

How Should Catholic Social Teaching Be Taught to Seminarians?

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IN ADDRESSING THE QUESTION posed in the title, this essay presumes Catholic Social Teaching (hereafter, CST) *should* be taught as a compulsory part of priestly training curricula. John Paul II famously taught that CST “belongs to the field . . . of theology and particularly of moral theology.”¹ All moral theology investigates and clarifies the implications of the truths of faith for living the Christian life. Upper-level seminary courses in applied ethics, such as sexual ethics and bioethics, examine in the light of the Gospel large areas of Christian living such as sex, marriage and family, or health and its care and promotion. CST examines the largest of these areas, overlapping with all the others, inasmuch as it includes in its scope all the goods of life in society, especially, but not exclusively, goods pertaining to the struggle for economic subsistence. The topic is so broad that instructors might find it difficult to identify a clear end to pursue in teaching a course in CST. More will be said on this below, but this much can be said at the outset. All courses in CST should aim to impart a substantive and clear Catholic understanding of *the concepts of justice and the common good*, and many of the ways these can be protected and promoted in communities, especially through the ministry of priests.

This essay argues that all courses in CST for seminarians should be developed, taught, and assessed according to at least five interrelated measures: the *theological*, *theoretical*, *pastoral/evangelical*, *interdisciplinary*, and *ecclesial*. Before outlining each, I want to state a presupposition of the

¹ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), §41 (*Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 80 [1988]: 571).

essay, which could be argued for, but for which, in the interests of time, no argument shall be given. In using the shop term “Catholic Social Teaching” (or Modern Catholic Social Teaching/Doctrine²), the essay presumes that most, though not all, of the materials drawn upon in teaching a corresponding course will be from the Church’s “social documents”—chiefly papal encyclicals—published over the past 130 years.³ Limiting the essay in this way implies nothing about the value of other courses taught in Catholic social ethics, with titles such as “Faith and Justice,” “Catholic Social Morality,” “Traditions of Social Justice,” and the like. It merely specifies a characteristic that I think *should* be part of seminary courses.

Five Measures

Theological

Conceptually, CST is thoroughly theological and so it should be taught that way. Christian social ethics must never be detached conceptually from the truths of faith, especially its eschatological truths. Although CST inquires into and practically applies the principles of justice and the common good, and these principles can be derived from philosophical reflection on the requisites of human flourishing, nevertheless, Christian revelation teaches us truths about the nature of the universe, the human condition and possibilities for choice that are inaccessible to natural reason and yet are necessary for rightly assessing social questions and proposing adequate solutions. It teaches that the “social order” in which all participate and upon which CST reflects is *at once created, fallen, and redeemed*. Humans are made “little less than God” (Ps 8:5); but they “all have sinned and fall short of God’s glory” (Rom 3:23); and even after baptism, they do not do the good they want but the evil they do not want (see Rom 7:19); and yet this present suffering “is preparing for [them] an eternal

² Some texts distinguish between the terms “Catholic Social Doctrine” and “Catholic Social Teaching”—such as Congregation for Catholic Education [CCE], *Guidelines for the Study and Teaching of the Church’s Social Doctrine in the Formation of Priests* (1988; English trans. United States Catholic Conference, now United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB])—the former laying stress on the theoretical aspects, the latter on the historical and practical aspects. The terms are used here synonymously.

³ “The social teaching of the Church must be presented in its entirety with appropriate principles of reflection, criteria for judgment, and norms for action. The systematic study of the social encyclicals of the popes is especially recommended” (USCCB, *Program of Priestly Formation [PPF]*, 5th ed. [Washington, DC: USCCB, 2006], §208).

weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Cor 4:17); and so they "look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen" (2 Cor 4:18) in which they hope (Heb 11:1); they "walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor 5:7), awaiting with eager longing, together with all creation, "the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom 8:21), never forgetting that they "must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body" (2 Cor 5:10), especially for how they have treated the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned, and the stranger (see Matt 25:35–36); and so they depend for spiritual guidance and support upon "the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth" (1 Tim 3:15).

