

JOHN A. RYAN: THEOLOGICAL ETHICS AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

INTRODUCTION

John A. Ryan died 16 September 1945, one year prior to the first meeting of the CTSA. To consider Ryan's thought and work is hence to attend to an imposing representative of the predecessor generation of American Catholic moral theology. During the three decades following his death, only a few treatments of Ryan's life and work appeared.¹ Beginning in the 1980s, renewed interest in Monsignor Ryan's writings and legacy sparked a number of extended examinations, among them the oft-cited analysis by Charles E. Curran.² That literature promises to increase as the fiftieth anniversary of the priest-economist's death is celebrated in various scholarly forums.

The biographical lines of Ryan's life and career have been well covered by others.³ Born of Irish immigrant farmers in the town of Vermillion, Minnesota, in 1869, Ryan was ordained a priest for the diocese of St. Paul, and received training in manualist moral theology and in economics at St. Paul Seminary and Catholic University. From his seminary days, Ryan took an interest in questions of economic justice in industrial society, an interest he found confirmed when, in 1894, he first read Pope Leo XIII's landmark encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*. His doctoral dissertation at Catholic University, published in 1906 under the title, *A*

¹See Patrick W. Gearty, *The Economic Thought of Monsignor John A. Ryan* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1953); Karl H. Cerny, "Monsignor John A. Ryan and the Social Action Department" (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1954); Francis L. Broderick, *Right Reverend New Dealer: John A. Ryan* (New York: Macmillan, 1963); David J. O'Brien, *American Catholics and Social Reform: The New Deal Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968) chap. 6.

²See Charles E. Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982) chap. 2; John A. Coleman, *An American Strategic Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982) chap. 4; Joseph McShane, "Sufficiently Radical" *Progressivism and the Bishops' Program of 1919* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1986); Richard Gaillardetz, "John A. Ryan: An Early Revisionist?" *Journal of Religious Ethics* 18 (Fall 1990) 107-23; Harlan Beckley, *Passion for Justice: Retrieving the Legacies of Walter Rauschenbusch, John A. Ryan, and Reinhold Niebuhr* (Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

³The following summary is drawn from Broderick, *Right Reverend New Dealer*, chaps. 1-2.

Living Wage, lifted up what was to remain a centerpiece issue of social reform for Ryan, wage justice for industrial workers.⁴ Following several years teaching at his diocesan seminary, Ryan pursued the rest of his career in Washington, D.C., as an academic (teaching at Catholic University and Trinity College), as an influential ecclesial administrator (the chairman of the Social Action Department of the National Catholic Welfare Council for more than three decades); and as a political opinion maker and policy advocate who became a highly regarded spokesman for Catholic social teaching among both U.S. Catholics and the wider American public. Advocates and critics alike accord Ryan credit for formulating a credible and effective platform for the U.S. Catholic Church's engagement in social, political, and especially economic matters during the first half of the twentieth century.

What might the work and legacy of Ryan have to offer to U.S. Catholics concerned with social justice in late twentieth century circumstances? The answers are potentially many. In this essay, I will probe one issue that stood at the center of Ryan's lifework, and that is also crucial for presentday social ethics. I refer to the links between Catholic moral theology and practical political engagement. Drawing on neo-scholastic sources, contemporary episcopal and papal social teachings, the data of the social sciences and common experience, Ryan modeled an approach to U.S. Catholic social ethics that creatively combined appeals to firm and universal religious and moral principles, and realistic attention to concrete circumstances and dynamics of his day. Beyond the halls of academe, this Leonine progressive, priest-economist, and what we today would probably call public policy wonk, was himself highly politically engaged. As director of the Social Action Department of the National Catholic Welfare Council, he helped establish a form of national political involvement by the U.S. Catholic Church which continues to this day. A larger question that Ryan's career highlights is: what constitutes a vital and adequate U.S. Catholic social ethics, and how does that theoretical enterprise properly interact with, serve and guide political action? We will delve into four critical aspects of this question, taking as our entrypoint and focus Ryan's economic ethics.⁵ We will inquire,

⁴John A. Ryan, *A Living Wage: Its Ethical and Economic Aspects* (London: Macmillan, [1906] 1912).

⁵Curran accurately judges Ryan's writings on political ethics much less original or substantive than his economic ethics. See, e.g., John A. Ryan, *The Catholic Church and the Citizen* (New York: Macmillan, 1928) chap. 3, "Conflicting Loyalties—Church and State." Ryan defended then-current official Catholic teaching on the desirability of church-state union, but his contribution on this disputed question (Ryan became embroiled in the controversy on this topic during the presidential campaign of Al Smith in 1928) was neither original nor persuasive. This essay focuses on Ryan's economic writings, and on the political assumptions that permeate these. Taking this tack allows Ryan to "play his long suit" in the interest of better ascertaining his positive legacy to U.S. Catholic social ethics. It also opens the way to a more radical interpretation of Ryan's approach to theo-

first, about Ryan's success in crafting a social ethics and style of political engagement that is simultaneously theologically rooted and publicly accessible. Second, what sorts and degrees of economic and political change does Ryan's rendition of Catholic social teaching require? Third, what methods of analysis does Ryan's U.S. Catholic economic ethics entail? What means of social and political change does he advocate? Finally, where does Ryan's approach to social ethics situate the motive force and guiding power and authority for practical political engagement? On these questions concerning the relationship between religious ethics and political practice, we will seek to discover how, and to what extent, the story of this significant U.S. Catholic is exemplary, and in what ways it might it be a cautionary tale.

