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Aquinas as a Primary Source of Catholic Social Teaching

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Aquinas did not speak of “social” teaching. What since *Rerum novarum* has been described as “Catholic Social Teaching” is a set of principles that Aquinas would have regarded as falling within the Church’s doctrine on faith and *morality* (*de fide et moribus*), insofar as morality – the living out of that faith which consists in true beliefs about the Creator – embodies the principles, precepts and virtue(s) of *justice*. For among the cardinal virtues, justice is the one bearing on those of our choices that relate to or impact on other persons, persons with whom in one way or another we are associated. And Aquinas’s treatment of justice, mainly but not only in his *Summa Theologiae*, is very extensive and very detailed.

With those verbal distinctions and conceptual connections in place, this chapter offers (in Section I) an overview of his significance for Catholic Social Teaching, before examining (in Section II) the appeals to his writings made in *Rerum novarum* and some of its successors, and concludes (in Section III) with his contribution to some leading features of more recent Catholic Social Teaching, including “subsidiarity” and “solidarity.”

I

Overview

As an integral part of his wider theological investigations and expositions, and of his ancillary philosophical investigations and commentaries, Aquinas mastered, analyzed, synthesized, and rearticulated the body of Catholic Social Teaching that he found in the prophets of Israel, the Gospels and apostolic Epistles, and the Fathers of the Church. He did so by, or while, taking advantage of the best available philosophy – that is, of the best available thought about these matters developed by thinkers like Plato and Aristotle.

These were open-minded, well-informed, curious, and critical men. But they lacked the inestimable benefit of the divine revelation – the information transmitted first to the people of Israel by the Prophets and then by the other theological sources just listed. The propositional contents of that revelation, as they were appropriated by those prophets and that people, were superior in depth and truth – on the strategic questions of Creation, Providence, human freedom, justice and other key elements of moral truth, and responsibility – to anything attained by the philosophers. And so the recipients and beneficiaries of that revelation, although by comparison to the great classical philosophers unsophisticated in many respects, were able to develop sounder – *truer* – insights into and norms of life in a political community than the philosophers ever did.

Aquinas attended to the observable and inferable facts about human persons (and groups), holding always in view both their particularity as persons (and groups) and their species-specific (generic) character as *kinds* of persons (and of groups) – and as a whole. He attended also to *both* poles of the unresolvable tension between (a) the *wholes* (the groups) that reasonably emerge in service of their *parts* (smaller groups, and families and individuals), and (b) the same *parts* variously subordinated to such wholes. By these refusals to oversimplify and overgeneralize, Aquinas – at least in principle – informed and stabilized *humanism*, if one may use that term to sum up a balanced respect for the freedom, accomplishments, and virtuous fidelities of particular persons (in principle, of each and every human person). He also inoculated that humanism against the intermittent frenzies and constant dreaming of ideologies, not least those that, in the twentieth century, would enjoy the greatest world-historical success: the atheistic socialisms, such as National Socialism and internationalist Marxism. He had indeed begun to see, and show, that the question centrally addressed by any worthwhile “social doctrine” is how a political community, while set up to be sustainable in this world, must nonetheless be dedicated to securing for particular persons (and their subpolitical communities) the opportunity to direct their own lives according to moral truth.

Human fulfillment in the Kingdom of God is, as divine revelation confirmed, the true point of rational seeking and acting.¹ But it cannot and will not be accomplished, so far as concerns the human species as a whole, before the world-ending Second Coming of the Lord in final judgment. So far as the Kingdom concerns each of us, one can reasonably presume that it will not be

¹ It is envisaged as a demand of reason in Plato’s philosophical myth of judgment and immortality in Plato, *Republic* 614a–621d; see also *Gorgias* 523a–525b.

accomplished before one's own death. By embedding these truths in both the deep structure and the propositional texture of his works, Aquinas inoculated sound Christian thinking against political utopianism, including Liberation Theology and Teilhardist progressivism.²

Aquinas's work is characterized by its concern to *transcend, so far as possible, the social and political conditions and questions of his own lifetime*, and to participate in a vast transtemporal conversation ranging back about two millennia. That conversation extends from the pre-Socratic empiricist, materialist, and morally skeptical proto-Machiavellian philosophers to the Greek cultural historians and Roman lawyers, on through the ferment of learned and inspired Christian appropriation and purification, to the dialectical grind of the scholastic and university project of reconciling all these sources of insight, knowledge, and wisdom. The centuries of Israel's fortunes – advances and regressions, fidelities and backsliding – as recorded in the Old Testament presented Aquinas with a special source of empirical material about the vicissitudes of social life. And given his Christian freedom to respectfully reject most of their content as framed, he could find in Mosaic Law and institutions a laboratory for advanced social thinking – a laboratory in which he often worked.

