I  Principles and Practical Wisdom in Catholic Social Teaching

In *Caritas in Veritate*, Benedict XVI lays out the tension between the Church’s modesty about its technical expertise and its mission of social reform: “The Church does not have technical solutions to offer and does not claim ‘to interfere in any way in the politics of States.’ She does, however, have a mission of truth to accomplish, in every time and circumstance, for a society that is attuned to man, to his dignity, to his vocation.”¹

The popes do not shy away from the Church’s involvement in social, economic, and political life. After all, the Church “has a mission to accomplish.” This mission is part of the Gospel. The Gospel is first and foremost the work of “evangelization through Word and Sacrament,”² but Christian faith has implications for how Christians live as well as for what they believe, and Christians live in the political, economic, and social order.³

Paul VI, in *Octogesima Adveniens*, places responsibility for solutions to local and national social problems on local “Christian communities.” To aid them in their search for solutions, the Church offers the invaluable resource of Catholic Social Teaching (CST).⁴ They are

² Ibid., para. 19.
³ Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes* (7 December 1965), para. 39, connects the Church’s work in the world to the Kingdom: “All the good fruits of our nature and enterprise” will be discovered in the Kingdom, “but freed of stain, burnished and transfigured” in Christ. www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.
⁴ Throughout this book, I use the abbreviation CST to refer to Catholic Social Teaching, the body of Council documents, encyclicals, and other official papal writings on
“to analyze with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country, to shed on it the light of the Gospel’s unalterable words and to draw principles of reflection, norms [criteria] of judgment and directives for action from the social teaching of the Church.”

John Paul II notes that the principles, criteria, and directives are themselves the result of “careful reflection on the complex realities of human existence, in society and in the international order, in the light of faith and of the Church’s tradition.”

The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church expresses confidence that CST is “the starting point for the promotion of an integral and solidary humanism.”

The Compendium helpfully lists its principles for reflection in Chapter 4, “Principles of the Church’s Social Doctrine.” Four principles are foundational: the dignity of the human person, the common good, subsidiarity, and solidarity. The Compendium insists that these four principles together provide a framework for evaluating the social order at every level: “These are principles of a general and fundamental character, since they concern the reality of society in its entirety: from close and immediate relationships to those mediated by politics, economics, and law; from relationships among communities and groups

the social order. In line with current theological usage, I will use the broader term Catholic social thought to refer to the reflections of theologians and others on what a just social order looks like in light of CST and the term Catholic social tradition for the practical action inspired by CST – the practice of charity in the world. For more on these distinctions, see Johan Verstraeten, “Re-Thinking Catholic Social Thought as Tradition,” in Catholic Social Thought: Twilight or Renaissance? eds. J. S. Boswell and F. P. McHugh (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2000), 59–77.

5 Paul VI, Apostolic Letter Octogesima Adveniens [14 May 1971], para. 4. Italics are mine.


7 Compendium, para. 7.

8 The Compendium (para. 160) gathers all four principles together, although none of the papal or Council documents of CST list these four principles as the four principles of CST. They are, however, tied closely together in the Catechism, paras. 1906–1908, 1878–1885, and in Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation Libertatis Conscientia [22 March 1986], para. 73, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19860322_freedom-liberation_en.html.
to relations between peoples and nations." In addition to these four, CST offers other “principles of reflection”: the option for the poor, the personalist principle, the universal destination of goods, the principle of participation, the centrality of the family, the right to work and just wages, the right to migrate, the right to life, the universal common good, principles of just war, and stewardship of the environment.

The Church does not offer CST as a detailed institutional blueprint for society. Catholic teaching is not technical analysis, and the experience of two thousand years of governance and observation has taught her that different systems of social organization can sustain [or abuse] human dignity. John Paul II insists in Sollicitudo Rei Socialis that the Church does not “propose economic and political systems or programs, nor does she show preference for one or the other, provided that human dignity is properly respected and promoted, and provided she herself is allowed the room she needs to exercise her ministry in the world.”

John Paul II notes further that because the Church is “an expert in humanity,” she must by necessity “extend her religious mission to the various fields in which men and women expend their efforts in search of the always relative happiness which is possible in this world.” Hence, CST has practical implications for social organization; it is not simply theoretical and descriptive: “Its aim is thus to guide Christian behavior.” CST is not just theology; it is a moral theology: a motive and guide for action toward the goal of social reform in light of the Gospel.

The Compendium expresses confidence that the principles of CST are a guide to effective action: “Making this doctrine known constitutes, therefore, a genuine pastoral priority, so that men and women will be enlightened by it and will be thus enabled to interpret...
today’s reality and seek appropriate paths of action.” If CST has no specific program of reform, though, then how might we translate its “careful reflection in light of the Gospel” into effective action? To translate a commitment to CST’s principles into practical action requires knowledge of social and historical context as well as experience in practical decision-making.