Other Catholic moralists during Ryan's lifetime wrote insightfully concerning the relationship between Christian ethics and the political order. In my analysis, I will allude to certain categories developed by one of them, the political philosopher Jacques Maritain. To my knowledge Ryan had very little direct engagement with Maritain's work, and vice versa.⁶ Yet despite differences in nationality, talent, temperament, and focal disciplines, the two shared much in the way of sources (both rely on and develop strands of Thomistic thought, and early papal social teachings), and both were motivated by a passion for Christian social reconstruction. Important aspects of Ryan's social ethics are illuminated by Maritain's more theoretically sophisticated treatment of the relationship between Christianity and sociopolitical life, and by the French philosopher's notion of a "concrete historical ideal" as a rubric for conceptualizing the intersection of Christian moral theory and socially transformative action under different "historical skies."

We turn, then, to the first of our four questions.

1. In what ways is Ryan's brand of Catholic social ethics and political engagement both theologically sound and publicly persuasive?

It has been suggested that Ryan's natural law approach, despite its undeniable merits as a vehicle for uniting Catholic social teaching with campaigns for economic and political reform, shares with other moral theologies of his day some glaring weakness. Ryan's ethics, particularly when regarded through the retrospective lens of the post-Vatican II era, seem nearly bereft of attention to explicitly theological questions or sources. His work is especially thin on engagement with Scripture, running more to proof-texting, and he rarely adverts

logical ethics and political engagement. Ryan believed a great deal of change would be needed to bring U.S. economic structures and practices up to standards of justice; and that a combination of formal legislative and informal (through civic associations, unions, and nongovernmental efforts of various sorts) civic action, supported by individuals, families, and the church, were required to accomplish this change.

⁶Ryan wrote a lukewarm review of Maritain's *The Things that Are Not Caesar's* when it appeared in English in 1931. See *Catholic World*, 13 May 1931, 50-51.

to theological themes such as sin or grace. Even in his use of the papal encyclicals, Ryan consistently elaborates moral principles and policy issues taken up by Leo or Pius, while giving papal exhortations concerning the Christianization of the social order, and the critical need for a return to true (Catholic) religion by the masses, only passing mention.⁷

In light of this, influential contemporaries like Virgil Michel accused Ryan of paying only lip service to the need for moral and religious conversion. Later commentators like Curran note that Ryan apparently subscribed to a compartmentalized, two-layer theory of the natural and supernatural. Ryan recognized the need for simultaneous moral reform to go along with the economic, says O'Brien, but "he admitted his lack of interest in the former."

"Of course I do not regard the supernatural order as a kind of a second story, built as if by afterthought on top of the natural order," he wrote a friend [in 1935], "but I confess that the assumption of no connection between the two except by elevator has always seemed to me rather logical and involving fewer difficulties than the opposite assumption."⁸

This is an undeniably flat-footed theological statement. But to conclude from it that Ryan's ethics eschews concerns with religion or with moral reform is to judge falsely. The credibility of his natural law approach depends heavily upon a context in which its centerpiece principle, the dignity of the human person in the image of God, can be firmly acknowledged. The economic claims that flow from his fundamental affirmation of human dignity and rights involve normative assumptions and content that are rooted in a distinctly religious worldview. Certainly, many of Ryan's specific economic proposals were advocated by others in the name of a robust humanism. The 1919 Bishops' Program for Social Reconstruction, largely penned by Ryan, enumerates policies that were dear to most progressives of the day. Yet the motive, the end, and the orienting norms of Ryan's economic ethics are steeped in Christian theological affirmations. Indeed, Ryan's conviction that religious concerns directly interfaced with the plight of poor workers impelled him to see his vocation in terms of economic and political engagement. Looking back over his career, he makes this link plain:

With each succeeding year of my theological studies, my desire and determination increased to devote as much time and labor to the study of economic conditions, institutions and problems as would be possible and permitted after my ordination. I wanted to examine economic life in the light of Christian principles,

⁷Explicit references to the links between economic reform and religious conversion tend to occur only in the closing pages of Ryan's book-length works. See, e.g., John A. Ryan, *Distributive Justice*, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1942) 347-48; *A Living Wage*, 331-32; *Social Reconstruction* (New York: Macmillan, 1920) 216.

⁸O'Brien, *American Catholics and Social Reform*, 147-48, citing Ryan to Russell Wilber, October 14, 1935, Ryan Papers; Paul Marx, *Virgil Michel and the Liturgical Movement* (Collegeville MN, 1957) 216-17.

with a view to making them operative in the realm of industry. It seemed to me that the salvation of millions of souls depended largely upon the economic opportunity to live decently, to live as human beings in the image and likeness of God.⁹

In these words we find crystallized the religious impulses that animate Ryan's work, and the practical venue through which his natural law methodology would take him. His concern for the salvation of souls would be expressed through his ministrations on behalf of workers' right to the economic opportunities to "live decently, to live as human beings in the image and likeness of God." This theological anthropological notion of the dignity of the human person functions as the linchpin of Ryan's theological ethics.¹⁰ Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* provided him with authoritative, religious approbation for his pursuit of economic reform. Forty years later, Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno* seemed to Ryan and many others to be a vindication of his life's work.