Any outline of Aquinas's social thought³ must start with his grasp of *human dignity* and *equality* and their objective basis in the reality of each individual's *rational nature*. Having each of us this same nature, which at least by its radical capacities if not also by the flourishing of those capacities in actions and dispositions, we are each an image of the divine nature – above all of its capacity of freely choosing between intelligent alternatives. For that remarkable (and essentially spiritual) capacity puts all human beings, in principle, on a par with each, and each person is superior in essential, radical capacity to every other animal and entity in this world. This reality and responsibility of *free choice* gives salience and solidity to the individual person, by nature not a slave either to subrational instinct or to the instrumentalizing command of another person.

With that base secured, Aquinas can affirm the natural realities of *family and household*, in which instinct and biological dependencies are taken up into rational (and thus truly *human*) commitments, priorities, and loyalties. Along with that, he affirms the complete and fulfilling *equality of man and*

² On these deviations and temptations, see "A Radical Critique of Catholic Social Teaching," Chapter 23 in this volume.

³ For explanation and documentation of the positions summarized in the next four paragraphs, see John Finnis, *Aquinas: Moral, Political, and Legal Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

woman as sexual partners in the lifelong mutual commitment of husband and wife, a commitment perfected by children and their nurture and education into responsibility and independence. This extending unit has a natural and chronological priority to the wider communities of neighborhood, of productive avocation in collaborative division of labor, of municipality, and of polity.

Yet the polity has a kind of priority in range and gravity of responsibilities for defense, preservation of just markets, and above all the administration of corrective, restorative, and retributive justice according to law – law critically administered by impartial judges. There emerges thus the distinction, central to Aquinas’s political (and much of his social) thought, between *the public* and *the private*, as aspects and spheres of life distinguishable from each other within any one polity, sufficiently to be manageably distinct zones of responsibility and limits of jurisdiction.

For the sake of the common good of individuals, families, and the wider communal wholes, public power legitimately and beneficially appropriates to private owners many of the resources of the world – archetypically land (with what is in it and the empty space above it) – subject only to a condition that wealth beyond the owner’s genuine vocational needs is available to persons in genuine need. Public power, for the same generic reasons, justly appropriates portions of the world’s surface (together with what is above and below it) as the territory of a nation. All this is then recast by Aquinas into the perspective of a charity that outruns in generosity the demands of justice, while not undermining the principles of justice in contract, restitution, property, and territory – principles that in his view resist being replaced by charity to the extent attempted (as we shall see) by the Catholic Social Teaching launched by Leo XIII.

II

Aquinas in Rerum novarum and Beyond

Rerum novarum (1891) is widely taken as initiating Catholic Social Teaching (or Catholic Social Doctrine). But it was also the beginning of a new *phase* in the Church’s perennial activity (duty) of evangelizing the world. And among its visible sources was the encyclical in which, nearly twelve years earlier, Leo XIII had urged the whole Church to study the philosophy and theology of Aquinas. In *Aeterni patris* (1878), issued eighteen months after his becoming pope, Leo commends Aquinas for “clearly and fittingly distinguishing reason from faith, while happily associating the one with the other.” For by his clarity in distinguishing yet associating the two, Aquinas could “preserve the rights

and have regard for the dignity of each; so much so, indeed, that reason, borne on the wings of Thomas to its human height, can scarcely rise higher, while faith could scarcely expect more or stronger aids from reason than those which she has already obtained through Thomas.”⁴

In reading these passages, one must bear in mind that the English word “faith” (bare of either article, “a” or “the”) is inadequate to translate the Latin of the encyclical (or the Italian in which it was probably first conceived). At each occurrence, the meaning includes both “faith” as the believer’s act and disposition of believing and “the faith,” the propositional object and content of such belief. That “propositional object” is the set of true propositions that are credible (worthy of belief), and indeed certain because they are conveyed by and in the acts, events, and communications that constitute the historical divine revelation – above all the words and actions of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ and Word Incarnate, who explicitly and implicitly confirmed and ratified the teachings of the Prophets. *Aeterni patris* does not explain this dual meaning of “faith”; it takes it for granted (as does all theology accepted and presented by bishops generally, until recent decades).

