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ENTITLEMENTS AND CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHINGS

ARTHUR F. MCGOVERN, S.J.*

Over the past several decades the United States government and governments in many other nations have provided for a number of benefits (for example, social security, Medicare, and welfare payments) which in earlier generations were considered personal responsibilities. Many of these benefits have come to be viewed as "entitlements," as goods that recipients have a moral and in many cases a legal right to expect. Defenders of entitlements believe that government programs have provided a level of security and welfare that individuals could not achieve on their own and that society as a whole benefits from the improved well-being of the recipients.

Critics of entitlements, however, have become increasingly vocal. They sharply question the wisdom of all these government programs and challenge viewing them as entitlements. Several concerns have fueled these challenges: the soaring costs of government assistance programs, a conviction that these programs weaken individual responsibility and thus undermine the whole social fabric of the country, and a contention that the state should stay out of the entitlement business and leave welfare projects to private organizations which handle them more effectively.

This essay seeks to examine what Catholic social teachings have to say about entitlements. Papal social encyclicals¹ constitute the main source of Catholic social teachings. All the "major" papal social encyclicals are considered in this essay, in addition to an important pastoral letter on the U.S. economy by the U.S. Catholic bishops.

The attempt to examine the relationship of entitlements to Catholic social teachings has proven a daunting undertaking. Defining entitlements and determining what to include under that heading creates an initial problem. The major difficulty arises from the fact that papal social encyclicals do not speak

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1. Encyclicals are long letters sent out by popes to the Catholic faithful to express official Catholic teachings on matters of faith and morals; only at the end of the nineteenth century did the popes begin to include social problems as issues that might be addressed in their encyclicals.

explicitly about "entitlements,"² so that evidence for or against them will depend on drawing inferences from statements that may seem to use the equivalent of entitlement language. Conflicting interpretations of Church social teachings (in this case, whether or not they endorse entitlements) and how much doctrinal weight to give them (with some arguing that even if they do imply entitlements, they need to be re-evaluated) constitute additional problems. Catholic social teachings do not easily translate into clear doctrinal imperatives as do, for example, church teachings on abortion and artificial birth control.

As a method of proceeding and dealing with these difficulties, the following steps are proposed: first, an initial effort to define entitlements and to suggest what to look for in Catholic Church teachings that might imply entitlements; second, an investigation of these teachings; and third, assessments of entitlements in the light of these teachings.

In this essay I will restrict the term "entitlements" to benefits provided by or mandated by governments. Peter Peterson and Neil Howe define entitlements in legal terms. Entitlements are benefits, cash or in kind, that the federal government automatically pays to qualified individuals; entitled beneficiaries can sue if the government fails to pay the benefits.³ This heading would include benefits such as social security, Medicare, Medicaid, supplemental security income, AFDC, and veteran aid benefits, benefits which do not require an annual appropriation by Congress. This list might be expanded to include benefits that governments mandate (for example, that businesses pay a minimum wage) and those which some believe government *should* provide (for example, universal medical care). This description of entitlements does, at least, narrow the topic to actual or potential *government* programs.

Catholic social teachings do not directly address the question of entitlements. They do, however, speak of many human "rights" dealing with socioeconomic claims. Whether rights connote entitlements and whether socioeconomic rights should be classified as true rights will require some discussion. A focus on rights and on government responsibilities will serve at least as a point of entry for considering Catholic social teachings in relation to the issue of entitlements.

2. NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS, ECONOMIC JUSTICE FOR ALL *in* ORIGINS 4c (1986) [hereinafter ECONOMIC JUSTICE FOR ALL] makes some references to entitlements, but I have not found the word used in any of the papal social encyclicals or in any of the indexes which accompany them.

3. PETER G. PETERSON & NEIL HOWE, ON BORROWED TIME, HOW THE GROWTH IN ENTITLEMENT SPENDING THREATENS AMERICA'S FUTURE 77-78 (1988).

I. THE CLASSIC ENCYCLICALS: RERUM NOVARUM AND QUADRAGESIMO ANNO.⁴

The first major social encyclical, Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (1891) focused sharply on "the" social question of that time: the disparity between "the enormous fortunes of individuals and the poverty of the masses" which had created class conflicts and moral deterioration.⁵ Throughout the encyclical Pope Leo refers repeatedly to rights. The Catholic tradition of rights, however, differs in some significant ways from the manner in which rights have been most often understood in the United States. The U.S. tradition, influenced initially by John Locke's political thought, stresses *freedom* as its focus. Hence rights, as in the U.S. "Bill of Rights," has meant primarily political rights, especially protecting the individual's freedom from intrusion by the state. These political rights, while inherent in each individual, receive their confirmation through a consensual social contract in the formation of the state.

The Catholic tradition, while also insisting that rights belong to individuals prior to the state, stresses *human dignity* as the basis of rights.⁶ This foundation of human dignity, David Hollenbach observes, creates a much broader scope of rights: respect for freedom, the meeting of basic human needs, and participation in community.⁷ This broader sense of rights clearly raises serious

4. The text of all the church documents cited in this essay can be found in *CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT, THE DOCUMENTARY HERITAGE* (David J. O'Brien & Thomas A. Shannon eds., 1992) [hereinafter *CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT*]. All the encyclicals have numbered paragraphs/sections; the footnotes that follow cite only the encyclical and numbered section where the quotation can be found. The main headings I use are borrowed in part from this O'Brien-Shannon volume.

