

DO WE UNDER-ESTIMATE OUR CALLING?

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Part 1 Culture

Every day, in the setting of 'ordinary' life, we have opportunities to shape the society we live in. Local and national elections give us opportunities to make more far-reaching differences. This calls for reflection on what society's needs are, and on what we have to offer.

It can be tempting to think our vote will make no difference, and even tempting to be 'fed-up' with all "politics." But we can become more confident when we look critically at the culture that underlies the politics:

Culture:

We are formed by the culture in which we live, both for better and for worse. A people's "culture" sums up their customary ways of interacting, and how they collectively 'feel about things.' It is a 'world' they live in.

People are comfortable within their own culture, because it gives them a sense of order and predictability. They are shaped by the culture in which they live, usually not aware of how much it influences them, and how much the 'world' of others can be different from theirs.

By repeating itself through communications media, a culture also reproduces itself, consolidating its own features: "... communication is not only the transmission of information, it is also creates a culture." (Pope Leo, Encyclical Letter on the Grandeur of Humanity, 135; (hereafter MH).

I recently heard a U.S. American emphatically and proudly assert that "Disneyland is our identity." What originated as a wonderful form of entertainment had become his 'world'. He could have said the same of Hollywood, with its pervasive culture of make-believe and widespread obsession with self-image. Because one's culture feeds off itself, it becomes difficult for those within it, and formed by it, to critique it, or to recognise its own decline. Others, from outside that culture, might have wanted better for their 'world' and their identity.

Every culture, and subculture within it, including churches, needs to be open – not uncritically - to outside influences. Failure to be open to scholarship, for example, is not harmless. Witness the ease with which swathes of U.S. Americans, trapped in the world of biblical literalism, have been manipulated into support for Israel's expansionist policies.

In short: culture is a matrix out of which we normally think, speak and act. So, it is to the culture we need to look to better understand what could be happening around us.

Negative influences infiltrating our own culture:

Different ways of thinking, speaking and acting can infiltrate a culture, and become normalised within it, even if they were formerly foreign to it. A simple example is the way uncouthness and violent rhetoric have become 'normal' in public discourse and main news channels. Cultures can deteriorate. Some negative examples we need to notice:

1. Easily unnoticed influences: "... platforms and services are often designed to capture users' time and attention, exploiting their vulnerabilities, and weakening their inner freedom. When business models thrive on human weakness, the person is treated as a means to an end..." (cf. MH 170)
2. Often, when the way the housing market is being discussed on TV programmes, both interviewer and interviewee are thinking of houses simply as commodities for trade and assets for making money, more than as homes for people. And so, the market is "strong" and "looking-up" when prices rise, and "weak" when they are low. In those discussions, unaffordability for those needing to buy a home hardly gets a mention.
3. Discussions on bringing down the cost of living invariably emphasise the need for a more competitive market, even though this has been an ever-failing solution. And because "competition" is the 'normal' way of thinking about this problem, other options, such as State control of assets that should be considered as belonging to everybody, such as water, electricity, telecommunications, railways, ports and airports are not even discussed as an alternative way of price control.
4. Within Western cultures, it is with increasing ease that the innocent victims of war are being regarded simply as "collateral damage", and that the intentional taking of lives in the womb and through euthanasia, is being 'normalised'.
5. The normalising of war:

"The growth of the military-industrial complex has become a defining feature of the current political landscape;...The close link between economic interests, the military apparatus and political decisions produces an "armed nation", in which war appears as a natural extension of politics, and the arms market becomes an autonomous driving force behind military decisions...The armaments industry, and countries that supply weapons, profit from a market that thrives on conflicts." (MH 193)
6. "... a distorted individualism that exalts self-fulfilment as the primary purpose of human life and regards society only as a means to pursue this self-interest." (Pope John Paul II, Address: 29 Oct 1992). This individualism shows up socially in claims that the individual's choices and life-style are no one else's business; and economically in claims that the State has no business regulating or controlling the 'free market'.

Our calling & The Grandeur of Humanity

Just as negative factors can enter and erode a culture, positive influences can also enter, for the better. This is where our calling as Christians comes into play. It calls us out of the mindset which assumes that "politics" is an optional extra, not really belonging to the

practice of our faith. By distancing ourselves from these realities, we surrender politics to the realm outside of faith, and we leave our own practice of the faith incomplete.

Failure to think critically makes us part of the problem. We need to become consciously aware of what we might be subconsciously endorsing. And we need to be aware of how very much we have to offer.

“... The civilisation of love will not arise from a single or spectacular gesture, but from the sum total of small and steadfast acts of fidelity that serve as a bulwark against dehumanisation... (MH, 213)

Far from regarding these matters as somehow ‘outside’ our faith, “...the Church’s social doctrine brings us to the *very heart of our faith*.” (MH, 48) It gives concrete expression to our relationship with Christ, and to his continuing love for the world.

These teachings do not give us social or economic policies; they give moral guidance to our social and economic thinking. (MH 21).

Pope Leo XIII commenced a tradition of formulating the social implications of our faith, highlighting the need to preserve human dignity in the midst of “new things,” which in his time was the industrial revolution. Now Leo XIV, building on the social teachings of every Pope since, looks at how human dignity is to be respected amidst the “new things” of our time, which is the digital revolution and AI.

