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THE DRAMA OF SOCIAL SIN

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For over a century, modern Roman Catholic social teaching has offered official commentary on contemporary social problems.¹ As Lisa Sowle Cahill notes, this literature has sought to connect 'the praxis of the reign of God with public analysis and participation', in a religious yet public voice'.² This tradition has been criticised for 'over-optimism about human nature and the historical possibilities of justice'; tendencies to think hierarchically about

discrimination; violence and terrorism; torture and repression; stockpiling of arms; and an 'unfair distribution of the world's resources and of the assets of civilization' that aggravates the gap between the rich and poor.⁷ The 'overwhelming power' of these problems bespeaks a world 'shattered to its very foundations' by sin, division and alienation.

Many long for reconciliation and healing, but truly effective efforts at social reconciliation must 'reach—in order to heal it—that original wound which is the root of all other wounds: namely sin'.⁸ Because 'sin is an act of disobedience by a creature who rejects, at least implicitly, the very one from whom he came and who sustains him in life', it is a self-defeating, even 'suicidal' act. As Genesis 3–11 illumines, through sin the self's 'internal balance is destroyed' and replaced by contradictions and conflicts.⁹ Inevitably, distorted relationships ensue.¹⁰

Sin, in this Catholic view, is irreducibly personal. However influenced by external conditions and circumstances, the individual freedom and accountability at the heart of human dignity remain the source and object of sin proper. 'There is nothing so personal and untransferable in each individual as merit for virtue or responsibility for sin.'¹¹

What, then, is 'social sin'? John Paul considers four different meanings of the term. In the first place, social sin connotes the innumerable ripple effects of every individual sin that occurs 'by virtue of human solidarity which is as mysterious and intangible as it is real and concis

in their causes, operations and effects, they can be called 'structures of sin'.¹³ But here, the pope stresses, the term 'sin' is used strictly analogically. To forget this obscures the moral accountability of individuals who cooperate with or benefit from these sinful patterns, and the responsibility of all to ameliorate or transform them. A final interpretation completely divorces sinful social structures from participants' decisions or intentions, blaming institutions or systems, not individuals, for social evils. This is an understanding of social sin that Catholic teaching firmly rejects. John Paul emphasises that every situation of social sin is 'the result of the accumulation and concentration of many personal sins'.¹⁴

Undergirding this discussion of social sin is a Catholic anthropology that locates moral responsibility in persons, and an implicit social theory which, despite a penchant for images of organic unity, remains 'actionist' rather than 'structuralist': groups never exert agency completely apart from the intentions and decisions of members.¹⁵ Over time, collective patterns can become ingrained, and operate largely outside conscious advertence. But the moral responsibility of those who participate in, benefit from, or perpetuate these patterns is never fully abrogated. Accordingly, changing sinful structures requires illuminating sufficient numbers of individual minds, and converting sufficient numbers of individual hearts.¹⁶

In 1996, the Pontifical Council on Development used this nascent vocabulary of structural sin in its document concerning world hunger.¹⁷ The Council's analysis of hunger's causes notes the intertwining of finitude and sin in unjust economic and political structures.¹⁸ Ignorance concerning the common good, combined with its abuse through the idolatrous pursuit of profit and power, breed 'structures of sin'—'all those places and circumstances in which habits are perverse' and sustain vicious patterns that are extremely difficult to resist.¹⁹ Economic structures of sin 'deliberately steer the goods of the earth away from their true purpose, that of serving the good of all, toward private and sterile ends in a process which spreads contagiously'. 'Greed, pride, and vanity blind those who fall prey to them ... to the limitations of their perceptions and the self-destructive nature of their actions.'²⁰ At the root of economic 'non-development' or 'mis-development' is a 'lack of will and ability to freely serve humanity, by and for

¹³ See Pope John Paul II, *On Social Concern* (1987), #36, hereafter cited as SRS.

¹⁴ *On Social Concern*, #16. Cf. Pope John Paul II, *On Social Concern* (1987), #36, n. 65.

¹⁵ Christine Firer Hinze, *Catholic Social Teaching: A Guide for the 21st Century* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), pp. 15–17, esp. p. 16, n. 5.

¹⁶ *On Social Concern*, #16.

¹⁷ Pontifical Council for Human and Christian Development/'Cor Unum', *On Social Concern*, A C A : D , Vatican City, 4 October 1996. Accessed 2 April 2009 at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/corunum/documents/rc_pc_corunum_doc_04101996_world-hunger_en.html

¹⁸ *On Social Concern*, #10.

¹⁹ *On Social Concern*, #25.