5. LEO XIII, *RERUM NOVARUM* para. 1 (1891) *reprinted in CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT: THE DOCUMENTARY HERITAGE* 14 (David J. O'Brien & Thomas A. Shannon eds., 1992). [hereinafter *RERUM NOVARUM*].

6. I am indebted to DAVID HOLLENBACH, *CLAIMS IN CONFLICT, RETRIEVING AND RENEWING THE CATHOLIC HUMAN RIGHTS TRADITION* 41-106 (1979), for this insight into the use of human dignity as the basis for Catholic social teachings on rights. *Rerum Novarum's* stress on human dignity is most fully articulated in one of the opening paragraphs on the right to private property. The pope uses the traditional scholastic argument that the human mind and power to reason distinguish humans from other animals, giving them special worth. References to human dignity occur throughout the encyclical, for example, employers "must respect in every man his dignity," "the true dignity and excellence of man"; humans "raised to the dignity of the children of God." Later encyclicals will emphasize more the biblical bases of human dignity, for example, all humans created "in the image of God." *RERUM NOVARUM* para. 16, 20-21.

7. David Hollenbach, S.J., *Global Human Rights: An Interpretation of the Contemporary Catholic Understanding*, in *HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE AMERICAS: A*

questions about how they can be implemented; at this point I want simply to emphasize a significant difference in the connotations of the term "rights."

The natural law tradition upon which Pope Leo relied also viewed rights as a part of an ideal, hierarchically-structured social order intended by God, not the result of any social contract. This ideal order envisioned the kinds of relations and conditions that should prevail in society. Medieval society, the pope believed, most perfectly exemplified this ideal social order.⁸

Pope Leo clearly viewed the problems created by the industrial revolution—the "misery and wretchedness" of the poor, the destruction of workers' guilds, "the callousness of employers and the greed of unrestrained competition"⁹—as conditions that militated against human dignity. The remedies he proposed were intended to correct these conditions.

In reaction against socialist teachings, Pope Leo placed repeated emphasis on the right to private property. "[E]very man has by nature the right to possess property as his own."¹⁰ Even in defending this right, however, the pope stressed human dignity by relating ownership to meeting basic human needs: "the daily supply of his daily wants";¹¹ "what is required for the preservation of life and for life's well-being";¹² "a father must provide food and all necessities for those whom he has begotten."¹³

His defense of a worker's right to a "just wage" followed the same line of argumentation: "the remuneration must be enough to support the wage earner in reasonable and frugal comfort."¹⁴ While the pope clearly viewed providing a just wage as the responsibility of owners, one might argue that his stress on a

STRUGGLE FOR CONSENSUS 7 (Alfred Hennelly, S.J. & John Langan, S.J. eds., 1987).

8. Speaking of the medieval past Leo writes:

Of these things there cannot be the shadow of doubt; for instance, that civil society was renovated in every part by the teachings of Christianity . . . the human race was lifted up to better things . . . to so excellent a life that nothing more perfect had been known before or will come to pass in the ages that are yet to be.

RENUM NOVARUM, *supra* note 5, at para. 22. Pope Leo thus insisted on the need to "restore" society, "to recall it to the principles from which it sprang" so that "to go back to it is recovery." *Id.*

9. RERUM NOVARUM, *supra* note 5, at para. 2.

10. *Id.*, at para. 5. The use of the generic "man" in the social encyclicals began at a time when language had not become a social issue; its continued use in more recent encyclicals has, however, evoked considerable criticism by many.

11. *Id.* at para. 6.

12. *Id.* at para. 7.

13. *Id.* at para. 10.

14. *Id.* at para. 34.

“just” wage at least leaves open the consideration of a “minimum wage” enforced by law, and hence as a form of entitlement.

While warning often against socialism which risks complete absorption of the individual by the state, *Rerum Novarum* nevertheless stresses the state’s duty to “provide for the welfare and the comfort of the working people.”¹⁵ Most of its references to governmental responsibility deal with protection of workers against abuses such as excessive working hours and unsafe working conditions. The encyclical includes statements which point to direct state assistance. Justice demands that the interests of the poor be carefully watched by the administration to ensure that the poor may share in benefits they create, “that being housed, clothed and enabled to support life, they may find their existence less hard and more enduring.”¹⁶ Public authority has a duty toward “those who are badly off and have no resources of their own to fall back upon, and must chiefly rely upon the assistance of the State.”¹⁷ While government should not take over family responsibilities, “if a family finds itself in great difficulty . . . and without prospect for help, it is right that extreme necessity be met by public aid; for each family is a part of the commonwealth.”¹⁸

One noted specialist on Catholic social teachings claims that “the most decisive step taken by *Rerum Novarum* was to establish firmly the legitimacy of some amount of state intervention in the economy in order to remedy major social evils.”¹⁹

Pope Pius XI’s *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) reaffirmed the main social doctrines set down by Leo XIII. It repeated the clear rejection of collectivist socialism but offered a much sharper criticism of “individualistic” capitalism, in which “immense power and despotic economic domination is concentrated in the hands of a few.”²⁰ It sought, as a middle way between socialism and the prevailing capitalism to promote a new “corporatism” model for

15. *Id.* at para. 27.

16. *Id.*

17. *Id.* at para. 29.

18. *Id.* at para. 11.

