOR ITS ACCOMPLISHMENT

When one addresses the sphere of the construction of society, which is a work of reason, the first consideration to emerge is that of its finality. Why society? In order for a person to reach fulfilment, the human being needs the web of relations that he establishes with other people. He thus places himself at the centre of a web formed by concentric circles that are the family, his home, his workplace, his neighbours, his nation and, finally, the whole of humanity. A person draws from each of these circles the necessary elements for his growth, at the same time as he contributes to their improvement. What a person cannot obtain by himself, but receives thanks to his quality as a social being, is the *common good*.

The essential purpose of all authority established within a society is to serve the common good. Justice, peace and security are all part of the common good. The society that is organised with a view to the common good of its members fulfils a need within the social nature of the person. 'The common good...is intimately bound up with human nature' (John XXIII, Encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, 1963, 55). The common good can be understood as the set of conditions that enable a person to become more and more

human. (cf. *Idem*, 65). Even when it is considered in its exterior aspects: economy, security, social justice, education, access to employment, spiritual research, etc., the common good is always a human good.

There is a common good which is identifiable at each organisational level of society. The common good sometimes requires the sacrifice of an individual good. The pursuit of the common good allows the city to mobilise the energies of all its members, for example when it is necessary to defend it from an aggression. Societies can be defined by the type of common good that they intend to provide to their members. The vision of common good evolves hand in hand with the societies themselves, because the awareness of the needs of the common good changes with the concepts of person, justice and role of public authority. Society must establish this created natural order, subject to the apprehension of reason.

The fundamental conditions that must be met in order for the common good to be discerned and achieved are: freedom, truth, justice and solidarity (cf. John XXIII, Encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, 37). These four social virtues, which respond to the natural inclinations of man, must be pursued together in order to assure the common good. If a single one of these conditions is not met, the city is no longer humanising, but becomes oppressive or anarchic.

In fact, *freedom* is the first condition of a humanly acceptable political order. Without the freedom to follow one's conscience, to express one's opinions and to pursue one's projects, the city is not human. Without the search and respect for the truth, there is no society, only a dictatorship of the strongest. A person's freedom is more than ever on the agenda of the media-driven society, which is submitted to the manipulation of the spirit and to the ideological conformism of a single ideology.

Only the search for the *truth* is capable of getting men to converge towards common objectives. The very existence of truth is denied by those who think that it is an obstacle to pluralism and democracy. Now, truth cannot be appropriated by anyone; it is always in front of us. The characteristic of truth is to impose itself on the mind by its very strength. Without this horizon of truth, including in the ethical domain, it is the most skilled or the strongest who will impose their own truth. The first condition for freedom is truth.

Without *justice* there is no society: violence reigns. Justice is the highest good that a city can provide. Justice ensures to each his due, both in the relations among people and between each person and the community. It presumes the search for the truth and the solidarity that binds the members of the same society. It assumes that what is fair must always be sought, and

that the law is applied with care according to each particular case, because fairness is the perfection of justice.

Moreover, society must be governed in a *solidary* manner, and the goods it has available must satisfy everyone's needs.

#### IV. SOLIDARITY

V. We will now focus in particular on the role of *solidarity* in the pursuit of the common good. The Church's social doctrine has hesitated to employ the concept of solidarity, long considered branded by the socialist ideology. In actual fact, the central concept underlying social doctrine is that of *philia*, in the sense in which Aristotle intended society as a community of individuals aiming towards communion (*koinonia*). *Philia* is the feeling of belonging to a same group that leads us to love our neighbour. It is an inner movement that breeds the desire to contribute personally to the good of the other members of one's community. The concept of *philia* was included in the Church's social doctrine first under the classic name of friendship, by Leo XIII (Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* 20-21), then of 'social charity' by Pius XI (Encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, 1931, 95), charity being the love for one's neighbour, which proceeds from an inner movement capable of producing the bond required by society. John Paul II's encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, (CA 1991, 10) tells us that this same concept has been rendered, more than once, by that of 'civilisation of love', especially in Paul VI's texts (cf. Paul VI, World Peace Day, 1977). Today this concept has also been taken up again within that of solidarity. John Paul II adds: 'Solidarity helps us to see the "other" – whether a person, people or nation – ...as our "neighbour", a "helper" (cf. Gen 2:18-20), to be made a sharer, on a par with ourselves, in the banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God' (Encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 1987, 39).