If it is true that "only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light" (Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* [GS], §22); and if it is also true that before the glorious coming of Christ, "the earthly and the heavenly city penetrate each other" (GS, §40), then without faith both man and history remain an "unsolved puzzle" (see GS, §21). The truths of creation and human dignity, of human sinfulness and forgiveness in Christ, of baptism, the sacraments, and the Church, and of divine judgment and hope for the kingdom are, as it were, lenses through which CST necessarily views its subject matter. Faith enables us conceptually to maintain the "already but not yet" character of human existence and so to avoid the kinds of misdiagnoses of social problems and false prescriptions that plague purely secular social theories. Without faith, we cannot fully understand the possibilities open to, and limitations besetting, the human spirit. We succumb either to hopelessness and nihilism or to various kinds of utopianism.

Christians do not need to make all things right in the world. They need only do what Jesus calls them to, which is to be faithful, as he was faithful, to the will of the Father. A divine reckoning will take place at Jesus's triumphal return, where the wheat and chaff of human good and evil will be definitively separated, evil's privations overcome, and the glorious kingdom of God realized in its fullness. At the same time, no good deed, however apparently invisible, ever disappears into the void:

After we have obeyed the Lord, and in His Spirit nurtured on earth the values of human dignity, brotherhood and freedom, and indeed all the good fruits of our nature and enterprise, we will find them again, but freed of stain, burnished and transfigured, when Christ hands over to the Father: "a kingdom eternal and universal, a kingdom of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, love and peace." (GS, §39)

Every effort, therefore, to dispense “true justice” (Zech 7:9) in defense of God’s “little ones” (Matt 18:6), in opposition to the “prince of this world” (John 12:31), and in deliberate imitation of the “man of sorrows” (Isa 53:3) will be found again polished and transformed in God’s kingdom.

Our task as Christians is to build up subject matter for the kingdom within the particular domains God prescribes to us in our personal vocations. God’s redemptive plan for the universe is like a great jigsaw puzzle. The number of pieces is far too great for anyone to know them all, and the scope of the whole too vast for anyone to see. But people *can* see small parts of the puzzle with relative clarity; and God calls them as individuals and in communities to do their best to assemble these parts. And though assembling small parts may feel insignificant, and the parts themselves sometimes look haphazard, each is necessary for the completion of the whole. And we *entrust* to God the assembly of *all* the parts.

The analogy, of course, breaks down because building the kingdom is not a matter of assembling preexisting parts like the pieces of a puzzle. God wills that human freedom is a necessary component in the realization of his divine plan. We collaborate with God not merely in assembling the pieces of the kingdom, but in a sense in creating them through our free choices. Since our freedom can be and is used contrary to God’s will, we more or less depart from his plan every time we sin. God forgives our sin when we repent, but he does not make it so the sin never happened. Sin has effects on us and the world around us. So the parts we are called to assemble/create, because of our sin, are in a certain sense in flux. But as soon as we repent, we are called to get back to co-creating the parts as best we can. And, as already said, we entrust the “assembly” of the whole to God. The vexing question of how God can direct a consistent plan for the redemption of the universe and invite us to be real collaborators knowing we will deform parts of the plan is answerable only by appeal to the mystery of God’s providence.

In light of this, CST must not be taught as a “fix-it” for the world’s problems, although problems doubtlessly would be less grave if its subject matter were taken more seriously. CST offers practical insights consistent with theological truths for assessing social problems, and ethical principles for replying to the problems as Christians. And however much CST’s proponents yearn for good news for the poor, release for captives, sight for the blind, and freedom for the oppressed (Luke 4:18), they must not measure the fruitfulness of CST’s proclamation by whether it brings about better states of affairs in the world. Its fruitfulness is “measured” by whether its witnesses—collaborators in God’s plan—sincerely resolve through the proclamation and living of its principles to bring the world

into more perfect conformity with the will of God.