19. Jean-Yves Calvez, S.J., *Economic Policy Issues in Roman Catholic Social Teaching*, in *THE CATHOLIC CHALLENGE TO THE AMERICAN ECONOMY* 17 (Thomas M. Gannon, S.J. ed., 1987). DONAL DORR, *OPTION FOR THE POOR, A HUNDRED YEARS OF VATICAN SOCIAL TEACHING* 16-28 (1983) also notes that *RERUM NOVARUM* insists on the duty of the State to protect the poor but DORR believes that Leo XIII stressed the state’s duty in part to avoid militant groups from trying to exercise power from below.

20. PIUS XI, *QUADRAGESIMO ANNO* (1931) reprinted in *CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT*, *supra* note 4, at 42 [hereinafter *QUADRAGESIMO ANNO*].

organizing businesses so that workers would share in ownership and managements decisions.²¹

With respect to the entitlement issue, two very different lines of argument might be inferred. On the one hand, Pius XI quite clearly repudiates the 19th century laissez-faire "liberalism" which viewed any intrusion by the government as a disruption of the natural laws of a free market. Such views have "long hampered effective intervention by the government."²² He praises civil authorities for introducing laws which defend the sacred rights of the worker "which proceed from his dignity as a man and as a Christian."²³ He repeats Pope Leo's insistence that "the mass of the poor, with no resources of their own to rely on, must look to the State for protection."²⁴ He notes the principle of social justice—a new concept introduced by Pius XI²⁵—should guide civil authorities in creating policies regarding the just distribution of wealth. "Each class, then, must receive its due share, and the distribution of created goods must be brought into conformity with the demands of the common good and social justice."²⁶

While these remarks suggest papal support of government assistance programs, the "principle of subsidiarity" first promulgated in this encyclical has often served as an argument for severely limiting or even trying to avoid such programs. The principle states that it is wrong to transfer "to the larger and higher collectivity functions which can be provided for by lesser and subordinate bodies."²⁷ The same principle, however, acknowledges that "much that was formerly done by small bodies can nowadays be accomplished only by large organizations." Subsidiarity thus means seeking first and wherever possible to address social problems at more local levels, but it suggests that government action may be necessary when, because of the magnitude of the social needs (or failures to address them), the problems and needs are not being dealt with effectively.

21. *Id.* at paras. 64-65, 81-97.

22. *Id.* at para. 27.

23. *Id.* at para. 28.

24. *Id.* at para. 25.

25. See DAVID HOLLENBACH, S.J., *CLAIMS IN CONFLICT* 50-56 (1979) for an extended discussion of social justice and its implications for state authorities on Pius XI, and his summary discussion of the types of justice, including social justice. *Id.* at 143-55.

26. *QUADRAGESIMO ANNO*, *supra* note 20, at para. 58.

27. *Id.* at para. 79.

II. CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT IN TRANSITION: POPE JOHN XXIII

Pope John XXIII, in his first social encyclical *Mater et Magistra* (1961), cites the principle of subsidiarity and stresses throughout the need for balance in sharing responsibilities. He affirms that "in economic affairs first place is to be given to the private initiative" of individuals.²⁸ He goes on, however, to note that "it is requested again and again of public authorities responsible for the common good, that they intervene in a wide variety of economic affairs, and that, in a more extensive and organized way than heretofore, they adapt institutions, tasks, means, and procedures to this end."²⁹

Ideally, says the pope, private initiative and responsibility serve best in addressing social needs, for example, individuals providing for themselves the necessity of life. The state, however, has a responsibility when private initiative fails in various sectors of the economy.³⁰ The complexity of modern society, the pope adds, has brought about a growing intervention by public authorities in health care, education and assisting the handicapped, "objectives . . . which exceed the capacity of single individuals."³¹

Pope John XXIII sought consistently to balance private and state initiative, and for the most part he focused on what needs to change without proposing specific programs or actions. In some instances, however, he proposed programs that seem clearly to indicate support for state assistance. His most detailed remarks concern farmers who, he affirms, should receive the same insurance and social security benefits that other citizens receive. He then adds: "Moreover, since social security and insurance can help appreciably in distributing national income among the citizens according to justice and equity, these systems can be regarded as means whereby imbalances among various classes of citizens are reduced."³² Less forceful, but still suggesting government programs in the same section on agricultural sector of society, the pope notes that everyone "and especially public authorities" should improve public services, under which heading he includes housing, medical services and schools.³³ Later he states also that farmers who work vigorously to improve their

28. POPE JOHN XXIII, *MATER ET MAGISTRA*, para. 51 (1961), reprinted in *CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT*, *supra* note 4, at 84 [hereinafter *MATER ET MAGISTRA*].

29. *Id.* at para. 54.

30. *Id.* at paras. 55-58.

31. *Id.* at para. 60.

32. *Id.* at para. 136.

33. *Id.* at para. 127.

output "may rightly demand that their efforts be aided and complemented by public authorities."³⁴

Pope John XXIII's subsequent social encyclical, *Pacem in Terris* (1963) offers the most detailed and comprehensive statements about rights found in any of the social encyclicals. If rights do imply entitlements, the strongest prima facie basis for including them as integral to Catholic social teachings would derive from this encyclical.

