

# ENACTING CATHOLIC SOCIAL TRADITION

The Deep Practice  
of Human Dignity

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# Introduction

## *Enacting and Applying Catholic Social Tradition*

This book is a reflection on how to apply and enact Catholic Social Tradition. The question itself can be considered dangerous. Let me explain.

There is a story about a failed development project in Haiti. A well-meaning person procured an expensive water filter and donated it to an orphanage. The orphanage staff was properly instructed on the use of the filter, and the benefactor was willing to send them new cartridges once the filter went through the first twenty thousand gallons. However, because the filter was so expensive, it was locked in a closet, and rarely, if at all, taken out and used. In addition to the lack of benefit to the orphans' health, this situation was also a missed opportunity to work together with the local community, which could have benefited from the filter in a way that would have strengthened relationships between the orphanage and the community. This story may be reminiscent of the parable of the Talents, in which the person who had received just one talent told the Master, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man . . . so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground" (Mt 25:24–25). However, the true story above (as well as the biblical lesson of the buried talent) may also apply to the way we deal with Catholic Social Tradition: it is officially held in high regard, but also carefully stored away and thus deprived of its fruitfulness.

Catholic Social Tradition (and, less broadly, Catholic Social Teaching)<sup>1</sup> are not harmless ideas, but rather serve as a thorn in the flesh. The teachings are part of the effort to make the kingdom of God more present; they are part of the message: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mk 1:15). For an example of the challenging nature of Catholic Social Thought, we may look to the teaching on the nonabsolute nature of the right to private property, for example, in *Populorum Progressio*:

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<sup>1</sup>The distinctions between these (as well as Catholic Social Thought) will be discussed below.

“He who has the goods of this world and sees his brother in need and closes his heart to him, how does the love of God abide in him?” [1 Jn 3:17]. The Fathers of the Church laid down the duty of the rich toward the poor in no uncertain terms. As St. Ambrose put it: “You are not making a gift of what is yours to the poor man, but you are giving him back what is his. You have been appropriating things that are meant to be for the common use of everyone. The earth belongs to everyone, not to the rich” [*De Nabute*, c. 12, n. 53; PL 14.74722]. These words indicate that the right to private property is not absolute and unconditional. No one may appropriate surplus goods solely for his own private use when others lack the bare necessities of life.<sup>2</sup>

Let me repeat the last sentence: “No one may appropriate surplus goods solely for his own private use when others lack the bare necessities of life.” This statement has explosive potential if applied and taken seriously. However, the precise meaning of “surplus” is a key question. There is a beautiful Swedish word, *lagom*, which means “exactly the right amount.” What is exactly the right amount of ties and toys, shoes and shirts, cars and condos?

The assertion also asks a lot from its intended audience. This is a sentence from a normative document that does not intend to just make inspiring suggestions. The claim is deeper and higher—it is a normative message that calls for a conversion and a particular form of life, similar to the Gospel passage “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” (Mt 19:24). I stumble over this sentence, knowing that in comparison to the vast majority of people on this planet, I am “rich.” If the world were a village of one hundred inhabitants, about twenty-nine would not have access to fresh drinking water, and about fifty-five would not have access to a safely managed sanitation service. I am rich. Why is it hard for me to enter the kingdom of heaven? This is a tough question.

My suspicion is that the rich person is tempted to take certain standards for granted and to consider himself or herself in full control of matters. There is so much money can buy. Wealth gives power over things and circumstances; it prevents problems from arising. If you have stable access to material resources you would likely not even be aware that certain situations, like a legal dispute with the authorities or a minor health issue, could become dramatic challenges. Money buys choices. It buys

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<sup>2</sup>Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, “On the Development of Peoples” (1967), no. 23, hereinafter *PP*.

independence—or the illusion of independence, the illusion of the “self-made.” This illusion is like a wall between the person and God. We are creatures; God is the creator. The question “What do you have that you did not receive?” (1 Cor 4:7) holds a universal truth. *Deep knowledge* that our life depends on God may require experiencing that material security is not a given. A personal remark: I may be rich by some standards, but not by others. My very real worries about how to pay certain bills (e.g., medical or tuition bills) induce much-needed humility in my life, and gratitude if the bills can be paid after all. This is an experience that puts me in the childlike position of having to trust the heavenly Father. The questions then become: Does being rich in a humble way mean being rich in humility? And also: Is that hard to do?

These are (tough) questions to be asked. And we have not even reached the reality of “application” and “enactment.” The Christian invitation to repent and believe is not a harmless endorsement of the culture of the convenient and the comfortable. Lessons about the demanding nature of the Christian message and our relationship with God were learned the hard way and communicated in moving letters by the Jesuit priest Alfred Delp. He experienced the “realness” of the Christian message in prison; he had been involved in the Kreisau Circle, which discussed Germany’s social order and democratic future and was linked to the failed July 1944 attempt to kill Hitler. Delp was arrested and tortured and then transferred to Berlin, where he spent Advent 1944. In his cell, he wrote letters and meditations, reflecting on the core of the Christian message.<sup>3</sup> He discovered “Advent” in a new way, maybe even as the very point of Christian life.<sup>4</sup> To him, “Advent” stands for “wilderness” and “repentance” and “utter dependence on God.”<sup>5</sup> There in prison, Delp rediscovered Catho-

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<sup>3</sup>Thomas Merton observed in his preface to Delp’s *Prison Meditations*, “Written by a man literally in chains, condemned to be executed as a traitor to his country in time of war, these pages are completely free from the myopic platitudes and the insensitive complacencies of routine piety” (Alfred Delp, *The Prison Meditations of Father Alfred Delp* [New York: Herder and Herder, 1963], vii–xxx, at vii).

<sup>4</sup>Alfred Delp was in Tegel Prison in Berlin from the end of July 1944 until the end of January 1945, during which time the Church passed through the liturgical seasons of Advent and Christmas. Advent had always been the liturgical season to which he had been most drawn. In prison, as he paced three steps in one direction, three steps in the other, his hands nearly always in handcuffs, the ‘Advent discovery’ that Delp made was that God was present in the midst of his desolation” (M. Coady, “Truth Hidden in Untruth: Thomas Merton and Alfred Delp,” in Angus Stuart, ed., *Across the Rim of Chaos: Thomas Merton’s Prophetic Vision* [Stratton-on-the-Fosse, Radstock: Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 2005], 81–88, at 85).

<sup>5</sup>“You need to have sat in a small room with your hands in irons and have seen the shredded flag of freedom standing in the corner, in a thousand images of melancholy. The heart flees from these images again and again, and the mind strives to lift itself free, only to awaken even more sharply to reality at the next guard’s footsteps sounding in the hall

lic Social Teaching, especially the encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*.<sup>6</sup> The testimony of his life and death—he was sentenced to death in January 1945 and executed on February 2, 1945—serves as a reminder that the Catholic Social Tradition is ultimately about our relationship with God, and is an expression of our deep belief that as creatures and sinners we depend on God.