How can Catholics cover the ground between the “starting point” of the principles of CST and effective, concrete action aimed at social reform? A more complete sketch of the practical landscape of CST requires answers to two questions:

1. Who in the Church is best positioned to carry out the required tasks of reform – to reflect, judge, and act?
2. What is needed to translate principles into practice?

The Church offers a clear answer to the first question. The principal agents of the Church’s mission in the social order are the laity, working either on their own or in cooperation with non-Catholics. The Vatican II Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* uses the scriptural image of leaven to describe their role:

The laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven. They are called there by God that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven.

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15 Compendium, para. 7.
The vocation of the laity places them in the middle of secular life in a way that bishops and clergy are not. As a result, they are well placed to put CST into practice at every level of society: as leaders in business, government, and non-profits; as workers and managers; as participants in civil society; as family members and friends. The popes unanimously affirm this central role. Paul VI asserted that, as societies become more secular and pluralistic, more would be required of the laity, not less, if the Church were to succeed in its mission. John Paul II connected the “vocation of the lay faithful to holiness” closely to “their involvement in temporal affairs and in their participation in earthly activities.” Pope Francis cautions that the recent emphasis on lay ministry within the Church can distract from the most important lay ministry outside of the Church, to bring about “a greater penetration of Christian values in the social, political, and economic sectors.”

The Church offers an answer to the second question (what is needed?) as well. To carry out their mission of sanctifying the social order, the laity require appropriate technical skills and a deep spiritual

18 Vatican Council II, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity Apostolicam Actuositatem (18 November 1965), para. 1: “Areas for the lay apostolate have been immensely widened, particularly in fields that have been for the most part open to the laity alone.” www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decrees_19651118_apostolicam-actuositatem_en.html.


life rooted in the sacraments, prayer, and the Church community. They also require the virtue of practical wisdom [referred to as prudence in the documents themselves]. Vatican II’s Decree on the Laity (Apostolicam Actuositatem) concludes its discussion of lay formation by acknowledging a role for practical wisdom: “Since formation for the apostolate cannot consist in merely theoretical instruction, from the beginning of their formation the laity should gradually and prudently learn how to view, judge, and do all things in the light of faith as well as to develop and improve themselves along with others through doing.”

The Compendium’s section on the role of the laity in CST invokes this virtue explicitly: “The lay faithful should act according to the dictates of prudence [practical wisdom], the virtue that makes it possible to discern the true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means for achieving it. Thanks to this virtue, moral principles are applied correctly to particular cases.”

The Compendium’s account of practical wisdom, which takes up two paragraphs and a lengthy footnote, assigns to it a weighty role in bringing CST’s principles to practical fruition. Practical wisdom “makes it possible to make decisions that are consistent, and make them with realism and a sense of responsibility for the consequences of one’s action.” We cannot take the presence of this virtue in the laity for granted, however. Practical wisdom is a difficult achievement: “It is a virtue that requires the mature exercise of thought and responsibility in an objective understanding of a specific situation and in making decisions according to a correct will.”

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22 The meaning of the term prudence (phronesis in Greek and prudentia in Latin) has changed since the Enlightenment. In the pre-modern era, the term prudence denoted the charioteer of the virtues. The decline of virtue ethics and the rise of rationalistic method in ethics led to a distorted meaning of prudence, which now connotes a barely reputable, compromising, calculating cleverness. Modern virtue ethics has abandoned the term prudence in favor of practical wisdom.

23 Vatican Council II, Apostolicam Actuositatem, para. 29. Italics are mine. See also Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Libertatis Conscientia, para. 80.

24 Compendium, para. 547.

25 Ibid., para. 548.

26 Ibid.
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In spite of the importance apparently granted to practical wisdom, CST makes only intermittent (and often oblique) references to this virtue. The documents of CST themselves occasionally invoke practical wisdom, but seldom treat it in any detail. It is telling that we must turn to the Compendium, an important but less authoritative summary of CST, to find a fuller treatment. Although the Compendium assigns an apparently important role to practical wisdom in the two paragraphs cited above, there are only eight other mentions of practical wisdom in its other 581 paragraphs. In these eight instances, the Compendium uses the term practical wisdom appropriately and consistently, but there are many more sections of the Compendium where one expects a reference to practical wisdom but finds none. The virtue of practical wisdom does not appear in lengthy sections on the human person and human rights, the common good, subsidiarity, the responsibilities of parents, and the subjective dimensions of work. The most striking absence is in the chapter on “Political Community.” This section reminds those who exercise political responsibility of “the virtues that make it possible to put power into practice as service (patience, moderation, charity, efforts to share).” Perhaps the passage’s focus on service explains the exclusion of practical wisdom from this list. Nonetheless, political practical wisdom is considered the highest expression of practical wisdom. Its absence from a discussion of practical politics is glaring.