In the opening statements of the encyclical, John XXIII speaks of the order God has created in the universe and the order that should exist in human society. To be well-ordered, any human society must have as a foundation that every human being is a person and as a person has universal and inviolable rights. The pope then continues:

Beginning our discussion of the rights of man, we see that every man has the right to life, to bodily integrity, and to the means which are suitable for the proper development of life; these are primarily food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, and finally the necessary social services. Therefore a human being also has the right to security in cases of sickness, inability to work, widowhood, old age, unemployment, or in any other case in which he is deprived of the means of subsistence through no fault of his own.³⁵

To this extensive list of rights, John XXIII adds others: "the right to share in the benefits of culture and therefore the right to a basic education and to technical and professional training in keeping with the stage of educational development in the country to which he belongs."³⁶ Then under the heading of economic rights the encyclical asserts "a right by the natural law . . . to an opportunity to work."³⁷

Reiterating the "just wage" principle first enunciated in *Rerum Novarum*, John XXIII says that "the worker has a right to a wage determined according to criteria of justice, and sufficient, therefore, in proportion to the available resources, to give the worker and his family a standard of living in keeping with the dignity of the human person."³⁸ Finally, after enumerating this

34. *Id.* at para. 147.

35. POPE JOHN XXIII, *PACEM IN TERRIS*, para. 11 (1963), *reprinted in* CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT, *supra* note 4, at 131.

36. *Id.* at para. 13.

37. *Id.* at para. 18.

38. *Id.* at para. 20.

long list of rights, the encyclical mentions also "the right to private property" as deriving from the nature of humans.³⁹

Pope John XXIII relates these many rights to "the dignity of the human person"⁴⁰ and to "the common good" which requires "that all members of the state be entitled to share in it" with special attention given by government "to the less fortunate members of the community."⁴¹ Catholics who inferred from this strong focus on rights that state-assistance programs could help to fulfill these rights seem clearly justified. Certainly *Pacem in Terris* gives no warning against such programs and *Mater et Magistra* had suggested some specific welfare programs. *Pacem in Terris* does, however, stop short of proposing government programs and speaks instead in very general terms. Civil authorities' "chief concern" should be to ensure "that these rights are acknowledged, respected, coordinated with others rights";⁴² they should "make earnest efforts," "promote," "inspire various steps" to see that citizens can easily exercise these rights,⁴³ but that "it is impossible to determine, in all cases . . . how civil authorities can most effectively fulfill their respective functions."⁴⁴

III. VATICAN II AND POPE PAUL VI

The Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), gave expression to a new movement in the Church, a movement reflected also in the social activism so prevalent in the 1960s. The Church had for centuries focused upon "saving souls" and the goal of eternal life as its primary mission. *Gaudium et Spes* engendered a new emphasis on the importance of transforming *this* world. Drawing upon scripture and biblical theology more often than natural law, it spoke of Christ's mission as breaking the power of evil "so that this world might be fashioned anew according to God's design and reach its fulfillment."⁴⁵

This new focus on working to create "a new earth where justice will abide"⁴⁶ marked the importance of *Gaudium et Spes* far more than any of the specific actions or policies it proposed. It addressed the need to overcome socioeconomic inequalities and

39. *Id.* at para. 21.

40. *Id.* at para. 34, 41, 50.

41. *Id.* at para. 56.

42. *Id.* at para. 60.

43. *Id.* at para. 60-65.

44. *Id.* at para. 67.

45. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *GAUDIUM ET SPES*, para. 2 (1965), reprinted in *CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT*, *supra* note 4 at 166.

46. *Id.* at para. 34.

spoke of the "universal purpose" of created goods which all should share,⁴⁷ but it remained for the most part at the level of general principles. Pope Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* (1967) dealt primarily with relations between rich and poor nations. While this issue has become important in recent Catholic social teachings, it goes beyond the purview of this essay.

IV. THE SOCIAL TEACHINGS OF POPE JOHN PAUL II

When Pope John Paul II issued *Laborem Exercens*, his first major social encyclical, *Newsweek* magazine commented that the Catholic Church might have its first socialist pope. His second social encyclical, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, evoked sharp criticisms in some conservative quarters for its seeming judgment that the United States and the then Soviet Union were equally at fault as obstacles to development in Third World countries. *Centesimus Annus*, in sharp contrast, turned conservative criticisms into applause, thanks to its strong endorsement of the free enterprise system.

In *Laborem Exercens* (1981) John Paul II focused on the dignity of human work as a unifying theme for the whole encyclical. Work, he asserts, is a distinguishing characteristic of human life, an expression of and means of fulfillment for human nature. The centrality of work in human life translates into a fundamental principle that should guide all economic policies and activity: "the priority of labor over capital." At times during the history of capitalism this principle was not observed and workers were treated as "instruments" of production.⁴⁸ Marxism claimed to change this but simply replaced a business elite with Party ownership and control in the state.⁴⁹

In discussing workers' rights and the responsibility for giving priority of labor over capital, John Paul II goes beyond the obligations of owners (the direct employers) to speak of the "indirect employer." The indirect employer includes all the persons and institutions that determine the socioeconomic system as a whole, but applies especially to the state, "for it is the state that must conduct a just labor policy."⁵⁰ The issue of employment receives special attention in this context. Many of the pope's comments,

47. *Id.* at paras. 65-69.

48. JOHN PAUL II, *LABOREM EXERCENS*, para. 8 (1981), *reprinted in* CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT, *supra* note 4, at 352 [hereinafter *LABOREM EXERCENS*].

49. *Id.* at para. 14.

50. *Id.* at para. 17.

worth citing at some length, appear clearly related to the question of entitlements.