The very fluctuation of these terms enables us to better define the contours of solidarity. It is not the Christian *agapè*, the theological virtue that is the unconditional love for others, including even the sacrifice of one's life following the model of Christ's love for us. But it is much more than the organised solidarity of our societies. It appeals to the free commitment of people who feel and know they are responsible for one another and interdependent.

Since it is rooted in the very nature of man, a social being by nature, the virtue of solidarity must be organised both at the level of society, and at the level of international relations. As a principle of political and social organ-

isation (cf. CA 10), solidarity is a condition for the achievement of the common good. Therefore it takes the form of intergenerational solidarity, of solidarity towards those people who have been marginalised by the economic system or by an impairment, of social welfare, of retirement benefits, towards the weak in general.

## V. SUBSIDIARITY

In highlighting the interaction of the four pillars of a social organisation that is at the service of the common good of its members, we still have not examined the principle according to which this organisation must be structured. This principle is *subsidiarity*, to which we must add the principle of *participation*. Participation is the expression of the equal dignity of each person and of his or her common vocation to deal with the issues concerning him or her. The principle of participation, like the principle of subsidiarity, is the translation, in organisational terms, of the four conditions for the implementation of the common good (freedom, truth, justice and solidarity). Participation and subsidiarity presume, as a prerequisite, an architecture of society similar to the one described. From the point of view of the Church's social doctrine, it is in view of a society understood in this way that the two joint principles of its organisation must be put in practice, i.e. participation and subsidiarity. One realises that these two principles of organisation are not operational unless the abovementioned four conditions are simultaneously met.

Subsidiarity is not located at the same level of social architecture as solidarity. The latter is one of the conditions *sine qua non* of the existence of a human society. Subsidiarity belongs to the 'bene esse' of a society, whereas solidarity belongs to its 'esse'. Without subsidiarity, society can work but it works badly, on the verge of collapse. An extremely centralised organisation of powers can meet temporary needs, without losing sight of the common good. But under normal conditions, all societies must let subsidiarity play its full role.

When Pius XI approached the topic of subsidiarity in his encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* 86-88, developing Leo XIII's insights in *Rerum Novarum*, 6 and 28, he described it as 'a principle of social philosophy'. Indeed, the idea of subsidiarity does not derive from anthropology but from the very nature of society. This idea can be found in Aristotle. According to him, some natural groupings form in the city: families, tribes, associations, neighbourhoods,

villages. All these natural groupings are self-sufficient for some tasks but not for others. In the fields where they are not self-sufficient, they rely upon a larger grouping. The authority of this larger grouping is subsidiary, as far as the insufficient means of the smaller group are concerned. The city has all the means to help smaller groupings achieve their goals (cf. *Politics* 1252 b 10-29). The city does not destroy smaller societies; it exists to help them survive, by supplying what they cannot provide for themselves. The authority practiced at each level is of a subsidiary nature. The city enables man to live up to his potential, to achieve his goals. This subsidiary role enables the transformation from potency to action, and the deploying of a being's potentiality. At the city level there appears the principle of totality, which only the city is capable of taking into account. The groupings that make up the city are like parts ordered to wholes. The whole is the city that must coordinate the performance of the parts to achieve a common purpose.

St Thomas Aquinas observed, in turn, that the societies to which the person belongs for his or her fulfilment are not ends in themselves, but a necessary aid contributing to the person's improvement. People and natural groups are varied and resistant to uniformity. The political society is made up of groups preserving their autonomy. The vision of the Medieval society is unanimist, objectivised. The foundations of social life are meant to be shared by all. 'Man is not ordained to the political community by what he is and has' (*S.Th.* I-II, q. 21, a. 4, ad 3). However, the finality of authority in the city is to 'attain, increase or preserve the perfection of the things governed' (*Contra Gentiles* III, 73). It must enable natural human groupings to reach their goals: 'correcting, if something is in disorder; subsidising, if something is missing; improving, if something better can be done' (*De Regno* I, 15).

