

**Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed,  
Something....True!  
The Categoriality of Catholic Social Teaching**

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**Abstract**

Deontology has two profiles. We have duties as *agents* but also duties as *critical thinkers*. Weaknesses or mistakes in either redound upon the other. My argument is that Catholic Social Teachings provides us with a fruitful articulation of both species of duty. This paper is divided into three parts: 1) epistemological considerations regarding Catholic Social Teachings' reception of political economy; 2) a brief look at the historical context in which *Rerum Novarum* received the notion of private property; and 3) an argument that early Catholic Social Teachings, working off of a superior notion of practical reason than found in classical political economy, was able to bring out dimensions of private property not found in political economy.

**Introduction**

Pope John-Paul II is well-known for his analogy that faith and reason are like the two wings of a dove. Each, while distinct, complements the other. So it is with faith and reason. I'd like to turn the analogy upside down: authentic *deontology* proceeds with two feet squarely on the ground. We have duties as *agents* but also duties as critical thinkers. Weaknesses or mistakes in either redound upon the other. My argument is that Catholic Social Teachings provides us with a fruitful articulation of both species of duty. It has two feet firmly on the

ground, each in turn taking the lead as come to grip with our human duties. Or to say it in Kantian language, moral duties without insight are blind; insight without moral agency is empty.

This paper is divided into three parts: 1) epistemological considerations regarding Catholic Social Teachings' reception of political economy; 2) a brief look at the historical context in which *Rerum Novarum* received the notion of private property; and 3) an argument that early Catholic Social Teachings, working off of a superior notion of practical reason than found in classical political economy, was able to bring out dimensions of private property not found in political economy.

## I Epistemological Considerations

The issue of 'reductionism'<sup>1</sup> is a central topic in philosophical discussion of science, social science, and religion. It quickly becomes clear in these discussions that 'reductionism' means different things to various academic ears. To scientists since the time of Galileo it appears to be a necessary condition for the pursuit of truth, an essential step in protecting the *autonomy of reason*<sup>2</sup>. To humanities types—especially to colleagues in

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<sup>1</sup>The problematic meaning of 'reductionism' is the claim that the only 'real world' is the world described by the physicist. This implies that we can *reduce* the truth-claims of biology and psychology—and *a fortiori* the claims of the theologian about the 'meaning of life'—to the descriptions given by physics. We see this understanding of reductionism in the 'natural philosophers' of the early modern period. They distinguish between 'primary qualities' (aspects of things that are really constitutive of them) and 'secondary' and even 'tertiary' qualities (aspects of things that are not 'really real' but are simply their impact on our subjectivity. This kind of reductionism appears to pull the rug out from under the attempts of scholars in the humanities to make truth claims using the tools of their disciplines. Historical examples of this kind of 'scientific reductionism' would be the Marxist and Freudian treatments of religion. It is kind of ironic that neither of these would be accepted as 'scientific' by many in science today.

<sup>2</sup> A classic discussion of the 'autonomy of reason' is found in Immanuel Kant's 1794 essay, *An Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent*, Thesis Four: "Nature seems to have taken delight in the greatest frugality and to have calculated her animal endowments so closely...that she seems to have willed that if, man should ever work

Theology—reductionism is anathema, a methodological undermining of their disciplines. To the theologian, reductionism is usually seen as an *external* threat to its non-scientific truth claims, especially those based on religious traditions and religious experience. To meet this threat they must, in some way, change the subject. They must make the case that the life of mind requires a methodological respect for the *integrity of reason, not its autonomy*. This implies a refusal to buy into the notion that authentic rationality – like the cheese in the children’s rhyme – must stand alone in a Kantian-style reverence for its self. While autonomy rules out modes of receptivity such as gift and grace, reason’s *integrity* demands a respect for intelligibility wherever we encounter it in the other. It requires a hermeneutic of humility in which the notion of receptivity, far from being a heteronymous distortion of practical reasoning, is an essential component. In contrast to this, reason conceived of as *autonomous* is *monological*. Charles Taylor, in *The Ethics of Authenticity*, offers the following description of the ‘monological’ ideal of human rationality.<sup>3</sup>

“True, we can never liberate ourselves completely from those whose love and care shaped us early in life, but we should strive to define ourselves on our own to the fullest degree possible, coming as best we can to understand and thus gain some control over the influence of our parents, and avoiding falling into any further such dependencies. We will need relationships to fulfill us but not to define ourselves.”