Ryan was as sure of the theological underpinnings of his economic and political commitments as he was of those of the popes.¹¹ Nowhere, however, does he provide a sophisticated and nuanced theoretical statement of the connection between the theological and the temporal in his thought and work. For this purpose, certain elements of Jacques Maritain's political ethics offer clarification. First, Maritain's theory of action illumines the distinction yet unity of the ends of Christian sociopolitical engagement that Ryan also assumes. Put forth in his widely influential 1936 book, *Humanisme Intégrale*, Maritain's neo-Thomist political ethics conceived of Christians in the world as simultaneously engaged in two distinct-yet-related dimensions and finalities, the supernatural and the temporal.¹² Within the purely temporal arena, the Christian attends to matters whose purposes are limited to this world. Economic, political, and cultural activities, however, do not occur in isolation from the spiritual dimensions and

⁹John A. Ryan, *Social Doctrine in Action: A Personal History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1941) 59. Cited in McShane, *Sufficiently Radical*, 29.

¹⁰See Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 30-34; Beckley, *Passion for Justice*, 117-27; Gaillardetz, "An Early Revisionist?," 111-14.

¹¹McShane speaks of the threefold lesson that Ryan gleaned from his encounter with *Rerum Novarum* in 1894, and subsequent study of Leo XIII's writing. First, religion had a place in the economics field, and the Church's pronouncements were the final critical word on social matters. Second, Ryan discovered in Leo's thought a way to bring traditional moral reflection to bear upon modern industrial questions, by adapting enduring religious principles to the changing "facts" of the modern situation. Third, from Leo Ryan derived a belief in the principle of state intervention as a positive nonsocialist means for social amelioration. McShane, *Sufficiently Radical*, 31-32.

¹²See both Jacques Maritain, *True Humanism*, trans. M. R. Adamson (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1938) and idem, *Integral Humanism*, trans. Joseph Evans (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968).

purposes of human life. Temporal action prepares and conduces in an indirect but real way to the spiritual well-being and destiny of human beings.¹³

Maritain also detects an intermediary plane of action for Christians, wherein mundane engagement more directly impinges on spiritual well being. Here, on "the plane of the spiritual as adjoining the temporal," Maritain explicitly locates the social teachings of Leo and Pius, referring precisely to the socioeconomic matters that most absorbed Ryan.¹⁴ When a Christian engages in political action to promote a better economic order, a vital dimension of that action engages spiritual dimensions of the temporal arena. This is so to the extent that any economic or political matter impinges on the respect for and realization of the God-given dignity and potential of the human being.

Ryan's advocacy of a decent livelihood for workers, limitations on the rights to private ownership, the obligation for persons to live less than extravagantly, and the obligation to distribute superfluous wealth to those in need are, I submit, examples of such spiritually interpenetrating temporal action. All are founded on an axiomatic claim about the intrinsic dignity of human persons, elaborated in a teleological anthropology that portrays humans as social beings who are physically, intellectually, and spiritually endowed for the purpose of developing their spiritual personality toward the proximate end of temporal flourishing, and the ultimate end of the beatific vision.

Ryan's theory of economic justice is built upon the affirmation that God has created the world for the sustenance of all God's creatures; any economic system that does not conduce to that end must be reformed or replaced.¹⁵ Framing both

¹³See Ryan's similar discussion of the material and spiritual dimensions of human personality and activity in John A. Ryan, *The Norm of Morality* (Washington DC: National Catholic Welfare Council, 1944); *The Church and Socialism* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1919) 198-201.

¹⁴This plane of action concerns "a zone of truths connected with revealed truths," which directs Christian thought and temporal activity by providing a theological backdrop against which particular concrete questions in contingent and changing economic and political circumstances may be measured. "Thus the encyclicals of Leo XIII and Pius XI have elaborated the principles of a Christian political, social, and economic *wisdom*, which does not descend to particular determinations of the concrete, but which is like a theological firmament for the doctrines and more particular activities engaged in the contingencies of the temporal sphere." Maritain, *True Humanism*, 293-94.

¹⁵Building on this religio-moral foundation, Ryan elevates "needs" as a moral title which rationalizes the claim of different persons to a certain minimal amount of the goods of the earth. The priority of needs as a partial rule for wage justice ultimately rests, explains Ryan, on three fundamental principles "regarding man's position in the universe:" (1) God created the earth for the sustenance of *all* His children; therefore, all persons are equal in their inherent claims upon the bounty of nature; (2) the inherent right of access to the earth is conditioned upon, and becomes actually valid through, the expenditure of useful labor. The very young, the infirm, and the landed wealthy excepted,

the worker's right to a decent livelihood and the obligations of employers to provide it are religiously inspired strictures against greed and the idolatry of material acquisition or success.¹⁶ These last are most evident in Ryan's several essays treating false versus true understandings of welfare, and minimum and maximum standards of living.¹⁷ Finally, Ryan himself is motivated by, and he exhorts others toward, a moral and spiritual conversion that both enables such a perception of reality, and motivates work for a society wherein economic justice will be more widely attained.

In short, if one were to attempt to wash the religion out of Ryan's social ethics, its fabric would disintegrate. A thinker like Jacques Maritain later provides a better theoretical articulation of the relationship between the religious and the temporal in the sociopolitical action of the Christian.¹⁸ But if there are exemplars of the integration of action Maritain describes, Ryan certainly is one.¹⁹

people must, and ought to, work in order to live. "For those who refuse to comply with this condition the inherent right of access to the earth remains suspended." (3) "The men who are in present control of the opportunities of the earth are obliged to permit reasonable access to these opportunities on reasonable terms." Every man willing to work has an inborn right to sustenance from the earth on reasonable terms and conditions. "[T]here is a certain minimum of goods to which every worker is entitled . . . at least a decent livelihood, that is . . . so much of the requisites of sustenance as will enable him to live in a manner worthy of a human being." Ryan, *Distributive Justice*, 270-73.