Centuries of absolutism and the French Revolution reinforced the centralising tendency of the states. Hegel responded by placing the concept of 'civil society' in contrast with that of 'political society', which absorbs all the social space. This is why 'civil society' must preserve the maximum autonomy with regard to the state. The state must not centralise everything. It must protect, promote, guarantee and provide for the needs of the public sphere, but not the interests of the individuals. Social wellbeing results from the respect of the natural autonomies. Society must not be absorbed by the state. The rediscovery of the principle of subsidiarity has enabled the reaffirmation of civil society. The latter needs the autonomy which follows from it. Hegel criticises the French and Prussian Jacobin state. The notion of subsidiarity enables the coordination of the need for autonomy of the social groupings with the need to defend general interest.

In the drafting of its social doctrine, the Church has paid growing attention to the principle of subsidiarity. Pius XI reacted against the fascist state that suppressed intermediary bodies. He specified that: 'Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do. For every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the body social, and never destroy and absorb them. The supreme authority of the State ought, therefore, to let subordinate groups handle matters and concerns of lesser importance, which would otherwise dissipate its efforts greatly. Thereby the State will more freely, powerfully, and effectively do all those things that belong to it alone because it alone can do them: directing, watching, urging, restraining, as occasion requires and necessity demands' (QA 86).

The principle of subsidiarity presupposes a construction of the common good starting from the basis of society. The source of social life is the person. The person grows within a family, a socioprofessional group, a community, a trade union, a region, a state and beyond. The state must guarantee that each natural or contractual level (companies, public non state-owned bodies) can develop its potentialities at the service of the common good, and must not replace it but for the time necessary to restore their autonomy. Civil society, made up of real players, has its own consistency. The idea of subsidiarity can be deployed when authority emanates from the person and when it is organised from the bottom up.

Authority has as its mission to aid the members of the social body, not to destroy or absorb them. One cannot withdraw from individuals or lower groupings the roles they can play for themselves. Meanwhile, the superior authority must direct, coordinate, encourage and contain the initiatives of the intermediary bodies. Subsidiarity is synonymous with auxiliarity. Subsidiarity does not only regulate the relations between state and intermediary body, it also presides over the distribution of responsibilities between public and private sector within the economy, over the regulation of the efforts in favour of peace among nations and the UN, and over the arbitration between individual initiatives and public responsibility within the field of labour. This principle is also consistent with that of the dignity of the person, and with the participation and search for the common good.

The principle of subsidiarity demands the real practice of the democracy of proximity and respect for autonomies. It binds state intervention to

the criteria of strict necessity. The state is neither the interpreter of the absolute nor of reason. The subsidiary state is voluntarist. It tries to curb two wrong natural tendencies: the individuals' demand for maximum protection (welfare state) and the authority's tendency to invading all domains (centralising Jacobin state). Subsidiarity is a plea for the authentic practice of democracy. Subsidiarity presumes the existence of a common good.

The subsidiary state is different from the Welfare State. The latter tends to take charge of all the needs of society, by relieving intermediary instances of all responsibility. Under the pretext of equality, the welfare state distrusts private and associated initiatives. The subsidiary state encourages the assumption of responsibility at the levels where problems can be solved and reserves the right to intervene in a subsidiary way when the latter are incapable of assuming their responsibilities. The principle of subsidiarity is completely oriented towards the achievement of the common good. An intervention of the higher instance is always justified when the smaller groupings cannot reach alone the objectives they have set for themselves.

The principle of subsidiarity (recourse to a higher decisional level) must be distinguished and completed by the principles of speciality (the higher level only deals with the competences attributed to it) and proportionality (the means employed by the higher level must not go beyond the goal settled upon). Therefore one must distinguish between exclusive competences and shared competences. Subsidiarity is not a principle of allocation of competences, but a principle of regulating the exercise of competences. Subsidiarity comes into play when competence is not exclusive.

