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Catholic Social Teaching: a trickle-up response to poverty?

Patricia Kelly

School of Divinity, University of St Andrews, St Andrews, UK

ABSTRACT

In this article, I offer a concise historical overview of the context in which Catholic Social Teaching developed. A necessarily brief account of nineteenth-century Social Catholics in France, Belgium, and the Rhineland demonstrates how three of the four principles of Catholic Social Teaching – solidarity, the common good, and human dignity – were already present in this endeavour. I then turn to the ideas of Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler, Bishop of Mainz, and his development of the concept of subsidiarity, which provides the fourth pillar of Catholic Social Teaching, differentiating it from broader Christian teachings to ‘do good’. Subsidiarity enables people and communities to pursue actions and policies which are best for them, thus providing a trickle-up response to poverty, environmental crises, and other socio-economic emergencies.

KEYWORDS

Catholic Social Teaching; Social Catholicism; Ketteler; subsidiarity; *Rerum Novarum*; Cardijn

Introduction¹

In the Catholic theological tradition, Catholic Social Teaching – often referred to, misleadingly, as ‘the Church’s best-kept secret’² – is generally considered to fall within the remit of the moral theologian. As a systematic and historical theologian, therefore, it is with some trepidation that I approach the subject, lest I ‘rush in, where angels fear to tread’. This article will provide a broad historical overview, for those readers less familiar with Catholic Social Teaching, of some of the principal theological and social developments which underpin the rise of modern Catholic Social Teaching. To that extent, I offer a context in which the remaining articles in this issue may be read, as well, perhaps, as a stand-alone introduction to the idea of Catholic Social Teaching.

As the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace reminded us in 2004, Catholic Social Teaching is based on four guiding principles: the dignity of the human person, the common good, solidarity, and subsidiarity.³ The dignity of the human person, created in God’s image; the requirement to behave justly towards God, our fellow human beings and the whole of creation (the common good); and the injunction to care for the poor

¹I am grateful to the Leeds Centre for Victorian Studies, the Newman University Humanities research seminar, and the Juniorate at Ampleforth Abbey, for the opportunity to present this research to them, and for their feedback; and to the wise and generous comments of the two anonymous peer reviewers.

²André Habisch, ‘Practical Wisdom for Social Innovation. How Christian entrepreneurs triggered the emergence of the Catholic Social tradition in Europe’, in Backhaus *et al.*, *On the economic significance of the Catholic Social Doctrine*, 167–190 (167); Vivencio O Ballano, ‘Why is Catholic Social Teaching so difficult to implement in society? A theological-sociological analysis’, *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 11/1 (2021): 93–106 (93).

³*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004), ch.4.

and oppressed (solidarity), all derive from the basic moral teachings found in the Scriptures and the wider traditions of Christianity and Judaism. Inasmuch as Catholic Social Teaching begins with Leo XIII's encyclical letter *Rerum Novarum*,⁴ which was responding to the most radical transformation of working and living conditions in human history, Catholic Social Teaching adds the principle of subsidiarity, the idea that problems should be solved at the most local level possible. In this article, I argue that it is subsidiarity, which marks the move from a tradition of care for neighbour and the world, stemming from the divine injunctions of covenant and righteousness in Scripture, to Catholic Social Teaching, which emerges as a distinct collection of doctrines from the 1890s onwards.

Komonchak argues that the principle of subsidiarity demands the priority of the person over the state and requires the human person to take responsibility for her own flourishing through communities which themselves are permitted to enable this flourishing. 'Intervention', he insists, 'is only appropriate as "helping people help themselves"'.⁵ This is a key definition of subsidiarity, which has formed the bedrock of papal writings on civil society since 1931. The principles of subsidiarity have spread further, from being the foundations of the European Union to underpinning the micro-grant movement in development, a contemporary example of which is GiveDirectly.⁶

In this article, I begin with an overview of Social Catholicism as the background to *Rerum Novarum*, in order to locate Catholic Social Teaching within the political, social, and economic contexts in which the European Church found itself during the nineteenth century.⁷ In their reaction to the cry of the poor, I argue, Social Catholics were already embodying three of the four principles of Catholic Social Teaching, namely solidarity, human dignity, and the common good. I will then turn to the specifically German hinterland which gives rise to subsidiarity, before noting how this concept is developed from *Rerum Novarum* to the present day.

