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# Voices in the Wilderness: Catholic NGOs and the Challenge of Human Rights

Kevin Ahern  
*Manhattan College*

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**VOICES IN THE WILDERNESS:  
CATHOLIC NGOS AND THE CHALLENGE OF HUMAN RIGHTS**

**Kevin Ahern<sup>1</sup>**

*“human rights will not improve much without the direct participation of a robust, free and independent civil society....”*

*Navi Pillay, High Commissioner for Human Rights, October 2012*

## **1. Introduction**

For nearly a century, Catholic non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have played an important role in the development of human rights norms and enforcement mechanisms. Like John the Baptist, these organizations are prophetic voices calling out from the wilderness for justice (Matt. 3:3). Gaining a better understanding these and other NGOs is absolutely essential in adapting the social practice of human rights to the challenges of the twenty-first century. This paper will attempt to summarize some ethical insights that emerge from my theological analysis of NGOs.

Given the initial resistance to rights language by the Catholic Church, it may surprise many to learn of the historical and present role played by Catholic NGOs in the human rights movement.<sup>2</sup> They have, for example, been key actors in the development of the global governance structures, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the establishment of the first special procedures mechanism, and the recognition of

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Glauber Ahern, PhD is an assistant professor of religious studies at Manhattan College. From 2003 to 2007, he served as the President of the International Movement of Catholic Students (IMCS-Pax Romana). Website: [www.kevinjahern.wordpress.com/](http://www.kevinjahern.wordpress.com/) Twitter: @kevin\_ahern

<sup>2</sup> The contribution of Catholic actors in the promotion of democracy and human rights has gained increased attention following the work of Samuel Huntington on the “Third Wave Democracy.” See Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Philpott, and Timothy Samuel Shah, *God’s Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011); Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991). For a brief essay on human rights within the Catholic tradition, see: J. Bryan Hehir, “Religious Activism for Human Rights: A Christian Case Study,” in *Religious Human Rights in Global Perspective: Religious Perspectives*, ed. John Witte and Johan David Van der Vyver (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1996), 97–119.

conscientious objection as a human right.<sup>3</sup> They are a regular feature at the UN Human Rights Council and often bring attention to human rights issues ignored by others. At the local level, they are involved in human rights education and social action as exemplified by the work of Congolese Sister Angelique Namaika, the recipient of the 2013 UNHCR Nansen Refugee award.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Theological Considerations

While the Catholic tradition has long inspired collective action for justice, a robust theological framework to understand socially engaged communities—both Catholic and non-Catholic—has not yet been fully developed. In light of this challenge, I argue for a framework of social or structural grace as a constructive way to appreciate the theological and ethical dimensions of NGOs.

For over forty years, the Catholic social tradition has acknowledged the existence of social or structural sin.<sup>5</sup> Originating in the context of Latin American liberation theology, the notion of structural sin applies social analytical thinking to insights from

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<sup>3</sup> For some reflections on the work of specific human rights NGOs see: Eric Sottas, “Pax Romana et Le Travail Intergouvernemental,” in *Memory and Hope: Pax Romana MIIC - ICMICA: 1947-1987* (Geneva: Pax Romana ICMICA/MIIC, 1987), 23–25; Bernard Cook, “Pax Romana and the Reconstruction of a United Europe Along Christian Lines,” in *Une Europe Malgré Tout, 1945-1990: Contacts et Réseaux Culturels, Intellectuels et Scientifiques Entre Européens Dans La Guerre Froide*, ed. Antoine Fleury and Lubor Jílek, vol. 9, L’Europe et Les Europes (Brussels: Peter Land, 2009), 267–279; Michael W. Hovey, “Interceding at the United Nations: The Human Rights of Conscientious Objection,” in *Transnational Social Movements and Global Politics: Solidarity Beyond the State*, ed. Jackie Smith, Charles Chatfield, and Ron Pagnucco (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 214–224; Jean Gartlan, *At the United Nations: The Story of the NCWC/USCC Office for United Nations Affairs (1946-1972)* (Baltimore, MD: Gateway Press, 1998); William Korey, *NGOs and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: A Curious Grapevine* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998); Felice D. Gaer, “Reality Check: Human Rights NGOs Confront Governments at the UN,” in *NGOs, the U.N., and Global Governance*, ed. Thomas G. Weiss and Leon Gordenker, Emerging Global Issues Series (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1996), 51–66.

