

Catholic Social Thought and Transformative Action: an Inspiring Framework for Caritas

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Catholic social teaching (CST) is an indispensable component of identity building at Caritas Europa. But what does CST really mean for the concrete daily action and strategic options of Caritas? Does it really inspire and challenge? How can we avoid to pay only lip service to it, or even worse, hiding it as our best kept secret in a filing cabinet? How can CST become more than self-justifying ideology or window dressing? In other words: how can CST become the heart of an organization with a soul? How can CST become the living source of an inspired organization?

Change as the Key Word

I will try to answer that question, not by way of explaining the main principles for judgment and analysis, but I will focus on *the fundamental framework of inspiration that underpins the principles and action with a fundamental meaning*. In order to do this, I will rely on a trustworthy guide: Pope Francis, who, after decades of predominantly doctrinal concern, returns to the spirit of Vatican II according to which the very *raison d'être* of the Catholic Church and its organisations is to be service to the world. Let me remind in this regard the first words of the pastoral constitution [Gaudium et Spes](#): *“the joy and hope, the sorrow and anxiety of the men of our time, especially of the poor and of those who are in any way suffering, these are also the joy and hope, the sorrow and anxiety of the disciples of Christ; and there is nothing human that does not find an echo in their hearts”* (GS 1). The consequence is that CST must be more than a set of *“mere generalities which challenge no one”* ([Evangelii Gaudium](#) 182) and that the church, which is the people of God, and thus all of us, must reach out to the millions who are still victims of violence, famine, environmental disasters, exclusion and hopelessness. In this regard Caritas is not a secondary task in the Church, but an integral part of the mission of the Church to reach out to the world. One could even say, paraphrasing Pope John XXIII, that an

organisation such as Caritas is the human face of the church itself. CST is in this context not something comparable to a lighthouse that attracts attention to itself as beacon, but rather a torch that accompanies people on their journey towards encountering the victims of history. In this perspective CST is also not sort of GPS telling in a detailed way what to do, but a compass that shows where to go.

According to Pope Francis CST can orient us in realizing a twofold task: being a “field hospital” for all those who need immediate relief, and simultaneously being a discerning community that “*enter[s] fully into the fabric of society, sharing the lives of all,*” and joining them on their way to building a new world (EG 269). The word *sharing* is crucial here: the Church’s commitment, thus our commitment, is not the attitude of a distant observer, but of a community that participates in the common effort of the humanity to realize a world in which every human person can live a dignified life. Building a new world is also fundamental. The key word is: change.

According to Francis “*an authentic faith [...] always implies a deep desire to change the world....*” (EG 183). This transformative approach has several fundamental implications for action. I will explain them in two parts. First I will articulate how Pope Francis proposes a paradigm of encounter and what this entails for our relationship with poor people and for the dialectic of love and justice. In the second part I will focus on his worldview and image of God, and how it implies a vision of reality as a process of change, how this is spiritually underpinned and why it requires discernment.

The Paradigm of Encounter

First of all, Francis interpretation of CST as based on the paradigm encounter, especially with poor, vulnerable or excluded people.

For pope Francis the so-called preferential option for the poor is not a principle, and the poor not an abstract category. He prefers to speak about the poorest and most vulnerable people, the left overs, the excluded. His starting point is, what Cardinal Kasper has called a paradigm shift in method based on the mysticism of co-existence and encounter. That means that social action and reflection must start