Social Catholicism: 'going about and doing good'⁸

As Misner has comprehensively shown,⁹ Social Catholicism developed through the nineteenth century in Western Europe in response to the 'social question': the poverty arising from the very specific, and very new, conditions of industrialisation.¹⁰ Despite the quarter-century of the Napoleonic Wars, industrialisation accelerated during the

⁴Pope Leo XIII, *Encyclical Letter Rerum Novarum*, 15 May 1891.

⁵Joseph A. Komonchak, 'Subsidiarity in the Church. The state of the question' *Jurist* 48/1 (1988): 298–349 (302).

⁶The US charity arranges cash transfers to individuals and communities in extreme need or poverty, arguing that this both restores dignity to the recipient, and ensures the funds are used in the most beneficial way for that recipient; extensive research shows that the benefits go well beyond the individual or family concerned, and can make a positive difference to local economies. [<https://www.givedirectly.org/research-at-give-directly/>], accessed 17/09/2022.

⁷Ballano (2021, 94–96) suggests that Catholic Social Teaching is 'largely adopted from Western European social contexts', noting that *Rerum Novarum* responded to the issue of industrialisation in Western Europe, and that much subsequent teaching may also derive more from a Western European than a world-wide context.

⁸I have borrowed this sub-title from Brian Dickey, ' "Going about and doing good"; Evangelicals and Poverty c. 1815–1870', in John Wolffe (ed.), *Evangelical faith and public zeal. Evangelicals and Society in Britain, 1780–1980* (London: SPCK, 1995).

⁹Paul Misner, *Social Catholicism in Europe from the onset of industrialization to the First World War* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1991). This work remains the most comprehensive account of the work of Social Catholics across Europe during the long nineteenth century.

¹⁰I have written more fully about the Social Catholics in France and Belgium in chapter 3 of my *Taking theology to work* (Adelaide: ATF Press, forthcoming 2023).

nineteenth century from Britain and Belgium to France, Germany and beyond. Of course such a generalisation disguises significant regional variation, but universal characteristics of nineteenth-century European industrialisation included mass migration from rural to urban areas where there was an almost total absence of infrastructure. There was inadequate housing, poor sanitation, and limited education, much of it provided by religious organisations. If living conditions were poor, working conditions were often worse, with no health and safety regulations, no insurance for those injured or killed, long days of arduous physical work, and a ban on the freedom of association. Free association, and by extension, unions, were only permitted towards the end of the century: in the UK, in 1871, in France in 1868, and in Belgium in 1883.¹¹

Social Catholicism was to be found predominantly in France, Belgium, and the German Rhineland, hence the dominance of these regions in the sources and, at the end of the nineteenth century, in the Union de Fribourg. Aubert¹² notes that Social Catholics generally formed part of the social and political elite, and as such were very remote from, and often unaware of, the realities of working life; even the middle classes and factory owners were more aware of the difficulties in which workers lived. Misner¹³ (ch. 6) points out that few if any Social Catholics engaged with political or economic theory, preferring to advocate the virtuous life as the solution to poverty and social ills. The focus of the employer-led workers' associations which developed was thus to promote virtuous living through religious education and to keep workers away from 'sin' (such as pubs and brothels), rather than to educate workers to enable them to improve their lot through unionisation.

Social Catholicism: solidarity, human dignity, the common good

The principal scholars of Social Catholicism¹⁴ agree that it is a movement of predominantly lay Catholics from the social elite, inspired by the Gospel values of their faith to improve the lot of those who suffered most from the ills of industrialisation. While the historiography is often sharply critical of the paternalistic attitudes brought by the social elite, it is also true that they were typically the only group with the resources to respond at all to the acute needs raised by the social question. The classic narrative of Social Catholicism, according to Misner and Pierrard, for example, runs something like this. First, in the interval between the end of the Napoleonic Wars until about 1840, was a period of 'social concern' (could there be a more paternalistic term?) leading to charitable welfare and some legislation. Second, in line with what might be described as the 'moral panic' following the 'Year of Revolutions' of 1848, we see the rise of *patronages*, employer-sponsored activities where employees could spend their leisure time yet remain observed. Third, from the 1880s onwards, we see a move towards employer-led associations and, eventually, unions; and fourth, the fruit of all this work

¹¹Misner, *Social Catholicism*, 27.

