

# Position Paper

Seeking a common future in solidarity  
Christians and Marxists/Socialists  
in dialogue

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## **In Search of a Common Future in Solidarity**

### **Joint Position Paper on the Christian-Socialist Dialogue**

*Vienna, March 2022 – The aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, which the General Assembly of the United Nations has condemned as a breach of international law and the UN Charter, has reminded us that the foundations of coexistence on our planet have become fragile. We stand in solidarity with the victims of the war and those who have fled, and we demand an end to hostilities, the withdrawal of the troops of the Russian Federation, and the beginning of honest negotiations to resolve the problems that exist between the states as parties to the dispute*

*Long before the tragic events of the past weeks, we, representatives of the Catholic world and the European left, concerned about the ecological crisis and disturbed by social injustice, and encouraged by a conversation with Pope Francis, decided to initiate a dialogue between Marxists and Catholic Christians.*

*'In search of a common future in solidarity.*

*Only together can we be saved.'*

*Under this slogan we describe in the attached document written last Summer the path we have travelled together so far, with the intention of presenting our common goal – a peaceful, ecologically sustainable, and socially just world – to a broad public.*

*We invite you, dear reader, to support our initiative with your signature.*

*Thank you!*

### **“Only together will we be saved.”**

“Only together will we be saved”. This may sound like a slogan, but it is it is the starting point of the dialogue between Christians and Socialists, and it embodies a double meaning. It indicates that there is something from which we have to be saved, and that it can be done only through a common effort.

This starting point of our joint efforts was present from the beginning of our dialogue as exponents of the Catholic world and those from the variegated world of socialism. It is likewise a dialogue tied to a direct invitation by Pope Francis.

We are well aware that they are two worlds that have largely been antagonists on the public stage for the last two hundred years, and which on certain issues are still quite distant from each other. But with the survival of humanity and the future of the earth at stake, the need for an authentic dialogue and for action together with all people of good will is now more urgent than ever.

Outraged,

- that billions of people have no access to the basic necessities of a self-determined life;
- that economic and political crises, and pandemics, as well as state destruction and wars, afflict millions every year and deprive many more millions of their homes;

- that the destruction of the diversity of life on earth and the warming of the globe are proceeding at a great pace as a result of today's mode of production and way of life;

we realize

- that there is an existential need and desire for a fundamental transformation of people's relations with nature and with each other;
- that only in this way can the conditions be created for the life of all people to flourish in freedom, equality, and solidarity;
- that without such a transformation there will be no lasting peace and no justice;
- that this is the only way to preserve the earth in its diversity and beauty as a habitat for people, animals, and plants;
- that this transformation was neglected after the end of the Cold War in 1989/90 and that it is the task of the generations living now to finally initiate a vitally necessary great transformation;

we have – as proposed by Pope Francis and motivated by many social, ecological, and peace-oriented movements – initiated a Christian-Socialist dialogue with the aim to contribute together to this transformation.

## 1. Antagonists in the past

Christianity and Socialism – two movements with very different characteristics – have been for long a loggerheads with each other, but have nevertheless both shaped world history in past centuries. Was this antagonism really necessary two hundred years ago?

Christianity had a social sensibility since its inception as a new religious movement in history. The *Magnificat*, in Luke's Gospel shows this only too well: „He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty“ (Lk 1:52-53). Nevertheless, soon to become the dominant religion in Europe, the symbiosis with agrarian civilization, the inheritance of pre-Christian juridical traditions of the Roman Empire, and the feudal hierarchical structures of the Middle Ages strongly conditioned Christianity. Later, the Church found itself unprepared for the profound changes in the societal structures introduced by the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution. Towards the eighteenth century, the Church therefore found itself much more closely allied – even if critically in many aspects – with capitalism and the bourgeoisie than with the working classes, women's movements, and with the idea of radical transformation of the basic structures of society.

In general, strong alliances between politics and religion were the norm in the ancient pre-Christian world. By contrast, as seen in the Gospel texts, Christianity – compared with other religious currents – steered towards a stronger distinction between religion and politics: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's" (Mt 22: 21). It is therefore legitimate to read history as a long process of de-sacralization of politics for two millennia. In many ways throughout these centuries, political elites were able to use Christianity as their

ideology to legitimize the existing order without the Church opposing a truly strong, organized set of ideas about alternative ways of shaping society. Why were Christians unable to help transform the rigid verticalist socio-political categories in the pre-industrial period?

