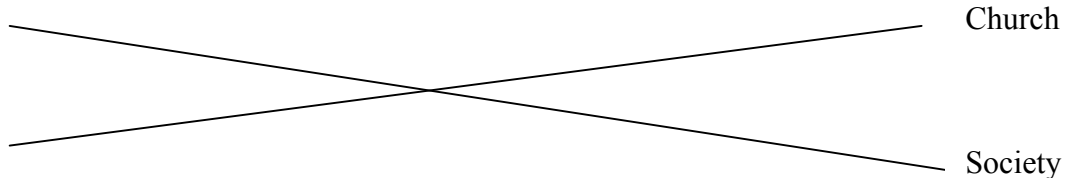


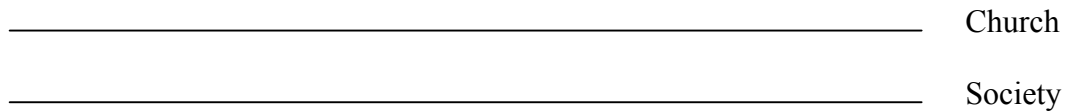
Catholic Social Teaching and the Cross

By Fr. Sebastian MacDonald

There are two vectors that comprise Catholic social teaching, and they cross one another in this fashion.



Some would prefer that they not intersect, but, rather, that they run in parallel courses, visible to one another, but only for consultation purposes, something like this:



so that each can run its own path without interference from the other.

They cross precisely at the point where the church has something to say about what is going on in the world around it. In this scenario, the world takes the initiative, while the church responds. Not all the initiatives underway in the world call for response from the church—only those that affect her own concern about advancing the foundations for God’s kingdom in this world.

Church and secular society will cross each other periodically, sometimes happily, at other times, less so. Sometimes the world would prefer the church to stay within the sanctuary, confining her interests to vestments, candles and incense. At other times the church opposes intrusions of secular society into its hallowed precincts, with tactics discouraging church influence on certain issues.

What might these secular initiatives be that could rouse the church’s interest? In recent times, here in the US, they have consisted of life issues (abortion, capital punishment, warfare, euthanasia), family concerns (divorce, homosexual unions, heterosexual cohabitation), environmental developments, economic affairs (labor-management, minimum wage, right to private property), health matters (access to basic medical care, stem cell research, adequate insurance coverage), international policy (free trade, rights of peoples in dire need to migrate, the usefulness of the UN).

The church notes the intersection of these issues with values fundamental to its mission. So, it delves into the treasure trove of its long tradition (Mt 13.52), and pulls out some

valuable resources that serve its interests in promoting God's kingdom in this life, while addressing initiatives that secular society is pursuing.

The spokespersons for the church are both the various national hierarchies of the bishops, and also the central authority center in the Vatican. The U.S. Bishops, disturbed by the nuclear militarization underway in U.S. society, presented its position on this program in their pastoral letter on peace, The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and our Response, (1983). A bit later, observing the enormous influence of U.S. economic activity both on life within this country, and also abroad, the bishops spelled out an economic vision that not only tried to meet secular projections, but also honored the dignity and value of the peoples whose lives unfolded in this climate (Economic Justice for All: Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy, 1986).

On other occasions, especially since the end of the 19th century, the Popes have shown a marked concern about what is going on in the world around them, noting the propensity for some significant disadvantages accruing to the kingdom of God entrusted to their care. No longer burdened with the material assets, such as the Papal States, that suggested a kingdom too akin to this world's structures, they enjoy a certain disinterestedness in voicing their guidance in secular affairs, more so than in times past.