¹²Roger Aubert, *The Church in a secularised society*. The Christian Centuries, V (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1965), 145.

¹³Misner, *Social Catholicism*, chapter 6.

¹⁴In addition to Misner, *Social Catholicism* and Aubert, *Church* see Adrien Dansette, *L'histoire religieuse de la France contemporaine* (Paris, Flammarion, 1965); J.-M. Mayeur, *Catholicisme sociale et démocratie chrétienne* (Paris, Cerf, 1986); Pierre Pierrard, *L'Église et les ouvriers en France (1840–1940)* (Paris Hachette 1984); A. R. Vidler, *A century of Social Catholicism 1820–1920* (London SPCK 1964).

in *Rerum Novarum* (1891). While there is much to commend this narrative, its weaknesses include the fixing of categories of action into distinct time periods, and the implication of a coherent, planned organisation. I contend that Social Catholicism is not a distinctive and organised movement for social change but is rather more muddled, with overlapping time frames and networks – some expected, some unexpected – across France, Belgium, and the Rhine. In their response to the social question, Catholics across Europe responded, like their fellow Christians of different denominations,¹⁵ to the extremes of poverty resulting from industrialisation in the time-honoured method of almsgiving. At the same time, we can see the principles of solidarity, human dignity, and the common good being expressed and developing in both theory and in practice.

Overall, Social Catholics may be said to have been offering an alternative to Socialism and Marxism by providing works of mercy, prayer, and encouraging personal growth. They were as far removed from Socialism as they were from the working classes they were seeking to help, yet there are similarities with Marx's methodology which it is important to highlight. Social Catholics and Marx were equally concerned with the dignity of the human person, which should have the corollary that workers are able to fully develop and flourish as human beings. Just as Marx used the powerful testimony of parliamentary reports and other early sociological evidence to demand better for workers,¹⁶ so Social Catholics likewise used hard evidence from surveys to call for improvements in living and working conditions. They differed, of course, over the end to which the flourishing human person should be directed, whether that end should be eternal salvation, or flourishing in this world.

Those Social Catholics who held posts in regional or national legislatures took the opportunity to push for legislative measures designed to improve working conditions and working-class life. While these began in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, legislation to improve the lot of the workers was in no way restricted to its early years but continued until the eve of WW1. A *député* such as Jean-Paul Alban Villeneuve-Bargemont (1784–1850)¹⁷ with his 'acute observation of economic and social conditions [which later] became the basis for an extended comparative study' (Ring 1935, 9), was in an excellent position to campaign for protection of industrial workers. As *député* for Lille (in the heart of the industrial *Nord* département) from 1840 until 1848, he became known as a political theorist, insisting that Christian principles should underpin the liberal economy and capitalism, alleging a causal link between capitalism and acute poverty, and sponsoring legislation to reform the vagrancy laws and limit child labour to 8 hours a day. His contemporary Armand de Melun (1807–1877),¹⁸ *député* for Brittany from 1843, supported this drive, while his wider parliamentary work included legislation to regulate apprenticeships, establish legal aid, educate young prisoners, improve housing, and set up mutual aid and pension societies (the forerunners of the social security systems). I suggest that the use of legislation to try to improve the lot of the worker is an example of solidarity.

¹⁵See John Wolffe, *Evangelical faith and public good*.

¹⁶Karl Marx, *Capital. Volume 1*. (London: Penguin 1976), pp. 340–416.

¹⁷Mary Ignatius Ring, *Villeneuve-Bargemont. Precursor of modern Social Catholicism (1794–1850)*, Milwaukee, Bruce Publishing Company, 1935.

¹⁸A. D'Andigné, *Un apôtre de la charité. Armand de Melun (1807–1877)*. Paris, Nouvelles éditions latines, 1961.