### Catholic Social Tradition, Thought, and Teaching

This book sets out to explore issues related to the enactment of Catholic Social Tradition, Catholic Social Thought, and Catholic Social Teaching. The relationship between these terms can be described as follows: The rich and broad tradition of Christianity has led to the generation of a way of thinking about social issues called Catholic Social Thought, and the tradition has been condensed into a more clearly defined body of texts, called Catholic Social Teaching. However, even in this normatively binding form, the documents of Catholic Social Teaching are contextual in nature; they reflect responses “to concrete circumstances rather than the handing down of already traditional doctrine.”<sup>7</sup> In this book, I am particularly interested in the enactment of human dignity as the central principle and commitment of the human person. I explore the appropriation of principles as well as concrete experiences and experiments within the Catholic Social Tradition, and offer a therapeutic reading of Catholic Social Teaching.

The book has five chapters. The first chapter introduces the key term of human dignity as the guidepost for the enactment of Catholic Social Tradition; it explores the connection between the experience of human vulnerability and the discourse on dignity, and discusses the enactment of human dignity. Chapter 2 offers a new way to think about the principles

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and the next clanking of keys. Then you know that you are powerless. You have no key, and your door has no inner keyhole, and your window is barred and set so high that you cannot even look out. If no one comes and releases you, you will remain bound and poor in misery. All the mental struggles do not help at all. This is a fact, a condition that exists and must be acknowledged” (Alfred Delp, *Advent of the Heart: Seasonal Sermons and Prison Writings, 1941–1944* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006], 112–13.)

<sup>6</sup>Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*, “On Reconstruction of the Social Order” (1931), hereinafter *QA*.

<sup>7</sup>H. McCabe, *God Still Matters* (London: Continuum, 2002), 86. This point has to be kept in mind when working through the hermeneutics of Catholic Social Teaching documents, since magisterial documents have a tendency to be self-referential; i.e., it is part of the linguistic scheme of magisterial documents that they refer to previously published magisterial documents, thus creating a set of growing discursive commitments.

developed in Catholic Social Tradition; it paints “portraits” of principles, making use of multiple sources to provide a rich and thick understanding of these principles and their relevance for moral judgment and moral clarity. The third chapter introduces the concept of “raw thinking,” which produces nonpolished reflections on open questions. Raw thinking, as opposed to the presentation of final and elaborated products, encourages the honest and tentative engagement with questions about the practical implications and the practical relevance of Catholic Social Tradition. Chapter 4, titled “Experiments with Truth,” describes the role of personal and social experiments in trying to enact Catholic Social Tradition, in order to translate into practice the principles and ideas of the social tradition. The final chapter presents Catholic Social Teaching as a rule of life (*regula*) and a therapeutic means, working closely with Archbishop Óscar Romero’s example of bringing Catholic Social Teaching to life in his prophetic ministry. The main point of the book is to show that Catholic Social Tradition responds to the wounds of the time, which is why the book ends with the image of a field hospital.

Catholic Social Tradition is not an optional add-on to the Christian message; it is the expression of the social dimension of the Christian faith. The 1971 Synod “Justice in the World” summarized this call: “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, you cannot credibly live the gospel without social and political commitments and engagements. This has traditionally been expressed as the unity between love of God and love of neighbor.<sup>9</sup> In his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis makes this point forcefully when he writes, “A personal and committed relationship with God . . . at the same time commits us to serving others.”<sup>10</sup> Catholic Social Tradition, one could say, is a spirituality rather than a doctrine, a *regula* to be lived rather than a rule to be followed, as this book suggests.

Catholic Social Tradition has a theological and not a philosophical foundation; that is, it is ultimately based on the encounter with Jesus, the Christ, and a personal relationship with God. But this relationship cannot be lived without “a turn to the other.” As the first letter of John puts it succinctly, “Whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they

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<sup>8</sup>World Synod of Catholic Bishops, “Justice in the World” (1971), no. 6.

<sup>9</sup>See Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, “Reflections on the Unity of Love of Neighbor and Love of God,” vol. 6, trans. Karl-H. Kruger and Boniface Kruger (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1969), essay 16, 231–49.

<sup>10</sup>Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, “The Joy of the Gospel” (2013), no. 91, hereinafter *EG*.

have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen” (4:20).

Only in the late nineteenth century, with the publication of *Rerum Novarum* in 1891,<sup>11</sup> do we observe the beginnings of a magisterial tradition that explicitly offers “Catholic Social Teaching,” especially through social encyclicals. But the social dimension of the faith has been an integral part of the Christian tradition from the very beginning. Underlining the importance of “love of neighbor” as a part of, expression of, and consequence of love of God, the most often-quoted Gospel passage in the first six centuries is Matthew 25:31–46, reading, “Whatever you did for one of these least brothers [and sisters] of mine, you did for me.” This phrase again shows the specific Christian framing of the turn to the other (although it does carry with it the temptation of instrumentalizing the most disadvantaged for one’s own spiritual edification).

The first centuries of the Christian era saw the rise of a social theology, but these developments were clearly not purely theoretical. We find many examples of concrete action, beginning with the Book of Acts in the New Testament, where we read that “there was no needy person among them” (4:34) and that there was a daily distribution for the widows (6:1). The year 368 was of special importance in this regard. People in Cappadocia suffered from a cruel famine, due to a severe drought, and the moral paradigm at the time was “indifference.” Bishop Basil of Caesarea (today a saint) preached a sermon titled “In Time of Famine and Drought,” and organized famine relief activities. He established a *ptochotropheion* (poorhouse or hospital), and bought available local grain from wealthy landowners that he distributed to the starving. His whole family engaged in these relief efforts, motivated by a new way of seeing society as a community and the human person as a being with dignity.<sup>12</sup> Peter Brown described this new way of seeing the person and community as “a revolution of social imagination”: Christian Social Tradition stretched the imagination of Basil’s contemporaries and continues to do so today. The values of dignity and solidarity were translated into practices and institutions, along with a new language to talk about community and justice.<sup>13</sup> Stretching the imagination so that it can inform proper action is a key point in the enactment of Catholic Social Tradition.

Delving into social issues does not come without risks. When Pope Leo

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<sup>11</sup>Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, “Rights and Duties of Capital and Labor” (1891).

<sup>12</sup>S. Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 64–98.