In the light of those teachings, it turns out that what we might have side-lined as “just politics,” in fact involves moral responsibilities. They have to do with what it means to be truly human across the whole spectrum of human life. And that is the business of our faith:

“The human person is the primary route the Church must travel in fulfilling its mission: the primary and fundamental way of the Church, the way traced out by Christ himself” (Pope John Paul II, *The Redeemer of the Human Race*, n.14)

Part 2 Church’s Social Teachings

Pope Leo’s emphasise is on dialogue and critical thinking more than of providing immediate answers. The Church’s social teaching is “the product of research, and hence of hypotheses, discussions, progress and set-backs, all aimed at conveying a reliable, organised and systematic body of knowledge...(cf. Address 17 May 2025). By honouring these teachings in the Church’s own life, the Church is “able to bear credible witness to society that seeking the common good together, with shared responsibility and fraternity, is not a utopia, but a real possibility”. (MH 89)

The following is a synthesis of Catholic social teaching, drawing on Leo’s encyclical letter *Magnifica Humanitas* – *The Grandeur of the Human Person* – (hereafter MH):

The Church's Social Doctrine is founded on our belief that being personally chosen for existence by God gives each person an underlying dignity that no circumstances or wrong behaviour can extinguish (MH 61).

Because our existence was not owed to us, and comes from God's love for each person, all human beings have a fundamentally equal dignity. "The value of persons does not depend on what they achieve or produce." (MH 51)

"Human rights are not an external addition to the person, but an expression of intrinsic human dignity, ..." (MH. 54); and the first of these is the right to life, from conception to its natural end. (MH. 55).

"It is not enough to state simply that men and women have equal dignity and rights; it is necessary that this be reflected concrete decisions, such as in laws, access to employment, education, social and political responsibilities, and the way society listens to and values women's contributions. As long as this gap persists, we cannot say that society truly and fully recognises that women have the same dignity as men." (MH57)

Our common duty, and a special responsibility of the State, is to promote the "common good", i.e. the social, economic and political conditions which "allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily (MH. 60). This duty requires appropriate restraints on individuals' choices and activities when they inhibit the development of others.

Fulfilment refers to "integral human development," i.e. the development of "each person and the whole person." Development is not truly integral if it allows benefits accruing to some to exclude others from what they need for their development. (MH 82- 88)

"... The earth's goods – soil, water, air and natural resources – are given by God to the entire human family to sustain the lives of all, and every person has an inherent right to use them." (MH 65). The right to private ownership is not an absolute right.

This "universal destination of goods" has many implications; e.g. the proper care of the planet, including action to reduce climate change, is a *matter of justice* towards all whose well-being depends on the planet's well-being.

It also involves a duty of hospitality towards those who have needed to leave their own homeland to find a share of what God intends for all - and where possible, helping to correct the situations which have forced them to leave.... "A litmus test for social justice today is the treatment of migrants, refugees and those forced to move due to poverty, violence, climate change and environmental disasters." (MH 81)

"Today, among the goods that are universally intended for everyone, we must include new forms of property, such as patents, algorithms, digital platforms, technological infrastructure and data... When these goods remain concentrated in the hands of a few, without adequate forms of sharing and access, a new imbalance is created that ... widens the gap between the included and the excluded." (MH.67)

“Social justice requires that social, economic and political choices allow everyone – particularly the weakest – to live a truly dignified life, without leaving anyone behind.” (MH 77.)

Today, this is brought into relief where technology contributes to job insecurity: “It is certainly desirable for technology to relieve humans of arduous, repetitive or dangerous tasks and to provide intelligent support for human activity...(but) The pursuit of greater profits cannot justify choices that systematically sacrifice jobs, because the human person is an end, not a means, and the economic order must remain subordinate to human dignity and the common good.” (MH 152)

Social justice also “helps us to recognise that injustices do not arise solely from the wrong choices of individuals, but also from structures, mechanisms, and economic and social systems that produce inequality...” (MH 79)

The principle of subsidiarity requires that decisions be made at the level closest to those most affected by them, to allow for creativity and responsibility by individuals and local groupings who have the right to do what they can do for themselves. The same restriction applies to “major economic and technological actors.” (MH 71)

At the same time, the principle of solidarity recognises the need for the higher entities to support lower-level human groupings and individuals to do what these cannot sufficiently manage on their own, thereby respecting the fact that “the future of each individual is connected to the future of all.” (MH 73)

“Peace begins with each one of us: in the way we look at others, listen to others and speak about others.... We must all examine our conscience regarding the words we use, the prejudices we have, and the explicit or implicit aggression that lies within them...” (MH 214)
 “Do you want peace? Then do justice.” (MH 215)

Where there is a duty to defend lives that are being unjustly attacked, the use of force is to be an absolutely last resort, given Jesus’ teaching on non-violence. When no action against injustice can equate with complicity, disinvestment, sanctions and boycott have a place, but the paramount need is for genuine dialogue.

“Dialogue is the primary means of co-existence between people and nations, and it is the alternative to open conflict...” (219) There is a need to shift from the “culture of power” to a genuine “culture of negotiation...” (MH 221) “Giving space to the perspectives and voices of victims helps us to reject the normalisation of conflict, not to turn away when human dignity is violated; and to restore to victims the dignity of being recognised and heard.” (MH 217)

While it is right to alleviate life’s sufferings, human nature’s limitations are something more than defects to be corrected. They can serve a deeper purpose as we journey towards our completion in God’s further gift of everlasting life. For example, that deeper form of love we call compassion can only happen in a world where there is suffering; and that gracious form of love we experience as forgiveness can only happen in a world where there is sin. We reach deeper levels of human maturity in these ways. (cf. MH 118 - 128)