Humankind evolves, and so do our moral consciences, albeit only gradually. This difficulty illustrates an underlying issue: the Greek philosophical tradition, for example, eloquently developed various theoretical concepts such as universalism and particularism, but in the end it was universalism that dominated, that is, the particular had to submit and disappear in front of universalism. In contemporary terms one could say that the single individual has to submit to the group! Not so in the Christian approach. Universalism was an essential part of the message of Jesus as gleaned from his final prayer: "May all be one" (John 17,21). However, he placed at the same level the value of the single person: "What you have done to one of the least of my brethren, you have done to me" (Matt. 25,40).

We know quite well that the course of history depends not only on the strength of ideas but more heavily on the evolution of political and economic interests that have more than once integrated only pale reflections of these ideas.

Specialists today conclude that in its two millennial evolution, Christianity, as well as other ethical systems, was more able to develop the ethic for individual people than to develop a creative, critical ethic regarding the basic structures of society. The affirmation of the Trinitarian dogma of the equality of the Son and the Holy Spirit with the Father also concomitantly generated a new concept of human equal and brotherly relationships, and the intriguing reflections that unity has to be understood as unity in diversity. Nevertheless, Christianity was more inspiring in personal (the particular) than in social ethics (the universal).

Why does Christians experience have such difficulties in influencing the basic structures of society in the direction of more brotherly relationships? An explanation lies in the lasting influence of pre-Christian categories, which heavily conditioned even the so called Christian centuries, especially during the Middle Ages. Only gradually did the Gospel transform mentalities and the basic socio-political convictions.

From the pre-Christian conservative concept of One God, one Emperor, one reign, Christianity inherited a rigid (conservative) concept of political authority and social relationships ('verticalism') that promoted small elites and in many ways blocked a mass bottom-up dynamism. Unity, as a key concept in the Gospel, the so-called universal aspect, was given importance; nevertheless historically, the dominant value of 'the particular' tended to reduce unity to vertical uniformity. Nonetheless, with ups and downs, the category of unity in diversity worked, from within, to transform the historically conservative, static pre-Christian socio-political categories.

One cannot forget in this context the strong and constant criticisms directed by the Church Fathers in the first millennium against many social inequalities, while encouraging a focus on the poor; and the lifestyle of the mendicant orders (for example Francis of Assisi and Dominic de Guzman, later the Jesuit 'missions' among the Indians in South America, the 'hospital towns' founded by Vasco de Quiroga in Mexico). These were pages of the Gospel lived in social structures with a strong egalitarian and community character.

This evolution opened the way in recent times to a more articulated discussion about pluralism and inclusive Christian thinking. This is surely a fruit of the intertwined story of Christianity with the rising Socialism and other broad social movements.

Socialism, some Christian thinkers feel, is in a way the fruit of a Christian subsoil - often underground and misunderstood (or condemned as heresy), or at least not officially adopted – that forged part of the history of the European church. Nonetheless, this was not the dominant perception in the eighteenth century of what the Christian heritage stood for.

The modern socialist movement emerged in the context of the Industrial Revolution, the intellectual revolution of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution in the late 18th and early 19th centuries in Western Europe, and the struggles against colonialism, slavery, and the oppression of women. The socialist movement regarded the uprisings of the slaves in antiquity and of peasants and craftsmen in medieval times, the tradition of liberation from slavery and oppression in the Old Testament and the life in community of the early Christians as its ancestors. In 1843 Karl Marx regarded religious distress “at the same time [as] the expression of real distress and also the protest against real distress” and called religion on this basis the “opium of the people” (MECW 3: 175)<sup>1</sup>. A current of Christian socialists emerged.

The modern socialist movement counted among its opponents the powers of old Europe – the authoritarian state, the privileged estates and classes, and the churches. It was an antagonism that was often bloodily fought by both sides. Socialists placed the question of social structures and social and political struggle at the centre of their efforts. They regarded individual fulfilment and a life in solidarity and peace as the inevitable outcomes of radical social reform and revolution. Overcoming the universal causes of war, exploitation, and oppression were emphasised, in part at the expense of the interests and dignity of the individual and social and cultural groups and communities. Too often the result was an instrumental relation to the individual, the right to self-determination, and collective self-organization. A part of the Left took up the path of violent revolution and party dictatorship as means of universal emancipation.