27 Two exceptions to this sweeping claim come immediately to mind. Leo XIII, in the Encyclical Letter Sapientiae Christianae [10 January 1890], fn. 35, invokes Aquinas’s treatment of practical wisdom in ST II-II, 47.12. www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_10011890_sapientiae-christianae.html. I shall return to this passage in Chapter 3. John XXIII, Mater et Magistra, paras. 228–233, discusses practical education in social apostolate, but does not invoke the virtue of practical wisdom explicitly. I will return to his discussion of practical lay formation in Chapter 5.

28 Compendium, para. 410.

29 NE, 6.8; ST II-II 50.1.
The *Compendium* does not ignore other virtues. The infused theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity play prominent (and appropriately crucial) roles in orienting Christians toward the good in this life and the next, inspiring them to pursue a “society attuned to man” in light of his dignity and supernatural calling. Social charity (solidarity) and justice also occupy critically important positions. One is left with the impression that in the *Compendium* practical wisdom is something of a formulaic afterthought – a virtue called up for service at the point of action, but not integrated into the doctrine itself. The *Compendium* develops and exposit the principles of CST with little reference to practical wisdom, which comes into play only after the formulation of principles.

When we turn our attention from the documents of CST toward the broader theological reflections of Catholic social thought, we find little mention of practical wisdom. References to practical wisdom are strikingly absent from academic and popular reflections on CST. The academic literature is a careful critique of and development of the principles proposed in the papal encyclicals and their implications for the political and social order, but often neglects the virtues that realize the principles in practice. *Modern Catholic Social Teaching*, edited by Kenneth Himes, offers incisive contributions on each social encyclical and a series of authoritative essays on the state of the tradition and its future.30 Charles Curran's *Catholic Social Teaching, 1891–present*, is a comprehensive critique of the tradition from three perspectives (historical, theological, and ethical).31 Rodger Charles, in *Christian Social Witness and Teaching*, offers a comprehensive historical overview, documenting and summarizing Christian social doctrine from its roots in the Old Testament until modernity.32 Albino Barrera's *Modern Catholic Social Documents and Political*
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Economy draws on a careful reading of Thomistic sources and a deep understanding of economics to elucidate the principles.\(^\text{33}\) Each of these volumes contributes significantly to our understanding of the tradition, but the expert analysis in this literature is an insufficient guide to human action. Neither practical wisdom nor the virtues appear very often in these texts; in most, they are entirely absent from the indexes. Each treats practical wisdom and the virtues as something relevant only after one has worked out the principles and thus irrelevant to the formulation of principle itself.

One might argue that the absence of practical wisdom from the academic literature is fitting: Practical projects require coherent principles, and the academic literature focuses on this important work. When we turn our attention to the more popular and practical literature on Catholic social thought, however, we find a similar absence. The True Wealth of Nations, edited by Daniel Finn, is a series of reflections on how one might implement the principles of CST in economic institutions. It outlines the characteristics of a good and just social order, but pays somewhat less attention to the virtues that bring such a system about.\(^\text{34}\) Finn’s wide-ranging textbook, Christian Economic Ethics, challenges the social worldviews that make it difficult to discern the nature of social problems and the possibilities for social action, but he assigns practical wisdom little to do in the hoped-for Christian social action.\(^\text{35}\) Similarly, Marvin Mich’s The Challenge and Spirituality of Catholic Social Teaching offers advice and encouragement for spiritual formation for social action, along with practical examples, but ignores practical wisdom.\(^\text{36}\) The welcome exception, Brian Benestad’s Church, State, and Society, is more


integrative and includes a chapter that emphasizes the necessity of grace and the virtues to the pursuit of the common good.\textsuperscript{37}

Discussions of virtue are not entirely absent from the literature, but the virtues discussed highlight the principles without raising the problem of concrete action. Thomas Massaro’s textbook, \textit{Living Justice}, takes social justice as its organizing principle. It encourages the reader to commit herself to just outcomes, but does not explore the role of practical wisdom in moving the reader from a commitment to justice toward concrete action in pursuit of justice.\textsuperscript{38} The Heart of Catholic Social Teaching, edited by David McCarthy, devotes several chapters to the virtue of charity in CST, drawing on Augustine and Benedict XVI. The function of infused charity and the integral love of neighbor are, however, primarily motivational; charity secures a commitment to pursue social justice and to reform social institutions. Practical wisdom (even as a Christian virtue shaped by charity) plays little role in moving from the motivation to seek justice to the instantiation of justice in society.\textsuperscript{39}

\textbf{The Modern Neglect of Practical Wisdom}

Those who exclude practical wisdom from discussions of the principles of CST and the motivations to act do not necessarily imply that practical wisdom is unimportant or that it is easy to grasp the details of application once one commits to the principles. An alternative conviction is more probable: that the exercise of practical wisdom is important but \textit{separable} from the development of principle and the motivation to act. If principles, motivation, and the details of action are separable, then we may discuss each of the three in isolation, without effect on the others. If this is the case, practical wisdom is simply beyond the purview of those who develop principles; they can

\textsuperscript{38} Thomas Massaro, SJ, \textit{Living Justice}, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012).