¹⁶Ryan summarizes the elements of a decent livelihood as "Food, clothing and housing sufficient in quantity and quality to maintain the worker in normal health, in elementary comfort, and in an environment suitable to the protection of morality and religion; sufficient provision for the future to bring elementary contentment, and security against sickness, accident, and invalidity; and sufficient opportunities of recreation, social intercourse, education and church membership to conserve health and strength and to render possible the exercise of the higher faculties." *Ibid.*, 273.

¹⁷See John A. Ryan, "The Fallacy of Bettering One's Position," *Catholic World*, 1907; "False and True Conceptions of Welfare," in *The Church and Socialism*, 1919; *Distributive Justice* (1916, 1927, 1942; 1942, chap. 18, "The Duty of Distributing Superfluous Wealth," esp. 242-45); "Minimum and Maximum Standards of Living," in *Declining Liberty and Other Papers* (New York: MacMillan, 1927) 315-29.

¹⁸See Maritain, *True Humanism*, esp. 251-96.

¹⁹The natural *telos* of the world includes, for Maritain, (1) the conquest of human autonomy, (2) the development of the multiple spiritual capacities of persons, especially of authentic knowledge, art, and moral understanding; and (3) progressive manifestation of all the spiritual potentialities in human nature in accordance with the impulse testified to by history, "to make manifest what is in man." In general, much economic, political, and cultural activity falls into this category. Through temporal activity, the Christian does not aim to make of this world itself the final kingdom, but to make of this world "according to the historical ideal required by different ages, and . . . by the *moltings* of this ideal, the place of a truly and fully human earthly life, that is, one which is full of defects, but is also full of love, whose social structures have as their measure justice, the

II. *What sorts and degrees of change does Catholic moral thought call for in the U.S. economy and society?*

Curran schematizes Ryan's developing vision of socioeconomic reform in terms of three evolving dimensions, that are also roughly chronological.²⁰ Emerging from these is a dynamic picture of economic justice that operates for Ryan as a "concrete historical ideal." Maritain uses this term to refer to "that prospective type, that particular and specific (ideal) image of itself towards which a given concrete historical epoch tends."²¹ Rather than a utopia advanced in place of or over against present reality, a concrete historical ideal is one that is realizable—with more or less difficulty, more or less imperfectly, and not as a finished thing but as something in process—and called for in a given historical climate. It is a goal that reflects, within particular historical circumstances, a relative maximum of political and social perfection. Precisely because it points to a goal capable of concrete realization, a concrete historical ideal presents the basic outlines, or a rough draft, which will, in particular circumstances, require further determination and development.²² A concrete historical ideal has synthesizing, clarifying, and motivating force for socially engaged persons in a given historical period. Contact between the common nature and destiny of human beings and the specific exigencies of different times, cultures, and circumstances yields varying, but analogous historical ideals. Though he did not employ Maritain's term, Ryan articulated such a concrete historical ideal for U.S. Catholic economic ethics in his day. The key features of this ideal were a universal living wage for workers and their families and the establishment of industrial democracy. The principal means for attaining it were to be the enactment of social reform legislation; the empowerment of workers by means of a new status in industry; and the promotion of a strong, interdependent, multigroup economic order.

Stage one: Social reform through legislation. In a two-part article published in *The Catholic World* in 1909, Ryan laid out his vision of social reform attainable through democratically mandated state intervention. While he advocated labor unions as the more grassroots level of worker empowerment, he regarded the state as a superior instrument of social reform, for its responsibility and power extended to the common welfare, not simply to group interests.²³ The first part of his proposal focused on labor legislation and included a legal minimum wage; an eight-hour law; protective labor legislation for women and children;

dignity of the human person, and fraternal love." Maritain, *Integral Humanism*, 111.

²⁰Curran, *American Catholic Social Thought*, 49-60. My discussion in this section employs Curran's three-stage categorization.

²¹Maritain, *True Humanism*, 121.

²²Maritain, *True Humanism*, 122; cf. *Integral Humanism*, 127-28.

²³Broderick, *Right Reverend New Dealer*, 58.

legal protection for peaceful picketing and boycotting; unemployment insurance and bureaus; insurance against accident, illness, and old age, and publicly funded housing. Besides labor legislation, Ryan's program contained proposals concerning public ownership of public utilities, mines, and forests; control of monopolies; progressive income and inheritance taxes; taxes on future increases in land values, and prohibition of speculation on the stock and commodity exchanges. Overall, this program placed Ryan "among the more radical progressives" of the day.²⁴ When, in 1919, four U.S. Bishops published Ryan's proposals as "The Bishops' Program for Social Reconstruction," and shortly thereafter, Ryan was made head of the National Catholic Welfare Council's newly created Social Action Department, Ryan rejoiced in the fact that his "sufficiently radical" positions were being endorsed as official U.S. Catholic episcopal teaching.²⁵ When in the 1930s, Ryan aligned himself with many of the New Deal programs of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, he rebutted charges that he was coattailing on the President's political agenda, insisting, rather, that U.S. politics was in some measure catching up with U.S. Catholic social teaching, especially as enunciated by him.²⁶