<sup>13</sup>P. Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2002), 1; see also P. Brown, *Through the Eye of the Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

XIII issued *Rerum Novarum*, addressing the situation of workers—and talking about just wages, labor unions, and the right to private property and its social function—he chose the path of using magisterial authority not to talk about matters of revelation, but rather about social realities. This was risky because social realities change, are always “particular” (rather than “general”), and are never exhausted by analysis. Their changeability stands in contrast with eternal truths. This does not mean, however, that the literary genre of a social encyclical is primarily based on social science. The biblical roots and thus the roots in revelation are as obvious as the anchoring in tradition and magisterium. The rootedness of Catholic Social Teaching in the Gospels deserves special attention since the Gospel foundations make it clear that enacting Catholic Social Teaching is discipleship, a way of following Christ. Catholic Social Teaching is not a social theory, based on certain key arguments and principles, but a social imperative, based on an encounter: the encounter with Christ. The gospel foundation has been present from the very beginning of systematic papal Social Teaching: in writing the social encyclical in 1891, Leo XIII incorporated biblical sources. Let us take a closer look at the way the encyclical works with biblical sources to explore the “gospel closeness” of the papal text.<sup>14</sup>

One example of this is found in section 22 of *Rerum Novarum*. It refers to the spiritual challenges of wealth (in the “camel through the eye of the needle” quote from Mt 19:23–24 as well as in the quotation from Lk 6:24–25: “But woe unto you who are rich; because you have no more consolation to expect. Woe to you who are now full; because you will starve. Woe to you who are laughing now; for you will complain and cry”). The same section also quotes Luke 11:41, which expresses the obligation of almsgiving, and cites the passage on the final judgment in Matthew 25, in connection with the description of the duty of solidarity (Mt 25:40).

References to the Sermon on the Mount are made in two sections of *Rerum Novarum*, namely 24 and 57: on the Beatitude of the poor (Mt 5:3; section 24) and in section 57 on the primacy of the kingdom of God (Mt 6:32–33). The primacy of the kingdom of God and eternal life is also underlined with the quotation from Matthew 16:26: “What good is it to a man if he gains the whole world, but at the same time pays with his life? At what price can a man buy back his life?” (section 57).

Section 24 of the encyclical indicates an “option for the poor”—here

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<sup>14</sup>It can be argued, however, that Catholic Social Teaching would benefit from an even more serious engagement with the Bible, and with the practical wisdom of the experiences and practices of Church engagement with social issues: see D. McLoughlin, “Catholic Social Teaching and the Gospel,” *New Blackfriars* 93 (2012): 163–74.



the reference to the first beatitude is mentioned, along with a reference to the invitation to the burdened: “Come to me all you who are struggling and carrying heavy burdens, I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28). In this way, the Gospel references convey sociocritical thoughts, that is, comments on the prevailing social relationships—“the rich” versus “the poor” and orientation toward the primacy of the kingdom of God, along with a view to a final judgment—and the admonition to solidarity based on the Gospel. At the same time, the text appeals to common sense.

*Rerum Novarum* is an important normative document that gives us a sense of the risks of applying the gospel to social realities. Exploring this connection between the gospel (discipleship) and the social world is the project of this book. Enacting Catholic Social Tradition (and Thought and Teaching) is the commitment of following Christ in the social world.

### “Applying” and “Enacting” Catholic Social Tradition

The story of Alfred Delp shows that the question of “applying Catholic Social Thought” is ultimately very simple: it is an invitation to a conversion, a permanent and recurring invitation. But as always, the question of “right application” is delicate and difficult.

The English word “apply” is etymologically linked to the French word “*plier*” (to bend), indicating that applicability and flexibility are inter-related. “*Plier*” can also mean “to fold”; there is a suggestion of the malleability of the material that can be adjusted to particular circumstances. This image expresses a specific epistemological aspect of the challenge of applying Catholic Social Tradition: how much flexibility or pliability can there be, and how much stability is necessary? This book discusses this question of the applicability of key values of the Catholic Social Tradition with a primary intention to understand the depth of the question.

The “application discussion” is also familiar from applied ethics, in which a common conception is the idea that one starts from a set of principles—such as autonomy, benevolence, welfare, nonmaleficence, and justice—and then transfers them to a specific area. Media, sports, or medical ethics are then understood not as special ethics that follow their own principles, but as reasonably well-defined contexts in which principles are brought into dialogue with particular situations. The much-cited “reflective equilibrium” is generated when common principles and the dynamics of a specific situation have been brought into balance.

Now this image—here the basket of principles, there the basket of special situations—does not seem implausible, but it has its pitfalls, which can be articulated in the form of questions:

- Does a principle change when it is confronted with a certain context? Are we talking about the same principle when we speak of the “autonomy principle” in the context of high-performance sports or in the context of a hospice? Does a principle remain stable when applied in different contexts?
- Is the context in question clearly distinguishable? How many ethically relevant preliminary decisions are already expressed in the profiling of a context?
- What does it mean to apply a principle? Can one imagine this application in terms of “entering into a dialogue” between a value and a social reality? Will this application also presuppose a personal “power of judgment,” so that a subjective moment necessarily takes place, and statements in applied ethics necessarily reflect the personal attitude of the judging agent?

These many questions point to the depth of the larger question of what it means to apply and enact the Catholic Social Tradition.<sup>15</sup> The principle of subsidiarity is not something to pull off the shelf and easily implement. Subsidiarity in unstable social situations—such as transitional justice contexts—may mean something different from subsidiarity in a politically stable situation. Solidarity in a context of an overabundance of material goods may be different from solidarity in a context of massive inequality. Of course, one could argue that the main message is the same, but the kinds of examples used, the ways in which the concepts and principles can be introduced, the challenges on the ground in taking the principle seriously, may be quite different. Ingrid Betancourt had this experience when she was held as a hostage by FARC<sup>16</sup> rebels in Colombia for six-and-a-half years. The practical meaning of terms like “human dignity” and “solidarity”—that is, the ways to enact them—changed significantly during her captivity in the jungle. Respecting human dignity did not mean “politeness,” but fighting dehumanization; living in solidarity did not mean “giving out of one’s surplus,” but “sharing the bare necessities.”<sup>17</sup> Ingrid Betancourt repeated the key concept of “dignity” as a reminder, as an anchor, as a reference point, to protect her innermost integrity:

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<sup>15</sup>See C. Sedmak, “Enacting Human Dignity,” in P. Carozza and C. Sedmak, eds., *The Practice of Human Development and Dignity* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), 27–45.

<sup>16</sup>The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, founded in 1964.

<sup>17</sup>Cf., I. Betancourt, *Even Silence Has an End: My Six Years of Captivity in the Colombian Jungle* (New York: Random House, 2010).