The continuing blockading of fundamental social and democratic reforms was met with revolutionary upheavals in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the socialist movement, under these conditions, sharp anti-clerical and anti-religious tendencies developed. The spread of religious belief was seen as a means of keeping people spiritually in bondage in order to oppress and exploit them politically and economically as well.

The socialist orientation toward the class struggle of the proletariat, the establishment of a dictatorship of the proletariat, the domination of the communist party and its Marxist-Leninist ideology led at times to anti-clerical and strictly atheist policies in the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. Many clergymen were persecuted, even murdered, under conditions of civil war and terror, with churches destroyed and believers oppressed. Only gradually could steps toward coexistence and even cooperation be made. As careful readers of the Marxian tradition rightly stress, *to topple the powerful from their throne* is similar to the categorical imperative of Karl Marx, which demanded that all conditions be reversed in which man is degraded, enslaved, or abandoned. And both in the Magnificat and in Marx, the view of the weakest in society leads to the demand for a fundamental change. In the Nazi concentration camps priests, religious and Christian lay figures and communist and

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works. Vol. 3, Karl Marx March 1843-August 1844*, Lawrence and Wishart online edition, 2010, (MECW).

socialist leaders experienced a fraternity that helped many of them open their mind to the value of the tradition of the other. A huge span of time passed from the most authoritative and first papal critical text on the new social situation of the West (*Rerum Novarum*, 1891), forty three years after the *Communist Manifesto* (1848,) until the late Seventies of the 20th century, when Catholic Social Teaching officially integrated the 'preferential option for the poor'. Catholic Social Teaching could no more be conceived as an act of private ascetic or face-to-face compassion for a poor person. It was seen as a specific response at the level of the wider society as a whole, a response to the unjust order of society, and not only as a policy for the poor but also with the poor. Particularism and universalism were closely connected again.

Probably the best comment on the change in mentality that this represented came from liberation theologian Leonardo Boff when he stressed that the Pope (Francis) has made liberation theology a full part of the official narrative of the Church. And he commented that for the Pope a poor person is not intrinsically a pauper but an impoverished person: one is not poor, one is made poor.

The socialist current has had to learn from the history of the 20th century that the defence of the dignity of the individual, the right to self-determination, and collective self- organization, as well as caring for nature are inseparable parts of a transformational practice, which simultaneously changes the world in solidarity and leads to emancipatory self- transformation. This requires overcoming the instrumentalization of people and communities and recognizing their intrinsic value. Here, too, we can see how particularism became as important as the universalist tradition. The still unachieved convergence around the importance of both dimensions is one of the most interesting elements of the contemporary evolution of worldviews.

## **2. Another wall to come down? Wild capitalism**

Modern socialism arose as a movement against 'unleashed' capitalism. It is in the primacy of capital utilization over the economy and of such an economy over the entire society and people as well as nature, that socialism sees the main cause of poverty, exploitation, oppression, alienation and war.

The capitalistically organized private property of the few and their interests rule the lives of the great majority and determine the entire development of society. Instead of conscious common control over the social conditions of production and their development in solidarity, the constraints of competition and profit prevail.

The relations between people are 'reified', their needs are oriented towards having and consumption. The immense possibilities of increased productivity through the socialization of work and production are not utilized when most needed for the solidary development of all, for the development of free individuality, and for the preservation of nature.

As the founder of British socialism, Robert Owen, wrote in 1821: "This principle of individual interest, opposed as it is perpetually to the public good, is considered, by the most celebrated political economists, to be the corner-stone to the social system, and without which society could not subsist. Yet when they shall know themselves, and discover the wonderful effects which combination and union can produce, they will acknowledge that the present arrangement of society is the most anti-social, impolitic, and irrational, that can be devised; [...] that the utmost pains are taken to make that which by nature is the most delightful compound for producing excellence and



happiness, absurd, imbecile, and wretched” (Owen 1993,308) <sup>2</sup>.

And on the Christian side? The *Rerum Novarum* (RN) document (1891, Pope Leo XIII) was seen already as a cry of protest against the exploitation of poor workers (RN2). It made crystal clear that the Church was not indifferent to the injustices of the time; it was taking a stand on behalf of the poor. And it committed the Catholic Church officially to a rejection of a central thesis of the liberal capitalism of the Western world, namely that labour is a commodity to be bought at market prices determined by the law of supply and demand rather than by the human needs of the worker (see RN §16). The tone is very similar to what socialism could say at the time: „A small number of very rich people have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of labouring poor a yoke little better than that of slavery itself“ (RN §2). No doubt that this was a significant move of the Church towards the side of the poor.