As with Marx, legislation would have been impossible without hard data. De Melun worked closely with the French mining engineer, Frédéric LePlay (1806–1882),¹⁹ who is remembered today for his influence on the development of sociology as an academic discipline, both in its process and its methodology. He spent twenty years using questionnaires and interviews to investigate the day-to-day lives and living conditions of miners around Europe, published as *Les ouvriers européens* in 1855.²⁰ Much of his data, like that of the Belgian Inspector of Prisons Édouard Dupéctiaux (1804–1868), who conducted surveys on issues such as housing, transport, health and safety, and education, provided the basis for legislation to improve working conditions.

Social Catholics were also profoundly concerned with the relief of poverty, both material and spiritual, offering not just material handouts of fuel, food, and clothing, but also trying to alleviate spiritual and social isolation. In Catholic Europe, of course, there were numerous religious Orders seeking to do the same, such as the Little Sisters of the Poor, but by the middle of the nineteenth century the largest urban centres of industry needed more than this. Many pious, wealthy Catholics from the social elites formed parish-based groups to try to help the destitute, of which the most famous, still functioning today, is the *Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul* (Society of St Vincent de Paul). Founded by Frédéric Ozanam (1813–1853)²¹ the Society became a network of parish-based ‘conferences’ whose members were to ‘visit the poor personally ... alleviate their needs and sufferings with food and clothing, [despite] the barriers of class and upbringing to establish personal contact’,²² with thousands of ‘conferences’ across Europe by the end of the century; most Catholic parishes world-wide continue to have a chapter of the Society, whose members support the local needy. Misner questions whether the Society of St Vincent de Paul should be considered a movement of Social Catholicism, noting that the focus was on offering material aid through a personal relationship, rather than social reform *per se*. I argue that the Society did operate within the parameters of Social Catholicism. It went beyond almsgiving and provision of food, clothing, and fuel, to establish personal relationships with the needy. The desire not only to meet immediate physical needs, but also to fulfil the need for companionship and to recognise the inherent human dignity of the poor, is a hallmark of Social Catholicism.

As industrialisation progressed, employers founded associations through which they might offer educational and leisure facilities to their employees and their families; as private, employer-sponsored clubs they were permitted despite the ban on freedom of associations. Funding and beneficiaries varied widely: some were organised by an employer or several employers and some by parishes or religious organisations; some were only for particular workers, and others for the whole community. Some parish confraternities sponsored sporting clubs, Sunday schools, libraries, and evening

¹⁹Françoise Arnault, *Frédéric LePlay. De la métallurgie à la science sociale* (Nancy: Presses universitaires de Nancy, 1993); M. Z. Brooke, *LePlay. Engineer and Social Scientist. The life and work of Frédéric LePlay* (New York: Routledge 2017).

²⁰Frédéric LePlay, *Les ouvriers européens. Études sur les travaux, la vie domestique et la condition morale des populations ouvrière de l'Europe* (Tours: Alfred Mame et fils, 1877).

²¹Gérard Cholvy, *Frédéric Ozanam. L'engagement d'un intellectuel catholique au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2003); M. Brejon de Lavergnée, *La société de saint-Vincent-de-Paul au XIXe siècle (1833–1871). Un fleuron du catholicisme sociale* (Paris, Les éditions du Cerf, 2008).

²²Misner 1991, 59.

classes.²³ The underlying common theme was inculcating Christian belief and a Christian way of life, meeting and improving material needs, and developing social resources. In other words, the *patronages* and related organisations were an expression of the common good, despite the fact that, whether founded and run by employers or the Church, the majority of these associations remained highly paternalistic in their aims and their structures, run by the social elites for the workers. An example is the French factory owner Léon Harmel (1829–1915), who offered his workers leisure activities such as singing and sport, paid a ‘family wage’, trained young women in housewifery, provided free primary education even before it was legally mandated, and established mutual savings associations, including encouraging children to save.²⁴ Workers were permitted to join a union, which was part of the factory management and oversaw every aspect of working life, from wages and bonuses to training and workplace safety. Harmel had earlier been involved in *L’Œuvre des cercles catholiques des ouvriers*, founded by Albert de Mun (1841–1914) in 1871, a workers’ club run by aristocrats to bring workers to the Church and offer an alternative to those run by socialists.²⁵ De Mun, Harmel, and other leaders of *patronages* and workers’ clubs were drawn together into the *Union de Fribourg* by the Bishop of Geneva, Gaspard Mermillod, and met annually between 1885 and 1892 to discuss research into and solutions for the social question. The work of the *Union* ultimately influenced *Rerum Novarum*, with its call for unions, the family living wage, workers’ involvement in management, and the requirement for adequate leisure time.