I had decided that they would not hurt me. Whatever happened, they would not touch the essence of who I was. I had to cling to this fundamental truth. [ . . . ] My father's voice spoke to me from very afar, and a single word came to mind, in capital letters. But I discovered with horror that the word had been completely stripped of its meaning. It referred to no concrete notion, only to the image of my father standing there, his lips set, his gaze uncompromising. I repeated it again and again, like a prayer, like a magical incantation that might, perhaps, break the evil spell. DIGNITY.<sup>18</sup>

The notion of dignity is a reminder that we are part of something bigger that transcends the observable dimension and concrete circumstances. There is something powerful in the term that suggests that we do not fully grasp what it means to have dignity or to live with dignity. There is a moment of elusiveness here that also serves as a source of a particular encouragement. Betancourt tried very hard to enact the principle of dignity—accepting the term as a reminder that we owe something to ourselves and to others on its basis. She was “holding on to dignity.”<sup>19</sup> As she observes, a sense of dignity is incompatible with certain types of behavior:

I refused to be treated like an object, to be denigrated not only in the eyes of others but also in my own. For me, words had a supernatural power, and I feared for our health, our mental balance, our spirits. When I heard the guerrillas refer to us as “cargo,” as “packages,” I shuddered. These weren't just expressions. The point was to dehumanize us. It was simpler for them to shoot at a shipment of goods, at an object, than at a human being. I saw it as the beginning of a process of degradation, which I wanted to oppose. If the word “dignity” had any meaning, then we must not allow them to treat us like numbers.<sup>20</sup>

Reducing people to numbers, to objects that can be replaced and disposed of, is a well-known strategy for dehumanizing persons. A person loses her face, her identity, and her uniqueness when reduced to a number. This human uniqueness calls for a particular attention to what each person brings to the world (which would not be part of the world otherwise) and for a particular attention to what we lose when we lose a person. It is not trivial to say, “A human being died that night” (the title of *Pumla*

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 15.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 465.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 253–54.

Gobodo-Madikizela's account of her painful interviews with Eugene De Kock, a state-sanctioned mass murderer who served the apartheid regime in South Africa).<sup>21</sup> Human dignity means that each person's life matters.

Ingrid Betancourt describes some of her struggles with dignity and upholding respect for human dignity. A particularly moving scene in Betancourt's memoir is her insistence on honoring the death of a fellow human being. A colleague had been killed and everyone had learned about it. It was mealtime: "Everyone hurried to stand in line, lost in thought." But Betancourt stood up. "'Companions!' I shouted, in a voice that I wished were louder. 'Pinchao is dead. I would like to ask you to observe a minute of silence in his honor.'" <sup>22</sup> This seems like a small gesture, but may go a long way in its symbolic power, pointing to something invisible and intangible within tough circumstances. Enacting principles requires both faithfulness to their established meaning and sensitivity to the local situation and the given context. Betancourt's memoir is a testimony to the commitment to honoring dignity even under adverse circumstances. There was no textbook or script telling her how to do it; she had to use her personal understanding of the dignity of the person.

Enacting principles (or concepts or values) requires, first, a moment of appropriation (of making it one's own), a moment of translation, a moment of anchoring; the principle (e.g., the principle of human dignity) has to be made one's own before it can be "inhabited." This distinction between "inhabited" and "noninhabited" has been inspired by Aleida Assman's distinction between "inhabited memory" and "noninhabited memory."<sup>23</sup> The latter points to museums and archives and memories that do not stir emotions, that do not lead to conversations, that do not play a role in people's lives; the former, "inhabited memory," refers to cultures of remembering that show people's emotions and shape communication and interactions. An inhabited principle has been personalized and reflects the style and personality of the person working with it; it is not enough to quote what has been stated or repeat what has been taught.

Second, principles have to be translated into practices, into habits and decisions, into particular actions and ways of exercising agency. The concept of human dignity, for instance, has to be translated into personal and institutional practices in daily life, since living values are nurtured from and within the everyday. Principles have to be translated into conversations and choices, into rituals and routines. And then, third, the mosaic of

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<sup>21</sup>P. Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died That Night: A South African Story of Forgiveness* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003).

<sup>22</sup>Betancourt, *Even Silence Has an End*, 513.

<sup>23</sup>A. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 119–35.

choices and habits will fill in, shaping a form of life that creates a culture and a climate that influence perceptions and judgments. The principle is then anchored in a way of life, in a particular way of being-in-the-world. One of Swiss philosopher Peter Bieri's deep insights into the concept of human dignity is his claim that our understanding of human dignity constitutes a particular form of life and facilitates a particular way of experiencing the world.<sup>24</sup> The "work" that the concept of human dignity is able to do affects our judgments and our perceptions. "Doing dignity" lays the foundation of a form of living; as Wittgenstein writes, for a concept to work, "there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments."<sup>25</sup> And not only in judgments, but also in perceptions; developing a common ground of both judgments and perceptions means that principles (appropriated, translated, and anchored) can shape emotional landscapes and the dynamics of perception.

Let me give one example, which may not be obvious at first glance. Environmental scholar Farhan Sultana talks about the emotional aspect of ecological matters,<sup>26</sup> pointing out that principles of ecological justice are in reality not applied as rational arguments, but come with heavy emotional baggage. Sultana describes a case study of contaminated drinking water in Bangladesh: many wells are unsafe due to arsenic, which puts women who provide the drinking water for their families under pressure to perform emotional labor.

[Women] will carefully monitor their behavior and emotions around those they are dependent on for safe water, so as to not upset tenuous relations that enable them to obtain water. Any social infractions such as disagreements, perceived lack of respect (on the part of the well owners), insufficient expressions of gratitude or providing free labor (in return for safe water) can jeopardize the right to access a safe well. As one young woman put it: "We suffer for water in many ways, and put up with a lot everyday just so that we can have some water to drink."<sup>27</sup>

Women suffer indeed for clean water, since they also suffer from unsafe water. This suffering says a lot about the emotional aspect of the principle of "care of creation." It reaches the level of human perception.

This "emotional turn" in political ecology has been observed

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<sup>24</sup>P. Bieri, *Human Dignity: A Way of Living* (Oxford: Wiley, 2017).

<sup>25</sup>L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), 242.