<sup>4</sup> See handout with a timeline and list of Catholic human rights NGOs.

<sup>5</sup> Peter J Henriot, “Social Sin and Conversion: A Theology of the Church’s Involvement,” *Chicago Studies* 11 (1972): 115–130.

traditional moral theology to identify dehumanizing and unjust social structures including racism and economic inequality.

This insight has been powerful, both inside and outside the Catholic world. Pope John Paul II affirmed the concept in his 1984 apostolic exhortation *Reconciliation and Penance* and his 1987 encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*.<sup>6</sup> From a different perspective, Paul Farmer, the Harvard Professor and founder of Partners in Health, frequently appeals to this theme in his work in social medicine.

If the structures that dehumanize, oppress and divide humanity can be considered structures of sin, might the structures that seek to uplift human dignity and heal the wounds of a broken world be considered structures of grace? A case for human rights NGOs as structures of grace can be made from several perspectives. In the interest of time, I will briefly outline four of these.

First, human rights NGOs serve as structures of grace in the ways they counter structural sin through human rights education and empowerment of local communities. There are countless examples of this type of work. Catholic NGOs such as Pax Romana and Franciscans International, for instance, work to support local communities and human rights defenders in the Universal Periodic Review process.

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<sup>6</sup> In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, John Paul II writes: "Sin" and "structures of sin" are categories which are seldom applied to the situation of the contemporary world. However, one cannot easily gain a profound understanding of the reality that confronts us unless we give a name to the root of the evils which afflict us." (no. 36)

While John Paul II did support the concept of structural sin, he warns against those applications of social sin that ascribe moral agency to structures. Social sin, he argues, are rooted in personal sin and can only be applied to communities and structures *analogically*. See John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia, Reconciliation and Penance* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1984), no. 16, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_02121984\\_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_02121984_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia_en.html); John Paul II, "Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, On Social Concern (1987)," in *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, ed. David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, Expanded Edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), no. 36.

Second, human rights NGOs counter the impact of structural sin by utilizing their “soft power” through advocacy and analysis aimed at holding political leaders and institutions accountable to the demands of the common good.<sup>7</sup> This work is most often done in what has been described as the “boomerang pattern of influence,” whereby non-state actors challenge structures and office holders normally seen as “sovereign.”<sup>8</sup> For many Catholic NGOs, such as the Dominicans for Justice and Peace, it is not uncommon for them, in this process, to support victims to take up their own voice and speak for themselves at the national and international levels.

Third, NGOs counteract structural sin in the ways in which they help to uncover the root causes of human rights abuses. Methods of social analysis that have been central to many international Catholic organizations have helped them to name and address underlying causes of abuse. This type of NGO analysis based on experience has been invaluable to the under-resourced special procedure mechanisms.

A framework of structural grace, however, is more than simply standing in opposition to structural sin. The category of grace is a critical theme in Christian theology with many social ramifications. Essentially, grace, according to the traditional Catholic viewpoint, is a gift of God that is freely given to humanity to heal the destructive effects of sin and raise the human person to a different level of being.<sup>9</sup> The social dimensions of grace have most explicitly been developed by the Belgian-Brazilian missionary José Comblin. According to Comblin, God’s grace manifests itself in history in concrete ways

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<sup>7</sup> Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 12.

<sup>9</sup> See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Complete English (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981), I–II qq. 109–114; Roger Haight, *The Experience and Language of Grace* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979).

in both persons and in communities. Grace, he asserts, is not some vague, invisible, and ineffective theory. Rather, it is a gratuitous presence of God that manifests itself in the prophetic movements of people fighting against sin and oppression. It is, he writes, “the force that awakens, animates, and maintains the struggle of the oppressed, who are victims of injustice and evil.”<sup>10</sup>

Human rights NGOs might also be understood as manifestations of grace as they seek to heal and transform society in light of specific missions. In Catholic theology, the mission of an organization is often described as a charism—a special gift or grace of the Holy Spirit given for the betterment of the common good.<sup>11</sup> For example, the NGO of the Daughters of Charity seek to respond to their Vincentian charism in their human rights advocacy work on behalf of the poor. The International Young Christian Workers, by contrast, focus their human rights advocacy work on their specific mission among young-adult workers.

