

Interviews:

**CHURCH SOCIAL TEACHING AS A UNIVERSAL
PARADIGM OF REASONABLENESS:
An Interview with Lorenzo Ornaghi**

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ADRIAN PABST AND ALESSANDRA GEROLIN [AP AND AG]: One of the main topics of this Conference was the grandeur of reason in relation to specific traditions and its claim to universality. According to your opinion, does Catholic social teaching have a universal value or does the fact that it is related to a specific tradition relegates it to a specific cultural and religious environment? What can justify its claim to a universal paradigm of “reasonableness”?

LORENZO ORNAGHI [LO]: Catholic social teaching certainly has a universal value and the reason for this universality lies in its “reasonableness.” It has a universal meaning and not only a relative one, just for the believer. Catholic social teaching, in fact, deals with the life of human beings in its entirety, as it is lived in different communities to which one belongs and with view to the common good. Secondly, the social doctrine of the Church can become universal ‘for all people of good will’, precisely because it is founded on reason and ‘fidelity to man’. As Pope Benedict XVI has said in the introduction to his most recent encyclical letter *Caritas in veritate*, this requires *fidelity to the truth*, which alone is

the *guarantee of freedom* (cf. Jn 8:32) and *the possibility of integral human development*. It is exactly for this reason that it is significant that the Pope concludes the introduction to his encyclical letter with these words: “open to the truth, from whichever branch of knowledge it comes, the Church’s social doctrine receives it, assembles into a unity the fragments in which it is often found, and mediates it within the constantly changing life-patterns of the society of peoples and nations” (9). In this sense, as the Pope had already written in his first encyclical *Deus caritas est*, the social doctrine of the Church wants “simply to help purify reason and to contribute, here and now, to the acknowledgment and attainment of what is just” (28).

The language of Benedict XVI is always very rigorous and the words used by him are chosen in their more precise meaning. For this reason, it seems to me that it is important to think about the expression “acknowledge” and “attain” what is just. In order to recognize what is right and realize it, reason and – for the believer – faith are necessary in every human being. Reason and faith are not simple names or realities characterized by confused and generic contents: they are fundamental features of each person. The human person is at the centre of Pope Benedict’s interest. Catholic social teaching establishes a theoretical and methodological relationship with the social sciences on the basis of what it represents. It is a form of knowledge, but at the same time it offers also a practical perspective. It is a knowledge which enters in the heart of reality, because it springs up from the concrete experience of the single person as well as from the collectivity.

The anthropology which underpins Christian thinking that is typical of the social doctrine outlines and suggests an idea of human being conceived as a creative subject, called fully to realize truth, freedom and dignity in the encounter with other human beings. This relational factor is crucial: it may be argued that the success or failure of the fulfilment of human beings depends on their corresponding success or failure in creating meaningful relationships with others. Moreover, the anthropological perspective leads us to reevaluate and understand the cultural sphere and what is proper to that. Culture is never a decorative aspect or the mere personal quality of a single person; on the contrary, it is so widespread because it is a collective reality, it springs up from a tradition, it deals with people’s past and present. It is exactly for this reason that the social life has

its roots in the culture, that, in turn, from generation to generation, is reflected – and at the same time it is nurtured – by human mind, will and hearth.

Besides we should not forget that the Church's primary mission consists in the announcement of the gospel. And the gospel is a message of liberating truth. It follows that the relationship between gospel and culture involves the ongoing incarnation of the first in the second, in the form of customs and practices, languages and symbols, all in addition to values. We have received splendid hints from Paul VI and John Paul II which enable us to cut the distance between gospel and culture, between faith and life, in order to guarantee the searching for the human being's authentic good.

Catholic social teaching, therefore, can legitimately appear as a universal paradigm of reasonableness: as an 'expert in humanity', the Church offers to the world that anthropologic vision which enables us to find direction and to measure the different situations and social actions according to a person's needs. This is directly linked to the concrete historical dimension of the social doctrine of the Church. Certainly Catholic social doctrine fully draws on (and is embedded in) human history. But its historical dimension does not make it dependent on the events and on the transformational processes that it interprets and, as far as it is possible from a human point of view, intends to direct. It happened frequently that encyclical letters were able to inaugurate some processes of transformation, when they were still unknown to the most part of the people. Integrated into the history of humanity, Catholic social teaching represents, for every man, "the accurate formulation of the results of a careful reflection on the complex realities of human existence, in society and in the international order [...] determining their conformity with or divergence from the lines of the Gospel teaching on man and his vocation, a vocation which is at once earthly and transcendent" (*Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 41).

AP AND AG: Can Catholic social doctrine be studied and thought of as an academic discipline? Among the obstacles that often impede a dialogue between the social doctrine of the Church and other areas of learning, which are the most important and difficult ones to overcome? Is Catholic social teaching interdisciplinary?