For Taylor, autonomy with its claim of independence is not a good account of practical reasoning, first of all because it is not ‘practical’: we cannot ‘liberate’ ourselves in that way. What then would be a better account of practical reason? Taylor argues:

“Well, how do we reason? Reasoning in moral matters is always reasoning with somebody. You have an interlocutor, and you start from where that person is, or with the actual difference between you. You don’t reason from the ground up, as though you were talking to someone who recognized no moral demands whatever. A person who accepted no moral demands would be as impossible to argue with about right and wrong

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himself up from the grossest barbarity...he alone would have the entire credit for it and would have only himself to thank; it is as if she aimed more at his rational self-esteem than at his well-being.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press) 1991, p. 34.

as would a person who refused to accept the world of perception around us be impossible to argue with about empirical matters.<sup>4</sup>”

Authentic practical reasoning, as Taylor points out, always requires a moment of receptivity characterized by a respect for the other in whatever dimension in which otherness is encountered. I argue that the hermeneutic at work in Catholic Social Teachings is a wonderfully rich example of ‘reasoning with somebody’ and thus conforms to Taylor’s notion of the integrity of reason. My argument is thus that Catholic Social Teachings can be read a correction of the notion of rational autonomy and its replacement by a more powerful and authentic notion of rationality understood as the integrity of reason. ***It is a more-powerful and particularly privileged instance of the integrity of reason precisely because an important part of the receptivity that CTS recognizes as essential is the domain that proponents of rational autonomy carved out for themselves, the economic and political order. Only by listening to the voice of political economy, a domain that has shown little interest in listening to the Church, can the Church witness to the social order.***

Alternately, I could describe my thesis as an attempt to reject *reductionism as an internal threat* to religion. Its purpose is to show the essentiality of the Catholic Church’s social teachings to the practice of Christian religion. That is to say, it aims to show that religion is more than ‘getting the rite right’ and that we do *internal* violence to religion when we attempt to reduce it to individual piety, to ritual formalism, and to theoretical conceptualization. Emphasis on Catholic Social Teaching restores balance to the religious perspective. Rather than its being seen as an unwarranted and illegitimate intrusion of religion into the “affairs of the world” by clerics dabbling in economics<sup>5</sup>, the social gospel is an essential moment in the life of a religion that

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* pp.32-2.

characterizes itself as incarnational. I will argue that the view that religion ought to confine itself to “the internal forum”--to the “spiritual” as opposed to the “worldly”-- is a form of reductionism that is *internal* to the religious viewpoint. One might see it as a contemporary version of an old error: anti-incarnational gnosticism. Moreover, the “friends of religion” who accept this kind of reductionism covertly assumes *the same* understanding of reason upon which *external* reductionism operates in the debate between religion and science. They accept a Kantian-style notion of the autonomy of reason. Both assume that religion can and should be contained in the private personal domain. Listen and you can hear the mantra: “I cannot impose my personal beliefs upon those whose beliefs differ.” ***But the real option is neither silence nor imposition, but ‘reasoning with’ as Taylor has described it.***

## II

### **Historical Background of the Reception of the Concept ‘Private Property’**

The social and political setting in which modern philosophy developed was one of unrest and revolution. Descartes cut his philosophical teeth as a quartermaster in the Thirty Years War, while Locke was a participant in England’s Glorious Revolution. They—and many other intellectuals who were their contemporaries—deplored the role that religion was playing in augmenting and fueling civic unrest and discord. The great enemy of enlightenment—in their

view--was *enthusiasm*, which they defined as the *public* expression of religious fervor. Their solution was to remove religion from the public order and make it a *private personal* matter<sup>6</sup>. Given the historical context in which the privatization of religion became an important intellectual project, privatization appears to be a rationally plausible solution to a pressing social problem. That is to say, the treatment of religion as private and personal was fueled by public social need, the need for civil peace and order. And there is no denying that this need was real. And our current lack of basic civility shows that it still is.