Stage two. Industrial democracy through an enhanced status for workers. The second feature of Ryan's developing economic thought was the establishment of "industrial democracy," a goal which required that workers become copartners or cooperators in all levels of the industrial order. Though elements of Ryan's notion were advanced as early as 1913, in 1920 Ryan introduced the formula to which he would repeatedly refer in the following decades: A better economic order would entail a threefold sharing among workers and owners: in

²⁴Broderick, 52, 59. "In scope and daring, Ryan's program probably went beyond what any other prominent Catholic had offered. Radical and detailed, it set a standard by which the proposals of others could be measured" (ibid., 61). Ryan's scheme was often criticized for leaning too far toward socialism. Ryan repeatedly rebutted this claim, as Broderick and McShane detail. Yet Broderick concludes that right up until New Deal Days the opinion concerning Father Ryan remained: "not technically enough of a socialist to draw . . . formal censure . . . but too radical for most of his coreligionists." He adds, "Ryan's view was simpler. He was about as radical as Leo XIII." (69) While publicly seeking to eschew either "radical" or "conservative" labels, Ryan privately admitted that his views were "sufficiently radical." Broderick, 108, cites a letter from Ryan to his sister, 12 May 1919. Coleman spotlights Ryan's more radical leanings in the area of economic changes in *American Strategic Theology*, 97.

²⁵Broderick, *Right Reverend New Dealer*, 107-109.

²⁶In a richly detailed footnote, Beckley elucidates Ryan's complex relationship to the policies of Roosevelt and other political movements of his day. See *Passion for Justice*, 230n.2. Beckley includes the apocryphal story recounted in Patrick Gearty, "Ryan's Economic Thought," 264-65, which reports "Ryan's response to a chiding remark that he was 'following after everything Roosevelt and the New Deal does.'" Ryan was supposed to have retorted: "It's not so. Before the New Deal was, I am."

management, in profits, and in ownership.²⁷ Ryan insisted that "trade unionism" and collective bargaining did not go far enough in reorganizing employee-employer relations, for these both retained a conflictual model of relations, and left workers no motive for intrinsic interest in the well-being of their workplaces.²⁸ More fundamentally, as Harlan Beckley points out, Ryan considered such sharing "a necessary addition to the just distribution of wages if individuals were to have an opportunity to develop." Each of the three sorts of participation would enable, in a different way, the safeguarding and development of the human dignity and potential of workers.²⁹

Stage three. The occupational group system as a means to a strong multi-group socioeconomic polity. Curran describes as the third and final chronological stage of Ryan's economic thought his focus on the occupational group system—a scheme for reestablishing organic group relations among workers in various fields, and between worker's associations in cooperation with owners and capitalists—advocated by Pius XI in *Quadragesimo Anno*. Ryan never rescinded his earlier stress on the need for state intervention to achieve economic justice in the short run, and his commentators debate the extent to which he seriously embraced Pius' plan.³⁰ Certainly, Ryan from early on recognized the need for what he called "private associations between the individual and the state to work together for full social reform." The most significant of these is the labor union.³¹

Ryan also pressed for greater personal and communal power for average workers, through both a living wage and industrial democracy. There was, however, a certain lack of fit between Ryan's and the pope's visions of the multi-group economy, that bespoke differences in their thinking about the "concrete historical ideal" appropriate for U.S. Catholic economic ethics. The concrete his-

²⁷Ryan, *Social Reconstruction*, 176; cf. *Declining Liberty*, 225-38; cited in Curran, *American Catholic Social Thought*, 55. Beckley analyzes the emergence and details of Ryan's industrial democracy proposals in *Passion for Justice*, 246-51.

²⁸See, e.g., Ryan, *Declining Liberty*, 226-27.

²⁹Beckley, *Passion for Justice*, 247-49; Ryan, *Declining Liberty*, 230-32. Beckley cites Ryan, "Social Objectives of Catholics," *Catholic Charities Review* 13 (April 1929) 114-16; idem, *Declining Liberty*, 213-23, 224-38. For contemporary analysis of and proposals concerning economic democracy, see Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, Jr., *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989) 298-314.

³⁰See Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 57-59; Gaillardetz, "An Early Revisionist?," 117; O'Brien, *American Catholics and Social Reform*, 142-49. O'Brien provides illuminating comparisons between Ryan and Father Raymond McGowan's corporatism on the one hand, and Virgil Michel's liturgical-social reform movement on the other.

³¹Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics*, 59-60. He cites John A. Ryan, "Morality of the Aims and Methods of the Labor Unions," *American Catholic Quarterly Review* 24 (1904) 326-55.

torical ideal that Ryan embraced entailed a proximate goal of the living wage as a universal norm for industrial society, and a longer-range but equally concrete goal of democratizing industry. In his post-1931 writings, Ryan duly included Pius' rendition of the occupational group system, in which sounded the unmistakable strains of 19th century European Catholic corporatism.³² But it never evoked in him the same passion as did the living wage, or industrial democracy.³³ Ryan's tepid reception of Pius' scheme reflects a more general lack of attention to this third facet of economic flourishing, of which we shall say more shortly.