Pope John Paul II urges planning to create employment for all. While private enterprise certainly plays a major part, the pope speaks also of the responsibility of the "indirect employer," adding that "[i]n the final analysis this overall concern weighs on the shoulders of the state."⁵¹ When unemployment occurs, the pope notes:

The obligation to provide unemployment benefits, that is to say, the duty to make suitable grants indispensable for the subsistence of unemployed workers and their families, is a duty springing from the fundamental principle of the moral order in this sphere, namely the principle of the common use of goods or, to put it another and still simpler way, the right to life and subsistence.⁵²

Then, under the heading of "Wages and Other Social Benefits," John Paul II reiterates earlier papal teachings on "just remuneration" for work, calling for a wage sufficient to support a family, but then adds

or through other social measures such as family allowances or grants to mothers devoting themselves exclusively to their families . . .⁵³

These grants should correspond to the actual needs, that is, to the number of dependents for as long as they are not in a position to assume proper responsibility for their own lives.⁵⁴

Later in the same section, John Paul II continues:

Besides wages, various social benefits intended to ensure the life and health of workers . . . play a part here. The expenses involved in health care . . . demand that medical assistance should be easily available for workers and that as far as possible it should be cheap or even free of charge.⁵⁵

The pope stops short of saying that the *government* itself should provide these benefits or that they should be considered entitlements, but he seems quite clearly to be asserting that assistance should be provided and that government should ensure that it is provided.

51. *Id.* at para. 18.

52. *Id.*

53. *Id.* at para. 19.

54. *Id.*

55. *Id.*

Pope John Paul II's next social encyclical, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), commemorated the 20th anniversary of *Populorum Progressio*. Its discussion of "structures of sin" and of obstacles to development in poorer nations evoked strong reactions, but like Paul VI's encyclical it chiefly addressed relations between nations, issues that go beyond the scope of this essay.

When *Centesimus Annus* appeared (1991), on the 100th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, defenders of democratic capitalism finally felt justified. They had often argued that the papal social encyclicals, including the earlier ones of John Paul II, had failed to appreciate the positive values of the free enterprise system. The new encyclical, they believed, reversed this trend. This new encyclical, Michael Novak wrote, "does what many of us had long hoped some church authority should do; it captures the spirit and essence of the American experiment in political economy."⁵⁶

Much of the discussion about the new encyclical focused on its comments about free enterprise and the free market system. It analyzed the failures of Communist regimes and contrasted them with the positive values of the modern free enterprise system. It acknowledged that the free market appears to be "the most efficient instrument for utilizing resources and effectively responding to needs," but qualified this endorsement saying that a truly free system "demands that the market be appropriately controlled by the forces of society and by the state, so as to guarantee that the basic needs of the whole of society are satisfied."⁵⁷

With respect to the entitlement issue, John Paul II issued some very critical remarks about the role of the state in the economy and most especially about "the welfare state." In the economic sector the state cannot "directly ensure the right to work for all its citizens" but should strive "to sustain business activities . . . which will ensure job opportunities," though in exceptional circumstances, and then only briefly, it may intervene.⁵⁸

Such interventions, however, have vastly expanded in recent years creating a new type of welfare state whose "excesses and abuses" John Paul II criticizes. He says that these excesses result from an inadequate understanding of the tasks proper to the state; the principle of subsidiarity must be respected.

56. MICHAEL NOVAK, *Tested by Our Own Ideals*, in *A NEW WORLDLY ORDER*, 139 (George Weigel ed., 1992). This volume contains short essays by Peter Berger, Milton Friedman, Richard John Neuhaus and others, nearly all of them praising the encyclical as setting a new direction in Catholic social thought.

57. JOHN PAUL II, *CENTESIMUS ANNUS*, paras. 34-35 (1991), *reprinted in CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT*, *supra* note 4, at 439.

58. *Id.* at para. 48.

By intervening directly and depriving society of its responsibility, the social assistance state leads to a loss of human energies and an inordinate increase of public agencies, which are dominated more by bureaucratic ways of thinking than by concern for serving their clients, and which are accompanied by an enormous increase in spending.⁵⁹

Those who need assistance are best served by those closest to them. Social policies which assist the family should receive special attention.⁶⁰

These would certainly appear to be quite telling arguments against implying Catholic support of entitlements; some might even say they are strong enough simply to conclude the whole debate. "The papacy has finally recognized that most entitlements do more harm than good; and this recognition now represents, on this issue, the official social doctrine of the Church." Such a conclusion, however, could lead one to question whether the Church has a clear and consistent set of social teachings or only social teachings that reflect the thought of a given pope at a given time.

V. A PASTORAL LETTER OF THE U.S. CATHOLIC BISHOPS

One final source of Catholic social thought should be considered before attempting a concluding assessment: the U.S. Catholic Bishops "Economic Justice for All: A Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy" (1986). Some may object that it lacks the status of papal encyclicals, or as one university colleague stated: "I take seriously what the pope has to say; I don't feel the same obligation toward the bishops." But this, in turn, raises serious questions about the locus of teaching authority in the Church. As the very title of the Bishops' Letter suggests, they are speaking as Church authorities on Catholic social teaching. This should, in itself, constitute sufficient reason for considering their letter.

The pastoral letter sets forth six moral principles which the bishops believe should serve as standards for judging economic life:

- (1) Every economic decision and institution must be judged in light of whether it protects or undermines the dignity of the human person;
- (2) Human dignity can be realized and protected only in community:

59. *Id.*

60. *Id.* at para. 49.