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<sup>6</sup>The philosopher of religion Robert Neville has a very interesting paper entitled "Political Tolerance in an Age of Renewed Religious Warfare" in *Philosophy, Religion, and the Question of Intolerance* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997.) Its first two pages simply name important socio-political events in the last quarter century. Its conclusion is that the notion that religion is a private and personal matter is an empirically false claim.

### **A Categorical Connection: Religion as Private and Property as Sacrosanct**

But the reduction of religion to the private personal was only one part of the project of religious reform of early Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke. It was a necessary but not sufficient condition for a coherent presentation of a new philosophical anthropology, that of the autonomous individual. According to this concept of the human, the notion of natural rights is inalienably and indefeasibly constitutive of the individual person. To be a ‘person’ is to be a possessor of such rights. Foremost among those rights is the *right of private property*<sup>7</sup>. As is well-known, Locke used the term ‘property’ in two senses: 1) it meant the human self: one owned oneself and one’s body; 2) the second sense of property referred to ownership of those things needed for personal survival and well-being that are procured by the individual through her own labor.

### **Can one think like a Classical Liberal without being a liberal?**

Bringing these thoughts together—1) the attempt to confine religion to the private personal and 2) an understanding of the self as possessor of rights based on private property—allows us, I would maintain, to formulate the *problem that Catholic Social Teaching poses for the Church itself, and for the world to which it has a mission*. Pope Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* 1) accepts the rights language of the modern liberal tradition and heavily emphasizes the right of property. But if one begins to talk and think like a classical liberal, the rest of the categories that are integral to that viewpoint will inexorably assert themselves. A central claim will be, as we have

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<sup>7</sup>cf. John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, section V “Of Property” for a classic articulation of the dual role that ‘property’ plays in the origin of modern rights theory.

seen, that religion ought not to play a public social role; that it is a matter of the internal forum, of the private and the personal.

Now let us ask: what ought an intellectual who is a ‘loyal son of the Church’—let us call him William Buckley Jr. for want of a better name—to think when meditating upon *Rerum Novarum*? He will surely approve of the Church’s breaking its ties to the older ‘feudal’ order that has become identified with social repression and economic stagnation. But he will also see religion’s playing a public social role as part of that older alignment that needs to be repudiated. He will see the discussion of social issues, especially economic ones, to be the prerogative of a priesthood of expertise rather than a priesthood of ordination. He will **applaud** the Church’s **endorsement** of the liberal doctrines of the autonomous nation-state and the emerging theory of free enterprise. But he will also expect religion to play a role in which it addresses the world as a serial order of individuals who treasure beliefs in the privacy of their conscience; as individuals whose agency in realizing those beliefs is a matter of individual generosity or ‘charity’, but whose knowledge of what is practically possible in the world is a function of secular social science.

***Post Rerum Novarum Developments of Catholic Social Teachings:  
Deepening or Distorting?***

Given the line of thinking that I have been developing, the celebrated response to Pope John XXIII’s *Mater et Magistra* attributed to William Buckley - “Mother, yes; teacher no” - should come as no surprise. Moreover one can find abundant textual evidence in *Rerum Novarum* to support the suggestion that the proper and essential part of Catholic Social Teachings is wedded to the doctrine of rights as Leo received it from classical liberalism, and that the ‘creeping socialism’ of the post Vatican II pontiffs is a virus infecting the body of

Catholic Social Teachings. It is a virus moreover that is curable through secular expertise. While dissent on the level of ‘dogma’ is damnable, dissent from a socialism that blurs the stark intellectual clarity of the classical liberal doctrine of rights in which the notion of private property hold the primary place is a duty through which lay experts can be of service to the Church. This way of looking at things evidences a view of Christian Religion that distinguishes sharply between lasting dogmatic truth that deals with the “proper” domain of religion--‘strict theological mysteries’-- and the passing commitment to 20<sup>th</sup> Century European socialism by Church leaders such as John XXIII and Paul VI. The former demands obedient assent. The latter calls for correction by Catholic intellectuals who both love the Church and are experts in secular matters *beyond* the domain of religion. Such a view, I submit, is correctly characterized as *internal reductionism* as I have defined the term above.