But there was a long way still to go because the Pope was not only challenging the dominant liberal capitalist ideology of the time; he was also attacking the socialist position and in this way sought to find a middle way between individualism and collectivism. In many aspects the Catholic thinking about the social injustice created by the new liberal capitalist economy and ideology sustaining it, had at least an ethical affinity with the thinking of socialists critics. How to create another economy was the question in a context of strong divergences, because in the first decennia of the nineteenth century, the perception was that the Catholic Church was part of the problem because of her privileges and numerous properties. Nonetheless, the core discussion between the leaders of the Socialist Workers’ Party in Germany and bishops such as von Ketteler was about the means to solve the worker’s problem, not about the problem itself. The problem in the eyes of leftist thinkers was the relation between church and state. With emerging Marxism, however, the question was no longer about the relation between church and state, as their destiny according to the theory of dialectic materialism was for both to disappear.

Von Ketteler instead, one of the most interesting catholic thinkers preceding and preparing *Rerum Novarum*, thought at the end of the 19th century that the unjust order founded on capitalism was sustained by a world vision (utilitarianism) that imposed itself through a political party at the service of big capital (the Liberal Party), and that it had a strategy of influencing the press. Its adversary, socialism, seemed incapable of opposing itself to this power beyond that of working towards the transformation of the power relations, through class struggle, for radical social reform or revolution. Christianity instead, was in Ketteler’s eyes, capable of operating the necessary transformation without provoking a social war.

Class struggle was always a difficult problem for Christian social thinking. Even if *Rerum Novarum* (clearly recognized, as did socialism, that there is a separation of classes: “two classes separated by a wide chasm” (RN §20); it nonetheless rejected class struggle.: “The great mistake...is to take up with the notion that class is naturally hostile to class, and that the wealthy and the working men are *intended* by nature to live in mutual conflict.” (RN §15). Forty years later, in *Quadragesimo anno*, another important social text of the papacy, the perception evolved and the text shows a more positive view of class struggle: “For if the class struggle abstains from enmities and

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<sup>2</sup> Gregory Claeys (ed.), *Selected Works of Robert Owen. Early Writings*, Pickering and Chatto Ltd., London 1993, p. 308.

mutual hatred, it gradually changes into an honest discussion of differences founded on a desire for justice, and if this is not that blessed social peace which we all seek, it can and ought to be the point of departure from which to move forward to the mutual cooperation of the Industries and Professions” (*Quadragesimo anno* §114).

The question of violence remained for the decennia to come an ongoing issue in Catholic Social Teaching. The recent reflections on conflicts as formulated by Pope Francis illustrate the most up to date ecclesiastical thinking on the topic of conflict and unity.

**A new “enemy”: a single dominant cultural model, globalization, which makes us neighbours, but not brothers.**

130 years after *Rerum novarum*, Pope Francis has been formulating the condemnation of ‘wild capitalism’ in possibly still harsher terms than did Leo XIII. *Fratelli tutti* (FT), *Laudato si’* (LS), and *Evangelii gaudium* (EG), the three social texts of the Argentine pope use a sometimes extremely hard and peremptory tone to express his sense of urgency for a new architecture of the world and of human relations’. In *Fratelli tutti* Pope Francis states:

“Opening up to the world” is an expression that has been co-opted by the economic and financial sector and is now used exclusively of openness to foreign interests or to the freedom of economic powers to invest without obstacles or complications in all countries. Local conflicts and disregard for the common good are exploited by the global economy in order to impose a single cultural model. This culture unifies the world, but divides persons and nations, for “as society becomes ever more globalized, it makes us neighbours, but does not make us brothers”. We are more alone than ever in an increasingly massified world that promotes individual interests and weakens the communitarian dimension of life. Indeed, there are markets where individuals become mere consumers or bystanders. As a rule, the advance of this kind of globalism strengthens the identity of the powerful, who can protect themselves, but it tends to diminish the identity of the weaker and poorer regions, making them more vulnerable and dependent. In this way, political life becomes increasingly fragile in the face of transnational economic powers that operate with the principle of “divide and conquer” (FT §12).

The Pope affirms that it is now urgent not to remain prisoners of two attitudes that seem to dramatically dominate the contemporary world: first, the ideology that sustains that the actual order of the world is the only one possible; and second to believe that soft reformism (with its superficial adjustments) will be able to weaken the strongest systemic injustices on the altar of which we sacrifice the future of the next generations.