- (3) All people have a right to participate in the economic life of society;
- (4) All members of society have a special obligation to the poor and vulnerable;
- (5) Human rights are the minimum conditions for life in community;
- (6) Society as a whole, acting through public and private institutions, has the moral responsibility to enhance human dignity and protect human rights.⁶¹

The pastoral letter adds a number of biblical themes that speak to issues of social justice: all humans having special dignity as made in God's image and likeness; God's covenant which entails acting justly and protecting the poor; Jesus' preaching of the reign of God with its special emphasis on the poor ("Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God") and similar themes.⁶² In the final sections of the letter the bishops address several issues which they see as especially important in the United States: employment, poverty, agriculture, and U.S. relations with poor nations.

The basic moral principles, the biblical themes, and the issues addressed all seem quite consistent with the social teachings presented in papal social encyclicals (though some would argue that the principles, both in the Bishops' Letter and in Catholic social teachings in general, have overemphasized the distribution of goods and neglected productivity). The strongest negative reactions to the letter, however, have centered on its specific "Guidelines for Action" which included endorsements for a number of entitlement programs.⁶³ While the Bishops' Letter states that not all social welfare programs have been successful and that welfare reform is needed,⁶⁴ it nevertheless strongly supports and defends many social welfare programs that have been initiated in the United States. For example, the bishops affirm: "[I]ncreased support for direct job creation programs . . . and public subsidies for employment in the private sector."⁶⁵ Then, citing evidence for the success of the Social Security Pro-

61. ECONOMIC JUSTICE FOR ALL, *supra* note 2, at paras. 13-18.

62. *Id.* at paras. 30-55.

63. Manuel Velasquez and Gerald Cavanagh, S.J., *Religion and Business: The Catholic Church and the American Economy*, 30 CAL. MANAGEMENT REV., n. 4 (1988), provides a useful summary of the many responses to the letter, including the strongest criticisms of conservatives. The article also offers a good overview of the long process and various drafts involved in reaching the final formulation of the letter.

64. ECONOMIC JUSTICE FOR ALL, *supra* note 2, at paras. 192, 210.

65. *Id.* at para. 162.

gram, Medicare and Medicaid, the Bishops' Letter claims "[t]hese and other successful social welfare programs are evidence of our nation's commitment to social justice and a decent life for everyone."⁶⁶ The letter defends the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program and criticizes those who stereotype welfare recipients as wanting to avoid work.⁶⁷ "Welfare programs should provide recipients with adequate levels of support."⁶⁸

VI. A FIRST ASSESSMENT: DO THE TEACHINGS ENDORSE ENTITLEMENTS?

Do Catholic social teachings contain or imply, then, an endorsement of entitlements? As noted from the outset, except for the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Pastoral Letter, official church teachings make no direct reference to entitlements. In this essay we have focused on three sources which may (or may not) imply an endorsement of entitlements: direct references to state-assistance programs, the implications of statements about socioeconomic rights, and inferences drawn from Church statements about the principle of subsidiarity.

There are enough specific examples, already cited, to argue that some types of government assistance programs seem clearly to have papal approval, including some points made by John Paul II in *Laborem Exercens*. To recall some of them briefly:

"Those who are badly off . . . must chiefly rely upon the assistance of the State";⁶⁹ "social security and insurance can help appreciably in distributing national income";⁷⁰ public authorities should strive to improve needed services, for example, housing and medical services;⁷¹ "the obligation to provide unemployment benefits";⁷² "social measures such as family allowances";⁷³ "besides wages, various social benefits . . . medical assistance should be easily available . . . cheap or even free of charge."⁷⁴

Pope John XXIII's advocacy of socioeconomic rights would significantly enlarge this number if accepted as legitimate claims that individuals have on society. That such rights constitute a part of Catholic social teachings is incontestable; references to

66. *Id.* at para. 192.

67. *Id.* at para. 194.

68. *Id.* at para. 212.

69. *RERUM NOVARUM*, *supra* note 4, at para. 28.

70. *MATER ET MAGISTRA*, *supra* note 28, at para. 136.

71. *Id.* at para. 127.

72. *LABOREM EXERCENS*, *supra* note 48, at para. 18.

73. *Id.* at para. 19.

74. *Id.*

them appear in all the social encyclicals, if most clearly in *Pacem in Terris*. Some challenge the legitimacy of such rights, however, even if the social encyclicals do include them. Socioeconomic rights, opponents claim, fail to meet the criteria needed to justify them. They go beyond the ordinary Anglo-Saxon usage of the term "rights" and have no constitutional basis in the United States. Rights imply corresponding obligations, but socioeconomic rights are not correlated with duties to assignable persons or institutions. They cannot be proven to be valid claims against any particular person or persons. They are positive claims to certain kinds of goods (food, clothing, medical care) but many states lack the financial resources to meet all the basic needs these rights call for.⁷⁵

The social encyclicals, however, do not use rights in a strict legal sense. They do not say that states must adopt welfare programs as *the* means of providing the financial resources needed for fulfilling all the conditions that would ensure true human dignity.⁷⁶ They do say, however, that governments must work to bring about social arrangements that can provide for essential goods. They speak in a language of "promoting," "striving," and "making efforts" to create conditions which will "allow for" the exercise of human rights.

The principle of subsidiarity has been invoked as an argument against state-assistance programs (or in the case of John Paul II, against their "excesses and abuses"). It serves, however, only as a guiding principle, a principle with two parts: problems are better solved at lower levels by smaller groups, but some require measures at a higher level by larger institutions. The principle itself does not tell us which legitimate social needs can be resolved at lower levels without recourse to government programs; only experience and empirical evidence can determine this (and analysts sharply disagree about both).