III. *What methods of analysis
does Ryan's U.S. Catholic economic ethics entail?
What sorts of political and social engagement for change?*

For Ryan, economic problems involved religious and moral issues as well as technical ones. Ryan believed that the best way to approach economic policy questions was to educate oneself in the enduring principles of Catholic social thought, and to conscientiously study the "facts" of the particular economic problem at hand in order to determine a potential course of action. One then must consider two questions: "Is this measure in conformity with right reason and Catholic teaching?" and "Is it prudent to advocate this reform at this time?"³⁴ Upon responding in the affirmative, every available avenue of legitimate influence ought to be used to promote that change. Ryan himself gained access to many: the classroom, the lecture hall, the newspaper, periodicals Catholic and secular, the radio, his personal connections with politicians, businessmen, and labor leaders, and his directorship in the NCWC.

³²See Paul Misner, *Social Catholicism in Europe: From the Onset of Industrialization to the First World War* (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 181.

³³Ryan regarded both the living wage and industrial democracy as direct Catholic contributions to the world at large, and their lack as indicative of the need for more effective Catholic voice and influence in modern industrial society. He saw these economic reforms as in the spirit of the medieval guilds. "Considered as a fundamental and consistent industrial system, cooperative ownership has a greater claim to the title of Catholic than any other. For the system that developed and that seemed destined to prevail in the days when Catholic principles and the social influences of the Church were at their zenith, in the later Middle Ages, was that in which the masses of the workers both in town and country owned and managed the tools and the land." Today urban workers cannot own separate industrial establishments, but they can participate in ownership and management through cooperation. "It is such a system, and not either socialism or present-day capitalism, that is in harmony with Catholic traditions and Catholic social principles." John A. Ryan and Joseph Husslein, S.J., *The Church and Labor* (New York: MacMillan, 1924) xvi-xvii.

³⁴Ryan, *Social Reconstruction*, 213-14.

How, more specifically, did Ryan believe that change ought to be effected? In the closing chapter of *A Living Wage*, Ryan designates two key means for advancing reform, variations of which can be found in his subsequent writings. The first, "moral suasion," appeals to the hearts and consciences of individuals, but does not shrink from using moral and spiritual sanctions in the process. In this Ryan saw religion and the Church as playing a direct role. The second means, "social effort," involved the activity of private associations such as labor unions, and of the state. Ryan criticized both those who underestimated the potential impact of religious and moral suasion, and those who assumed that persuasion alone could assure economic justice.³⁵

Ryan cautions social justice seekers concerning the false consciousness that keeps "good Christians" in thrall to the foreign, and ultimately inhumane ethical standards of the competitive marketplace.³⁶ In the face of this, effective moral suasion requires "earnest, continuous, enlightened activity on the part of public teachers and molders of public opinion." Clergymen should preach the duty of paying a living wage, and not fear to impose spiritual and social sanctions on those who fail to comply:

If [clergymen] would use all the power of their ecclesiastical position to deprive recalcitrant employers of the church privileges that are ordinarily denied to disobedient members; and if public speakers and writers who discuss questions of industrial justice would, *in concrete terms*, hold up to public denunciation those employers who can pay a living wage and will not,—the results would constitute an ample refutation of the libelous assertion that employers cannot be got to act justly by moral suasion. They have never been made to feel a fraction of its power.

Concerning social effort, Ryan recognizes that the effectiveness of a group's action depends on the character and quality of information had by the individuals

³⁵"We are not infrequently assured that, 'only religion will solve the labor question.' Most certainly it will not be permanently and adequately solved *without* religion, that is, without the aid of religious agencies and a larger infusion of the religious spirit in the minds and hearts of men; but neither will religion suffice in the absence of a detailed application of moral principles to the relations of employers and employees." Ryan, *A Living Wage*, 329.

³⁶"Men may be religious in the ordinary meaning of the term, and yet remain so thoroughly dominated by the ethical code of unlimited competition that they are blind to the many forms of moral wrong which that code sanctions. There are thousands of employers in every church organization who wish to live up to the standards of their respective denominations, and believe that they are succeeding fairly well, who nevertheless feel no conscientious scruples when they pay their employees much less than a Living Wage. They see no wrong in this, for are they not paying the current rates? In other words, they conform to the standard of business ethics, instead of to the standard of Christian ethics." *Ibid.*, 329-30.

who compose it. "But," he adds, "it is also true that organized effort will add very materially to the results that can be accomplished through moral suasion addressed to individuals. This very obvious general truth is superlatively true in our time, when man's social relations have become so numerous and so complex."³⁷

Both methods, then, are necessary. "There must be an appeal to the minds and hearts of individuals, and the fullest utilization of the latent power of organizations and social institutions." This dual effort promises to have the greatest positive outcome for the laboring class, especially its poorest-paid members.³⁸

IV. *Where is the guidance and motive force for change situated in efforts for socioeconomic reform?*

This is the question of how transformative power flows and operates according to Ryan's Catholic social ethics. Both in theory and in practice, one discerns a certain tension between populism and elitism in Ryan's ways of relating Catholic social thought and political engagement. His own career bespeaks a determination to acquire and use the power that accompanied membership in intellectual, ecclesial, and political elites. As what would later be called a "public intellectual," Ryan embodied a mixture of populist allegiance to everyday people and a predilection for paternal methods of amelioration. This blend reflects, on the one hand, what Wilson Carey McWilliams suggests is a persistent trait of Left-intellectuality in the U.S.—specifically, an historically elitist strain reflected in the Progressive era insistence that majorities need guidance from social scientists and expert administrators. Ryan embodies a distinctly Catholic version of this elite-populist mix. His "urban populist" support for labor unions and industrial workers, and his conviction that attaining economic justice would both require and promote an engaged, self-actualizing citizenry were sincere and lifelong.³⁹ Yet Ryan's most influential theological mentors operated from within a worldview and understanding of religion strongly marked by hierarchy rather than egalitarianism, and paternalism rather than solidarity. His own social location as a second generation Irish American who had attained education, status, and success through the hierarchical priesthood, also shaped his view. Seeing Ryan's social reformist stance within this context makes the strains of elitism or paternalism in his approach less surprising. One

³⁷Ibid., 331.