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<sup>10</sup> Comblin uses the example of prophets to highlight the social dimensions of grace: “If sin is both personal and social, never purely personal, never purely social, so is grace. The human being acts socially. Even prophets who anticipate and appear to cry in the wilderness need at least a small audience to listen to them. Without an audience they would not be prophets. There is an initial nucleus, the beginning of the people the prophet wishes to enlighten. The grace animating the prophet acts at the same time in the nucleus of the audience. The prophet’s grace would be ineffective if it were not linked to the grace of the group that received the prophecy. In reality both constitute a single action.” José Comblin, “Grace,” in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 529–530; José Comblin, *The Holy Spirit and Liberation*, trans. Paul Burns, Theology and Liberation (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989). The American Jesuit theologian Roger Haight affirms this insight as he insists that that grace “is not and cannot be a purely personal phenomenon in any individualistic sense precisely because it liberates a person by effecting spontaneous openness to the neighbor.” Haight, 178.

<sup>11</sup> The Second Vatican Council speaks of the social dimensions of charisms. Drawing from St. Paul, Vatican II reclaimed an appreciation for the role of charisms as animating forces within the church and church communities. *Lumen Gentium* no. 12, in particular, recovers the Pauline notion of charisms while emphasizing the participation of all the people of God in the threefold office of Christ (priest, prophet and king). God freely distributes such special graces, the constitution teaches, which may be ordinary or extraordinary, to the faithful of every rank *for the common good*. Second Vatican Council, “Lumen Gentium, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (1964),” in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, trans. Colman O’Neill, vol. 1, New Revised Edition (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1998), no. 12.

At their best, human rights NGOs manifest noble missions or charisms aimed at advancing human dignity, charity and justice. The language of charism puts the specific mission of the organization into perspective. To recognize the mission of an organization as a charism helps to see a broader picture where mission is received by the organization as a gift to be directed to the common good.

### **3. Ethical Considerations**

While human rights NGOs have the potential to manifest social grace, no organization is perfect. Several ethical considerations surface from a theological reading of human rights NGOs as structural grace. To conclude, I will briefly highlight three considerations or sets of polar tensions that might be applied to all human rights NGOs in their important work.

#### A. Mission and Institution

First, socially engaged NGOs can experience a tension between mission and institution. On the one hand, there is the danger of neglecting the real need for ethical institutions to live out an important mission. Social transformation for human rights is a serious task. Having a good mission cannot be an excuse to ignore the need for organizational structures that safeguard effectiveness, participation, and accountability. On the other hand, there is a related danger for social groups to gravitate toward a stifling institutionalization, which can overshadow the dynamic grace or mission at the core of the organization. Over the course of organizational development as charisms and missions become routinized, attention must be paid to ensure that organizational

structures do not, as Roger Haight warns, hamper the “spontaneity” and creativity that are characteristic of grace.<sup>12</sup>

Within the Catholic tradition, the church has always maintained that charism and grace are not in opposition to institutional structures.<sup>13</sup> Both mission and institution are necessary to effect change. Institutions, however, ought to be secondary and in service to the mission of the organization and not the other way around. This means that in order to effectively carry out their specific missions, NGOs need to find a balance between flexibility and adaptability to a changing world and the need for participatory structures to guarantee that the organization is guided its mission, its members, and the needs of the common good.

This tension between mission and institution also requires a balance between the common good and the organizational good. The theologian James Keenan has spoken frequently about the virtue of self-care for people involved in social action. This same lesson can be applied to the organizational level.<sup>14</sup> Like the human rights defender, organizational structures need attention to avoid burn out and a loss of a sense of mission. One way to avoid this loss of mission is to appoint a person or committee to take charge of mission, such as a vice-president for mission.<sup>15</sup>

## B. Unity and Diversity

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<sup>12</sup> Haight, *The Experience and Language of Grace*, 180.