## VI. RELATIONS BETWEEN SOLIDARITY AND SUBSIDIARITY

I have tried to show that common good, solidarity and subsidiarity are not at the same level in the architecture of the social doctrine. *Common good* is inseparable from the very existence of society. It constitutes its aim. The common good is the goal of social production. It enables men in society to aim for happiness.

*Solidarity* derives from the social nature of the person who, in order to exist, needs the contribution of the others, as well as knowledge, material and cultural goods accumulated by previous generations and the services of his or her contemporaries. No one can live without any support, in a hostile nature. Each member of society is aware of this and makes an effort to cultivate solidarity as a personal virtue. Society, in turn, organises solidarity.

*Subsidiarity* concerns the organisation of society, and more precisely the relationship between its different natural components. Natural component means family, community, region, company or administration in which one works, the world of associations, in short, all the forms of organisation called intermediary bodies that are between family and state. Even the state is no longer an environment that ensures all aspects of the common good, only the forms of unions of states such as the European Union or the United States, or even the whole of the international community.

Whereas common good and solidarity derive from the very nature of the person and his or her life in society, subsidiarity arises from the need for good governance and for giving each natural grouping the vital space that it requires. Centralised societies have not known the principle of subsidiarity and have systematically smothered local life and civil society. The structures of governance derive from the organisation into a hierarchy of the responsibilities and powers from the bottom up and not the opposite. Subsidiarity is not obtained by decentralisation, which is a concession of the higher organisational level, but by the lower level's request for assistance to the higher levels of the social organisation.

Between solidarity and subsidiarity there is no automatic reciprocity. Whereas solidarity makes sure that all the members of society have access to the necessary goods for a worthy and human life, subsidiarity protects the good exercise of the government of a given community, by honouring intermediary bodies and the initiative of civil society. Solidarity influences subsidiarity in this sense, always setting the goal it should achieve. This implies that the supreme instance, the one who is in the last resort responsible for the common good, is not limited in its field of competence. It can be led to intervene in all domains and at all levels where its subsidiary intervention is necessary and desired.

According to the Church's social doctrine, solidarity does not function subsidiarily. One cannot say that the state grants financial aid to a person subsidiarily, because he or she is not self-sufficient. Subsidiarity regulates the powers that intervene in society. Subsidiarity, for instance, will determine if social aid is attributed by the community, the region or the state or by any competent body. Solidarity is not conditioned by the subsidiary organisation of powers. It remains a priority that transcends the organisation, good or less good, of the powers.

## CONCLUSION: PRINCIPLES AND THEIR INTERPRETATION

It is well known that the concepts used in the Church's social doctrine are submitted to semantic mutations in the different cultures, especially in the context of the current exacerbated individualism.

Therefore, the common good is hardly mentioned in the European legislations: public good or general interest are used instead. Each of these concepts has a more or less precise accepted meaning according to the philosophical and legal context in which it is employed.

In a similar fashion, the idea of person hardly appears, in all of its anthropological density, in the habitual vocabulary of jurists. In the Anglo-Saxon context, one generally avoids the word and replaces it with 'individual', which has a limited reach with regard to the philosophical implications of the notion of 'person'.

In the welfare state, solidarity figures in all the systems of social welfare. However, the solidarity contained in social doctrine is related to the Aristotelic *philia* and to Christian 'social charity'. It is a virtue and not only an organisation of the assistance to the weakest.

Subsidiarity owes a lot to the Church's social doctrine that has derived it from Aristotle's thought. Notably, it has inspired German constitutional thought and has made its appearance in the Maastricht Treaty. Subsidiarity imposes itself on the forms of federal government and the unions of states. Nevertheless, the concept does not always conform to the Church's doctrine. In the European texts it is sometimes a question of devolution of power starting from the summit towards the lower echelons. On the contrary, subsidiarity is a movement that begins from the bottom up.

In short, to understand the scope of the concepts of social doctrine, one must go back to the Aristotelic-Thomistic philosophical sources, whereas the vision of man and of society that it promotes (the human person image of God, the human being social by nature, the common good as the goal of all social organisation, the universal destination of goods, the natural order of human relations), comes to it from biblical revelation.