One must admit that there is a certain plausibility in this way of conceiving things. After all, it was the Church itself that invited the liberal perspective “in” and used its categories to fulfill its religious mission. One might say that the Church cannot have it both ways. Either one sticks with the *Syllabus of Errors* and maintains that the Papacy can never be reconciled with the “modern world”<sup>8</sup>. Or one attempts a modern Pentecost in which liberal ears hear, each in the private personal space of her own conscience, of the marvelous works of God—but in which the tower of Babel reigns in the public social world.

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<sup>8</sup>Issued on December 8, 1864 by Pope Pius IX, the *Syllabus* asserts in number 80 that the following proposition has been “condemned and anathematized”: “that the Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself, and come to terms with progress, liberalism and modern civilization -Allocution "Jamdudum cernimus," March 18, 1861. Given this response to the agenda of liberalism that flowered in the 1860's in the founding of a whole series of modern secular nation-states that declared their independence from the older feudal political order of which the papacy was a constitutive part, Leo XIII's use of liberal categories just a quarter of a century later is truly remarkable.

### III Subsuming the Counter-Positions Catholic Social Teachings as a Corrective Expansion of the Notion of Property

But—as a good student of Hegel—I want to argue that the Church *can* have it both ways. Charles Taylor makes a strong case for this possibility—albeit not in regard to social teachings—in his *The Ethics of Authenticity*. I want to maintain that the historical development of classical liberalism, while a plausible response to the social and religious difficulties of early modernity, is not inevitable, and that it sacrifices what I take to be a truly creative and coherent approach to social issues in the contemporary world: Catholic social teachings.

While this paper is in no way a call for submission to church authority in the sense of an intellectual capitulation that abdicates the role of critical responses of experts in the social sciences,<sup>9</sup>

it does target what I would term Buckley-style reductionism. I believe that it is important to do so in as much as the body of Catholic Social Teaching stands today almost alone as a coherent and developed reflection on the contemporary social order that spans the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. What I mean by this claim is analogous to Sartre’s characterization of Marxism as the ‘only possible philosophy’ in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. By this he meant that, in his view, it alone offered an integrative intellectual road map that brought together the various regions of human experience in a coherent vision of life. Most other philosophical positions had given up as impossible and undesirable the

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<sup>9</sup>It is clear that the documents containing Catholic Social Teaching do not require or encourage such ‘submission.’ A leitmotif that grows stronger and more insistent as one moves from *Rerum Novarum* to the present is the role of the Catholic laity, the Christian Community, and “all people of good will” to reflect on and respond to Catholic Social Teaching. The circle of inclusion broadens and challenges all who are capable of responding to be responsible.

attempt to provide such a ‘grand metaphysical vision’ of life in which the theoretical, the practical, and the productive areas of experience are integrated. As a philosopher, I believe that Sartre was right—not about Marxism as fulfilling this need for integration—but about the need for integration being the primary spiritual need of the present. I would characterize the fundamental theme of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as the search for integration. And when I characterize Catholic Social Teaching—flowing as it does out of the Catholic communitarian notion of human life—as a uniquely coherent and sustained response throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century to the need for integration, what I am trying to point out is that it stands rather alone since 1891—the date of *Rerum Novarum*—in sketching out a coherent architectonic of experience in which the theoretical, the practical, and the productive orders are integrated. I am of course not claiming that the Church has done this as well as one might have hoped, or that an indefinite number of serious criticisms—from its response to the Holocaust to the treatment of its employees, to its turning of a blind eye to problematic behavior of members of its clergy—cannot be made. But just as Sartre was quick to critique ‘official’ Leninist Marxism, so one can make the claim that few institutions can rival the creative role that Catholic Social Teaching has played in shaping the conversation on social issues while also admitting that the actual history has been far from ideal. The in-breaking of the ideal into the real is never instantaneous and usually messy. But that does not undercut the essential role of ideals in human experience.