from a concrete encounter with people, more precisely that we must become companions of crucified people, and this in the fullest sense of the word. To say it with Francis own words: “*only on the basis of a **real and sincere closeness***” can we “*properly **accompany** the poor on their path of liberation*” (EG 199). Each word is important here: closeness, becoming companion, and joining their path of liberation. Personal encounter and closeness is crucial because it is the precondition for a genuine reciprocity or mutual sharing, for a “*commitment to walk together*” as Aunty Di, an aboriginal Australian woman, expressed it (opening ceremony of the 25th Assembly General of the International Federation of Catholic Universities, Melbourne 2015). According to the Argentinian theologian Scannone, Pope Francis pleads for a ‘cultura de encuentro’, a culture of encountering others, which entails the duty to include their perspectives into our own understanding of the issues. And so we both change. Such culture of encounter is not only about ‘caring or thinking for the poor’. It requires acknowledging the poor’s active participation in decisions that concern their lives (EG 49). To say it with the American global health expert and patologist Susan Holman: They are neither objects of decisions taken by experts, nor “passive objects for the more powerful donor’s greater spiritual good”.¹ They are subjects of their own destiny and actors from whom we have much to learn and who evangelise us. In his address to the popular movements at Santa Cruz (Bolivia, July 9, 2015) Francis’ standpoint is unambiguous in that regard. He said: “*You the most humble, the exploited, the poor and excluded [...] the future of the world is to a large extent into your hands, in your capacity to organise yourself, and to promote creative alternatives. Don’t underestimate yourself, you are the sowers of change*” (translated from Le Monde, July 10, 2015).

The paradigm of encounter is in many regards relevant for the work of Caritas Europa. First of all, the ‘mysticism of encounter’ is a critical correction of misplaced charity. According to Susan Holman, misplaced charity “*handicaps many, who then experience a lifelong struggle with low self-esteem, a deep sense of inferiority*” (Holman, Beholden, p. 178). A genuine closeness and encounter on the contrary reveals “*the shame and stigma of poverty, including the shame of being an object of charity*” and it leads to a “*disempowerment of shame*”. It strengthens the

¹ Susan Holman, Beholden: Religion, Global Health, and Human Rights, Oxford University Press 2015, p. 6.

consciousness that *“action responding to poverty is not essentially about stuff; it is about how I relate in daily life to everything and everyone who is ‘other’...”* (Holman, Beholden, p. 192): the migrant, the unemployed, the lonely poor elderly person, the homeless, and so on.

Secondly, the mysticism of encounter implies a critique of strategies, actions and theories that are the result of disconnected thinking. In [Laudato Si'](#) Francis criticizes the fact that *“many members of the academia, opinion makers, media and power centres [...] operate at great distance from the real people and have no direct contact with reality; [...] the lack of physical contact and encounter [...] leads to a fragmentation of conscience and to the denial of reality in tendentious analyses”* (LS 49). When action and theory are not rooted in an encounter with real people they run the risk of becoming an ivory tower producing abstract theory disconnected from the lifeworld. Only closeness enables us to hear the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth (*‘el grito’* in Spanish, LS 117). And in *Evangelii Gaudium* Francis reminds us that *“conceptual tools exist to heighten contact with realities they seek to explain, not to distance us from them”* (EG 194). Hence reality is more important than ideas.

The third most captivating aspect of Francis ‘paradigm of encounter’ is that it is based on a profound spiritual intuition. One could even say that his paradigm shift is itself based on another new paradigm, re-establishing again a link between CST and spirituality. Both are victims of the functional disconnection as a cause of modern rationality. Social action must above all be rooted in following the way of Jesus. Francis articulates that with a strong metaphor: *“... Jesus wants us to touch human misery, to touch the suffering flesh of others. He hopes that we will stop looking for those personal or communal niches which shelter us from the maelstrom of human misfortune and instead enter into the reality of other people’s lives and the power of tenderness. Whenever we do so, our lives become wonderfully complicated and we experience intensely what it is to be a people, to be part of a people”* (EG 270). In *Laudato Si'* Francis refers to a spirituality of solidarity with people who suffer. More precisely he proposes to integrate *“the suffering of crucified people into our own suffering,”* what he articulates more concretely as follows: *“Our goal is not to amass information or to satisfy curiosity, but rather to become painfully aware to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our personal suffering and thus to discover what*

each of us can do about it" (LS 19). Solidarity and social action emerge not from applying abstract principles, but from a profound inner combat. In his Message for the Celebration of the 51st World day of Peace (January 1, 2018), Pope Francis applies this to our attitude vis-à-vis migrants and refugees. We must welcome them with a "*contemplative gaze*" which allows us to see their dignity as human being whereby we mutually change and enrich each other. This is again the culture of encounter at its best and an antidote to the globalisation of indifference, which not only dehumanizes migrants and refugees, but make us all '*anonymous persons*', '*unnamed*', '*leaders without names and without faces*'.²