It is hard to imagine how even after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a critical tradition such as socialism, would disagree with the idea that this economy is an economy that excludes. It is an economy that promotes the idolatry of money, allowing the world of finance to govern our planet rather than serve it, permitting so many situations of injustice that generate violence against people and our natural environment.

Just as the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say “thou shalt not” to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills. How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points? This is a case of exclusion (EG §53).

In the next section (§54) pope Francis attacks the theory that after 150 years still



characterizes laissez faire capitalism:

In this context, some people continue to defend trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world. This opinion, which has never been confirmed by the facts, expresses a crude and naïve trust in the benevolence of those wielding economic power and in the workings of the prevailing economic system. To sustain a lifestyle which excludes others, or to sustain enthusiasm for that selfish ideal, a globalization of indifference has developed. Meanwhile, the excluded are still waiting.

On the environmental crisis pope Francis is no less severe:

The human and natural environment are deteriorating side-by-side; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to the roots of human and social degradation. In fact, the deterioration of the environment and of society affects the most vulnerable people on the planet: “Both everyday experience and scientific research show that the gravest effects of all attacks on the environment are suffered by the poorest” (49). It needs to be said that, generally speaking, there is little in the way of clear awareness of problems which especially affect the excluded. Yet they are the majority of the planet’s population, billions of people (LS §49).

For Pope Francis the result is the new ‘face’ of alienation in our postmodern world: individualism and limitless consumption! “As a result, there is a growing loss of the sense of history, which leads to even further breakup. A kind of ‘deconstructionism’, whereby human freedom claims to create everything starting from zero, is making headway in today’s culture. The one thing it leaves in its wake is the drive to limitless consumption and expressions of empty individualism” (FT §13).

### **3. Surprising affinities in the present**

In the Catholic Church as in the socialist-oriented movements, the perception has grown stronger that the goals of both can only be realized if a radical civilizational transformation is carried out. There can and must be no ‘business as usual’.

Pope Francis' message ‘This economy kills’ unites us. It also unites us in the knowledge that it is the economic, political, cultural, and international relations that generate unholy destructive tendencies. We want to end the barbarism of destruction of nature, of hunger, disease, and war, of constantly building new walls and camps, of obscene luxury and monstrous concentration of property, power, and wealth. Together, we are committed to policies that unite many in solidarity.

The socialists among us call it a politics of class-binding bottom-middle solidary alliances. In the last decades a kind of common ground has appeared between the two traditions with the special option for the poor and the thinking about the special active role of the poor – and the popular movements – in our societies and the world. The underlying principle could be formulated as follows: no one can be truly free unless the most disadvantaged among us are free.

Change begins with saying ‘No’. Together we say ‘No’

- to the exploitation and destruction of our most important common heritage: the nature world;

- to an economy which kills;
- to politics which create hate;
- to a culture which transform human beings into egoistic consumers and destroys the cultural heritage of humanity;
- to an imperial mode of life;
- to racism and patriarchy; and
- to an international policy which leads to a New Cold war, terrorism, regional wars, and civil wars.

Our common resistance grows from this 'No'. It aims to effect a break with all lethal conditions, calling instead for the creation of an economy, society, and culture of free people living in solidarity. It is the difficult path of nonviolent resistance, which includes persistent civil disobedience. We recognize the differences between the power and violence of those defending their own privileges and the structures of exploitation of people and nature and those rising up against these structures.

On the basis of this common ground, the relationship with God and religion no longer separates us. We mutually recognize that the commitment to justice, the preservation and increase of natural and cultural wealth, and to peace can be fed by different ethical sources. We focus on the common goals and approaches, and work to address the differences that remain.

It is surely not easy to think for the moment how our obvious different approaches to the more personal ethical problems of today can be bridged so as to reach a better reciprocal comprehension of perspectives. Nonetheless we accept that this cannot be solved in the short term but that building fraternity in a general climate of mutual respect and working on the less divisive social issues will help us to progress and further deepen our common ground.

#### **4. Refoundations on both sides**

Today's neoliberal capitalism is no longer the capitalism of the first industrial revolution, but also the two distinct traditions, the Church/churches and the Left are no longer what they used to be.

We have to ask why these two social forces – Christians and socialists – were unable to unite their millions caused by the industrial revolution, and oppose the triumph of the savage capitalism of the time.

