

CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT—TOPIC SESSION

- Topic: *Sensus Fidelium* and Catholic Social Thought:
Justice Concerns Bubbling Up and Trickling Down
- Convener: Thomas Massaro, S.J., Jesuit School of Theology
of Santa Clara University
- Moderator: Thomas Massaro, S.J., Jesuit School of Theology
of Santa Clara University
- Presenters: Kevin Glauber Ahern, Manhattan College
Mari Rapela Heidt, Independent Scholar
Gregiore Catta, S.J., Boston College School
of Theology and Ministry

The conference theme of *sensus fidelium* offered an opportunity to reflect on often-neglected aspects of Catholic social thought, including the development of official church social teaching through the participation of individuals and movements among the lay faithful. The three presentations summarized below allowed our session to reflect not only on the content of church social teachings but also on the wider historical context in which church-based instruction on social justice has unfolded in recent decades. As different as their foci are, these three presentations dovetailed in intriguing ways and allowed a felicitous investigation of the origins, reception, and context of official Catholic social teaching.

Kevin Glauber Ahern's paper, "Instruments of Reception and Innovation: Lay Organizations and the Shaping of Social Doctrine," probed key questions about the social teaching of the Second Vatican Council. How did international Catholic lay movements and organizations contribute to the articulation, development, and reception of what was said about politics, the economy, culture, and related areas in *Gaudium et Spes* and other Vatican II documents? Ahern draws on the work of Ormond Rush and others in describing a powerful mediating role played by such influential organizations as the Young Christian Workers Movement and various Catholic peace organizations, whose contributions are so often overlooked and underappreciated by scholars. Their dedication to the renewal of the social order and evident deep concern about pressing social issues of our times render them prime instruments of the lay apostolate and a crucial part of the "ecology of production and reception" of church social teachings—with an importance that far transcends the observable and perhaps tokenistic presence of lay participants at Vatican II and its antecedent and subsequent ecclesial gatherings.

Mari Rapela Heidt next offered her presentation, "An Economy that Serves Human Needs: Louis-Joseph Lebreton's Contribution to Catholic Economic Thought." The presentation began with an explanation of key biographical facts about this important but often overlooked French Dominican, whose influence on the social thought of Paul VI and especially on *Populorum Progressio* (which appeared a year after Lebreton's untimely death in 1966) merits wider acknowledgement. His extensive travels to newly independent colonies and his keen observations of rich and poor in developed and developing lands alike prompted him to question standard economic theories and to challenge trickle-down approaches to development. As a *peritus* at Vatican II, Lebreton contributed to the writing of *Gaudium et Spes*, adding emphases that amount to a distinctive personalism somewhat similar to that of his contemporary

Jacques Maritain, whose contributions often (unfairly) eclipse those of Lebret. A critic of laissez-faire capitalism, Lebret proposed in his many writings an attractive and distinctive Christian vision of development, indeed an economic ethic that truly comes “from below.”

The third presentation, offered by Gregoire Catta, S.J., was “Listening to the Poor: Pope Francis, *Sensus Fidei*, and the Option for the Poor.” The Argentinian pontiff insisted in *Evangelii Gaudium* that making an option for the poor includes the imperative of listening carefully to the voices of under-resourced individuals and communities within society. After all, “the poor share in the *sensus fidei*” and “have much to teach us,” to cite the words of Francis. While affirming its continuity with related social teachings regarding solidarity with the poor from previous popes, Father Catta emphasizes the novelty of this particular papal message and proposes a model of concrete accompaniment of the poor in their daily struggles as a key method for putting into practice this agenda of Pope Francis. The work of the Jesuit Refugee Service was held up as an exemplar of this promising methodology for adequate social action, where encounter with Christ precisely through contact with the poor might “evangelize the affluent” and allow an open-eyed discernment at the grassroots that has often been lacking, even in sincere efforts to enact the social mission of the church.

Following the three presentations, a lively discussion ensued that involved topics introduced by each of the three speakers. Among the topics covered during the question and answer period were the many challenges associated with publicizing and promulgating the central principles of Catholic social thought, a variety of encouraging indicators during the papacy of Francis so far, and the many lessons available from recent church history, including the slices of history treated in the three presentations in this topic session.

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