

CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT AND FUTURE GENERATIONS

Topic: Catholic Social Thought and Future Generations
Convener: Regina Wentzel Wolfe, Dominican University
Presenter: William George, Dominican University
Respondent: Christine Firer Hinze, Fordham University

In his paper “Privileging the Present? Catholic Social Thought and Future Generations,” William George challenged us to appreciate more fully Catholic social thought’s (CST) ability to contribute to debates on public policies, especially those affecting future generations. His paper was in three parts: a brief discussion of CST’s references to future generations; an in-depth discussion of the virtues of charity and prudence and their ability to “provide the moral horizon needed for justice to be envisioned and enacted between and among” present and future generations; and a brief discussion of international law as an effective dialogue partner for CST.

In the first part of the paper, George was clear that CST is, in fact, concerned about future generations. But such concern lacks any “systematic discussion of future generations” and the relationships and obligations that exist between and among the generations. To address this lack, George argued for “a human moral psychology that provides a real and realistic link between present and future generations, a moral psychology that at the same time is open to a robust theological grounding and motive for thinking about and acting with regard for posterity.”

He then proposed that the virtues of “charity and especially prudence as understood by Thomas Aquinas” provide a solid link between the generations and argued that these virtues place “concern for posterity in the very center—chronologically and authoritatively—of [the Christian] tradition.” He contended that these two virtues, particularly prudence, are sufficiently nuanced so as to suggest “a multi-dimensional moral relationship between and among past, present and future generations.” He further noted that such an approach is not only deeply theological, but it also complements other approaches to future generations, particularly philosophical approaches. In addition, he emphasized the fact that “a virtue ethic, rather than simply an ethic of principles—including key principles of CST—speaks to the real situation of *developing* moral agents operating today in a diverse and complex world.” This situation includes the reality of sin.

These points were followed by a discussion of charity and prudence. George argued that “charity, extends to future neighbors, and, as importantly, to future *relations* among persons.” He then developed at some length the relationship of prudence, future generations, and CST. Key to this relationship are the parts of prudence: memory, understanding, docility, shrewdness, reason, foresight, circumspection, and caution (II-II, 49). While “foresight” provides a pivotal link to future generations, George emphasized “the multi-faceted, non-reductive nature” of a Thomistic approach to prudence and reminded us that “prudence cannot be

reduced to any of its parts. Rather, a ‘perfect’ act of prudence requires the proper functioning of all the parts.”

In the final section of the paper, George highlighted the impact of dialogue between CST and international law. Through references especially to the Law of the Sea and environmental law, he identified points of intersection between the two and suggested that CST’s retrieval of a Thomistic virtue-ethic might advance an international *jurisprudence* of future generations.

In her response, Christine Firer Hinze began the conversation by making a series of observations and posing one or two questions for consideration. She highlighted the importance of George’s position, reiterating that a “Thomistic treatment of prudence offers a badly-needed map of the sophisticated use of practical reason involved” in determining which actions are appropriate for fostering the common good in any given set of circumstances, particularly in light of the ever more complex and interdependent world in which we live. Firer Hinze drew our attention to the motivational dimension of virtue theory that assists us in long-term engagement in and commitment to actions that promote the common good in ways that give consideration to concern for future generations. She “wondered, too, whether a Thomistic ethic has a place for the desire to be seen as honorable in the eyes of our descendants” and noted that such a desire can provide a needed corrective to the instant-gratification of our day.

George’s paper and Firer Hinze’s response were well received and led to a energetic discussion of the vices opposed to or falsely resembling prudence, of the case of over-fishing in both the North Atlantic and Zimbabwe, of key distinctions regarding rights and obligations, and of other topics requiring, appropriately, future discussion.

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