



ICMICA

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**LIVING OUR CHRISTIAN FAITH IN THE MODERN
WORLD**



SEARCHING FOR CONVERGENCES BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND MARXISTS

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The mere suggestion of a dialogue between Marxists and Christians provokes unease, discomfort, and even anger in common perception. Significantly, this unease and discomfort (let alone anger) are notably absent when considering the dialogue – or even the juxtaposition – between being Christian and being liberal, conservative, or nationalist.... Under the pontificate of Francis, the possibility of a fruitful dialogue between the universes of Marxism and Christianity has gained momentum. What, for decades, has been commonly seen as an impossibility and a forbidden path due to reciprocal anathemas between the two cultures now appears to have become not only a possibility but a challenge that deserves a courageous answer.

1.A story of Anathemas

The history of the relationship between Christian churches and the socialist left is mostly a long story of a deep and insolvable discord. A story of polarization between mutual representations, in which Marxism is condemned by Christianity for being an 'enemy of religion,' and, likewise, Christianity is condemned by Marxism for constituting the 'opium of the people.' Marxism is refuted by Christianity for being nothing more than militant atheistic materialism, while, symmetrically, Christianity is accused by Marxism of being a disembodied spiritualism. Christianity refuses the centrality of class struggle – and with it, a conflictual view of society where the dialectic opposition of interests is the engine of social dynamics – while Marxism criticizes Christianity for its role as an accomplice to exploitation and oppression.

These crossed accusations built a long history of mutual anathemas and fundamental incompatibility. They are part of the dominant discourses produced and disseminated by the conservative poles of each of the two cultures, this being one of the ideological mechanisms they both use to hegemonize their respective fields. For these conservative perspectives, Christianity and Marxism are, by default, enemies of one another and are called upon to eradicate each other. Hegemonic discourses created a public perception in which they are confused with the whole Christian and Marxist cultures, fueling the common understanding of an irredeemable incompatibility between 'Christianity' and 'Marxism.'

All doctrinal orthodoxies are expressions of intellectual narrowness and fear. They result from extreme difficulty in dealing with the internal heterogeneity of each culture. Indeed, as all cultures, Marxism and Christianity are internally diverse realities, universes with varied constructions around their structuring principles. But the acknowledgment of internal diversity should not be an end in itself. It opens room for choosing strategies and actors for the search of common grounds. Therefore, it demands a distinction, within both Christianity and Marxism, between their transformative and emancipatory elements and their conservative components. Based upon such a mapping of heterogeneity, the challenge is to foster dialogues between the transformative and emancipatory dimensions of the two fields that may feed concrete struggles for the liberation of individuals and communities.

Ignoring this internal differentiation in Christianity and in Marxism and disdaining the challenge of differentiated dialogues resulting from it is to waste an enormous potential of liberating dynamics against massive conditions of indignity and injustice.

2. A New Context

The complexity of the contemporary world makes such waste even more unacceptable. Three main realities show that this is the case. First, the radicalization of the basic characteristics of capitalism, often referred to as late capitalism, whose core is financialization, a dynamic based on speculation disconnected from the real economy. This loss of centrality of the real economy means that capitalism no longer requires the establishment of social rights as a counterpart to wealth accumulation, thereby taking on an authoritarian character – democracy and the social contract are no longer mandatory contextual elements for capitalist development. Second, the globalization of capitalism is being sustained by an unstoppable predatory process of natural resources, leading to an irreversible framework of climate catastrophe with varying effects and responsibilities among the different peoples of the planet. The unsustainability of this process makes the need to combine an answer to the cry of the people with an answer to the cry of the earth an absolute priority. Third, late capitalism constitutes a new phase in the relationship between labor and capital, which is marked by the generalization of precarity, labor segmentation, the consequent weakening of unions, the rise of gig economy, etc. But precarity goes well beyond the field of labor relations – it has become a general condition across all spheres of life, and resilience (that is, the ability to adapt to it) has come to be regarded as the default response.

Given this reality, given the intensity of inhumanity in the present context, the dialogue between Marxists and Christians, which took various paths in the past, assumes increased importance.

This is evident in various contemporary expressions of inhumanity, such as the treatment of the poor, the precarious, refugees, migrants, and victims of all kinds of abuse (children, women, indigenous peoples, slum dwellers, or victims of racial, gender, or religious violence). It is also evident in the projected inhumanity of a near future, exemplified by environmental injustice – the unequal social or geographical distribution of harmful environmental effects – exacerbated by climate change.

In these contexts, it becomes increasingly imperative to consider the reality of the poor, the marginalized, in understanding the world and the mechanisms that (dis)order it, and to give substance to an ethic of care for creation. The search for answers to these various layers of inhumanity constitutes an unavoidable challenge to the rapprochement between Christians and the socialist left.