Moreover, as suggested above, the instruction of CST should keep in the foreground of all the matters it addresses Christ's urgent warning about the consequences of ignoring social needs (see Matt. 25:41–46). Solicitude should be taken *not* to

cover over or even (all things considered) soften the Lord's information about the conditionality of sharing in the Kingdom, and warnings about the fact that, as many have and will, so I too may well be found to have condemned myself to be for ever outside it. CST is animated by the enlightened desire, and resolve, to act as the sheep in Jesus' final "parable" act, and not to act or fail to act as the goats do.⁴

Bishops and other seminary leaders should ensure that no theologians (including those who are clerics) "who do not really believe [Jesus] said it, or meant it, or that he worked miracles to show his privileged knowledge of the matter" are made teachers of CST.⁵

Finally, instructors should endeavor to *show* how CST in all its parts, and especially in its developments, is always (or should be) harmonious with prior doctrinal teaching; that, in essence, CST is the re-affirmation and elaboration of the Church's apostolic teachings on the imperative to do justice and God's command to seek first his kingdom, even—and especially—in secular affairs.

Theoretical

By "theoretical" I mean based on abstract normative principles.⁶ Much in CST is not in this sense theoretical. It is ad hoc, contingent, and temporally relative. But inasmuch as the documents of CST propose a set of general and universal principles ("Principles of CST") meant to guide reflection on social matters, establish criteria for judgment, and yield directives for action, CST has a distinctly theoretical dimension. In whatever

⁴ John M. Finnis, "A Radical Critique of Catholic Social Teaching," in *Catholic Social Teaching: A Volume of Scholarly Essays*, ed. Gerard Bradley and E. Christian Brugger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 548–84, at 584.

⁵ Finnis, "Radical Critique."

⁶ Since CST is moral theology, it is an exercise of "practical reason" in the classical sense, that is, a course of inquiry and judgment for the sake of action. In *this* sense, it is not firstly "theoretical" (i.e., not concerned exclusively with knowledge for its own sake).

way a course in CST is structured—whether chronologically following the publication of ecclesial documents, topically focusing on issues such as immigration and just war, or biographically centering on the social pontificates of individuals such as John Paul II—these principles should take pride of place. Seminarians should memorize them, understand them, be able to articulate them and be able to apply them: they should eat, drink, and sleep the Principles of CST. How the canon of principles is divided and how each principle is formulated are up to the instructor. I formulate sixteen principles, but the catalogue can be formulated differently. Even so, all accounts should ground their catalogue of principles in what I formulate here as the first principle of CST: the primacy of human good:

1. Primacy of the Human Person
2. Justice and the Common Good
3. Conformity of the Social Order to the Moral Order
4. Human Solidarity
- 5/6. Private Ownership versus Universal Purpose of the World's Resources
7. Subsidiarity
8. Importance of Marriage and the Family
9. Importance of Religion
10. Dignity of Work and Dignity of Workers (Primacy of *Labor* over *Capital*)
11. Morally Responsible Openness to Life
12. Preferential Option for the Poor
13. Fair Wage
14. Right of Labor to Organize
15. Right to Participate
16. Stewardship for Creation

Since justice is the guiding norm for social morality, the subsequent principles are various requisites of justice. Each can be likened to a coin where one side concerns the negative moral implications of the principle and the other side the positive implications. The negative side excludes actions that are violative of the principle. These are often more easy to assess, such as: the “importance of religion” excludes the violation of legitimate expressions of religious liberty; “right to participate” excludes arbitrarily barring persons or groups from active participation in national self-determination; “morally responsible openness to life” excludes imposing foreign-aid policies that require as a condition for reception the acceptance of population control measures.

But the positive expressions are rarely easily assessed. How can true marriage and family be positively promoted in education, healthcare, and social welfare policy? Does preferential option for the poor mean more entitlements for the indigent and greater coercive taxation for the gainfully employed? Would limiting the political influence of labor unions be consistent with the right of labor to organize? What are the implications of the principle of solidarity for a national immigration policy? These are complex questions and can be difficult to answer under the best political conditions.