LO: I answer immediately the last question with great conviction. I am in fact persuaded that, precisely because of its specific relation with the notion of truth, Catholic social teaching cannot but “transcend” every strict disciplinary limit. This is more important nowadays, when the hyper-specialization is making even the communication among contiguous disciplines more difficult and at the same time – and this is a meaningful paradox – makes this communication intensively more desirable. Today not only the distance between the tough sciences of nature (as they are still called) and the human sciences is always wider, but the same social sciences hardly recognize themselves as component of a unique, even if ancient, family. I do not think that this will lead to an artificial synthesis among different sciences; rather it is important to be able to recognize the point where the authentic progress of each science requires the consideration of problems and methods of inference with other sciences.

In my opinion, in the dialogue between Catholic social teaching and the other areas of knowledge the biggest obstacle is constituted by what has characterized the late modern turn of science, in particular since the end of the nineteenth century. I hope to be sufficient clear as I have to use some simplification. Among the criteria or “rules” of that scientific method to which the late modern sciences have delegated the legitimating process of their scientific code, there are the characters of “being empirical” and “being predictable” rather than “being valuable”. Considering in particular the last two “rules”, the suggestive value and the prescriptive aim of Catholic social doctrine have been felt and considered distant, and sometimes incompatible, with the supposedly sheer scientific method, when not even hostile to what is usually considered as “science”.

Probably it is worth considering that today, exactly for these reasons, the social doctrine of the Church can help elaborate not only perspectives for a better understanding of the big transformations under way, but also to prepare the instruments to shape these processes. According to this perspective, in an ongoing inter-communication with Catholic social teaching, the other academic disciplines and various sciences – in particular human and social sciences – can find an innovative set of “paradigms” of theory and practice, necessary in order to improve our knowledge of reality. Two examples, even if different, can help to explain this last point.

The dialogue between medical science and the social doctrine of the Church is becoming ever more necessary and useful. Thanks to the rapid evolution of technologies and knowledge in many specialist disciplines, it is possible to offer cures and drugs able to heal and alleviate the pain of people who, just few years ago, could not have been helped. At the same time, the cure of the ill, the attempts made by health services in developing countries, the same progress in the research field made by scientific laboratories find in the social doctrine of the Church a precious term of comparison. This happens in particular in the awareness that every progress is a real one only if it is made for the sake of the human person. The integral view of the latter is the essential condition for the relationship between science and life being more and more balanced and harmonic.

The second example deals with the wide set of disciplines that we describe with the term “humanistic disciplines” or humanities. According to the most common opinions, those disciplines seem less important, also because their “social utility” looks inferior to the one of other sciences. Yet, it is exactly in the dialogue with Catholic social teaching and with the anthropology typical of it that the humanities could find the impulse necessary to be the source of that ‘new humanism’ we need more than ever. If in the dialogue with the social doctrine of the Church it is in fact possible to find those principles and criteria of action through which we can face the contemporary challenge of material well-being, then it is even easier to find the resources to overcome what is at the basis not only of social apathy and resignation, but also of the condition of individual fragmentation, that is to say, spiritual famine.

AP AND AG: What are the most decisive aspects of Catholic social teaching in our time?

LO: First of all I recall two fundamental aspects which I have already hinted at in the previous answers. The first one, whose value is particularly evident to believers, is given by the “prophetic” character always present in the social doctrine of the Church. The second aspect consists in the always “open” nature of Catholic social teaching: the latter is open to the dialogue with other

disciplines, open to a method of knowledge which is always ready to be marvelled by what happens, even when (or in particular when) it happens in an unexpected and unforeseen way.

On the basis of these two aspects, I would like to point out three great spheres which raise important questions about our present and future, on which the social doctrine can play a very important role. The first sphere is constituted by what we call “globalisation”. Such a term tries to describe an incredibly wide set of economic, social, political, cultural and technological processes. The most meaningful aspect of globalization is constituted by the strong and visible bound of inter-dependence which binds together each of these processes with all the others. This is a kind of inter-dependence whose effects show a sort of worldwide ubiquity, which deeply modifies and sometimes subverts the most consolidated and spread perceptions of time and space. However, globalisation is accompanied – like a sort of shadow – by local fragmentation: what is nearer, the territory more known, becomes the space where we find security, where we find our social and cultural identity, where we can easily grasp the meaning of our action. Considering the double and often contradictory reality of globalization-fragmentation, Catholic social teaching maintains the necessity of a unitary horizon for the entire human family. It is a horizon characterized by precise values: the value of the person, the search for the common good of all the communities which compose the human family, the promotion of life and the communication of the well-being. The fact that these values are not abstract or theoretical – on the contrary, they can constitute the criteria of action of the diverse economic, political and social action – is shown by the global economic and finance crisis in which we are still stuck. In order to overcome such a crisis, sector-based policy or “new rules” are not enough. On the contrary, it is essential to reaffirm the ethical foundation of any form of action: without such a foundation, the same aims or outcomes of action are in the end – if not unhealthy – scarcely sustainable, of limited effectiveness and almost never functional in terms of the increase of an authentic well-being of the person and the community.