²⁰ *On Social Concern*, #25.

each human being, which is a fruit of love', a lack that runs through every level of the 'entire complex situation' of world hunger.²¹

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How can social sin be resisted or ameliorated? Recent Catholic teaching has responded to this question by sounding the theme of solidarity, described v6(s26.04 -1.2 Td00unding)-136c9 be of ð 53a720069BDC (CHRI)TjEMC (S)

Yet here too, John Paul qualifies the radical implications of this claim, emphasising, in line with his predecessors, that justice will be achieved not by overturning all current economic or social structures, but by re-orienting them to their authentic purposes in service of the common good.³⁶

In sum, recent Catholic teaching advocates solidarity as the primary weapon for confronting and dismantling the destructive social structures that deny well-being and survival to so many today.³⁷ Policies and institutions oriented by solidarity can be rightly called ‘structures of solidarity’,³⁸ or ‘structures of the common good’. Through them, solidary patterns can counteract and repair harms and divisions caused by social sin.³⁹

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Among most Catholics in the affluent West and North, however, reception of recent church teaching on social sin and solidarity has been inconsistent, superficial or non-existent. This lack of traction threatens to render Catholic rhetoric on these matters hypocritical, even perverse. As Mexican liberation theologian Javier Limon warns, in a world where millions have less than the minimum needed for survival, proclaiming hope to those experiencing suffering can itself be immoral if those proclaiming it simultaneously accept, through action or omission, the ‘untimely death of the great majority, which ... is the greatest and most mortal contemporary sin’.⁴¹

What explains this apparent moral torpor among sincere Christians in comfortable circumstances? Philosophers Peter Singer and Peter Unger suggest one reason: a common tendency to feel morally excused—and to excuse others—from obligations to aid (even at minimal cost) those experienced as geographically or socially distant, or whose distress is muffled by informational ambiguity or experiential indirectness.⁴² Arguing that there is no authentic moral difference between deliberately walking by a child drowning in a shallow pool, and ignoring a charitable solicitation for \$25 that would certainly save the lives of a dozen starving children in another

³⁶ CA, #58.

³⁷ , #40.

³⁸ C , #193.

³⁹ ‘Conversely, as soon as groups of men and women begin working together in order to take due account of the need to serve the whole community, and each individual member of it . . . a positive effect gradually improves the material, psychological and moral conditions of their lives. This is really experi-

country, these authors press a point especially germane for Christians who grant sacred authority to scriptural narratives like the good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25–37), Lazarus and Dives (Lk. 16:19–31), and the Last Judgment (Matt. 25:31–46). In the failure of so many to acknowledge a positive obligation to help those in vital need, even at little cost, Unger and Singer implicate circumstantial, intellectual, emotional and decisional factors.

Catholic social teaching echoes this philosophical analysis, observing that social virtue requires lived circumstances wherein persons are made conscious of their own dignity and that of their neighbors, and people are motivated and equipped to freely embrace their calling to love of God and neighbor. This freedom can be undermined by both acute deprivation and excessive advantage.

For freedom is often crippled by extreme destitution, just as it can wither in an ivory-tower isolation brought on by overindulgence in the good things of life. It can, however, be strengthened by accepting the inevitable constraints of social life, by undertaking the manifold demands of human relationships, and by service to the community at large.⁴³

John Paul II contended that consumer culture fosters dispositions and practices—of having over being, individualism over community, and power- and security-seeking over open-handed and -hearted generosity—that oppose authentic fulfillment and breed injustice. A consumerist ethos of over-work and over-spending also eats up the time, attention and energy needed to honor social interdependencies. In affluent cultures paradoxically burdened by both excess and ‘never enough’,⁴⁴ solidarity finds little ground in which to take root.

Non-impovertised Catholics’ tepid response to these teachings itself manifests a structurally sinful situation that is difficult to overcome. Christian solidarity must above all, writes Limon, be active solidarity with the victims of humanly-caused social and historical injustice. Limon warns that such intransigence stands in direct contradiction to the demands of Christian solidarity which must, above all, be active solidarity with victims of social and historical injustice. He concludes, pointedly, that ‘if solidarity among human beings does not include the victims, it becomes perverted into a pact or an interested deal between the evildoers among themselves’.⁴⁵

Reinhold Niebuhr’s work sheds its own light on the realities of social sin and the practical failures of solidarity that educe Limon’s biting words. To what Catholic social principles against a Niebuhrian perspective can create

⁴³ G , #31.

⁴⁴ Ulrich Beck, *The Invention of Solitude* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), p. 54, notes this irony: For the rich, space is overcome and time is always full and ‘short’. For the poor, space ties one in place; time is often empty and may drag on.

⁴⁵ Limon, ‘Suffering’, p. 707. Cf. *CA*, #57.

sparks, but it can also sharpen Catholic understandings of social sin and of hazards that line the road to solidarity.