The specific relevance of *Aeterni patris* to Catholic Social Teaching emerges in no. 29:

For the teachings of Thomas –

- on the true meaning of liberty, which at this time is running into license;
- on the divine origin of all authority;
- on laws and their force;
- on the paternal and just rule of princes;
- on obedience to higher authorities;
- on mutual charity one toward another; and
- on related subjects –

are teachings that have very great and irresistible force to overcome *those principles of the new politico-legal order [iuris novi] which are well known to be dangerous to the peaceful order of things [pacato rerum ordini]* and to public safety.⁵

That sentence in *Aeterni patris* sets out the framework for the first four paragraphs of *Rerum novarum*. They begin and end with references to the conflict and disturbance already created, and now threatened, by the “spirit of

⁴ Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Aeterni patris* (On the Restoration of Christian Philosophy) (1879), no. 18.

⁵ Emphasis added. Here and elsewhere I make use of but amend and correct the translation to be found on the Vatican website.

[lust for: *cupidine*] revolutionary change [of lusting for a new order of things: *rerum novarum*]” – a spirit or restless desire that has “long been disturbing the nations of the world” [political communities: *civitates*; peoples: [Italian] *popoli*]. Features of the “new order,” besides its context of industrialization and new technologies, include setting aside of the protective workingmen’s guilds, the expulsion of the old religion (Catholicism) from “public institutions and laws,” and the growth and rapacity of usury – all leading to vast disparities of wealth, concentration of enterprises into the hands of relatively few, and the consequent reducing of “the teeming masses of the laboring poor” to a condition akin to slavery. So, although he had already devoted several encyclicals to the questions of political authority, human freedom, the Christian constitution of states, and related matters, Leo in 1890–1891 judged that he now needed to take up the difficult questions that were emerging from a widespread and growing desire – indeed, an urgent longing, with roots in genuinely pressing problems of poverty and injustice, and accompanying temptations to the false solutions of Socialism – for revolutionary *social* change.⁶ As he says near the beginning of *Rerum novarum*, this change was envisioned, both by those who desired it and those who feared it, as more than a political makeover; it would uproot economic arrangements as well, all the way to the abolition of private property in favor of state or municipal ownership of everything. Against such ruinous “solutions,” there was, as he put it, need to highlight [make prominent: *emineant*] those *principles* by which, in line with truth and fairness [*aequitas*], the problem can be resolved.

As the sentence in *Aeterni patris*, no. 29 implied, these needed and true principles are articulated in the writings of Aquinas. The list in that paragraph contained only one item bearing on economics as distinct from politics: the reference to mutual charity. And, as we shall see, *Rerum novarum* describes at least one of its key theses as a teaching about charity rather than justice.

Rerum novarum starts its argumentation with a refutation (RN, nos. 5–15) of the radical socialist thesis that property is theft, followed by a sketch of the rational and superior (and Christian) alternative (RN, nos. 16–22). Strikingly, Aquinas’s own argument for the *justice* of appropriating the world’s resources to private owners is tucked away in a single sentence in no. 15, at the far end of an extended and energetic series of cumulative arguments for the justice of the institution of private property. But even there, Aquinas’s argument or set of

⁶ Urged on eloquently by Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore and Cardinal Manning of Westminster (London): see Gabriele de Rosa, “L’Enciclica nella Corrispondenza del Vescovi con il Papa,” in *L’Enciclica Rerum Novarum e il Suo Tempore*, eds. Giovanni Antonazzi and Gabriele de Rosa (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1991), 5–42, esp. 9–21 and 41–42.

arguments for that position is not attributed to him and is said to be *not* an argument or set of arguments or a thesis about justice, but about bad consequences of common as opposed to private possession, management, and disposition of things!

Aquinas is first mentioned in no. 14, but in connection with the supervisory authority that parents, rather than State government, properly have over their children: parental authority is not to be abolished or absorbed by the State.⁷ The first explicit and attributed reference to Aquinas in relation to property is later, in no. 22.