The second sphere is the one of ecology. The engagement in the care for the created world concerns everyone. The use of the goods of the earth is bound up with their scarcity. This requires attitudes and behaviours orientated towards

justice none only regarding the distribution of limited resources within the entire human community, but also regarding the same resources. To avoid predatory attitudes or irresponsible uses of technologies is essential in order to safeguard the future of the next generations. Towards them we have the duty to keep the world healthy and not devastated by the outcomes of our arrogance or blindness. Moreover the social doctrine of the Church can consider ecology from a second point of view, strictly related to human beings and the cure that is due to them. Against dangerous scientist and technological drifts, but also against the logic of conflicts and violence, it is important to reaffirm the principle of the person's dignity as unique and irreducible. Notwithstanding the many occasions of debate concerning the rule of science and the humanitarian emergencies generated from ongoing wars, it is important to remember how Catholic social teaching can offer convincing conceptual instruments and concrete practical solutions to defend the good for human beings, first and supreme creatures of God.

There is finally a third sphere to consider. This is the problem of relativism which, for the most, constitutes the deepest root of the challenges we have to face. Already John Paul II in his *Veritatis splendor* pointed out the risk that the different societies – in particular western societies – always run: that is to be deprived from “the acknowledgement of the truth”. Joseph Ratzinger, both as Cardinal and as Pope, has identified relativism as the biggest problem of our age. While, in fact, the Church restates that not all the perspectives concerning what is good for the human being have the same value, we know that – according to the words of the former Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith – we have to face a worrying “dictatorship of relativism”. Later, in the famous Regensburg address, the Pope has clarified that “the specifically human questions about our origin and destiny, the questions raised by religion and ethics, then have no place within the purview of collective reason as defined by "science", so understood, and must thus be relegated to the realm of the subjective. The subject then decides, on the basis of his experiences, what he considers tenable in matters of religion, and the subjective "conscience" becomes the sole arbiter of what is ethical. In this way, though, ethics and religion lose their power to create a community and become a completely personal matter. This is a dangerous state of affairs for humanity”.

Catholic social doctrine helps us to cope with partial and unsatisfying conceptions of human being and society or ones that are confined to a relativist view of the subject. On the contrary, Catholic social teaching safeguards the good that modernity has been able to develop during its authentic progress in the knowledge of human beings.

AP AND AG: The Church's social doctrine has become one of the most promising areas for ecumenical progress. What is your view?

LO: It is since the encyclical *Rerum novarum* that Catholic social doctrine has been offering an extremely positive prospective towards an ecumenical path. The ecumenical impulse is coherent and consequent – as we have underlined at the beginning of this conversation – with the universal tendency of the principles and criteria of Catholic social teaching concerning the most important contemporary challenges. The universal perspective of the problems – especially in the age of globalization – requires the universality of the possible answers: answers related to the possible well being of every person and people. Who has faith knows that the hundredfold has been already promised in this world, in the time of history, in which we have been called to believe and act. If we agree on the fact that today there are monumental challenges (common to all religions) in the fields of ethic, politics, economy, we will be easily persuaded that only from a perspective of a common elaboration of adequate solutions we can do a step forward, building the future through a shared hope. The faith in God can represent a decisive link among people who want to work together for the progress of the common good.

Having said that, it would be unrealistic to hide the difficulties present in such a path. But the common reference to a personal God, Logos of which we are images, can help us to overcome obstacles and can help human reason, which is a divine gift to human beings, to become the favourite way for a cordial communication. Once again, rationality can become the paradigm of universality, also in the process of bringing Churches and faiths near to that human feature which 'pools' us as brothers. On the other hand, after the events of 11 September 2001 – a day which indeed made the difference in the recent

history – John Paul II said that “the various Christian confessions, as well as the world’s great religions, need to work together to eliminate the social and cultural causes of terrorism. They can do this by teaching the greatness and dignity of the human person, and by spreading *a clearer sense of the oneness of the human family*. This is a specific area of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue and cooperation” (Message for the world day of peace 2002, 12).

In this sense, the strong cooperation between the Centre of Theology and Philosophy based at the University of Nottingham and the Athenaeum Centre for the Social Doctrine of the Church of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart provides us with the faith necessary to take steps forward, that is far better done together than separately.