E

How might Niebuhr assess modern Catholic rhetoric concerning solidarity and social sin, and the lack of reception of this teaching among economically-advantaged Catholics?⁴⁶ The answers hinge upon Niebuhr's distinctive interpretations of humanity as created, fallen, and redeemed; of the differing impacts of grace and sin in history; of the moral disparities between individuals and groups; and—in light of all this—of the principles that ought to guide Christian approaches to contemporary political and economic life.

Catholic social teaching portrays human beings as dignified, personal, social, free, sin-wounded, but graced moral agents. In an anthropology more indebted to Augustine of Hippo than Thomas Aquinas, Niebuhr paints a dialectical picture of humanity as composed of forms and vitalities both material and spiritual, and as immersed in and yet transcending nature and history, both to indeterminate degrees. Existentially suspended between freedom and finitude, humanity finds itself in a state of anxiety which each individual inevitably, though freely, resolves in sinful ways. Genesis 1–2 depicts mythically the normative condition of humanity as the complete harmony of life with life grounded in bonds of perfect trust in and obedience to God. The 'fall' in Genesis 3 tells of the rupture, confirmed in the heart and action of every human being, whereby the anxiety of finite-yet-free humanity is falsely resolved by forsaking theocentric right-relatedness for an egocentrism that short-circuits genuine fulfillment, and whose destructive effects seep into every aspect of life.

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tradition of the nineteenth-century 'masters of suspicion',⁴⁸ Niebuhr's 'negative apologetic' exposed flaws and failures in dominant worldviews past

The thesis of his early work, *I*, became a hall-

SOCIAL SIN AND THE (IM)POSSIBILITY

of love is impossibility, Niebuhr gives it a further role, suggesting Calvin's third use of the law as a pedagogue, leaven, and lure by which, within sin-riven history, greater approximations of love may be attained.⁶⁵

His keen mind, dialectical and paradoxical sensibilities, and 360-degree hermeneutic of suspicion made Niebuhr a formidable intellectual pugilist, skilled at landing blows against contending positions of every stripe.⁶⁶ History's ambiguous dramas and dynamisms, he was convinced, require an ethical posture that is attentive, flexible, and poised to respond resiliently to unpredictably shifting circumstances. Because all social arrangements and actions carry an alloy of sin, ideological suspicion, humility and contrition are required virtues for Christian realists,⁶⁷ who must continually negotiate more tolerably just social arrangements, while steering clear of prideful and slothful extremes.

A

If recent Catholic teaching has failed to motivate large-scale solidary action for justice, Niebuhr's Christian realism has logged failures of its own. Niebuhr's ruthless analysis of sin has at times discouraged ameliorative efforts, or encouraged consequentialist strategies that collapse the dialectics between sin—grace, love as relativising historical approximations of justice—spurring justice-seeking—dialectics pivotal to Niebuhr's responsibilist ethic. The fact that political scientist Hans Morgenthau could read Niebuhr's primary contribution as revealing the supremacy of self-interest in politics is partly due to Niebuhr's inadequate account of the links between love and social practice.⁶⁸ Too often Niebuhr's 'moral ideal—the law of love—remains stubbornly disconnected from his pragmatic approach to solving specific moral problems'.⁶⁹

Larry Rasmussen praises Niebuhr for taking 'a theological anthropology—existentialist neo-orthodoxy—and transposing it into a brilliant theology of history',⁷⁰ then masterfully rendering this theological vision into a 'working

⁶⁵ See, e.g., Edward Downey, 'Law in Luther and Calvin', *Theological Studies* 41.2 (July 1984), pp. 146–54, accessed at <http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/jul1984/v43-4-article1.htm>. Arguably, Niebuhr's more paradoxical Lutheran sensibilities prompted him to emphasise the first two uses, but never to the extent of ignoring the third.

⁶⁶ Yet Carl Rogers, among others, declaims the lack of humility in Niebuhr's rhetoric, and questions Niebuhr's claim that the chief human flaw is inordinate self-love. 'Reinhold Niebuhr's *Dialectic of Human Existence*: A Criticism', *Journal of Religion* 9.5 (June 1958), pp. 15–17.

⁶⁷ D. Stephen Long, 'Humility as a Violent Vice', *Journal of Religion* 12.2 (1999), pp. 31–46, criticises Niebuhr's political renditions of humility and contrition, arguing that, unless embedded within a substantive faith community, humility is reduced to intellectual suspicion of every political 'answer', and contrition to sorrow for mistaking any political theory or arrangement as fully correct.

⁶⁸ Lovin discusses this in *Theological Studies* 60.1 (January 1995), pp. 9–11.

⁶⁹ Malotky, 'Niebuhr's Paradox', pp. 101–102. Malotky defends Niebuhr against this interpretation.

⁷⁰ Rasmussen, *Theological Studies* 60.1 (January 1995), p. 37.