3. The Social Doctrine of the Church and the Critique of Capitalism

The dialogue between Christians and Marxists is far from being a novelty of our time. Namely in the peripheries of the capitalist world-system, it has been a crucial reality for both theological debates and practices and for the structuring of strong social movements against different forms of oppression and discrimination. In those places, where the realities of poverty and exploitation were most brutal, Christians felt compelled to go beyond the moral judgement of individual sins and go deeper into identifying the structural mechanisms that generate and naturalize such offenses to human dignity. There, where the struggle for dignity became most arduous, the anathemas between Marxism and Christianity have been naturally overcome since they were not only a waste of liberation energies but also part of the cultural background facilitating oppression and inequality as structural sins.

In those geographies, the Christian denunciation of capitalism's creation of poverty and its inherently subjugating impact on humanity met the socialist left's struggles for social and economic transformation. The intensity of this dialogue in Latin America – which underpinned the development of liberation theology and the articulation between grassroots ecclesial communities and the transformative agenda of social movements – is undoubtedly the clearest example of how the anathema was naturally replaced by convergence on the peripheries of the world system.

But this is not a reality confined to the peripheries. Far from it. The evolution of the Catholic Social Teaching, particularly in recent decades, has expressed a profound critique of capitalism. This critique, while never adopting a Marxist-inspired foundation, has denounced the structures of sin associated with capitalism as an objective mode of production and not merely as a framework of greedy and uncharitable personal behaviors.

Encyclicals such as *Pacem in Terris* (John XXIII), *Populorum Progressio* (Paul VI), *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* or *Laborem Exercens* (John Paul II), *Laudato Si* and *Fratelli Tutti* (Francis) contain comprehensive analyses of the mechanisms generating inhumanity and systemic crises and put at the heart of the Catholic Social Teaching central principles like human dignity and the primacy of human rights, the preferential option for the poor, the dignity of labor and its precedence over capital, the universal destination of goods, the common good, solidarity, the fight for justice, and the construction of positive peace. By converging, in this regard, with the priority concerns of the socialist left, these texts also serve as references for all transformative thought opposed to doctrinal and organizational sectarianism.

Pope Francis adds density to the previous critique of the predatory nature of the dominant mode of production: “This economy kills”, he has written in *Evangelii Gaudium*. It kills the millions of people cast aside as disposable and destroys the ecosystems that sustain life in our common home. The cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor are one and the same because their cause is one and the same, as the Pope writes in *Laudato Si*. Therefore, the response to the structures of sin (as Christians call them) or to the relations of production that generate exploitation (as Marxists call them) must also be one of convergence.

4. Dialop - The Dialogue in Progress

On September 18, 2014, during a private audience granted by Pope Francis to Alexis Tsipras, Walter Baier (former Secretary General of the Communist Party of Austria and now president of the European Left Party), and Franz Konreif (from the Focolare Movement), the Pope emphasized that, in the current global situation, no single force – including the Catholic Church – has the capacity to offer solutions and alternatives on its own. Therefore, all “forces of good” must come together to think and act collectively. This set the stage for continuing the dialogue initiated on that occasion, aimed at developing those solutions and alternatives.

To facilitate this, the Pope appointed Archbishop Vincenzo Zani, then president of the Pontifical Commission for Education, as the Vatican’s liaison with the dialogue platform that was launched. The Pontifical Dicastery for Culture and Education, now chaired by Cardinal Tolentino de Mendonça has assumed that responsibility since 2022.

In 2016, the platform organized a seminar to exchange perspectives between Marxist and Christian circles on topics previously discussed by Pope Francis and Tsipras – war and peace, migration, poverty, social justice, and responsibility for creation – with the encyclical *Laudato Si* serving as a key reference. This initial initiative highlighted the importance of the academic

field and the involvement of young students as the preferred setting for future initiatives. This vision materialized with the summer university on “Europe as a Common,” held in Ermoupoli (Greece) in September 2018. The event brought together 54 participants from 19 countries, equally divided between individuals from the socialist left and the Catholic sphere.

In 2021, in Cádiz (Spain), a joint manifesto (“Position Paper”) has been discussed and approved, in which the partners analyze the shadows and lights of the history of the relationship between the two cultures, acknowledging the mistakes of the past and paying tribute to the steps taken on the path of dialogue. “Only together will we be saved” is the title and basic message of this document, acknowledging that Christians and Marxists are both called to build a transversal social ethics, having in mind both their differentiated consensus and their qualified dissents. The document was immediately signed by 62 subscribers and later presented in the European Parliament. Further initiatives like the “International Conference on Integral Ecology: For a Social and Ecological Transformation”, in 2023, and a set of webinars on peace and on migration, in 2023-24, were relevant steps in the process of constructing that transversal social ethics.

On January 10th 2024, Pope Francis invited 15 representatives of DIALOP to a private audience at the Vatican. Ten years after the first steps given by this platform, Pope Francis pronounced clear words of call to dialogue and convergence: *“A politics that is truly at the service of humanity cannot let itself be dictated to by finance and market mechanisms. Solidarity is not only a moral virtue, but also a requirement of justice, which calls for correcting the distortions and purifying the intentions of unjust systems, not least through radical changes of perspective in the sharing of challenges and resources among individuals and among peoples. That is why I like to call those engaged in this field “social poets,” for poetry is about creativity, and here it is a question of putting creativity at the service of society, in order to make it ever more humane and fraternal. Do not be afraid of poetry, poetry and creativity.”*