75. See John Langan, S.J., *Defining Human Rights: A Revision of the Liberal Tradition*, in HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE AMERICAS (1982), for a very balanced study that takes up the arguments against socioeconomic rights (by Maurice Cranston and others) and makes a case for these rights *as understood* in Catholic social teachings.

76. Many social arrangements (families, clans, states), Langan observes, contribute to meeting the claims on goods necessary for a dignified human life. Langan's study provides a ground also for indicating how socioeconomic rights can legitimately be called rights. Most people, for example, would clearly affirm that parents have an obligation to feed and clothe their children and, moreover, that children have a *right* to such basic goods. The state governments implicitly recognize these rights when it prosecutes parents or removes children from their parents for neglecting these basic needs. *Id.* at 78.

Do Catholic social teachings, then, imply an endorsement of entitlements? They certainly do not give any blanket endorsement of entitlements or say that state-assisted programs provide the best solution for meeting social needs. All the encyclicals spread out the responsibilities for achieving the common good. They do, however, strongly stress *social* responsibility under a variety of headings: the common good, social justice, respecting the dignity of every person, human solidarity, human rights, option for the poor. Within this context, moreover, they emphasize that governments (and not just individuals acting in their own behalf) have "as a chief concern" ensuring that social justice and human rights should be carried out, and they give some indication that state-provided assistance may be at times required.

VII. A SECOND ASSESSMENT: SHOULD ENTITLEMENTS BE RECONSIDERED?

If there is some justification for including some entitlements (or at least some government programs of assistance) as part of Catholic social teachings, should they be reconsidered in the light of criticisms about their effects (soaring costs, excessive bureaucracy and inefficiency, etc.)? Has not, in fact, Pope John Paul II already engaged in such a reassessment and reached a negative judgment about welfare assistance programs? In *Laborem Exercens* he seemed to have favored some; in *Centesimus Annus* he criticized the abuses and excesses of the "welfare state."

With respect to intellectuals and politicians, changing one's views—arriving at different positions than one previously held in the light of new evidence or revised thinking—occurs frequently enough. For popes, however, who call upon the faithful to assent to their teaching and who claim to represent "what the Church has always taught," such changes could create a real problem, suggesting that social teachings are not consistent and carry little moral weight (perhaps even less than some secular treatment of socioeconomic issues since few popes or bishops have expertise in the social sciences).

This issue, at least, can be resolved without favoring either position on the entitlement issue. Catholic social teachings operate on different levels.⁷⁷ They offer first an overall perspective

77. On these levels of Catholic social teachings confer Charles E. Curran, *Relating Religious-Ethical Inquiry to Economic Policy*, in *THE CATHOLIC CHALLENGE TO THE AMERICAN ECONOMY* (Thomas M. Gannon, S.J., ed., 1987). Curran adds an additional level, the Person, an aspect of teaching that he finds too often neglected. Curran argues that one cannot go directly from the gospel to solutions of very complex social issues. "One cannot address these complex

about the social relations that should prevail in society: the first social encyclicals viewed medieval society as a model embodiment of Christian teachings and the natural law; more recent writings draw on scripture, especially what Jesus envisioned when he spoke of the "kingdom of God." They offer at a second level a set of general moral principles about human rights, social justice, the role of the state, an option for the poor—the types of principles that the U.S. Bishops formulated in their letter. At a third and lower level, Catholic social teachings offer practical policy recommendations which would include the state-assistance programs discussed in this essay and other possible entitlement programs.

In prefacing their own policy proposals, the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Pastoral Letter articulates a position with respect to this third level which applies to their own discussion of specific issues but would hold true of the papal encyclicals as well. The movement from principles to policy, they note, "is complex and difficult." While moral values are essential in determining public policies, "they do not dictate specific solutions." Policy recommendations depend not only on the moral force of principles but "also on the accuracy of our information and the validity of our assumptions."⁷⁸ Their judgments on specific issues, the bishops add, "do not carry the same moral authority as our statements of universal moral principles and formal Church teaching."⁷⁹ Their specific recommendations, they conclude, should be given serious consideration, but are open for debate.

This reflection, which I believe applies to all Catholic social teachings, might seem to render useless the whole effort of this essay—to determine the place entitlements may or may not occupy in Catholic social thought. Indeed it does imply that any specific policy statement (for or against any specific entitlement) falls outside of "formal Church teaching." This same formal Church teaching, however, demands of us an effort to make prudential judgments about specific issues and policies and to make them in light of the perspective and moral principles set forth in Catholic social teachings. With this in mind I offer some final reflections about entitlements.

The first reflection is an obvious one: that each entitlement needs to be evaluated on its own merits. While the extent of entitlements is certainly an issue, few would argue that we should

issues without knowledge of the social sciences, human experience and all the other data involved in the situation itself." *Id.* at 44.

78. ECONOMIC JUSTICE FOR ALL, *supra* note 2, at para. 134.

79. *Id.* at para. 135.

eliminate all of them (for example, benefits to war veterans, or assistance to disabled persons).