<sup>26</sup>F. Sultana, "Suffering for Water, Suffering from Water: Emotional Geographies of Resource Access, Control and Conflict," *Geoforum* 42 (2011): 163–72.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 169.

elsewhere,<sup>28</sup> allowing for the discussion of issues such as the role of emotions in power relations, the emotional attachment to place and emotional geographies, and the role of collective emotions as triggers for collective action—but also revealing the connection between emotions and over-exploitation exemplified in

the paradox of fishermen with strong emotional attachments to the sea that end up overexploiting it. . . . While their attachments to the sea and cooperative daily practices on board their boats can result in self-regulating fishing efforts, in policy meetings, where decisions about quotas, fishing effort, etc., take place, they feel uncomfortable when labeled by powerful others (e.g., trawlermen) as unruly, which provides a strong disincentive for self-regulation.<sup>29</sup>

The CST principle of “care for creation” is indeed a deeply emotional one, and Pope Francis acknowledges this dynamic in *Laudato Si'*:<sup>30</sup> “If we feel intimately united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously” (*LS* 11). This feeling of union and closeness is also a source of the kind of pain necessary to overcome indifference: “God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment.”<sup>31</sup> The encyclical underlines the importance of feelings as forces that sustain the motivation to enact the principle of “care for creation.” Commenting on small, microlevel actions, such as “avoiding the use of plastic and paper, reducing water consumption, separating refuse, cooking only what can reasonably be consumed, showing care for other living beings, using public transport or car-pooling, planting trees, turning off unnecessary lights,” Pope Francis observes,

We must not think that these efforts are not going to change the world. They benefit society, often unbeknown to us, for they call forth a goodness which, albeit unseen, inevitably tends to spread. Furthermore, such actions can restore our sense of self-esteem; they can enable us to live more fully and to feel that life on earth is worthwhile.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>M. González-Hidalgo and C. Zografos, “Emotions, Power, and Environmental Conflict: Expanding the ‘Emotional Turn’ in Political Ecology,” *Progress in Human Geography* (January 2019): 1–21.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>30</sup>Francis, *Laudato Si'*, “On Care for Our Common Home” (2015), hereinafter *LS*.

<sup>31</sup>*LS* 89, quoting *EG* 215.

<sup>32</sup>*LS* 211 and 212, respectively.

Bringing emotional components to bear on discussions of a seemingly abstract principle show that we have left the level of mere intellectual concerns. Because of the emotions involved, however, it is not surprising that enacting principles can lead to serious conflict since they touch upon questions of human identity and human integrity.

### Conflicts

Enacting values and principles is clearly not as simple a process as, say, thawing frozen goods. One of the well-known challenges vis-à-vis the concept of human dignity is that participants in a controversy can make use of the same principle and idea and yet arrive at diametrically opposing views. Both proponents and opponents of abortion rights invoke human dignity, and same-sex marriage is both defended and rejected on the basis of human dignity.<sup>33</sup> The principle of dignity is also used by those fighting against and by those arguing for physician-assisted suicide, with both sides using language like “dying with dignity.” Agreement on the importance of the principle and—to some significant extent—its content does not guarantee agreement in applying or enacting that principle.

The same can be said about Catholic Social Teaching more widely, and its application. Persons referring to Catholic Social Teaching may arrive at different and even contradictory positions. For example, while invoking Catholic Social Teaching, Catholics can disagree on the issue of free markets and market regulations, and on border control and migration management. Catholic Social Teaching can be used to justify support for opposing political parties and their candidates. In fact, the teaching gives the impression of having a certain elasticity.

A famous example of this dynamic in the history of American Catholicism is the 1949 cemetery workers’ strike against the Archdiocese of New York. The conflict was significant:

On January 13, 1949 approximately two hundred forty members of the Calvary unit of Local 293, UCW struck the archdiocesan operated Calvary Cemetery, New York City’s largest burial ground. The walkout was total, and included all classes of workers—gardeners, gravediggers, chauffeurs, machine operators, foundation workers, and maintenance men. Located in Middle Village, Queens, Calvary

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<sup>33</sup>See R. B. Sigel, “Dignity and Sexuality: Claims on Dignity in Transnational Debates over Abortion and Same-Sex Marriage,” *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 10, no. 2 (March 30, 2012): 355–79.

Cemetery averaged ten thousand interments a year; in 1949 it held nearly two million departed within its four hundred acre tract.<sup>34</sup>

From a Catholic Social Teaching perspective, workers' rights as well as aspects of the common good were at stake. The history of the negotiations between the employer (the Archdiocese of New York) and the employees reveals different linguistic tactics. The former was employing the feudal language of managerial paternalism, with the benevolent Father offering paid employment and showing voluntary generosity. The latter were using a democratic language of rights and entitlements and the employer's duties. There was clearly a lack of consensus on the meaning and weight of equality in employer-employee relationships.

The figure of Cardinal Spellman, carrying the political and financial power of his elevated position, aggravated the effects of this managerial paternalism. His eminence kept a low profile at first, but became visibly involved in the strike negotiations in the second half of February. In spite of *Rerum Novarum's* defense of unions in section 49, the cardinal (concerned about leftist tendencies) offered the strikers a flat 8 percent wage increase, "but with the proviso that they return to work free of union membership by noon the following day."<sup>35</sup> When they refused the offer, Cardinal Spellman took action and became a strike breaker, organizing seminarians to dig ninety graves, as reported by the *New York Times*.<sup>36</sup> This created quite an uproar:

The grave diggers were dumbstruck when they saw his Eminence enter Calvary Cemetery in Queens accompanied by three busloads of seminarians, but of course, this was precisely the effect that Spellman had hoped for, spouting to the press that he was proud of his strike breaking. . . . No less a personality than Dorothy Day served notice to the Cardinal that what he really buried was Catholic social teaching.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>A. Sparr, "The Most Memorable Labor Dispute in the History of U.S. Church-Related Institutions: The 1949 Calvary Cemetery Workers' Strike against the Catholic Archdiocese of New York," *American Catholic Studies* 119, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 1–33, at 3–4.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>36</sup>W. Lissner, "Cardinal Directs as His Seminarians Dig Ninety Graves; Spellman Leads 100 Past the Strikers at Calvary—Offer to Use Pick Declined," *New York Times*, March 4, 1949.

<sup>37</sup>P. J. Hayes, "Estote Firmi: New York's Local Church under Cardinal Spellman's Watch," in Christopher D. Denny and Christopher McMahon, eds., *Finding Salvation in Christ: Essays in Christology and Soteriology in Honor of William P. Loewe* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 23–48, at 35.



In her letter to Cardinal Spellman, dated March 4, 1949, Day made it very clear that the (Catholic) workers rejected support by communists and were instead supported by the Catholic Worker Movement. She supports the strike since it is about “not just the issue of wages and hours. . . . It is a question of their dignity as men, their dignity as workers, and the right to have a union of their own, and a right to talk over their grievances.”<sup>38</sup> She appealed to the cardinal to go out as “father” to the children, especially since it is easier for the powerful to give in than for the poor. What is at stake in this controversy is the understanding and application of Catholic Social Teaching, based on the social encyclicals *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno*. In the words of David Gregory, “Dorothy Day and the *Catholic Worker* bore profound and direct witness to the Cardinal’s egregious repudiation of Catholic social teaching on the rights of workers.”<sup>39</sup>

One of the negotiators for the Archdiocese of New York, Godfrey P. Schmidt, a Fordham Law graduate, questioned the reading of Catholic Social Teaching by New York’s labor priests and their allies, and published an article in 1947 calling for the establishment of a commission of Catholic theologians to translate abstract principles and apply them to the realities of life.<sup>40</sup> He felt the need for a Catholic casuistry to deal with the day’s challenges, in a context that differed from 1891, when *Rerum Novarum* was published. He named the challenge of translating and applying and enacting the abstract ideas and general principles of Catholic Social Teaching. As he pointed out, the texts of social encyclicals leave space for conflicting interpretations in concrete situations. The 1949 cemetery-worker strike also draws attention to the possibly severe divide between Catholic Social Teaching and Catholic institutional practices.