Seminarians should be presented with a sound theory of justice (e.g., from Aquinas) and instructed on how each principle has normative implications for justice. They should understand the notion of the two-sidedness of the implications of the principles and helped to see and work out the clearer exclusionary conclusions. They also should be helped to see the complexity of the application of positive norms and discouraged from adopting simplistic practical solutions. This often can be done effectively through the use of case studies that illustrate the problem of unwanted side-effects in the arena of public policy. After drawing provisional conclusions on complex matters, they should be required to defend their conclusion through sound argument grounded in the Principles of CST.

The inclusion of a rigorous theoretical dimension will help seminarians to inculcate a theological habit of mind shaped by the Principles of CST. When they see difficult social questions arising from race relations, their mind at once turns to the principle of solidarity. When they see social crises arising from unlawful immigration, they think about how to harmonize the preferential option for the poor with the needs of the common good of the host community. When proposals to nationalize healthcare arise, they ask (*inter alia*) whether the proposals respect the principle of subsidiarity. When they think about administering the resources of their parish, or counseling the faithful on moral duties arising from death and inheritance, they think about the related principles of private property and the universal destination of the world's resources.

The opportunities for seminarians to engage in social ministry increase dramatically after ordination to the priesthood. But opportunities for concerted study of the theoretical principles of CST may not. Their coursework in CST may be the only time some of them ever seriously examine the larger theoretical picture of the Catholic Church's social vision.

Pastoral/Evangelical⁷

“Pastor” means shepherd in Latin. We refer to priests as pastors because they occupy the role of spiritual shepherds for the Christian people. A priest feeds his flock when he teaches the faithful how to put their faith into action in their lives. Before he can do this, *he* must understand both (1) the faith of the Church *and* (2) the lives of the faithful. As we said, CST is the branch of moral theology that concerns the implications of faith for life in society. Thus a course in CST should be first and foremost *pastoral*. By “pastoral” I do not mean it should be less theological and theoretical (or “doctrinal” in the words of the CCE’s *Guidelines*⁸). “Pastoral” refers more to the method by which CST is taught than it does to the content. Pastoral means it should be taught *practically*, that is, with an eye toward the domains of action proper to the students to whom it is being taught. It should assist future priests “to proclaim the Gospel message through the cultural modes of their age and to direct pastoral action according to an authentic theological vision.”⁹

When CST is taught to laypeople, its purpose is to instruct them on how to *engage* the world as Christians. Priests too engage the world, but ordinarily by sustaining and fostering the social activity of the laity “to whom this area belongs in a particular way.”¹⁰ Priestly intellectual formation therefore should aim at a mature knowledge of human nature, the human condition, and human affairs.¹¹ CST facilitates this by educating future priests about important social, cultural, economic, and political issues.¹²

To do this, instructors may introduce seminarians to the problems that

⁷ The Second Vatican Council teaches that pastoral concerns “ought to permeate thoroughly the entire training” of seminarians (*Optatam Totius*, Decree on Priestly Training [1965], §19); and the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace’s *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* [*CSTC*] (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2005) says that CST should serve as “a guide” for priestly teaching and a “tool” for priestly pastoral service (§11).

⁸ CCE, *Guidelines*, §55.

⁹ CCE, *Guidelines*, §55.

¹⁰ *CSTC* says its teaching is offered “above all in order to sustain and foster the activity of Christians in the social sector, *especially the activity of the laity faithful to whom this area belongs* in a particular way” (Ranato Martino’s “Presentation” in *CSTC*, xxv; emphasis added).

¹¹ “The overall goal of every stage of seminary formation is to prepare a candidate who is widely knowledgeable about the human condition, deeply engaged in a process of understanding divine revelation, and adequately skilled in communicating his knowledge to as many people as possible” (*PPF*, §138).

¹² *PPF*, §150.

gave rise to the modern tradition of CST. They might help them see the way the “social question” was formulated in the late nineteenth century (i.e., the problem of the horrendous social conditions besetting the urban working class, stemming from capitalist greed during the Industrial Revolution). They could explain how the proponents of nineteenth-century socialism got out in front of the Catholic Church in publishing a vigorous critique of those conditions and calling out the injustices against the working class, but also how the philosophical errors of Marx, Engels, and others vitiated their critique and social prescriptions. Every seminarian should read the Church’s reply to the problem in Leo XIII’s landmark social encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891).