Last but not least, the mysticism of encounter sheds a light on the relationship between charity and justice. In Francis' thinking personal encounter and a structural analysis of poverty (EG 188) cannot be separated. Love is not limited to individual action. It has a macro dimension. Charity does not only allow us to meet the other as my direct neighbour, but also as my "*socius*", the person I encounter via institutions. Direct love of poor people as neighbours needs to be "incarnated" in structures such as a just legislation, the way cities are transformed from spaces of violence into spaces of good life, in reshaping the workplace, in re-organizing healthcare, in the implementation of a just taxation system, in new forms of political participation, new ecological lifestyles, and new rules for the financial sector. In his structural analysis Pope Francis pays much attention to inequality, which he labels as the "*source of social ills*" (EG 202). He confirms the theory of Thomas Piketty, who demonstrates that despite economic growth, inequality has increased. In Francis' words: the trickle down approach has failed (EG 54). We can also compare his analysis with that of Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, who argue that inequality creates an ever growing unequal, 'broken' and socially corrosive society. Extreme inequalities indeed are damaging human abilities, performance and happiness, and they lead to more health and social problems, as well as to a breakdown of social life. Francis's diagnosis is also similar to Dorling's thesis that damaging inequalities are not only a 'physical' reality, but also a consequence of subjective beliefs and biases which serve as false justifications, such as elitism, prejudice, the idea that greed is good

² For another adequate interpretation of Francis' address in Lampedusa see Anna Rowlands, "After Lesvos and Lampedusa: the European 'Crisis' and Its Challenge to Catholic Social Thought," *Journal of Catholic Social Thought*, 14 No. 1 (2017): 63-85.

and despair inevitable, or misleading theories such as in the book 'The Bell Curve'. Combatting such prejudices is an integral part of our action.

In short, the example of inequality shows that charity and justice are inseparable. On the one hand charity is a matter of direct contact with the poor, in whom we must see the "*the sacred grandeur of our neighbour*" (EG 92). On the other hand we need justice, which orients us towards the 'everyone' of the institutions. But even in the best institutions and social security systems there are tears that the bureaucracy cannot see. In those cases Caritas is again indispensable as personalisation of abstract relationships. To say it with the French theologian Alain Thomasset who is inspired by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur: "*In order to avoid that the 'to each' of the just distribution, would be reduced to the anonymous level of the 'everyone' or to the reification of social relationships, the imagination of charity and its singularizing regard must guarantee that the privilege of the face to face is extended to all relations with the others without face*".³

So far the first part of my presentation, that confronts us with many questions such as

- How do we interpret the tension in Caritas Europe between functioning as a 'field hospital' for people who have immediate needs and contributing on the long term to a fundamental transformation of the world?, or
- In what regards does spirituality underpin our social commitment (for example the spirituality of receptivity for the suffering of others)?, or
- How does direct contact with the people for whom we work, enable us to overcome the negative drawbacks of bureaucratic rationality and differentiation of roles and tasks?, or
- What is our strategy in the struggle against the prejudices that influence inequality, prejudices which are very much present in social media and new right movements?

Reality as a process and discernment

³ Alain Thomasset, Paul Ricoeur: Une Poétique de la Morale, Leuven : Peeters/Leuven University Press 1996, p. 572.

In my second part now, I wish to go a step further and dig deeper into the profound layers of Francis' approach: his vision of reality as process, the spiritual underpinning of it, its implications for discernment and dealing with conflicts. When Francis emphasizes so many times that an authentic faith contributes to change, this idea is rooted in his conviction that reality itself is a process of change. Reality, or more concretely the social, economic, cultural, and ecological context in which people live, is a process and even a continuing *process of change*, in which God moves the world always forward towards *new possibilities*. Francis is averse to anxious conservatism or status quo thinking. He does not want to re-write history, but invites us to move it forward (Spadano) and he is convinced that, whatever happens, something new and more good can always emerge.