If we try to interpret the undeniable historical fact that Day and the cardinal disagreed about the moral status of the strike, we can identify several different possibilities:

- Cardinal Spellman and Dorothy Day agreed on the content of Catholic Social Teaching about workers’ rights, such as the right to unionize, but did not agree on the application of these papal teachings to the concrete situation on doctrinal grounds (given a

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<sup>38</sup>Dorothy Day, *All the Way to Heaven: The Selected Letters of Dorothy Day*, ed. Robert Ellsberg (New York: Image Books, 2010), 219.

<sup>39</sup>D. Gregory, “Dorothy Day,” in John Witte Jr. and Frank Alexander, eds., *The Teachings of Modern Roman Catholicism on Law, Politics and Human Nature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 336–67, at 357.

<sup>40</sup>G. P. Schmidt, “Moral Theology and Labor,” *America*, April 26, 1947, 95–97.

- particular interpretation of the teachings that rejects communism as much as it supports workers' rights, for instance).
- Cardinal Spellman and Day agreed on the content of Catholic Social Teaching in its statements about workers' rights, but did not agree on the application of these papal teachings to the concrete situation on pragmatic grounds. Perhaps Spellman did not want to suffer economic disadvantages and social inconvenience as a result of the teachings that he had accepted, or maybe he operated under the assumption that Catholic Social Teaching *ad intra* (i.e., applied to Catholic employers), is softer than Catholic Social Teaching *ad extra* (i.e., applied to non-Church institutions and agents).
  - The cardinal and Day disagreed about the content of the teaching given the variety of interpretations available for relevant texts as well as the variety of relevant texts.

We have reasons to believe that both Spellman and Day had good knowledge of *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), with both accepting the normativity of these papal documents. It is also safe to believe that they both shared a sense of the dignity of the human person created in the image and likeness of God. They seem to have disagreed on the relationship of principle to a concrete situation, and it seems plausible to see their dispute as a question of proper application. They made different judgments about the role and meaning of human dignity, the dignity of workers and work, and the common good in this particular context.

### The Necessity of Judgment

Issues of application arise because of the elasticity of the material at stake. The 1949 dispute over labor rights would not be possible without this flexibility, which permits the application of social doctrine to be a personal interpretation rather than a mechanical implementation. You can only apply what can be formed or molded to the relevant situation, which differs from other situations, and the molding is done by someone with the necessary expertise. Here, the personal commitment of the epistemic subject is required; the judgment cannot be delegated to chains of citations. In application, the selection as well as the bending of the material has to be performed by the judging and interpreting subject—thus it cannot be standardized. This is also the place where biographical elements may enter the process of judgment. The life worlds of Dorothy Day and Cardinal

Spellman were clearly different; this influenced their individual readings of the situation and the relevant papal texts.

The disagreement in 1949 illustrates the need for judgment in the selection, interpretation, and application of Catholic Social Teaching. A principle can only provide concrete orientation if it is properly applied, with the particular reality in mind. Let us take the issue of migration, for instance. As a document defending human rights, the encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, completed by Pope John XXIII shortly before his death, is an influential source of orientation for the matter of migration. We read in section 25, “When there are just reasons in favor of it, he [the person] must be permitted to emigrate to other countries and take up residence there.”<sup>41</sup> The Latin text speaks of “*iustae causae*” or “just reasons.” We are, however, not told what these just reasons might be, especially in the changing circumstances of our times. In the same encyclical we see a further statement defending the right to migration:

Among man’s personal rights we must include his right to enter a country in which he hopes to be able to provide more fittingly for himself and his dependents. It is therefore the duty of State officials to accept such immigrants and—so far as the good of their own community, rightly understood, permits—to further the aims of those who may wish to become members of a new society.<sup>42</sup>

The key passage here is the caveat “so far as the good of their own community, rightly understood, permits.” Again, by which criteria can we decide what “the good of their own community permits” and what it means to understand this good “rightly”? Judgments connecting the general statement and its applicability within concrete realities are indispensable.

The document *Ecclesia in Europa* mentions “intelligent acceptance and hospitality”<sup>43</sup> in the context of migration as a challenge for Europe. What then is an intelligent elaboration of the concept of intelligent acceptance? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* provides a general orientation with regard to migration when talking about general duties of wealthy nations: “The more prosperous nations are obliged, to the extent they are able [*in quantum fieri potest*], to welcome the foreigner in search of the security and the means of livelihood which he cannot find in his country

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<sup>41</sup>John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, “Peace on Earth” (1963), 25, hereinafter *PT*.

<sup>42</sup>*PT* 106.

<sup>43</sup>John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Europa*, “The Church in Europe” (2003), no. 101, hereinafter *EE*.

of origin.”<sup>44</sup> We need to make judgments about the application of this implicitly invoked “ability-to-pay principle,” the principle that holds that those who *can* pay *should* pay. Judgments do not follow mechanically; we are left with the necessity to exercise the key skill of Immanuel Kant’s third Critique: *The Critique of Judgment* (1790). We need this ability to make appropriate judgments in concrete situations.

Working with Catholic Social Teaching *in concreto* leaves us with the challenge of how to identify and select an appropriate textual basis given the vastness of the body of relevant texts. This unavoidable selection of the texts is a further call to judgment. “Official Catholic social doctrine” is not as simple as a strictly ordered set of sentences, as we find in Spinoza’s *Ethics* or in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*; these two texts are examples of buildings in which each sentence has its place in the structure. In the case of the *Tractatus*, they are also numbered, and the claim is not only that of freedom from inconsistency but also of the validity of well-considered architecture, in which one sentence is built upon the other, no sentence is superfluous, and no sentence is missing. We do not have that with regard to Catholic social doctrine. And even if there were agreement on the selected set and the weight of relevant texts, one would need to take into account the signs of the times when making judgments. Sister Carol Keehan, president of the Catholic Health Care Alliance, for example, sided with President Barack Obama in the political debate surrounding the Affordable Care Act in the United States; the US Conference of Catholic Bishops had rejected the draft. Keehan’s argument was that one cannot wait for the perfect statute, but must have, in addition to principles, preferences and priorities.<sup>45</sup> These preferences and priorities inform judgments about courses of action, allowing for a pragmatic approach that recognizes that the moral landscape is nuanced. Such preferences and priorities are formed on the basis of deliberations of “relevance,” a category that cannot be separated from pragmatic considerations, which in turn inform judgments.