A second reflection deals directly with Catholic social teachings. They focus consistently on "those in need," the poor especially. They do not argue that entitlements should be given automatically to everyone, including even the very wealthy. In the United States a major cause of the soaring costs of entitlements is that many of them *do* go to all who fall under a specific category. Only 15% of government entitlements, Peterson and Howe claim, are based on need. Eighty-five percent of them do not go to the poor.⁸⁰ Eleven times more benefit dollars per capita go to persons over sixty-five than to children under eighteen.⁸¹ College students at state universities have their educations subsidized, sometimes at twice the cost of keeping a mother with two children on welfare. Well-to-do households generally receive more in total entitlements than do poor ones. A *Newsweek* report illustrated this point with examples viewed as typical: a senior citizen with an income of \$143,598 receives \$18,885 in total entitlements compared to a part-time waitress with an income of \$7,800 who receives \$5,656 in total entitlements.⁸² Even *Business Week* editorialized that neither a Republican Congress nor a Democratic Administration "has done much to end middle-class entitlements or special benefits to corporations. . . . So let's give the poor a break."⁸³

A third set of reflections relate to welfare-for-the-poor programs. In recent political campaigns "welfare reform" has become a focal issue. More than any other entitlement, welfare payments (and most especially welfare for single mothers) have come under attack. The cost of these benefits does not seem to be the major reason for targeting them. AFDC payments amount to \$12-13 billion dollars, compared to \$85 billion spent on "corporate welfare," and they are certainly dwarfed by military spending and by social security payments which go to all regardless of need. The more frequent argument—made popular by Charles Murray's *Losing Ground*—is that the welfare system promotes "dependency" and encourages lack of personal responsibility. Others would add to this criticism an argument that private organizations deal with social needs of the truly indigent much more

80. PETERSON & HOWE, *supra* note 3, at 90-91.

81. *Id.* at 11.

82. Steven Waldman, *Benefits 'R' Us*, NEWSWEEK, Aug. 10, 1992, at 56-58.

83. *Time for Congress to Get Cracking*, BUSS. WK., July 8, 1996, at 142.

effectively (both in terms of costs and results) than inefficient government bureaucracies.⁸⁴

Catholic social teachings certainly favor empowering the poor and enabling them to become self-sufficient. The "dependency" arguments, however, are generally based on assumptions that the poor are on welfare because they do not make the effort to find jobs, and that receiving welfare payments only encourages their lack of effort. But eliminating welfare does not create jobs, and at present the millions of jobless poor people outnumber job vacancies by at least six to one.⁸⁵ Moreover, welfare cuts affect the most vulnerable beneficiaries of welfare: children who live in poverty (about one-fourth of all children in the United States).

The correlation between welfare and dependency may hold true in a number of cases. Certainly an attitude that "I am owed any welfare benefits I receive" is unhealthy and, as many social workers will attest, welfare recipients do sometimes adopt this view. Eliminating welfare, however, will not change the conditions that create poverty like that I observed in many Latin American countries which have little welfare—but much unemployment and underemployment—and where children often must drop out of school to help support their families by selling fruit and gum or shining shoes. As to the argument that localized community efforts can better meet the needs of the poor in the United States, Christopher Lasch responds: "It is naive or cynical to lead the public to think that dismantling the welfare state is enough to ensure a revival of informal coopera-

84. RELIGION & LIBERTY, a publication of the Acton Institute in Grand Rapids, MI, has carried numerous articles arguing, on one side, that government welfare encourages dependency and, on the other side, that private organizations have handled true welfare cases far more effectively than government programs and could handle all cases of true need. Catholic authors buttress this argument with appeals to the "principle of subsidiarity." See, e.g., RELIGION & LIBERTY, Sept.-Oct. (1995) and Nov.-Dec. (1995).

Countering this argument, Fred Kammer, S.J. argues that the entire private giving in the social service sector is \$8-10 billion which is one-tenth of what the proposed Welfare Bill intends to cut over seven years. To cover the entire cost of welfare entitlements every church in the United States would have to contribute \$215,000 to \$270,000 per year. (Interview in the NAT'L JESUIT NEWS, Dec. 1995/Jan. 1996, at 11).

85. Max Frankel, *What the Poor Deserve*, N.Y. TIMES MAG., Oct. 22, 1995, at 46 (discussing HERBERT J. GANS, *THE WAR AGAINST THE POOR: THE UNDERCLASS AND ANTI POVERTY POLICE* (1995)). Frankel adds that the poor are assumed to be lazy or unable to learn the importance of work. "All are presumed in need of discipline to cure their 'dependence' on welfare or their antisocial activity." *Id.*

tion.”⁸⁶ The informal structures of community that once characterized U.S. life have given way to individualism, he observes, and people will not “reinvent communities” just because the state has proven an unsatisfactory substitute.

The welfare issue is clearly complex, too complex to be dealt with in a few concluding reflections (and it concerns only one of many entitlements). True welfare reform, however, must look beyond ideological perspectives (liberal or conservative) to consider what types of programs and changes (private and governmental) can most effectively meet true social needs and enable beneficiaries to move out of dependency on welfare.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Catholic social teachings do not claim to have final answers to the many complex issues involved with entitlements. They do, however, contain a set of moral principles (again, social justice, rights that look to the dignity of every person, an option for the poor) that emphasize human solidarity. They call for solutions motivated by Christian concern (“I was hungry and you gave me food”), which recognize our social responsibility and do not leave those without resources to fend for themselves. Reevaluating current entitlement programs and making needed changes in them are goals consistent with the Catholic social tradition; but that same tradition certainly insists on making all possible efforts to provide the poor with effective supports.

86. Christopher Lasch, *The Age of Limits, in HISTORY AND THE IDEA OF PROGRESS* 227, 240 (Arthur M. Melzer et al. eds., 1995).