³⁸Ibid., 330-31.

³⁹Ryan's populist leanings were honestly come by, traceable to his boyhood in an Irish immigrant farming community in Minnesota. Populist leader and orator Ignatius Donnelly was one of his boyhood heroes. See Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (New York: Basic Books, 1995) 117; Broderick, *Right Reverend New Dealer*, 69.

finds in his writings a mixture of affinity with the everyday worker's plight and distance from the same. This "Leonine-progressive" elitism also helps explain why Ryan's commentators find his treatment of legislative and judicial avenues for social change far more developed than his understanding of the role and potential influence of economic or political grassroots movements or associations, with the possible exception of labor unions.⁴⁰

This feature of Ryan's legacy prompts reflection on both our political and ecclesial situation today. In light of the complexity and scope of the American economic and political system and the problems it faces, some today judge this tension between elitism and populism endemic. Given our large-scale, complicated and commercial republic, writes McWilliams, "the distinction between 'the people' and 'the elite' is inherent in the thing, bridged only by institutions, including the parties, that let us feel represented." Populist movements have periodically cropped up to redress corruptions or distortions in the large-scale institutions. Though populists in Ryan's day (far more than today) believed they could build such movements from the bottom up, the role Ryan plays in Progressive and New Deal era politics reflects his position as a member of the elite who was convinced of the efficiency of top-down, state-directed reforms as a means to facilitate populist goals.⁴¹ He directed his energies and invested his political and ecclesial capital according to that conviction.

The unresolved tension between elitism and populism in Ryan's work suggests something more fundamental about modern Catholic social teaching and its relationship to the mediating structures and associations that compose a healthy body politic. We find in official teaching, especially from *Quadragesimo Anno* on, support and approval for a multigroup society marked by the principle of subsidiarity. The fostering of thriving, empowered, local groupings within complex modern society has been a historical strength of the U.S. Catholic Church. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the Church was the locus for a proliferation of local communities that connected, educated, and empowered its immigrant members. Yet, as community organizer and Catholic lay leader

⁴⁰So, Kazin's history of U.S. populism correctly treats Ryan, the academic and Washington politico, as a largely secondary figure, while devoting an entire chapter to the less-sophisticated but by far more popular radio priest, Fr. Charles Coughlin. Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, chap. 5.

⁴¹Kazin judges the progressive-era populist-elitism represented by Ryan as having this clear advantage over the forms of populism cropping up in the 1990s: Progressive era thought presumed that intellectual elites spoke as the servants or champions of "the people." As McWilliams states in his review of Kazin's book, "By contrast, the contemporary liberal left has become wedded to cultural and theoretical relativism and associated with and identity politics designed to protect favored constituencies against majorities." See Wilson Carey McWilliams, "The Old Populism vs. the New," review of Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, *Commonweal* 122/11 (2 June 1995) 24-25.

Ernie Cortes points out, a full-bodied U.S. Catholic theory of social participation, social power, and the moral dimensions thereof has remained underdeveloped.⁴² This is reflected in the evident awkwardness of Ryan's efforts to take seriously Pius XI's call for the reestablishment of the occupational group system. His economic ethics, while championing the living wage and the formation of industrial democracy, and promoting the state and labor unions as bodies for facilitating this, remains weak in its articulation of a more comprehensive network of smaller and larger groups in economy and society, whether Pius XI's version or some other.

Writing in 1991, Cortes suggests that this is, in fact, a deficiency in U.S. Catholic social thought which locates a critical task for contemporary scholarship. Catholics need to retrieve and reexamine a history of performative engagement in multigroup civic and ecclesial life, and activists and academics must collaborate in clarifying for today concrete, people-oriented avenues of empowerment that can link persons effectively into a complicated mass economic and political society, and allow them to challenge and resist its pernicious aspects. This cannot be done by isolated individuals; therefore, tapping and developing wisdom and strategy at the level of group action is of the utmost importance. In the absence of this, the tension between elitism and populism too easily grows into a festering rift between the possessors of information and control and an increasingly cynical and alienated populace.⁴³ Effectively controlling the encroaching technical, market, and communications powers that our century has unleashed, and guiding these toward humanizing ends, will require that "the people" and "the elites" find ways to effectively yoke and pull together. Mutually attending to these questions is of the utmost importance for Catholic social ethicists and activists.

⁴²See Ernie Cortes, "Reflections on the Catholic Tradition of Family Rights," in John A. Coleman, S.J., ed., *One Hundred Years of Catholic Social Thought: Celebration and Challenge* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1991) 155-73. Cortes is a nationally known community organizer in the style of Saul Alinsky, currently on the national staff of the Industrial Areas Foundation.