This future oriented attitude leads in *Evangelii Gaudium* to the principle that "*time has priority over space*," which means that we must seek to make "*links in a constantly expanding chain*" (EG 223). It also entails, that "*we are always more effective when we generate processes rather than holding on positions of power*" (LS 178). In order to be capable of acting according to God's emerging future, we must abandon our fixed "*spaces of power and self-assertion*" (EG 223), and this obliges individuals and groups, to leave their comfort zones, and to tear down the mental walls that narrow their understanding of events (EG 222). Such mental walls are, for example, grey pragmatism, the iron cage of bureaucratic rationality, sacrificing the purpose of an organization for self-interest or group interest, seeking uniformity instead of accepting differences, and so on.

Francis' vision of reality as process is based on trust in God's active and transformative presence. In *Laudato Si'* he writes: "*In the heart of this world, **the Lord of life, who loves us so much, is always present**. He does not abandon us, he does not leave us alone, for **he has united himself definitively to our earth**, and his love constantly **impels us to find new ways forward***" (LS 245). These are very significant words and every part merits attention.

In the words about the presence of God in all what is resounds the contemplation to attain love at the end of Ignatius' spiritual exercises: "I will consider how God dwells

in creatures, in the elements, giving them existence; in the plants giving them life; in the animals giving them sensation; in human beings giving them intelligence” (Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, par. 235) and “consider how God labours and works for me in all the creatures on the face of the earth” (*Spiritual Exercises*, par. 236).

These words express that God does not operate in the world as a mechanistic *Deus ex machina* who, like a Greek God, intervenes on the scene, but “via a mysterious interconnection,” an interconnection in which, according to the theologian Erik Borgman, all the components “*protect, nourish, complete, restore, make more dynamic, and open new possibilities*” and this “*in their diversity and multi-coloured character*”.⁴ In *Laudato Si'* Pope Francis articulates this as follows: “*Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth*” (LS 92). Indeed, as the [Catechism](#) states “*God operates in his creation via the interdependence of all creatures.... Creatures exist only in dependence on each other, to complete each other, in the service of each other*”.⁵

In the light of this interconnectedness Francis pleads for acting and thinking with a sense of the whole, more concretely he writes “*the subdivision of knowledge risks to become irrelevant when it loses its sense of the whole, when it does not pay attention to the ‘relationships between things’, when it disregards the wider horizon*” (LS 110). Hyper-specialisation, also in big organisations like Caritas, can alienate people from the fundamental purpose of their work and diminish their motivation. That looking at the wider horizon of what one does is crucial, is expressed in a well-known story about medieval stone dressers building a cathedral. A pilgrim arrived in a town on a hill where a number of people were busy carving. He asked the first one: What are you doing? He answered: I am doing an exhausting job. A second one answered the same question saying: I am working for an income. The third stood up

⁴ Erik Borgman, “Deelnemen aan het goede. De contemplatieve politiek van de encycliek *Laudato si'*”, *Tijdschrift voor Theologie*, 56 (2016): 209 [Participating in the Good. The Contemplative Politics of the Encyclical *Laudato Si'*].

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana 1994, par. 340. Quoted in LS 86.

and said proudly: I am building a cathedral. He had the wider horizon in mind and this kept him motivated, even when knew that he would not see the final result of his work during his life. That is what matters: whatever our differentiated job is in an organisation, always look at the fundamental perspective and how your work is related to it. And it means even more when one considers that the wider horizon is ultimately participation in working towards the ultimate horizon of God's dream of a fully humanized world, God's kingdom, that is already present in all the good that we realize.

Francis vision on the interconnectedness of all what is, has also consequences for his ecological ethics which he strongly links with his social teaching: "...we have to realize that a true ecological approach becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor" (LS 49); and in LS 91: "a sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings", and further: "We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental" (LS 139). The document "[Engaging in the 2030 Agenda through the lens of Laudato Si](#)" is a splendid example of what this means.