Private ownership, as we have seen, is the natural right of man, and to exercise that right, especially as members of society, is not only lawful, but absolutely necessary. “It is lawful,” says St. Thomas Aquinas, “for a man to hold private property; and it is also necessary for the carrying on of human existence.” (ST II-II 66.2c)

The encyclical says nothing here about the “three reasons” that Aquinas refers to in the very sentence just quoted in truncated form by the encyclical. It had given those three reasons – but not as Aquinas’s and not as concerned with *justice*, in no. 15. On this logically prior question whether private persons can justly own property, the main thrust of *Rerum novarum*’s argumentation is not taken from Aquinas’s argumentation about the same issue. What, then, is that main thrust, and does Aquinas provide any of its premises?

In answering that question it would be helpful first to glance forward at the version of the argument given summarily and abstractly – too abstractly – nearly 75 years later by Vatican II in *Gaudium et spes*⁸ (headed “On Ownership and Private Property; and on Large Estates”):

Since property and other forms of private ownership of external goods contribute to the *expression of the personality*, and since, moreover, they furnish one an occasion to exercise one’s function in society and in the economy, it is very important that the access of both individuals and communities to some ownership of external goods be fostered.

Private property or some ownership of external goods confers on everyone a sphere wholly *necessary for the autonomy of the person and the family*, and it should be regarded as an *extension of human freedom*. Lastly, since it adds

⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II 10.12.

⁸ Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* (On the Church in the Modern World) (1965).

incentives for carrying out one's functions and responsibilities, it constitutes one of the conditions for civil liberties. (GS, no. 71; emphasis added)⁹

Compare that with the concreteness of *Rerum novarum's* first argument against socialist communism, its first argument, that is to say, for the justice of appropriating the world's resources to particular owners. (It is in no. 5, and appeared first in the encyclical's second draft,¹⁰ by Cardinal Zigliara OP, the leading Dominican Thomistic scholar and head of the commission for the editing of the works of Aquinas established by Leo XIII to follow up *Aeterni patris*.)

when a man engages in remunerative labor, the impelling reason and motive of his work is to obtain property, and thereafter to hold it as his very own. If one man hires out to another his strength or skill, he does so for the purpose of receiving in return what is necessary for the satisfaction of his needs; he therefore expressly intends to acquire a right full and real, not only to the remuneration, but also to the disposal of such remuneration, just as he pleases. Thus, if he lives sparingly, saves money, and, for greater security, invests his savings in land, the land, in such case, is only his wages under another form; and, consequently, a workingman's little estate thus purchased should be as completely at his full disposal as are the wages he receives for his labor. But it is precisely in such power of disposal that ownership consists, whether the property consist of land or chattels.

Socialists, therefore, by endeavoring to transfer the possessions of individuals to the community at large, strike at the interests of every wage-earner, since they would deprive him of the liberty of disposing of his wages, and thereby of all hope and possibility of increasing his resources and of bettering his condition in life. (RN, no. 5)

Though there are no citations to Aquinas here, the argument in fact takes off from the principles articulated by him in discussing the justice of buying and selling, including buying and selling labor. A just price is one in which sellers are fairly compensated for what they are giving up, and buyers are fairly

⁹ The last nine words of this passage, unlike the preceding words in the same sentence, are also a significant part of the thought of Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Rerum novarum* (On the Condition of the Working Classes) (1891). These sentences in *Gaudium et spes*, no. 71 cite to relevant pages in RN, Pius XI's Encyclical Letter *Quadragesimo anno* (On Reconstruction of the Social Order: 40th Anniversary of *Rerum novarum*) (1931), the Christmas Message of 1941 and 1942, and a radio message of Pius XII on September 1, 1944; and John XXIII, Encyclical Letter *Mater et magistra* (On Christianity and Social Progress) (1961).

¹⁰ For all the drafts, and their authorship, see Giovanni Antonazzi, ed., *L'Enciclica Rerum Novarum: Testo Autentico e Redazioni Preparatorie dai Documenti Originali* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1991).

compensated for what they are giving up; so there is an equality between buyer and seller. The selling of one's labor is just a specific case of this desirable equality in exchange – exchange of services for wages/salary/fee. Equality here is what a fair-minded person would consider fair when considering the transaction in light of the interests of both employer and employee, the customs of the country, and the nature of the work done.¹¹ Taking all that for granted, Zigliara's argument in *Rerum novarum*, no. 5 looks then to the disposition of *the worker's savings from his wages*: these savings may rightly be invested in, say, land (or other capital). *Therefore*: "Everyone has by nature the right to hold property as his own" (RN, no. 6).