Seminarians should be helped to see how the problems of “capitalism” and “socialism” identified in *Rerum Novarum* reappear over the next 120 years in different forms. The “unbridled capitalism” of Leo’s time will in the latter half of the twentieth century come to signify freedom-as-license in the socio-economic sector: freedom detached from morality; freedom at the service of selfish gain, arbitrary preference, and unjust exclusion. They will see how the Church’s social critique broadens from a focus on a single group—wage laborers—to the general category of “the poor,” sometimes designated by the region of the world in which they abide (the “developing south” [i.e., southern hemisphere] vs. the “developed north”).¹³

The “socialism” of Leo’s time will come to signify more generally the overzealous intervention of the state, its abusive monopolization of socially significant tasks, its overreach into the personal lives of its members, and so the consequent squelching of rightful freedom, initiative, creativity, and appropriate self-determination that should and must be protected by any political power adequately attending to the needs of the common good.

To understand the meaning and scope of application of the Principles of CST, it can be helpful to see the particular contexts in which they have been proclaimed and applied by the popes over the past century. Seminarians should be familiar with the most significant social events and phenomena shaping modern CST’s unfolding. A few examples, not meant to be exhaustive, may include the Industrial Revolution, the Bolshevik Revolution and the rise of the USSR, World Wars I and II, the Great Depression, the establishment of the United Nations, the development and proliferation of nuclear weapons, Vatican II, the “sexual revolution,” the fall of the Soviet Union, globalization, terrorism and religion, the recession of 2008, the Arab Spring, and international development.

This dimension was also called *evangelical*. Good pastors are also

¹³ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), §§14, 21, 22, 24, 25, 45.

apostolically minded. Thus CST should call forth in seminarians deeper motivation and commitment to assist the faithful to be missionaries in their proper domains.¹⁴ When Vatican II teaches that the distinguishing characteristic of the mission of the laity is *secularity*, it means that the laity serve God precisely “by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God.”¹⁵ They bring Christ into homes, hospitals, boardrooms, showrooms, prisons, courthouses, governments, and schools. Animated by faith, hope, and charity, they make Christ known in places to which priests ordinarily do not have access. Priests therefore must be convinced that when the Christian lay faithful occupy themselves rightly with temporal affairs they perform a great and irreplaceable work for the evangelization of the world.¹⁶ They must abandon the deep-seated and harmful proclivity of the clerical state to treat the lay faithful *working in their proper domains* like children; they should see that when working in all corners of the secular realm, the faithful have God’s mandate and often specialists’ knowledge that gives them authority to which priests should appropriately defer and which priests should facilitate in order for a fruitful collaboration between the two states in life to take place.

This evangelization includes the remedying of injustices. CST is one of the Church’s most important pedagogical tools for intellectually awakening the faithful to the manifold expressions of justice in society. It therefore should be taught with an eye to helping future priests *equip the lay faithful* to understand and be prepared to live their apostolic duties.

Interdisciplinary

Because diverse human goods are realized and realizable only within the civil and political communities—goods pertaining to the interpersonal, economic, and religious wellbeing of individuals and groups—CST concerns itself with a range of allied subjects other than ethics, each itself relatively autonomous its own right, but unified by CST inasmuch as each subject contains proper matter of ethical reflection and analysis. CST’s purpose is to shed the light of Christian insight onto these diverse domains of human existence. Therefore, although CST’s defining field is ethics and its skill-set is moral reasoning, inasmuch as that reasoning is brought to bear upon these other domains, the teacher of CST *must have adequate interdisciplinary knowledge*.

One of the most important allied fields is economics. Seminarians

¹⁴ PPF, §137.

¹⁵ Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* (1965), §31.

¹⁶ See Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, §35.

should have a basic understanding of economic systems such as socialism and capitalism, of the workings of markets and how government intervention can affect them, of concepts such as profit, supply, demand, exchange, contracts and self interest, of modes of wealth distribution, and of the important distinction between ethics as prescriptive and economics as descriptive. Catholics who do not possess a minimal understanding of economics are liable to support partial solutions. Their priests have a responsibility to assist them to *think inclusively* about the relevant goods at stake in complex social scenarios and to support solutions that are most apt for protecting and promoting integral human welfare. This means being able to envisage how unwanted and unforeseen—but foreseeable!—side effects often vitiate political initiatives.