Now a word about "finding new ways forward." It strikes me that this idea of Pope Francis resounds the words of Paul VI in [Octogesima Adveniens](#), about the role of a 'forward looking' imagination that enables us to "to perceive in the present the **disregarded possibility hidden within it**" and to direct the present "towards a fresh future" (OA 37). Such a forward looking imagination "sustains social **dynamism** by the **confidence** that it gives to the **inventive powers** of the human mind and heart" and breaks down the mental walls or "the horizons within which our understanding likes to find security" (OA 37). One can compare this with what John Paul Lederach describes as to "imagine responses and initiatives that, while rooted in the challenges of the real world, are by their nature capable of rising above destructive patterns and giving birth to that which does not yet exist".⁶

⁶ John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, New York: Oxford University Press 2005, p. 182.

So far reality a process, and its implications. The question now is: how can we act in accordance with Gods future as it emerges in and through our interconnected world?

One thing is clear: applying principles is not enough. The main task is more fundamental. Francis calls it: discernment in view of realizing the greater good. This 'greater good' is not a sort of vague utopia, but something very real which can emerge from any concrete situation, however ambiguous or uncertain it is. In his address to the Community of La Civiltà Cattolica Pope Francis said: "*This is the time of discernment in the Church and in the World. Discernment is always realized in the presence of the Lord, looking at the signs, listening to things that happen, the feelings of the people who know the humble way of the daily stubbornness, and especially the poor. But we need to penetrate ambiguity, we need to enter in there, as the Lord Jesus did assuming our flesh*".⁷ And in an address to the Jesuits in Krakow, he said: Only when we learn "*a refined discernment of the spirits, we will be capable of helping people in their concrete life. This is what you must understand: in life not everything is black and white. The most important in life are the shades of grey. What thus matters is to learn to discern in that grey*".⁸

That is very relevant, because discerning throughout the grey zones of life reveals the reality of conflict. Francis refers in this context to the device that "*unity prevails over conflict*" (EG 226-230). That doesn't mean that conflicts should be avoided, nor that people should 'remain trapped' in conflict.⁹ On the contrary, each conflict must be taken seriously, it must "*be faced head*", "*resolved*," and above all "*transformed*" into "*a link in the chain of a new process*" (EG 227). And that requires to go "*beyond the surface of the conflict*" and to see those who participate in it "*in their deepest*

⁷ Francis, "Discourse to the Community of La Civiltà Cattolica" La Civiltà Cattolica (9 February 2017), available at <https://www.laciviltacattolica.it/articolo/discourse-of-the-holy-father-francis-to-the-community-of-la-civiltà-cattolica>. Another interesting address about discernment is [To Have Courage and Prophetic Audacity? Dialogue of Pope Francis with the Jesuits gathered in the 36th General Congregation](#) (October 24, 2016).

⁸ Transcript of the meeting was published by La Civiltà Cattolica on September 10, 2016, available at <https://www.laciviltacattolica.it/articolo/oggi-la-chiesa-ha-bisogno-di-crescere-nel-discernimento-un-incontro-privato-con-alcuni-gesuiti-polacchi/>.

⁹ Juan Carlos Scannone, "Violence socio-politique, communauté chrétienne et liberation," *Transversalités* No. 147 (2018): 77.

dignity” (EG 228), even the person who is perceived as an ‘enemy’, who is part of our network of relationships.

The purpose of the transformation of conflict is not the fixation of a status quo, nor uniformity. Uniformity is an imposition upon people without recognition of their diversity. The purpose is to realize a “*life-giving unity*,” which is a unity that doesn’t destroy particularity and individuality, and which can also be described as “*reconciled diversity*” (EG 230). In order to clarify what this means, Pope Francis, refers to the metaphor of the *polyhedron*, which is the image of a situation “*in which all parts converge, while each of them preserves its distinctiveness*” (EG 236).

