

# Culture in the social teaching of the Roman-Catholic Church

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to discuss the principles of the social teaching of the Church and the role of culture in the efficiency of economic systems. The authors made an attempt to identify the impact of culture on the operation of an economic system and on its efficiency (or inefficiency) in the light of the social teaching of the Church.

*Keywords:* Catholic Church, efficiency, economic systems, social teaching  
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## 1. Introduction

Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum novarum* promulgated on 15 May 1891 lays down the social doctrine of the Roman-Catholic Church. Some interpret the above doctrine as the "social teaching" or the "social Magisterium of the Church". Most often, however, the literature of the subject refers to the topic as social teaching of the Church (by implication: Roman Catholic Church) or, less frequently, as the Catholic social teaching. The authors analyse the principles of the social teaching of the Church and, what in our opinion is very interesting, the role of culture in the efficiency of economic systems. The aim is to attempt to identify the impact of culture on

the operation of an economic system and on its efficiency (or inefficiency) in the light of the social teaching of the Church.

## **2. Culture in the social teaching of the Roman-Catholic Church**

Among the wealth of publications about the social teaching of the Church the one that stands out is a collection by Bartolomeo Sorge Sr (2000) called *For a Civilization of Love: The Proposal of Catholic Social Teaching* published in Italy in 1996. The work includes a very clear and precise interpretation of the Catholic social teaching. From our perspective, these principles could be presented as follows:

1. The human person is in the centre of the social order. As Pope John Paul II said, this principle is the first and fundamental truth of the social teaching of the Church and the source of all other principles.
2. Dignity of the human person and human rights. Man has been made by God and human being has been created in the image and likeness of God. Therefore, humanity is a non-negotiable value. It is a specific value expressing man's ability of independent and voluntary action and of intellectual and moral growth. On 10 December 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted in Paris the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in which the United Nations of the World declared that all people are equal, regardless of their: colour, wealth, religion, culture, social class, political views, etc.

The foundations of the above Declaration have their source in *Humanisme intégral* by Jacques Maritain (1936). Maritain, the theoretician of the "new Christianity" explicitly says that *persona est affirmanda propter se ipsam, i.e. "the person must be affirmed for his own sake"* (Maritain 1936; quoted in Jakubów et al. 2004). According to Maritain, human dignity embodies such values as truth, freedom, justice, solidarity, peace and Christian love, to which reference must be made during the implementation of all social and institutional reforms in any country.

A. The principle of mutual dependence between the human person and the society. This above principle has many dimensions, as it involves:

- a) respect for every person from conception to natural death,
- b) acknowledgement that private property is a source of progress and of building a fair social system,
- c) recognition of the significance of human work,

- d) connection between the idea of the state under the rule of law and welfare state,
- e) recognition of two dimensions of democracy: formal (rules of governing) and spiritual (so-called fundamental human values, such as rights, freedom, etc.).

Re: a). It is a problem which, in our opinion, should not be resolved by politicians or academics. Every man has a conscience. Every man is brought up in a certain culture and professes a certain religion. It was the Catholic Church which originally gave the status of a person to a human foetus only after the 9<sup>th</sup> week of pregnancy. Today it changed its mind and we must respect it but one cannot impose on any state to lay down in its law that a foetus is a person since the day of conception.

Re: b). Especially after WWII, when the Eastern bloc was formed, the Catholic Church wanted to see if there was *tertium datur* (“third option available”) as regards a fair state system. Scientific research and economic history have shown that despite many shortcomings, a system based on private property leads to the development of the human person and to civilizational progress.

Re: c). The problem of human work in the social teaching of the Church has been the subject of many serious disputations. First of all, we would like to point out that the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries has reversed the “doorways to the Kingdom of Heaven” from the ethos of prayer to the ethos of work. According to Calvinists, Lutherans and other Protestants, whether a human person deserves the Kingdom of Heaven depends on such person’s work and not prayer. Following the Grey Friars, the Catholic Church was strengthening its believers in their following the “ora et labora” maxim of the Catholic faith where “pray” stood before “work”. It was only Pope John Paul II who in his *Laborem Exercens* encyclical of 14 September 1981 elevated work to the level of Evangelical value saying that by means of his labour man participates in the work of creation.

Re: d). All contemporary states should be states under the rule of law, regardless of their social or economic policy. The above was pointed out on many occasions by Jacques Maritain, the Catholic philosopher already quoted in this paper. We absolutely subscribe to this doctrine, especially that it is in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the UN which was signed by practically all the states of the world.

Re: e). In most countries, the rules of government are based on universal human values. Many states even refer to Christian values in their constitutions. However, at this point we would

like to remind what Jacques Maritain (1936) wrote - “modern Christianity cannot be based merely on the culture of Western Europe.” One should always and everywhere respect other cultures, as there are no better and worse cultures and there are no cultured and uncultured societies. Every society has its own culture which supplements its physical struggle for existence. Every society has an inalienable right to develop its culture and to draw on its works for the spiritual advancement of the people.