##### **Socialism reconsidered**

Karl Marx had summarized the ideas of socialism in four thoughts. First, the "*categorical imperative to overthrow all relations* in which man is a debased, enslaved, abandoned, despicable essence" (MECW2:182) and to create associations "in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all" (MECW 6: 506).

Secondly, through a social revolution or transformation, the capitalist mode of production must be overcome, in the wake of which "socialised man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and

achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of, their human nature“ (MECW 37:807).

On this basis, it would be necessary, thirdly, to gradually create the conditions for abolishing “the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour”, to organize work and activities in such a way that they become “life's prime want” and finally “with the all-round development of the individual, [...] all the springs of common wealth flow more abundantly” and “the society inscribes on its banners: From each according to his abilities, to each according to her and his needs!” (MECW24:87)

Fourthly, Marx made it clear with all firmness: “Even a whole society, a nation, or even all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not the owners of the globe. They are only its beneficiaries, its usufructuaries, and, like *boni patres familias*, they must hand it down to succeeding generations in an improved condition.” (MECW 37:763)

Socialists are faced with the task of renewing these four ideas under the conditions of the fundamental multiple crisis of today's modes of production and life, property and power relations, and culture. The old approaches of a centralized economy, dictatorship of the proletariat, and rule of an ideology have failed.

But the approaches of mere social and democratic containment of capitalism have also failed. New ways can only be found in dialogue and cooperation with all those who also face this crisis.

Socialists ask themselves the following questions in particular:

(1) What does an economic order look like that leads to solidary development, secures freedom, and preserves nature? How can the plan, the market, and civil society cooperation be combined? How can joint control over socialization be achieved without suppressing self-responsibility and individual initiative?

(2) How must the various political orders be changed to overcome the domination of capital exploitation over economy and society and to make possible democracy of the people, for the people, and by the people, which at the same time includes global solidarity and care for the natural and cultural heritage?

(3) How can we contribute to the emergence of a living culture of caring for and standing by one another, of preserving and increasing the natural and cultural wealth, of non-violence, and of focusing on the good life in good circumstances?

(4) What international order can genuinely enforce global solidarity, peace, and a socio-ecological transformation?

(5) What alliances can we build to initiate a change of direction in politics from within our societies, through social movements, through trade unions and other organizations and parties, and through responsible governments, and to begin a socio-ecological transformation of solidarity and peace?

### **Twenty centuries of Christianity's complicated story**

What could make Christianity shed its reputation of always being the defender of the status quo, the existing order, the privileged ally of conservative political regimes, the main providers of a legitimating rhetoric for the existing social order against change, whether revolutionary or reformist?

Scholars of the history of civilizations have long reminded us that early

Christianity had broken the narrow limits of the solidarity of the family, the clan, and the city, proclaiming a universalism of love that they understood as concerning every person and the whole of humanity. In truth all the religions that were born in the first millennium BC shared this cultural revolution in some way, and expressed it for example in the sentence that today we identify as the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”. Even if history shows that religions find it hard to evolve in this sense, they have never removed that sentence from their sacred texts.

At the end of the 19th century we saw the strong criticism of Church figures aimed at the capitalist system which was creating unjust conditions for workers and the poor. At the same time the Church lacked the creativity needed to develop efficient countermeasures to defend them. Especially if the Church experienced too much resistance from the worldly powers that imposed their own agenda, the Church was inclined to search for any possible compromise, fearing the consequences of conflict!

In returning to Leo XIII and *Rerum novarum*, Leo’s spirituality was in line with his theology. It was a kind that tended to think that hardships on earth will have no end or cessation, and in effect could be considered as discouraging the poor from actively confronting the wealthy to claim their rights; he asked the victims of oppression and injustice to put up with their suffering in the hope of a reward in the next life (RN §18). This is not to say that Leo was not calling for major changes in the socio-economic order. He maintained that the State has a duty in the short term to protect workers against exploitation, and in the long term to ensure that the ownership of property is much more widely distributed (RN37).

But Leo wanted these changes to be initiated ‘from the top down’, by the very people or classes who were benefitting from the existing liberal-capitalist order. If, however, they failed to introduce a more equitable society, Leo was not prepared to encourage the poor or workers to engage in confrontation. Nonetheless, important still to note is that he “defended the right of workers to form trade unions” (RN §§49, 54), which in the long run would become one of the best tools to defend the workers. This was also instrumental in the development of the welfare state, at least in Western Europe – which was a major achievement of the labour movement in the 20th century.