Seminary instructors should avoid giving seminarians the impression that complex social problems have simple solutions. For example, they must not be led to think that problems raised by the needs of migrants versus the right of nations to maintain sovereign borders are easily solvable by simplistic inclusionist or isolationist proposals. They should be taught to assess the real needs of the common good of the host country in relation to the legitimate claims of potential immigrants, and to understand what dimensions of national life constitute true common goods, how these are likely to be affected by minor, moderate, or major immigration patterns, and what harmful side effects to potential migrants or to the common good can be acceptable to tolerate in light of the benefits promised by varying incompatible alternatives under consideration.

Likewise, when discussing issues related to poverty and human rights, such as the right to housing, fresh water, and energy, sociological facts will obviously have a place in understanding the needs of people and nations. The principle of Subsidiarity, prescribing that assistance, including from the international community, should be kept as local as possible compatible with it being adequately delivered and should be neither over-applied so as effectively to erase the duties of far-away wealthier nations to poorer ones nor ignored in favor of the simplistic and often unjust solution that U.S. intervention is always the way to solve problems.

Moreover, issues pertaining to the welfare of families, marriage, and procreation often can only be assessed in light of social facts about how the institutions and practices are faring in certain regions of the world, what ideologies and movements oppose their flourishing, and what legitimate grounds of common action between opponents and Catholics reasonably can be pursued while avoiding scandal and compromising the duty to bear witness to the Christian faith.

Finally, the rich–poor dialectic around which so much of modern CST

revolves must be treated with care. The common and sadly still-prevalent tendency to frame it in terms of the adversarial principle of class conflict—good guys and bad guys, oppressed and oppressors—as is done in all neo-marxist liberationist ideologies, must be strenuously resisted. CST must not be used to advance ideas that are incompatible with a Christian view of the human person and society.

Ecclesial

The *PPF* teaches: “The intellectual formation of the candidate must be directed to the *ecclesial dimensions* of priestly formation, namely, the teaching office [*munus docendi*] of the priesthood.”¹⁷ In attending to this “ecclesial dimension,” seminarians should be helped to understand three elements of their priestly teaching office: fidelity to the Gospel; fidelity to the magisterium; fidelity to their properly priestly role in the dissemination of CST.

First, a priest should be a “faithful, loyal and authentic teacher of the Gospel.”¹⁸ He must understand that CST, as stated above, is principally a theological and evangelical endeavor. The Church teaches it in order to advance the reign of God on earth in preparation for the glorious second coming of Jesus. But CST, unlike Catholic sexual ethics and bioethics—in which negative norms defending life and marriage do much of the heavy lifting—emphasizes the application of positive norms of justice. It therefore addresses issues and proposes principles that the secular world often applauds. It tends to be more acceptable than other areas of Catholic moral teaching. Thus there might be a temptation to teach it in trendy ways, in ways that tickle people’s ears and minimize hard truths.

But the Church presents its social teaching not as any simple political prescription to social happiness, but as an instrument for proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Seminary instructors should urge seminarians to see it and treat it in this way. When Christians fight for justice alongside non-believers, they do so for a reason unacknowledged (and sometimes strenuously opposed) by their non-believing counterparts. They do so with firm and living hope that the justice to which they contribute is merely an interim and provisional stage in the divinely guided process of renewing all things in Christ. And so they are less tempted to affirm solutions to worldly problems that entail impeding, damaging or destroying human goods, or cooperating in evil-doing in such a way as to cause scandal or to compromise the duty to bear perspicuous witness to the Gospel in the world.

¹⁷ *PPF*, §139 (emphasis added).

¹⁸ *PPF*, §139.