Judgments are not achieved by reiterating well-known statements. It is not enough to repeat the official general doctrine in concrete situations with their specific demands. It is not just about the what, but also about the how. There is more to the application of principles than their normative expression. Purely mechanical repetition of doctrine can even be dangerous since it could lead to numbness and indifference: “The message

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<sup>44</sup>*Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 2241, hereinafter CCC.

<sup>45</sup>C. Keehan, “Time to Collaborate,” *Modern Healthcare*, March 30, 2009.

is one which we often take for granted, and can repeat almost mechanically, without necessarily ensuring that it has a real effect on our lives and in our communities. How dangerous and harmful this is, for it makes us lose our amazement, our excitement and our zeal for living the Gospel of fraternity and justice!”<sup>46</sup> A judgment in the spirit of a fresh outlook cannot be realized in a mechanical way; in fact, in a sense, it surprises the person doing the judging, as philosopher Ted Honderich was surprised by his own analysis of moral rights in relation to terrorism.<sup>47</sup> Any judgment inhabited by an epistemic subject has a “subjective” dimension, which means that there is no guarantee that two individuals posing the same question will come up with the same conclusion or solution—and in the event of their conclusions being similar in content and results, the basic tenor of their arguments can still be different.

The enactment of Catholic Social Teaching calls for fresh judgments. These judgments are not arbitrary; they are guided by Catholic Social Teaching itself. If we take the category of “Catholic social doctrine” as part of moral theology and the magisterium, we find hints to its own application in the doctrine itself. Part of the essence of the social doctrine of the Church is “to apply the Word of God to the lives of people and society, as well as to the related earthly realities.”<sup>48</sup> Here, the biblical foundation is stressed as well as the challenge, known from the art of homiletics, to translate the Word of God into life realities. The apostolic letter *Octogesima Adveniens* contains important notes on the application of social doctrine: we read that social doctrine does not present a prefabricated pattern, works in a solution-oriented manner, and is constantly applied to the changing course of things.<sup>49</sup>

Repeating doctrine is not enough, as has been explicitly stated in the encyclical *Mater et Magistra*: “All social teachings, however, must not only be recited, they must also be realized. This is especially true of the social doctrine of the church.”<sup>50</sup> A list of core principles of Catholic

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<sup>46</sup>EG 179.

<sup>47</sup>T. Honderich, *After the Terror* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003). Honderich embarked on a journey of analysis and reflection after 9/11 and arrived—to his own surprise—at the conclusion that there is such a thing as a moral right to terrorism. I am not emphasizing this claim here, but rather the moment of surprise in the process of deliberating and judging.

<sup>48</sup>John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, “The Social Concern” (1987), no. 8, hereinafter SRS.

<sup>49</sup>Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens*, “Eightieth Anniversary [of *Rerum Novarum*]” (1971), no. 42, hereinafter OA.

<sup>50</sup>John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, “On Christianity and Social Progress” (1961), no. 226, hereinafter MM. Section 229 reflects on the difficulties in application and implementation: “The transition from theory to practice is already difficult. It is even more difficult to put the social doctrine of the Church into practice. The reasons for this are the unbridled

Social Doctrine can be quickly created and effortlessly memorized, and basic definitions of “subsidiarity” and “common good” are simple to draw from easily accessible sources. More is obviously needed to apply Catholic social doctrine. A suggested scheme for the project of applying Catholic Social Teaching is the “see-judge-act” approach,<sup>51</sup> which calls for a proper consideration of social realities and the signs of the times, a well-justified judgment, and a consistent translation of this judgment into action. In this see-judge-act process we see a particular concern of good judgment, namely, moral clarity. One cannot act upon diffuse and unclear judgments, and moral clarity about crucial ethical questions cannot be separated from spiritual identity and belonging. This is not only a matter of intellectual judgment, but more so, an existential question and a matter of spirituality.

### Moral Clarity

Especially amid the complexity and fragility of our lives, moral clarity is hard to find; it is relatively easy in situations with clear boundaries, but boundaries shift and become blurred. Moral clarity can be hard won and then can get lost again; the December 1984 UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment was adopted in the wake of many atrocious experiences and moral disasters. The text of the convention arrives at moral clarity with its absolute understanding of the prohibition of torture, stating explicitly in article 2.2: “No exceptional circumstances whatsoever, whether a state of war or a threat of war, internal political instability or any other public emergency, may be invoked as a justification of torture.” After 9/11, the commitment to the absolute prohibition of torture weakened, especially in the United States. Jeremy Waldron, defending its absolute prohibition (“My personal conviction is that torture is an abomination, to be excluded from consideration in all circumstances, even in the ticking-bomb scenarios”<sup>52</sup>), appeals

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selfishness of man, the materialistic world-view that is spreading in society today, and the difficulty of determining what justice demands in the concrete situation.” There are both social and epistemological hindrances in applying Catholic Social Teaching. Universal principles can touch local realities only in a certain way; they are limited in their capacity for making directive statements and providing judgments in particular circumstances. They can serve as a point of departure and reference point, but not as the final result of local deliberations. There is no alternative to personal judgment and “local moral knowledge.”

<sup>51</sup>MM 236.

<sup>52</sup>J. Waldron, “What Can Christian Teaching Add to the Debate about Torture?,” *Theology Today* 63 (2006): 330–43, at 335; cf. J. Porter, “Torture and the Christian Conscience: A Response to Jeremy Waldron,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61, no. 3 (2008): 340–58.

to specifically Christian sources to defend moral clarity with regard to torture: Christians should have a sense of absolute prohibition of torture, given the sacredness of the human person, the sacredness of norms, and the spiritual dangers of breaking the soul through torture.<sup>53</sup> Waldron even quotes F. S. Cocks, a UK delegate to the 1949 negotiations preparing the European Convention on Human Rights, who noted affirmatively that “The Consultative Assembly . . . believes that it would be better for a society to perish than for it to permit this relic of barbarism to remain.”<sup>54</sup>

The challenge of applying principles in concrete situations consists of achieving moral clarity without losing a handle on the complexity of the situation at stake. And given our human condition, there are many complexities to negotiate. Wheaton College graduate Darren Yau authored the award-winning essay in the 2017 Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity’s Ethics Essay contest. Titled “Truthfulness and Tragedy: Notes from an Immigrant’s Son,” his piece talks about two situations where persons struggled with integrity and truth.<sup>55</sup> In the 1970s his great-grandfather, a citizen of the People’s Republic of China, was falsely accused of being a Nationalist sympathizer; he refused to sign a false confession and brought danger and shame to his family. Imprisoned, he was released after seven months in jail. In the spring of 2012, the author’s uncle was notified that he had stage IV pancreatic cancer and refused to let his father (then in his late nineties) know; he was buried without his own father knowing of his son’s illness and passing. In the first situation, a person refuses to lie, and in the second situation, a person refuses to tell the truth. Yau makes the point that in both situations a particular person—his great-grandfather, then his uncle—had acted to preserve and honor his integrity, and that the situations revealed a sense of the tragic character of our lives. Quoting a line from Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*—“The true genre of life is neither hagiography nor saga, but tragedy”<sup>56</sup>—he characterizes tragedy as “a drama wherein the actors are motivated by fundamentally conflicting cares and loves that inevitably lead to some demise.”