To some extent, the argument assumes that appropriation of land or other capital goods to private owners is just. So the argument is only a persuasive beginning, not a proof, and it needs supplementation. *Rerum novarum*, nos. 6 to 9 offer the needed supplementation (though this too will need further premises).

[A]nimal nature, however perfect, is far from representing the human being in its completeness, and is in truth but humanity's humble handmaid, made to serve and to obey. It is the mind, or reason, which is the predominant element in us who are human creatures; it is this which renders us being human, and distinguishes us essentially from the brute. And precisely because man alone among the animal creation is endowed with reason, it must be within one's right to possess things not merely for temporary and momentary use, as other living things do, but to have and to hold them in stable and permanent possession; one must have not only things that perish in the use, but those also which, though they have been reduced into use, continue for further use later. (RN, no. 6)

Aquinas's thought, in its substance, is free from the dualism suggested by *Rerum novarum's* handmaid metaphor, a metaphor none too happily making the animal aspects of our nature (and the inclinations to preserve one's bodily life, and to propagate) extrinsic as a "humble handmaid" is extrinsic to her mistress. But Aquinas was clear that one's *reason* should govern the other elements in one's nature, and that this governing is appropriately constitutional, not despotic, in character. *Rerum novarum* puts it thus:

[M]an, fathoming by his faculty of reason matters without number, linking the future with the present, and being *master of his own acts*, guides his ways under the eternal law and the power of God, whose providence governs all things. Wherefore, it is in his power to *exercise his choice* not only as to matters

¹¹ See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II 71.1, 4; Finnis, *Aquinas*, 200–203.

that regard his present welfare, but also about those which he deems may be for his advantage in time yet to come. (Emphasis added) (RN, no. 7)

The pivotal idea deployed here is that human persons are masters/owners of their own acts (and thus each is an image of God). This is the idea with which Aquinas chose to open the entire Second Part of his *Summa Theologiae* (see I-II, Prol.). Only left inexplicit in *Rerum novarum*, no. 7 is what Aquinas made explicit: this self-mastery or self-ownership in, by, and through choices is by virtue of the *freedom* we exercise in those choices. *Rerum novarum* here prefers to stress the provident concern to link past, present, and future – a concern that is the mark of *rational* planning and control.

The last of the developed elements in *Rerum novarum*'s arguments for private property owes more to Locke than to Aquinas. But its intended practical conclusions are not in opposition to the moral norms regarding property that are defended by St. Thomas; and the argument itself may perhaps be supportable by going behind Locke and his confused ethical methodology to the moral thinking that was given a juristic form by that somewhat Aristotelian school of Roman jurists which, in opposition to a somewhat Stoic school, explained and delimited the rule of classical Roman law whereby one can unwittingly and honestly become owner of someone else's materials, by pointing to the expending of labor and skill that is involved in transforming those materials into something else.¹² *Rerum novarum* declares:

[W]hen man thus turns the activity of his mind and the strength of his body toward procuring the fruits of nature, by such act he makes his own that portion of nature's field which he cultivates – that portion on which he leaves, as it were, the impress of his personality – and it is only just that he should possess that portion as his very own, and have a right to hold it without any one being justified in violating that right. (RN, no. 9)

... As effects follow their cause, so is it just and right that the results of labor should belong to those who have bestowed their labor. (RN, no. 10)

Nos. 12–14 of *Rerum novarum* broaden out the argument for private property by showing how essentially bound up that institution is with the maintenance of an even more (indeed supremely) important social institution, the family of husband, wife, and their children.¹³ These sections work up to the encyclical's

¹² See Gaius, *Institutes* II 79 (on acquisition by *specificatio* in the doctrine of the Proculian jurists rather than the [Stoic-influenced] Sabinian jurists of the first and second centuries AD).

¹³ “[I]nasmuch as the domestic household is antecedent, as well in idea as in fact, to people's gathering into a community [*civilis coniunctio*], the family must necessarily have rights and duties which are prior to those of the community, and more natural. If the citizens, if the