Subsidiarity: the German roots

As Komonchak²⁶ notes, subsidiarity is a concept rooted in the German intellectual tradition, with roots in the thought of Wilhelm Emmanuel Ketteler (1811–1877), Bishop of Mainz, and later theorists including the Jesuit Heinrich Pesch (1854–1926). Ketteler was in many ways typical of the Social Catholics of France, Belgium, and the Rhineland during the nineteenth century. From a wealthy aristocratic background, he had studied law before working as a civil servant for the Prussian state. He then moved to Munich where he studied for the priesthood, being ordained in 1844. Lo Presti insists that Ketteler was neither a theoretician nor a philosopher,²⁷ but rightly emphasises the importance of the context of nineteenth-century Germany in the development of

²³The Société Ouvrière Saint-Joseph in Liège offered workers ‘a Sunday school and appropriate leisure activities . . . [it] founded libraries, a health-insurance fund . . . a savings bank, and even two co-operative stores. . . . By 1866, it already had 1000 members.’ (Lode Wils, ‘La Belgique au 19^{ème} siècle: situation religieuse, politique, et sociale’, in Emmanuel Gerard and Paul Wynants (eds), *Histoire du mouvement ouvrier chrétien en Belgique* KADOC-STUDIES 16 (Leuven, Leuven University Press 1994), vol. I p.33; while the *Archiconfrérie de Saint-François-Xavier* offered libraries and evening classes where ‘reading, writing, grammar, mathematics, and the catechism’ were taught, sponsoring choirs, bands, dramatic societies, savings banks and insurance funds, Rudolf Rezsöházy, *Origines et formation du catholicisme sociale en Belgique 1842–1909* (Louvain, Publications universitaires de Louvain, 1958), 53.

²⁴Taken from Harmel’s description of how he ran the factory as a specifically Christian enterprise, with the well-being of all its workers at heart, in line with the demands of Leo XIII in *Rerum Novarum*. Léon Harmel, ‘Lettre sur la question des salaires’, *La Croix de Riems*, 1893.

²⁵P. Levillain, *Albert de Mun. Catholicisme français et catholicisme romain du syllabus au raillement* (Rome: École française de Rome, 1983); B.F. Martin, *Count Albert de Mun. Paladin of the Third Republic* (Chapel Hill NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1978).

²⁶Komonchak, ‘Subsidiarity’, 300f.

²⁷Alberto LoPresti, *Introduzione al pensiero politico di Ketteler* (Rome, Armando, 2017), p. 17.

Ketteler's political philosophy, and in particular, what would become the principle of subsidiarity. The dissolution of the German states under Napoleon was followed by increasing secularisation and moves towards unification, which progressed through the century. The Catholic Church lost its formal political role (although some clergy, such as Ketteler himself, were also elected to parliament), and so, argues LoPresti, the institution could increasingly turn to the social question. In many ways Ketteler's own development of the concept of subsidiarity may be understood as an attempt to slow down excessive centralisation as what is now Germany slowly coalesced: what might work in Prussia might not work in Swabia, for instance.

We can trace Ketteler's concept of subsidiarity back to his early support for the *Gesellverein*,²⁸ developed by his contemporary at the seminary in Munich, Adolph Kolping (1813–1865). A former cobbler who had returned to education and eventually retrained as a priest, Kolping knew first hand of the difficulties faced by artisans who, having completed apprenticeships, had to travel from town to town seeking work. The *Gesellverein* was a journeyman's club, offering bed and board, facilities for leisure and education, and some savings opportunities, based in Catholic parishes and run jointly by the journeymen themselves and the local parish clergy. The network grew rapidly, with over a thousand lodges functioning by the end of the century across Europe and the United States.