Discernment is also about scrutinizing the signs of the times in the light of the gospel, which is mainly: trying to understand how all the good that people and institutions realize, how protecting and promoting human rights, how producing innovative ideas, how developing practices and policies that contribute to the realization of justice, and so on, how all such actions are an anticipation to the kingdom of God. *Gaudium et Spes* speak in this context of deciphering “*authentic signs of God’s presence and purpose in the happenings, needs and desires*” (GS 11) we share as people of God with the rest of humanity.

That sort of discernment requires simultaneously social analysis and looking to the world in the perspective of the gospel. On the one hand judgements on social, political, and economic realities cannot be made merely on the basis of faith propositions.¹⁰ Without social and ethical analysis the faith perspective loses touch with reality.¹¹ But, on the other hand, there is more needed than an analysis of facts. The analysis must be done *in the light of the gospel*. That is not about supplementing the world with additional truths, nor of using the Bible as a reservoir of citations for the illustration of ethical arguments. What matters is a confrontation between gospel and life. When we read the gospel from the different social, political and cultural context in which people live, something happens in the interplay between the

¹⁰ For a reflection on this problem see Johan De Tavernier, “Eschatology and Social Ethics,” in Louis Janssens, Joseph A. Selling, and Franz Böckle, *Personalist Morals: Essays in Honor of Professor Louis Janssens*, Leuven: Peeters/Leuven University Press 1988, p. 279–300.

¹¹ Cf. Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers*, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 1994, p. 24.

readers and the text. In and through a contextual-hermeneutical relation with the biblical text, the readers of the gospel see the world in a new light and discover new ways of being and acting. To say it with Jon Sobrino: the gospel enables us to look to the world with *“new eyes for seeing the ultimate truth of things and new energies for exploring unknown and dangerous paths”*.¹² Simultaneously this functions as critical leverage against the prejudices of our time. It reveals our dependency on what Lonergan described as ‘negative spontaneities’, spontaneous biases which are deeply rooted in our systems and lead us to ‘hate the truly good and to love the really evil’. The critical function of the reading of reality in the light of the gospel destroys mental walls and unmask the dominant root-metaphors which make us blind for the human suffering they hide.

And last but not least, discernment requires living dialogue with all who contribute to a more human world: In *Laudato Si’* we can read: *“I urgently appeal then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all”* (LS 14). *Evangelii Gaudium* mentions: other Christians, members of other religions, scientists (EG 238-258), and non-religious people who share the same fundamental concerns for the world.

So far the second section of my talk, which allows me some concrete questions for our discussions:

- (1) Do we take into account that every action we take has an impact on the world as complex interconnected reality?
- (2) Do we listen to the cry of the earth and the poor in our daily work?
- (3) How do we scrutinize the signs of our time and how do we respond to it in the transformation of our organization and advocacy work?
- (4) How do we discern about our priorities? How do we connect in our search for answers, a competent analysis with a spiritual awareness of God’s presence?
- (5) Do we acknowledge conflict and what can we do to transform it into a link in the chain of a new process?

¹² Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross*, New York: Orbis Books 1994, p. 151.

(6) How do we cope with the grey zones in our action? How far can we go in thinning out our identity in order to please donators or governments who provide us with funds?

(7) Do we opt for bureaucratic uniformity and/or do we seek unity in diversity?

(8) How can we develop a forward looking imagination?

Conclusion

CST is an important as source of inspiration for our action. But there is more than analysis and ethical judgements on the basis of the principles. Something more fundamental is at stake. It requires that our action and reflection is rooted in a profound spirituality, based on a direct encounter with people and their suffering. A spirituality that makes us aware that there is always a greater perspective than what we immediately see. We are involved in a process of change in which God creates again and again new possibilities and moves everything towards a new future in which every person will experience the fullness of life, and all will live a dignified life, in connection with the plants, animals and other human beings woven together to a reconciled diversity. Caritas stands in the heart of that process. Hence the crucial role of discernment between what is primordial and what is secondary, and above all to set first the questions rights.