In his reflection on the resistance to the powerful Leo did not follow the older Catholic tradition which held that it is lawful to resist a tyrannical abuse of power. He refused to accept that rebellion could sometimes be justified. In the twentieth century, however, Christianity and particularly the Catholic Church became increasingly conscious that the Gospel stimulated a preferential option for the poor. Secularization and the gradually ending of the preferential conservative alliances of the Church with obsolete political systems have made it possible for the Catholic world to look more innovatingly at the social problems of society in a way more in line with the evangelical ideals, and with a practice more in line with the preferential option for the poor – fostering a growing general attitude that prioritizes a culture of encounter and dialogue, because no one has the whole truth on their side.

### **What has changed?**

Today, God no longer seems an obstacle to the Left for collaboration with official Christian forces, and reaching the homeland of fraternity is no longer only an unearthly dream for Christians. A passive attitude towards existing (unjust) social conditions without reaction is no longer a tolerable attitude for the Church, a culture of change (following prophetic impulses) and dialogue is preferred (see the Vatican II

Council text *Gaudium et Spes*). The preferential option for the poor, in Church terms, is surely more in line with Left demands for the liberation of the oppressed, the excluded, aiming at a just and solidary world for all, than the non-intervention philosophy of neoliberalism. Moreover, nowadays care for the ecological dimension of our world has become a strong issue for both sides.

The God that socialism rejected when it adopted an atheist and violent approach to life and society, so to speak – was that really the God of Jesus Christ?

Today's theology tells us that it was not. A chief God, at the top of a social and political pyramid, is clearly the opposite of the image of the Father, Abba, which Jesus proclaims. He is not the impenetrable Mystery: He is the Father who is the source of the freedom of the Son and of all his children and as He is the source of fraternity among all, this means that the real frame of reference for Christians implies freedom, justice, and sharing. The issue of violence too as a way to revolutionary reform is approached differently nowadays on both sides, with the value of active non-violence in the political realm becoming a common point of interest. Socialism in Europe has long opted for the path of change by democratic means.

These developments remove any doubt about the idea that the Church has to be on the side of the status quo, of the preservation of unjust social and political structures. Jesus had already removed all ambiguity in this regard: the face of the Sacred and of God can no longer be exploited to guarantee any status quo that is not fraternal, just, free, or in solidarity. Nevertheless it is clear that this understanding today is the result of an evolution in many stages and is manifesting only now its full force!

The coming of the Kingdom of God which Jesus preached, itself gave a new content to relationships for mankind, starting with the poor and the excluded. This new content was not meant to shape a well-defined social organization. The early Christian communities did not have a blueprint of how to transform society. What they attempted was to establish relationships between men and women in the social and even the political sphere, like yeast in a dough.

The very fact of Jesus penetrating history, and of his community living in the midst of society, and not building an ideal world in some secluded place, meant that not only heaven was valid for Christians, but also earth. This always in a dynamic perspective of change, moving towards the sense of greater fraternity among all. No concrete system was ever to be seen as the definite incarnation of God's Kingdom on earth. This was a clear choice for gradual evolution!

The first Christian communities had such consistency that Paul the apostle could enthusiastically write: "There are no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, man and woman" (Gal 3,28), in the sense that enmity and inequalities tended to disappear. That is not to say Paul was hiding the difficulties and conflicts already emerging in the first generation of Christians – thanks to him we also have a realistic picture of the situation – but they never occupied the main place in his thinking.

The relatively autonomous social space of Christians, based on fraternity within the community and for the society outside, will in time inspire significant social changes. If one considers the truce rule in times of war, the common kitchen for the poor, free education for the poor, care for the marginalized, the fight against usury and abolition of slavery, to name a few, these are certainly social achievements with Christian influences.



It is true that the social ethics that was thus developed by Christians in the first centuries after Christ remained linked to the perspective of the individual project of life, without also touching the basic social conditions.

This is of course not the whole story. Any organized religion seems to show a dialectic between closeness and openness, between institution and prophets. In history, the defence of existing religious institutions was regularly broken up by dynamic openness, forged by special gifted persons, bearers of charismas, changing perspectives, proposing new insights, liberating new social forces, creating a bottom-up dynamism, and interesting elements of reform. Some of them influenced the whole Christian world as did Benedict of Norcia, or Francis of Assisi. Not infrequently the protest aspect of each charismatic, prophetic figure and the movements they animated encountered sufficient openness from the institutional (Catholic) Church, but sometimes they were only received centuries later, and only after dramatic schisms.