SOCIAL SIN AND THE (IM)PO

paradoxical understanding of humanity and history provides potentially corrective contrasts. Areas for productive interchange with Catholic thought include Niebuhr's depiction of history's drama and unpredictability; his proto-Foucauldian description of society as a complex field of struggles for power and self-interest; and his depiction of groups, less as organisms sharing a common good, than as distorted by the 'common bad' of group egotism (an egotism that comprises the effects of members' inattention and ignorance due to finitude, their culpable flights from understanding and responsibility, and their selfish grasping after power, possessions, and profit). More consistently than Catholic thought, Niebuhr tracks the way sinful self-interest clouds awareness of structural sin, confounds efforts to understand it, and removes the motivation to combat it. Niebuhr's observations concerning collective egotism's capacity to ensnare well-intentioned persons and altruistic actions in distorted social patterns can help Catholics better analyze and address dynamics such as patriarchy, nationalism, tribalism, and ethnic and racial division.

Niebuhr's hermeneutic of suspicion also presses Catholic social thought to sharpen its ideological acuity and its prophetic voice. His commitment to unmasking the complicated workings of sin in all quarters of collective life, including the church, urges a virtuous suspicion toward even their own best-articulated teachings and best-intended efforts to redress structural evil. Niebuhr's dramatic, tragic view of history and society, where the effects of sin as sloth and sin as pride multiply like the weeds among the wheat, underscores the need for Catholic justice agendas to incorporate (1) avenues for self-critique and for course adjustments as circumstances change or new knowledge is gained; (2) checks and balances to power—including the power of those who lead solitary efforts; (3) effective mechanisms of accountability; and (4) avenues for repentance and reconciliation in the cases where justice-making efforts fail, hurt, divide or oppress.

Second, Niebuhr's ethics suggest a realistic reframing of Catholic solidarity in terms of the 'impossible possibility' of the law of love in history. Recall that C

As impossible possibility, the 'law of solidarity' stands in judgment over each of its concrete approximations, exposing the sin that laces even the most laudable social agendas. Positively, Christian solidarity entails altruistic practices whose goal is fully just social relations. This goal is never fully realizable under the conditions of fallen history, yet the law of solidarity lures and compels action toward it. Catholics who fail to grasp this dialectic gloss over solidarity's prophetic sting (a sting that exposes injustice, disabuses ineffectual utopianism, and spurs conversion) as an emergent norm for twenty-first-century praxis.

To re-describe solidarity in this way does not excuse Christians from pursuing it. Rather, these Niebuhrian tropes underscore the challenges and costs that solidarity dedication to the common good entails. They also invoke the prophetic realism of Catholics' own recent tradition, exemplified by people like Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, who insisted that 'one who is committed to the poor must risk the same fate as the poor'.

an unjust status quo, and the sentimentality or hypocrisy of 'liberal' or 'progressive' Catholics who tout teachings on social sin and solidarity, but to little practical effect. Niebuhr's analysis also challenges radical or liberationist Catholic tendencies to presume the innocence of injustice's victims, or to advance transformational agendas that ignore sin's persistence. All such betrayals of Christian realism, Niebuhr would warn, put Catholic social efforts in danger of foundering, either on the slothful Scylla of fragmentation, dispersion and futility, or on the prideful Charbydis of rigidity, presumption, and hypocrisy.

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Contemporary Catholic social thought also offers gifts to Niebuhrian realism. First is Catholicism's willingness to envisage social structures as capable of being 'structures of the common good'. Sin's social workings and ripple effects are never wholly unaccompanied by those of grace. Injected into a Niebuhrian ethic, this viewpoint can buoy work toward substantive, if ever-fragile and ambiguous, social advances. Second, Catholicism's developing treatment of solidarity as a virtue emerges from a tradition that emphasises communities of character, discernment and practice. This Catholic virtue theory augments a Niebuhrian picture of solitary selves

between theory and committed action remains a pressing need. To move solidarity from idea to practice, justice-seeking communities require both intelligent social analysis and sustaining spiritual and moral disciplines. Here, contemporary Catholic social teaching encounters its pre-eminent ecclesial and public challenge.⁸⁷

Adopting these priorities can lead Niebuhrians and social Catholics to sharper social diagnoses, improved rhetorical efficacy, and enhanced odds of sparking and sustaining fruitful action on behalf of justice. Though their conversations may be contentious, Christian realists' and social Catholics' distinct strengths can work together to the benefit of their shared concerns. Confronted by the unjust suffering of our neighbors, continuing this dialogue and debate is worthwhile; connecting ethical discourse with sturdy practices of solidarity, essential.

⁸⁷ See, e.g., William Spohn, *God and Justice: A Christian Perspective* (New York: Continuum, 2000); Vincent Miller, *Christian Social Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2004).