<sup>13</sup> In speaking of organizational charisms, Pope John Paul II notes, “The institutional and charismatic aspects are co-essential as it were to the Church’s constitution. They contribute, although differently, to the life, renewal and sanctification of God’s People.” John Paul II, “Address of His Holiness Pope John Paul II on the Occasion of the Meeting with the Ecclesial Movements and the New Communities, Rome, 30 May 1998,” in *Movements in the Church: Proceedings of the World Congress of the Ecclesial Movements, Rome, 27-29 May 1998*, *Laité Today 2* (Vatican City: Pontificium Consilium pro Laicis, 1999), 221.

<sup>14</sup> James F. Keen, “Proposing Cardinal Virtues,” *Theological Studies* no. 56 (1995): 709–729.

<sup>15</sup> The challenge of balancing mission and institution has been addressed by Catholic colleges and hospitals by instituting vice presidents for mission.



A second set of poles that need to be balanced in the work of international NGOs is the tension between unity and diversity within the organization. At one extreme, some organization's excessive focus on unity and adherence to a global "brand" leaves little room for diversity. At the other extreme, the embrace of diversity, particularly in global NGOs with federated structures, can make it impossible to agree on a common mission or shared social action plan. Finding the right balance between unity and diversity is not easy. The growing accessibility of social media offers new possibilities to engage a diverse group of people in a common task, but this needs critical evaluation to ensure that marginalized voices are taken into consideration.

### C. Cooperation and Competition

Human rights NGOs also struggle with the tension between cooperation and competition. With over 3,000 NGOs presently accredited to the UN, for example, only a very small number of highly funded organizations can be effective on their own. In order to have an impact on the global debate, organizations must join together in campaigns, coalitions, and other collaborative efforts. Partly overwhelmed with logistical challenges, the international institutions themselves are incentivizing NGO collaboration.

But collaboration, of course, is not always easy; nor is it always desirable. Working with other organizations takes precious time and energy that NGOs often do not have. Collaboration with other organizations can also mean that the specific concerns of one's organization are watered down or limited to the lowest common denominator. In a culture where NGOs are often forced to compete against one another for limited funds, there is often considerable pressure for organizational reports to emphasize their distinctive contributions and downplay collaborative efforts.

A theological framework of structural grace can help organizations negotiate these dangers. If these organizations ultimately have the same goal of the promotion of the common good and if they reflect missions rooted in the same (divine) source, then they should be open to exploring means for cooperation in such a way that respects the specific mission and identity of each party involved.<sup>16</sup> At times, this may also mean merging two different structures or organizations that have increasingly similar missions and goals. While any process of merging will likely involve painful decisions, a theology of structural grace can help those involved to remain focused on the demands of the common good and the grace-filled mission needed to address those demands.

In their opposition to social sin and embodiment of specific charisms human rights NGOs are potential manifestations of what might be called social or structural grace. This is not to suggest that organizations have moral agency in the same way as a human person; nor is it to say that they are perfect. Rather, a framework that acknowledges the pneumatological dimensions underlying efforts aimed at social

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<sup>16</sup> Tensions between organizations working in similar fields are not new within Catholicism, In his 1996 post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, Pope John Paul II addresses this as he recalls the memory of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) who wrestled with competition between medieval religious orders:

“Fraternal spiritual relations and mutual cooperation among different Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life are sustained and nourished by the sense of ecclesial communion. Those who are united by a common commitment to the following of Christ and are inspired by the same Spirit cannot fail to manifest visibly, as branches of the one Vine, the fullness of the Gospel of love... Saint Bernard's words about the various Religious Orders remain ever timely: ‘I admire them all. I belong to one of them by observance, but to all of them by charity. We all need one another: the spiritual good which I do not own and possess, I receive from others ... In this exile, the Church is still on pilgrimage and is, in a certain sense, plural: she is a single plurality and a plural unity. All our diversities, which make manifest the richness of God's gifts, will continue to exist in the one house of the Father, which has many rooms. Now there is a division of graces; then there will be distinctions of glory. Unity, both here and there, consists in one and the same charity.’” John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation On Consecrated Life and Its Mission in the Church and in the World* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1996), no. 52, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_25031996\\_vita-consecrata\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031996_vita-consecrata_en.html).

transformation can help organizations maintain perspective as they discern how to best to embody their mission in their service of the common good.