### ***Catholic Social Teaching - Reception and Inversion of the Liberal Notion of Property***

What Leo XIII saw in the liberal doctrine of private property was the significance that the notion of private ownership plays in a contemporary understanding of the task of meeting the needs of human life in a sustained way. And what the tradition of teachings based on *Rerum*

*Novarum* brings out is that property claims are **only** justifiable when they play this role in specific communities at particular times. Thus we read the following claims made in *Rerum*

*Novarum*:

1. Our first and most fundamental principle, therefore, when we undertake to alleviate the condition of the masses, must be the inviolability of private property. This laid down, we go on to show where we must find the remedy that we seek.<sup>10</sup>
2. All human subsistence is derived either from labor on one's own land, or from some laborious industry which is paid either in the produce of the land itself or in that which is exchanged for what the land brings forth.<sup>11</sup>
3. The limits of private possessions have been left to be fixed by man's own industry and the laws of individual peoples.<sup>12</sup>
4. The soil which is tilled and cultivated with toil and skill utterly changes its condition; it was wild before, it is not fruitful; it was barren and now it brings forth in abundance.<sup>13</sup>

All of these assertions are formulations of classical Lockean liberalism. Property is the fundamental human right for only through it can the establishment of liberty and equality of opportunity be conceived. The world, as the common heritage of mankind, belongs especially to the industrious, and labor—through which 'waste land' becomes domesticated—is the source of all value.

But there are significant differences between the reception of these ideas in *Rerum Novarum* and the meaning they have in their source, Locke's *Second Treatise of Civil*

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<sup>10</sup>*Rerum Novarum* - # 12

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.* - #7

<sup>12</sup>*Idem.*

<sup>13</sup>*Idem.*

*Government.* These differences are crucial, and illustrate a hermeneutical principle at work in Catholic thought throughout its history: *quidquid recipitur, ad modum recipientis recipitur.*<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Whatever is received is received according to the perspective of the recipient.

In Locke, the three assertions are put forth as an integral part of a *social contract* interpretation of government with its anti-communitarian and serial notion of the rationally autonomous individual as the building block and goal of the social order. In Leo XIII's writing they are received in a Catholic communitarian notion of the social order. Thus we read the Pope—in the same section of the encyclical that contains the defense of private property—asserting the following: “The child takes its place in civil society not in its own right, but in its quality as a member of the family to which it is begotten.”<sup>15</sup> Private property is conceived of here as *family capital*, not as the giving substance to an atomic individual. Moreover, the discussion of the foundational role of private property is undertaken by the Pope to “alleviate the condition of the masses”<sup>16</sup>, not to establish the rights of the middle class vis a vis the feudal order.

A further difference between the two texts centers on the limits of property acquisition. The beginning agreement between them—formulated in thesis three above—quickly diverges. For Locke, the fundamental sin appears to be ‘waste’ or ‘spoilage.’ Upright folks do not waste. Goods should not be allowed to spoil. Thus the Lockean limit on acquisition is set at the point where one takes so much of the world's goods that they are either wasted or begin to spoil. If, however, they can be transformed into a condition in which these limits do not apply, then limitless acquisition is morally legitimate. That form of course is money, and ultimately capital. And when we couple this notion of limitless individual acquisition with Locke's claim that the first sense of property is personal identity, we discover the origin of a way of thinking whose remarkable nature is only hidden by its being so commonplace: “how much is she worth?”

*Rerum Novarum* tells a different moral tale. Private property is a fundamental principle **“when we undertake to alleviate the condition of the masses.”**<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.* - # 11

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.* - # 12

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.* # 12

The moral significance of the concept of property lies in its role as a diagnostic tool in understanding and addressing the problem of social inequality and social injustice. Moreover, the right to accumulate property is balanced by a discussion of its proper use:

5. “It is one thing to have a right to the possession of money, and another to have a right to use money as one pleases.”<sup>18</sup>

6. “Money and the other things which men call good and desirable: we may have them in abundance or we may want them altogether; as far as eternal happiness is concerned, it does not matter; the only thing that is important is to use them aright<sup>19</sup>.”