B. The principle of the common good. The term was defined more fully in the encyclicals of Pope John XXIII. Since that time, the Catholic social teaching has been defining common good as the “sum of such conditions of social life in which people may attain their perfection more fully and faster.” Stress should be placed on the following three aspects:

- the common good is not something ready-made that may be measured or weighed,
- the attainment of the common good requires a wide-ranging cooperation of individuals and groups,
- the state (public authorities) may contribute to the coordination of efforts aimed at the attainment of the common good.

C. The principle of solidarity often used in the context of the principle of subsidiarity: A man in need cannot be left to himself and he must be helped by other people and institutions.

D. Principle of participation. This is connected with the idea of the common good. It imposes a duty on individuals and social groups to participate in a fair, proportional and responsible manner in the development of social, economic, political and cultural life to improve the life of members of the society.

E. The principle of universal destination of goods. Private property should not lead to social stratification and it is in the interest of both the rich and the poor. It is also connected with the concept of accomplishment of the common good. The role of the state is here enormous (Sorge 2000).

On the centennial anniversary of the *Rerum novarum* encyclical by Pope Leo XIII, Pope John Paul II promulgated his encyclical *Centesimus annus* (1 May 1991), whose paragraph 24 he devoted to culture. While analysing the inefficiency of the economic system, Pope John Paul II said that it was not to be considered simply as a technical problem, but rather a consequence of the violation of the right to private initiative, to ownership of property and to economic freedom. The Pope further wrote: “...To this must be added the cultural and national dimension ... Man is

understood in a more complete way when he is situated within the sphere of culture through his language, history, and the position he takes towards the fundamental events of life, such as birth, love, work and death. At the heart of every culture lies the attitude man takes to the greatest mystery: the mystery of God.” Different cultures are basically different ways of facing the question of the meaning of personal existence. When this question is eliminated, the culture and moral life of nations are corrupted. For this reason the struggle to defend work was spontaneously linked to the struggle for culture and for national rights (*Centesimus annus* 1991).

The above quote from the encyclical of Pope John Paul II is very important for any economist as it points out that every economic activity takes place in a certain cultural and historical context and the goal of economic activity should always be grounded in culture, which is often omitted by mainstream economists. The above concept is called *homo oeconomicus*. The literature of the subject includes views according to which *homo oeconomicus* does not cut himself off the cultural context and it is not necessary to stress the cultural context of the "working man" so much. We have a different opinion on the above, and in the light of the quote from the *Centesimus annus* encyclical of Pope John Paul II, the problem may be viewed as follows:

Firstly, it is the Pope who points out to the inefficiency of the economic system which is a result, among other things, of the failure to take into account the cultural and national dimension.

Secondly, by creating the paradigm of economics based on the concept of *homo oeconomicus*, mainstream economics does not admit the concept of group rationality because rationality must be derived from rational actions of an individual. While formulating the concept of the common good, the social teaching of the Church assumes the cooperation of people, solidarity and *eo ipso* group rationality in the attainment of the common good, which is in accordance with our opinion that in practice group rationality exists next to individual rationality.

Thirdly, Christian culture is related to the mystery of God, which is obvious and we respect this view.

### **3. Concluding remarks**

Johann Gottfried Herder (1744 – 1803), German philosopher and pastor said that man is born twice: as a natural creature and as a creature of culture (see Barnard 1967). For Herder, culture is the source of humanity which means that there is no such thing as “cultured nations and uncultured tribes”. All nations, tribes and societies have their culture and this multi-cultural dimension is universal and has been acknowledged by the UN and the nations of the world.

Culture may be defined: descriptively, historically (cultural relics), normatively (cultural norms), psychologically (learning process), structuralistically (internal organisation of culture), genetically (origin of culture).

We think that for many deliberations about culture the following working definition would be sufficient: “Culture is the entire body of material and spiritual work produced by humanity, gathered and enriched in the course of history and passed on from generation to generation (Noga 2009: 267).” In our opinion, the Roman-Catholic church was right to make the question about the sense of individual existence the central axis of culture because the cultural, social and historical contexts must be taken into account in any type of governance.

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## ***Kultura w nauce społecznej Kościoła Rzymskokatolickiego***

### ***Streszczenie***

Celem artykułu jest omówienie zasad nauczania społecznego Kościoła oraz rola kultury dla efektywności systemów ekonomicznych. Autorzy podjęli próbę zidentyfikowania wpływu kultury na działanie systemu ekonomicznego, a także na jego efektywność (lub nieefektywność) w świetle nauk społecznych Kościoła.

***Słowa kluczowe:*** Kościół Katolicki, efektywność, systemy ekonomiczne, nauka społeczna