⁴³Kazin's study concludes that one outcome of this lack of attention to the tissues of civic involvement is the threatened usurpation, since the 1980s, of populist impulses by technologically sophisticated and highly centralized organizations representative of political conservatism and economic liberalism. Meanwhile, the traditional left-intellectual-progressive populist alliance with which Ryan might have identified has languished. Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, chaps. 10, 11.

CONCLUSION:

RYAN'S LEGACY FOR CATHOLIC POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Let us summarize, in conclusion, the legacy we discover in John A. Ryan's way of bringing together Catholic social ethics with political engagement on issues of economic justice. First, Ryan espouses a worldview saturated with a Catholic natural law understanding of the human and of the temporal order as having distinct features and purposes, which right reason and Christianity illumine. Socioeconomic life, seen from this perspective, has a distinctively moral aim, and indirectly, a religious purpose: to provide the material conditions for a decent and moderately comfortable livelihood conducive to people's development of their potentials and fulfillment of their responsibilities, human and spiritual, as images of God.

Second, Ryan's religiomoral worldview, while it clearly subordinates the temporal to the supernatural plane, recognizes them as mutually influential, and in a real way interdependent. This being so, political engagement and economic reform become activities intrinsic to moral and spiritual rectitude, not additive or superfluous. Ryan reflects his times by according the temporal order a great deal of independent attention, but, as Maritain articulated in a more theoretically sophisticated way, and as the theological anthropology that grounds Ryan's economic proposals attests, Catholic thinkers of this era saw no dichotomy between the natural and the supernatural. As we have also seen, however, Ryan's talent and interest lay far less in clarifying the theoretical nuances of the intersection between theological ethics and political engagement than in identifying concrete problems with specific solutions and figuring out how to advance those.

Third, while his theoretical vocabulary reflects neo-scholastic sources, Ryan advances U.S. Catholic social ethics beyond the deductivism of the manuals both in theory and in practice. He does so by his insistence, inspired by his early teacher Fr. Thomas Bouquillon, on the need to critically correlate Catholic teaching on economic matters with the "facts" of the concrete circumstances and dynamics of modern, industrial society. Moreover, Ryan's focus on the dignity, needs, and rights of real human persons—rather than abstract first principles of natural law—as the starting point for economic ethics also contributed to a more inductive performative approach.⁴⁴

Fourth, Ryan's work illustrates major features of the U.S. social Catholicism that developed in the early decades of the century: its basis in certain renditions of Thomistic natural law thought; its loyalty to ecclesial tradition and papal teachings, but interpreted through distinctly American lenses; its particular

⁴⁴See Gaillardetz, "An Early Revisionist?" esp. 113, Gearty, "Ryan's Economic Thought," 101, 129; and Beckley's judicious treatment and response to Gaillardetz in *Passion for Justice*, 118-27; 114n.27; 119n.44. On Thomas Bouquillon, see the essay by Charles Curran in this volume, 156-73.

solicitude for the poor and vulnerable, especially the working poor; its support for individuals and private associations like unions on the one hand, but leanings toward hierarchical and paternalist ways of envisioning social problems and social reform on the other.

This last, as I have suggested, raises questions concerning the relevance of grassroots or populist tactics and appeals in today's complex and globally interdependent political and economic circumstances. Both as a Leonine Catholic and as a liberal progressive, Ryan instinctually grasped the potential power "for the good" that centralized or hierarchical institutions authentically devoted to the common good could wield. That this stood in tension with his populist and democratic predilections did not perturb our pre-Vatican II monsignor as much as it would theologians and pastors, among them liberationists, in the wake of the Council. In the U.S. since Ryan's death, the Catholic Bishops have continued to seek to influence those "at the top" in the seats of governmental power, while struggling to make their leadership and official teachings more receptive to and reflective of "the people." With some important exceptions (e.g., the notable success of the Campaign for Human Development, and some aspects of the process of writing the 1986 U.S. Bishops' pastoral letter on the economy), the bishops and Catholic social ethicists have been more effective at this "at the top" level than they have been at finding ways to articulate and associate themselves with bottom-up, grassroots movements for economic and social justice.

But the common good, and social transformation to that end, requires a dynamic interplay in both these directions, with all the tensions and messiness that such inevitably entails. A particular task for present-day U.S. Catholic ethics, therefore, is to find ways to better link the centralized, national level of Catholic moral influence associated with the National Council of Catholic Bishops and the United States Catholic Conference with local and grassroots groupings, including but not limited to parishes. The strengths that allowed Ryan and his successors to gain a hearing at the national and academic level—including a cohesive and centralized episcopal tradition and structure from which to speak—may prove less helpful in this endeavor to forge authentic solidarity with the grassroots. Within the Church, and within the wider civic and economic arenas, enacting subsidiarity by revivifying relations between individuals and families, neighborhoods and community groups, and centralized institutions of ecclesial and governmental authority will require education and apprenticeship in different sorts of skills and talents than those that have served in the past. Aspiring agents of this bridging of the people and elites will need to be tutored by persons whose talents and commitments have, more fully than Ryan, brought them into respectful and mutual partnership with everyday people.

Catholic academics and activists now confront the need to move in this direction, and to help equip a rising generation of Catholic social thinkers and actors for the tasks ahead. As we do so, the writings and work, successes and failures of predecessors like John A. Ryan offer a rich lode of wisdom and experience. Those committed to evolving an authentic and effective U.S. Catholic

voice and practice on behalf of social justice, especially for our most vulnerable neighbors, do well to mine it.

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