Property—in the form of money “or other things which men call good and desirable” is an *instrumental good, not a principle of personal identity*. It is essentially directed towards protecting and preserving human life. An intrinsic part of the proper use of money is “the duty to give to the indigent.”<sup>20</sup> Pope Leo describes this duty as one “not of justice (except in extreme cases) but of Christian Charity.”<sup>21</sup> I would argue that the fundamental hermeneutic at work in the subsequent documents that develop Catholic Social Teachings is the removal of the parenthesis contained in this text. The weight of the argument moves from charity to justice.

### ***Removing the Parentheses around “Except in Extreme Cases”***

We have seen that the point of claiming that the right to property as fundamental is received into Catholic Social Teaching as an attempt to carry out the Church’s moral role as *Mater et Magistra, as a mother and teacher who* keeps before the human community its responsibility for the protection and preservation of human life. What the texts of Catholic Social Teaching—especially those following Pope John XXIII’s 1961 encyclical *Mater et Magistra*—bring out is that the liberal tendency to view the economic order of capitalism as ‘natural’ and thus to view the extreme poverty and social dislocations that have attended its development as ‘acts of god’ like the striking of a tornado is unacceptable. Such a view is predicated on a reduced or

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<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.* # 19

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.* # 18

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.* - # 19

truncated notion of the notion of property and its proper role in human life. The genius and value of Catholic Social Teaching is that it demands that those who claim the right of property as foundational do a radical reflection on the implications of their own claim. It acknowledges that they are on the right track—that socialism as the organizing economic concept is flawed. But it demands that property claims be connected to a vision of the human good in which they are shaped and limited. One might view the very titles of the post 1961 texts—*Peace on Earth, On the Development of Peoples, Justice in the World, On Human Work, On Social Concern, and Economic Justice for All*—as following Pope Leo’s insight that ‘extreme cases’ move our stance towards inequality and poverty from the benevolence of charity to the demands of justice. The tradition removes the parenthesis that Leo had placed around his insight as the Church, as an international presence, became increasingly aware of the problems of underdevelopment and exploitation that are iterated throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as the world assumed its current shape.

***A Concluding Thought: The Current State of the Church’s dialogue with “the world”***

I take the fundamental issue in the Church’s proclamation of its social teaching to be that of the rejection of reductionism in one form or another. What it is saying to ‘the world’ is that the city on the hill with its thousand points of light cannot be build on an abstract view of property that neglects to see the social responsibilities that are inherent in property claims. The notion of property cannot be reduced to individual proprietorship. It has a communal dimension that is essentially a part of it. When that part is not seen or is rejected, then righteous critique develops on its own into a kind of socialism that Catholic Social Teaching has always rejected. What “the world” is telling the Church is that it must learn before it attempts to teach. And this is a formula that CTS accepts, while holding open the same hermeneutic to the realm of political economy

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<sup>21</sup>*Idem.*

itself. For there is truth in classical liberalism's treatment of religion. The truth in liberalism's viewing religion as reducible to the private and personal is that a truly *catholic* conversation about social issues is extremely difficult and demanding. What seems 'universal' may be—as the deconstructionists never tire of reminding us—merely the imposition of one perspective. The Church must struggle to be catholic in a world that positions it as private and perspectival, a world in which the very warp and woof of contemporary history appears to be reductionist, a world in which the Church is always tempted towards reductionism itself. This is a daunting task, but the documents of Catholic Social Teaching show that the Church has undertaken it in a sustained and serious way. In doing so, it brings to the task a communitarian vision of life (something old). It has received the liberal doctrine of the role of private property (something new, something borrowed.) In doing so, it attempts to live out the truth of its incarnational and anti-reductionist vision of religious life (something true.)