Since these journeymen's clubs were based in Catholic parishes it was entirely natural that a member of the parish clergy should be on their governing body; but the remainder of the team were the journeymen themselves, who knew first-hand what they and their peers needed most. This might be an employment exchange, education, savings clubs, or leisure facilities, in addition to the board and lodging and moral and catechetical education all the clubs provided. It was, in other words, what the journeymen themselves needed most which was provided in each *Gesellverein*. This is what marks the crucial difference between the *Gesellverein* and the French and Belgian *patronages*: the *Gesellverein* run by the workers for their benefit, could truly respond to their needs, where the *patronages* tended to offer what employers thought their workers needed or would benefit from most.

As a newly ordained priest Ketteler had used family funds to provide health and social care in his poor parishes,²⁹ as a result of which he was elected to represent the – largely Protestant – region in the 1848 Frankfurt Parliament.³⁰ Already in 1848, Ketteler was writing to his constituents describing the state as a body with limbs, in whose operations should take place at the lowest possible level (e.g. the shoulder should not do the work of the wrist), and arguing that 'the family and the commune' needed to be 'allowed to act with autonomy . . . and the people to manage their own affairs'.³¹ Also in 1848 he was invited to give the Advent sermons in Mainz Cathedral, in which he addressed 'the social problem' and from then on, notes O'Malley, was seen as the Church's spokesman on the question, and this authority would only increase once he was appointed bishop of Mainz

²⁸Misner, *Social Catholicism*, 97–98.

²⁹Lo Presti, *Ketteler*, 25.

³⁰As Martin O'Malley notes, the clergy supported the parliamentary elections in 1848 and many of them, including Ketteler, stood as candidates. Martin O'Malley, *Wilhelm Ketteler and the birth of modern Catholic Social Thought* (Munich, Herbert Utz Verlag, 2008), 9–10.

³¹W.E. Ketteler, *Offenes Schreiben Kettelers als Deputierter der Deutschen Nationalversammlung an seine Wähler. Frankfurt, 17 September 1848*, quoted in Lo Presti *Ketteler*, 123–4.

in 1850.³² For Ketteler, what we would call ‘subsidiarity’ was an important, indeed, a crucial way of curbing the ever-increasing centralisation of the German/Prussian state, and of protecting the freedoms of the individual, the family, and the Church, for example in questions of education. In his 1873 *Die Katholiken im Deutschen Reich*, Ketteler listed a number of points reaffirming his commitment to subsidiarity, including recognition of autonomy of all the states of the German Empire, and individual freedoms for all living in those states.³³ Furthermore, Ketteler, like many of his contemporaries, including Leo XIII, was opposed to both Marxism and Liberalism, perceiving both as prioritising the state above the individual. In particular Liberalism was seen as making a ‘god’ out of the state, to the detriment of the dignity of every human person.

As noted above, *Rerum Novarum* makes no explicit reference to the concept of subsidiarity, and certainly does not name it as such. However, Eissrich points out that Leo XIII had read French translations of Ketteler’s works before his election to the papacy,³⁴ and sheds light on the clear connections between Ketteler’s writings and *Rerum Novarum*. Here Eissrich demonstrates that, at least in part, Ketteler’s work, and the concept of subsidiarity, lie as much in the encyclical’s intellectual hinterland as neo-Thomism. Moreland observes that the ‘discussion . . . on private property, the family, the role of the state, and the importance of institutions’ are subsidiarity in all but name, all, of course, grounded in the very Thomist concept of the natural law.³⁵

***Rerum Novarum* & the development of Catholic Social Teaching**

As we can see *Rerum Novarum* flows from a number of streams. First, the reflections which took place in the *Union de Fribourg*; second, the influence on the *Union* of Ketteler’s work and writings; and finally neo-Thomism, not least because the main drafter of the encyclical was Matteo Liberatore (1810–1892). The Jesuit Liberatore, who had been working recently on the principles underpinning economics, had been a co-founder of the journal *Civiltà cattolica*, and, most crucially had also had a hand in drafting Leo’s 1879 encyclical, *Aeterni patris*, on the centrality of Thomism to Catholic philosophy.³⁶ Perhaps the most obvious aspect of the multifaceted shift from a more general tradition of ‘doing good’ to Catholic Social Teaching marked by *Rerum Novarum* is that, where the more general tradition enjoins a series of general principles which the virtuous person should follow, Catholic Social Teaching responds to contemporary needs. It is in this sense that Catholic Social Teaching may be said to begin with *Rerum Novarum*. From its very first words, *Rerum Novarum* sets itself up as a social encyclical, a specific response to the ‘new things’ of the social question faced by the contemporary world. This engagement with contemporary reality marks the development of Catholic Social Teaching throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries, whether it

³²O’Malley, *Ketteler*, 67.