Clearly, seen from where we stand now, socialism as a broad historical current helped the Christian world to make the final leap from a dynamic ethics for each person – with growing social impact in the long run – to an ever more effective ethics for the social world that builds relations between social classes, peoples, cultures, politics at any level and in international relations.

The rise of modernity, on the other hand, ended up radically transforming the structures of traditional societies, and after a few centuries it also tended to marginalize or denigrate the role of Jesus Christ and his relationship to God, as a generator of consistency and innovative capacity in history. On the other hand, the innovative energies that have their roots, even partially, in the evangelical inspiration did not cease to work from within our societies. Regardless, modern culture and evangelical inspiration were still unable to create synergy for many decades.

### **The intertwined story of the last century**

During recent decades we could observe that both, the liberal and socialist, ideologies have changed. The mainstream of socialists express their commitment to freedom, human rights, and the rule of law, while socially minded liberals distance themselves from neoliberalism and advocate the respect of social rights.

And the Christian world? With John Paul II, we understand how it was possible to introduce the concept of ‘structures of sin’, and to imagine structures of freedom and communion. It is a belief common to many that the critical analysis of society from the Marxian point of view played an important role in this deepening of what Christian revelation could possibly signify for the improvement of the basic structural conditions of the society as a whole.

How can we, in a nutshell, summarize the evolution of Christian ethics from the individual person towards an ethic that encompasses the basic social structures of society, a social ethic in the plain sense, spanning a journey of twenty centuries? *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, the most authoritative compilation on the subject of the Catholic Church,(52) states: “God, in Christ, redeems not only the individual person but also the social relations existing between men“. Probably the most important comment on this quote comes from Pope Francis in *Fratelli Tutti* defining the notion of ‘social’ and ‘political love’:

Furthermore, there is a ‘commanded love’, expressed in those acts of charity that spur people to create more sound institutions, more just regulations, more supportive

structures. It follows that „it is an equally indispensable act of love to strive to organize and structure society so that one's neighbour will not find himself in poverty“. It is an act of charity, even if we do not know that person, to work to change the social conditions that caused his or her suffering. (FT §186)

### **Cultivating a culture of encounter**

A final outlook that the Church is acquiring and which allows us to foresee a very different role in the future for the Christian world, concerns what Pope Francis calls the culture of encounter.

Obviously, if one is already convinced that s/he has the whole truth on his or her side, it would be difficult to enter into a real dialogue. Even in the 1950s, the doctrine that 'error' – as seen from the point of view of the Church – 'has no rights' was still part of official ecclesial (Catholic) discourse. The Second Vatican Council pushed the Catholic world in a completely different direction which is now summarized in the Bergoglian expression about promoting a 'culture of encounter'.

In truth, the years of the Vatican Council II (1962-65) opened a new era: its pastoral and also theological openness would generate the idea that within the Catholic Church today one is not acting according to the Spirit of God if one does not work towards unity in one's own Church, if one is not open to ecumenical dialogue with other Christians, or if one does not promote interreligious dialogue and dialogue with those who do not profess a religious conviction. Many aspects of this new course it took decades to make their way and enter into practice but also into the theory of the Church's action.

Today there is an increasingly consolidated practice and conviction, which can be summed up in the idea that one should not wait to agree on everything to start a dialogue. As often repeated by Pope Francis, what is important is to start a process. No one has a monopoly on truth. In the process of building mutual respect, fraternity, taking responsibility together for the future of the planet, one is certain to discover elements of a transformative transversal ethic.

### **And what finally about changing capitalism?**

As said synthetically by one of the most prominent Christian economists, Stefano Zamagni, president of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences: "I don't believe in the possibility of smashing capitalism as the revolutionary tradition suggests. I believe in the possibility of transforming it from within by setting in motion processes capable of changing how it develops."

In the socialist current, the concept has been developed of a double socio-ecological transformation in capitalism beyond capitalism, overcoming in a process of radical reforms, based on alliances of different classes and strata, both from the bottom up and by government, closely linking local, national, and global.

## **5. In our common struggles, we are working on joint projects driven by common visions**

Only together we will be saved, striving for

- an economy of life;
- a community of caring;
- a politics of solidary transformation;
- a world in which there is room for many worlds;
- the dignity of each individual in a rich world of commons;
- and for a togetherness of peace.

Cádiz, August 2021 | Vienna March 2022

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