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<sup>53</sup>Waldron, “What Can Christian Teaching Add to the Debate about Torture?” 337–40.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, 336n14. Christian sources of moral clarity are also evident, for example, in any Catholic Social Teaching–inspired discourse on migration, since the priority of the sacredness of the human person and the universal destination of goods over national sovereignty is well established in its documents (see, e.g., *PT* 105; Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, “Charity in Truth” [2009], 62, hereinafter CV).

<sup>55</sup>Darren Yau, “Truthfulness and Tragedy: Notes from an Immigrant’s Son,” Elie Wiesel Foundation, 2017, <http://eliewiesel.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Truthfulness-and-Tragedy-3.0-Formatting.pdf>, 3.

<sup>56</sup>A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 247.

There is a lot of wisdom in these observations. Not all of those refusing to respect article 2.2 of the UN Convention quoted earlier did so light-heartedly. For instance, Alan Dershowitz's claim to accept certain cases of justifiable torture reflected a process of careful deliberation.<sup>57</sup> There are painful situations that convey the tragic character of life; we may find ourselves in circumstances where moral clarity comes with a price that seems too high to pay, but concerns a good too precious not to procure. Human dignity is the most precious good that we have as creatures created in the image and likeness of God and saved into the image of Christ.<sup>58</sup>

There are situations in which it seems easy to protect and respect the dignity of the human person, such as in the moving Easter celebrations in a parish community or the joy of celebrating the birth of a child. And then in some situations tragedy strikes, and the path toward respecting human dignity becomes more fraught. For instance, it is tragic to be diagnosed with an inoperable tumor on the spine when one is a man in his mid-fifties, as Jeffrey Spector was, faced with the challenge of "living human dignity" after the diagnosis.<sup>59</sup> It is tragic to have a son, born with cardiofaciocutaneous syndrome, who is in danger of seriously hurting himself, whose behavior is unpredictable, and whose sleeping patterns do not align with his parents' needs for rest. Journalist Ian Brown describes this journey with his son to both heaven and hell in his book *The Boy in the Moon*.<sup>60</sup> Again and again he finds himself in situations that challenge categories like "family life," "tenderness," or "love." It is in such circumstances that we are called to "a deep practice of human dignity," to a practice that holds onto the dignity of the person under adverse circumstances. Tragedy is a framework whereby a person makes the experience of being "an unwelcome guest in the world"; tragedy leads to the exposure to "forces which neither be fully understood nor overcome by rational prudence"; tragedy brings with it a moment of irreversibility

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<sup>57</sup>A. Dershowitz, *Why Terrorism Works: Understanding the Threat, Responding to the Challenge* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

<sup>58</sup>Cf. Col 1:15; 1 Cor 15:49; 2 Cor 3:18; 2 Cor 4:4.

<sup>59</sup>Jeffrey Spector decided to end his life in Switzerland and was celebrated as a "hero of life" in certain circles in the United Kingdom; see A. Grey, *Dignity at the End of Life: What's beneath the Assisted Dying Debate?* (London: Theos, 2017), 23–27. Spector's case reminded many of that of paralyzed UK citizen Diane Pretty, who went all the way to the European Court of Human Rights to claim the right to assisted suicide; see M. Freeman, "Denying Death Its Dominion: Thoughts on the Diane Pretty Case," *Medical Law Review* 10 (2002): 245–70; see also S. B. Chetwynd, "Right to Life, Right to Die, and Assisted Suicide," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 21, no. 2 (2004): 173–82.

<sup>60</sup>I. Brown, *The Boy in the Moon: A Father's Journey to Understand His Extraordinary Son* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011).



and irreparability, a sense of excessive suffering.<sup>61</sup> But in the words of George Steiner, “Yet in the very excess of his suffering lies man’s claim to dignity.”<sup>62</sup> Our sense of human dignity is shaped and molded by the tragic. Enacting Catholic Social Tradition happens in the space between the obvious and the impossible.

Alfred Delp found moral clarity and a new understanding of the price of Catholic Social Teaching in prison. His experience of the clear moral vision of the right and the wrong in politics was like his experience of Advent—and not only because he spent the crucial months of Advent 1944 in prison, preparing for the trial that would lead to his sentencing and execution. Advent, as Delp experienced it, challenges comfort, indifference, and ambiguity. Advent turns out to be the time of decision,<sup>63</sup> the time in which we must see things as they are.<sup>64</sup> Advent is the time of decision because the prophetic call to conversion compels a decision; it opens up a horizon of decisions on which people have to take a position. The possibility of indifference is no longer an option given the radical difference between what is, and what is preached as future reality. Advent is a time of a new realism, entailing a new discipline to see things as they are—including an understanding of what really counts when measuring and weighing what is. Advent lets us experience the temporary nature of the ephemeral structures of our lives, which increases the need for moral clarity and support beyond the variable and changeable. And this moral clarity can be drawn from an understanding of the absolute.

Delp experienced Advent as both an encounter with the absolute and a time of truth. Such an experience of truth in the wrong, as Delp had in prison (Coady called it “Truth Hidden in Untruth”<sup>65</sup>), stands in the way of the famous Adorno statement: “There is no right life in the wrong one.”<sup>66</sup> Delp experienced truth “in the wrong life,” in an injustice. This does not justify the wrong life, but strengthens our hope and trust both in the power *of* good and the power *for* good. Seen in this way, Advent becomes an exercise in overcoming comfort and indifference. In prison, Delp was shaken to the core. And this shock continued, since it went hand in hand with a deeper sense of incompleteness and sinfulness, and a need

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<sup>61</sup>G. Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), xi and 8, respectively.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>63</sup>Delp, *Prison Meditations*, 33.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>65</sup>Coady, “Truth Hidden in Untruth.”

<sup>66</sup>“Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen” (T. W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben*, Gesammelte Schriften 4 [Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1997], 43).

for conversion. Advent does not give freedom to those who think they have already converted. Advent provides moral clarity, precisely because the essential is separated from the nonessential. Catholic Social Teaching is an invitation to build the kingdom of God, to renew the commitment to a new social order. It is, in this sense, an expression of “an Advent spirituality.”