³³LoPresti, *Ketteler*, 138–9.

³⁴Eissrich, ‘An economist’s view of the work of Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler and its influence on *Rerum Novarum*’, in Backhaus et al., *Catholic Social Teaching* 11–26 (12).

³⁵Michael P. Moreland, ‘The pre-history of subsidiarity in Leo XIII’, *Journal of Catholic Legal Studies* 56 (2017): 63–76 (67); he also suggests that it is the neo-Thomist tradition of rooting Catholic Social Teaching in the natural law which separates it from the Protestant Social Tradition, which appeals only to Scripture (72).

³⁶Leo XIII, *Encyclical Letter Aeterni Patris. On the restoration of Christian philosophy* (4 August 1879); Misner, *Social Catholicism*, 214.

be the expansion of workers' rights demanded by *Quadragesimo Anno*, the challenge of globalisation in *Mater & Magistra*, the threat of communism in *Centesimus Annos* and *Laborem Exercens*, the care for the planet in *Laudato Si'*, or questions of just war, the teaching of justice, and just living examined in articles elsewhere in this issue.

A full analysis of *Rerum Novarum* is beyond the scope of this article but a brief summary demonstrates the extent to which the encyclical engaged with the contemporary reality of life in industrialising and secularising Europe.³⁷ While work is good according to the natural law (#20), workers are at the mercy of the 'hardheartedness of employers . . . the greed of unchecked competition [and] rapacious usury', without the protection of guilds. (#3) Employers are called on to recognise the human dignity inherent in each worker (#40) and there is a powerful call for adequate rest, including a Sabbath (#41), the regulation of working hours and conditions (#42), payment of a decent, living, family wage (#43-46), and the right to free association through unions (#48-49). There are also calls for the state not to intrude on family life unless to relieve penury (#20), and an insistence that the role of the state is to enable the flourishing of all and to promote the common good (#30-40).

The reach of the encyclical was unprecedented and positive. Misner notes that it was widely perceived as a way for the papacy to regain some of the prestige it had lost over the nineteenth century in its response to modernity³⁸; *The Times* dedicated a comment piece to 'the pope's encyclical', giving a summary of the content³⁹; in Belgium 'at least eight popular editions' (5 in French, 3 in Flemish) were published immediately, with a dozen or so more editions following over the next year⁴⁰; study circles were formed across Europe for workers to discuss the encyclical. While it is easy, from the perspective of the early twenty-first century, to focus on the encyclical's limitations, such as its defence of private property and social hierarchies, it is important too to view it in the context of its time and to acknowledge its enormous positive impact.

The impact, of course is not merely an impact outside the Church, although this response continued to be noteworthy. In his 1931 response to *Rerum Novarum*, *Quadragesimo Anno*, Pope Pius XI noted that it had influenced and continued to influence many out with and within the Church in their response to the social question.⁴¹ It is in this encyclical that Pius clearly enunciates the principle of subsidiarity, that the state is to 'let subordinate groups handle matters and concerns of lesser importance' (#80), for 'to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community' is as unjust as 'to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do' (#79). Subsequent popes have used social encyclicals to demonstrate that subsidiarity has an important role to play in all political discourse, whether at the level of the local council, or the United Nations.

³⁷See e.g. John Coleman and Gregory Baum (eds), *Rerum Novarum. One hundred years of Catholic Social Teaching. Concilium* 1991/5 (London: SCM Press, 1991); Anna Rowlands, *Towards a politics of Communion* (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 23–27.

³⁸Misner, *Social Catholicism*, 219.

³⁹'Dalziel', 'The Pope's Encyclical', *The Times*, 18 May 1891.

⁴⁰Paul Gérin, 'Catholicisme Sociale et démocratie chrétienne', in Emmanuel Gerard and Paul Wynants (eds), *Histoire*, vol. I, p. 81.