Second, seminarians should understand that, as men of the Church, priests should always preach and teach “in fidelity to the magisterium.”¹⁹ The *PPF* states that seminary instruction should “emphasize the intrinsic relationship” between course content and “the ecclesial dimensions of priestly service”; no part of priestly education should ever been seen “in isolation from the Tradition of the Church.”²⁰ This applies to all seminary instruction. But I think it is particularly relevant to CST, which addresses divisive issues such as poverty, punishment, weapons and war, money and taxation, racism, terrorism, and torture. Seminarians are being trained to be ambassadors of a Christian worldview. Defending this, they will certainly meet resistance. Their fidelity to magisterial teaching will be a protection to them and a witness to the Church’s role on earth as teacher of divine truth. This implies, of course, that they are entitled to a full and generous explication of magisterial teaching by their instructors. In those instances where the pronouncements of popes or bishops on social matters are not—or not obviously—harmonious with prior conciliar, papal, or episcopal pronouncements on the same or related matters, these instructions are best not given pride of place in a course on CST. How can seminarians be expected to treat as authoritative for themselves and those for whom they are given responsibility teachings that are promulgated in documents that make no effort to show how their pronouncements derive from and are true developments of—or at very least not inconsistent with—the apostolic faith of the Church?

Thirdly, a course in CST should assist future priests to understand and be ready to take up their proper role as educators of the laity. The primary role of priests in disseminating the truths of CST is to exhort and prepare the laity *to take their proper place in the social sphere*. Priests should be sensitive to the fact that the laity will often be better informed about some secular matters than they are themselves. Where this is the case, they should humbly acknowledge the fact and not act aloof or pretend they are not ignorant. At the same time, while avoiding every semblance of clericalism, priests should confidently take up their role as teachers of moral and theological truth and guardians of the consciences of those whose vocations it is to renew the secular realm.

Conclusion

Although the numbers of seminarians are down in the West from what they were a half century ago, seminary enrollment today is highly self-se-

¹⁹ *PPF*, §139.

²⁰ *PPF*, §139.

lecting. Most who enter are sincere, self-motivated and devout. They enter wanting to give their whole lives to God and to make a difference in the world. So they are invariably idealistic. This spiritual energy is what helps them endure six to eight years of tight schedules, intense formation, and fishbowl-like scrutiny, in the midst of a secular world that finds their way of life at best a curiosity and at worst preposterous.

Seminary formators and instructors are aware of this idealism and do their best to channel the energy in constructive ways, ways that bear fruit in moral maturity, that avoid disillusionment and discouragement, and that assist students over time to replace idealism with realism wedded to the theological virtues.

Instructors of CST should be especially aware of the problems to which this idealism can give rise. The “social sphere” is vast and complicated. Spiritually motivated students, who are both idealistic in their desires and inexperienced in the ways of the world and the Christian life, may adopt unrealistic ideas about what is possible in the social realm. Although motivated Christians have always been tempted by the desire to immanentize the eschaton, the temptation with devotees of CST seems to be especially strong: “If we can just get the social formula correct, we can eradicate poverty, establish world peace, overcome greed, racism, sexism, and so on.”

The desires are admirable but completely unrealistic. The Principles of CST are not blueprints for an ordered social life or the formulations of techniques which if scrupulously followed produce a satisfying product. They are norms of justice directing choosers to adopt alternatives that are consistent with integral human fulfillment. Original sin and concupiscence ensure that in this life their directiveness will never be fully integral. This does not mean that we concede defeat in the face of injustice. Christians continue to fight, even battles that according to worldly wisdom are unwinnable. But their motive to keep fighting is not an expectation that their efforts will ever result in a perfect world, but a conviction that they are doing the will of the Father. Jesus’s earthly mission of messianic restoration of the people of Israel was a complete and utter failure. He knew the outcome in advance, but was undeterred from carrying out his mission because his motivation came from his resolve to do the will of his Father.

So in teaching CST, seminarians should be warned against utopianism. Instructors must not unwittingly lead seminarians to believe that human efforts on behalf of justice will ever realize on earth more than inklings of the peace of Eden and the glory of the kingdom. That kingdom is here in seed form; but its blossom and fruit await the eschaton. The teaching of CST therefore should firmly be contextualized within the already-but-not-yet horizons of the earthly reality.