So Leo XIII, with an eye to the unfolding of Communism across Europe, wrote his RERUM NOVARUM (1891), laying out a Catholic position on property, labor, distribution of wealth, etc. A bit later, in the aftermath of WW I, Benedict XV laid out a blueprint for peace among nations (1920), followed up later by John XXIII's PACEM IN TERRIS, (1963). With the rise of fascist states in the Europe of the '30s, Pius XI defended the individual person against the power of the totalitarian state with his principle of subsidiarity, and later specifically addressed the rise of Nazism (Mit brennender Sorge, 1937). As certain forms of free market capitalism began to cause concern, John XXIII's MATER ET MAGISTRA (1961), Paul VI's ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF PEOPLES (1967), together with John Paul II's ON HUMAN WORK (1981) and ON SOCIAL CONCERNS (1987) appeared, one by one— contributed from the treasure house of the church's rich tradition. And Vatican II produced an important statement on church-state relations in its document on RELIGIOUS LIBERTY (1965), that lent church support, somewhat slow in coming, to democratic institutions so dear to the U.S., and so conducive to the spiritual as well as the temporal welfare of people.

This tradition of church involvement with social concerns goes back to the bible and to the positions it voices about issues not too different from those of our day. From the adroitness of Jesus' response to possible conflicts with civil authorities (Lk 20.25), to His decision to establish His own institution by choosing twelve men to act on its behalf (Mt 10), to the perplexity of Pilate trying to figure out what kind of king Jesus was (Jn 18.33-38), to the fairly early (toward the end of the first century) migration of the burgeoning church's center from Jerusalem to Rome (the capital of the Roman empire), to the emergence of faith-based groups in the church (the monastic establishment in the sixth century) that began to address social issues otherwise left unattended (hospitality,

education, health care), to the criticism Spanish theologians (the 16th century Bishop Bartholome de Las Casas) began to level against conquistadors exploiting native populations in The New World (and the remarkable appearances, in 1531, of Our Lady of Guadalupe to Juan Diego, galvanizing a new sense of identity among a demoralized and conquered people)—we are beneficiaries of a long history that embodies in flesh and blood terms what corresponds to the texts of national and Vatican magisterial authorities express above.

What is noteworthy about this development of the church's social doctrine is that it gradually began to address not only its Catholic base, nor even a Christian fellowship, but all men and women of good will (cf. the opening words of John XXIII's *PACEM IN TERRIS*), comparable to the Good News announced by the angels on Christmas day, over the fields of Bethlehem (Lk 2.14 & note in Catholic Study Bible ed). This occurred because it gradually became evident that a primary source of church teaching on social issues like war, poverty, family, abortion, etc., was not only scriptural, but also a vision of the common good. The common good is the crystallization of the best wisdom humankind has been able to formulate, over the ages, regarding those "goods" common to everyone: not just to the powerful and influential, but to the least and lowliest among us (the common good is ... "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily." *THE CHURCH IN THE MODERN WORLD*, n. 26). It has been the confluence of biblical and cultural developments that combine to form a body of doctrine on social justice, under church auspices, that likely outweighs, especially during the past century and a half, any comparable corpus of ecclesiastical teaching, whether that be on the sacraments, the church, the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Redemption, heaven, hell, death, etc.

Catholic social teaching would seem to be of special interest to those for whom the Passion of Christ is important. Christ's sufferings on the Cross furnish front and center memories for His followers, who understand them not only in the terms of His own death on the cross, but also of all those down the ages who have experienced their share of suffering, and whom we can properly identify as The Crucified of the World Today.

These constitute the heart of the social doctrine of the church. Can we think of any social concern that the church has addressed, over the centuries that did not involve some element of suffering: persecution, torture, imprisonment, execution, hunger, ill health, broken families, abandoned children, homelessness, unemployment? These constitute secular situations that intersect the interests of the church. What emerges may appear as the letter x to some, but, to the Christian, it assumes the form of a cross +, different from the upright cross of Christ, but similar to the cross on which St. Peter died. St. Peter, the first pope, embodies the human face of the church as it began its course down the annals of history. He initiates the rich symbolism of the cross that marks Catholic social doctrine which has developed under the patronage of the church, on behalf of the Crucified of the World Today.