⁴¹Pius XI, *Encyclical Letter Quadragesimo Anno* (31 May 1931) #12, #21.

A further example of subsidiarity is provided by the ‘See-Judge-Act’ methodology (sometimes known as the pastoral cycle) developed at the start of the twentieth century by the Belgian priest Joseph Cardijn (1882–1965), founder of the Young Christian Workers.⁴² Born into a working-class family in Brussels, Cardijn was ordained priest in 1906, going on to study social science at Leuven under Victor Brants, a disciple of Frédéric Le Play. As a parish priest he ran many groups for young workers, whom he encouraged to investigate the living and working conditions of their peers, and to reflect on them in the light of Church teaching in *Rerum Novarum*.⁴³ This grew into the See-Judge-Act, during which the young workers discussed, for instance, an injustice in the workplace (See) in the light of the gospel or Catholic social teaching, before agreeing on a solution (Judge) which the group would then put into practice (Act). Horn has noted that the See-Judge-Act had an oft-ignored further advantage, ensuring that action was thought-through and planned, an important brake on teenage impulsivity.⁴⁴ As Cardijn spread this method across Brussels, he came under pressure to merge it with either adult-run unions, or student (middle-class) organisations, both of which he vehemently rejected. It was vital, he argued that young working-class people be empowered to run their own groups, to respond to their own needs and the needs of their peers: it had to be ‘by, through, and for’ young people. This principle ensured that the Young Christian Workers were ‘owned’ by its members, the young workers, who “bought in’ to the movement through their ‘subs’. They led the discussions (enquiries), based on personal experience of injustice, which led to action to improve their surroundings; the action was thought-through and planned.

Cardijn’s expertise led, in 1961, to him being asked to provide a draft proposal for an encyclical letter to mark the 70th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, *Mater et Magistra*.⁴⁵ The range of this encyclical, and indeed, Cardijn’s briefing paper, is vast, touching on technological advance, agriculture, and the start of globalisation; nonetheless, subsidiarity plays an important role. In this encyclical, subsidiarity is key to the economic structures of the state (#51, 53, 55), and should underpin all development and aid work (#163, 169–70). It is most evident in the focus on education and formation, which returns again and again: building a just society requires the education and formation of young people (especially in ‘young countries’), enabling them to take on responsibility for managing the society and economy to come. Finally, throughout the encyclical we see how subsidiarity is knitted in to solidarity, human dignity, and the common good.

Subsidiarity is not only an important curb on the authority of the state; it is also a way to restore the human dignity due to each person, by allowing them autonomy. At the same time, subsidiarity relies on the existence of smaller administrative units, including, for instance, unions and associations, which themselves build solidarity among people,

⁴²Walckiers, M.A. *Sources inédites relatives aux débuts de la J.O.C. 1919–1925*. Louvain/Paris: Nauwelaerts, 1970; Fiévez, M. and J. Meert. *Cardijn*. Brussels: Éditions Vie Ouvrière, 1978; Louis Vos, ‘La Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne’, in Emmanuel Gerard and Paul Wynants (eds), *Histoire du mouvement ouvrier chrétien en Belgique*. KADOC-STUDIES 16. Leuven, Leuven University Press 1994, 2.425–495.

⁴³Walckiers, *Sources inédites*, xiii–xiv.

⁴⁴Gerd-Rainer Horn, *Western European Liberation Theology. The First Wave (1924–1959)*. Oxford, Oxford University Press 2009, 13.

⁴⁵John XXIII, Encyclical Letter *Mater et Magistra* on Christianity and Social Progress (15 May 1961). Cardijn’s notes are available in microfiche at the Cardijn archives held by KADOC in Leuven; ‘70^e anniversaire de Rerum Novarum. L’Église face au monde du travail’ April 1960, microfiche 1807, Cardijn archive, KADOC.

and thus work towards the common good. Despite its relative novelty, subsidiarity is as key a pillar to Catholic Social Teaching as solidarity, the common good, and the dignity of the human person.

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Notes on contributor

Patricia Kelly is Honorary Senior Research Fellow in the School of Divinity, University of St Andrews. Her research focuses on ressourcement theology and the Church in France during the long nineteenth century; this also permits forays into the world of the twelfth-century renaissance and Dante.

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