



## Social democracy and the Principles of Catholic Social Teaching

By Anthony Annett

(Part II of a three-part series from *The Fallen Idol: A Catholic alternative to neoliberalism*)

[In looking at the world we live in] the question to be asked is this: Can our present crisis be resolved by a new social-democratic moment, attuned to the particular circumstances of the twenty-first century? I believe the answer is yes, and that the solution can be informed by the principles of Catholic social teaching. To see this, it helps to explore the role that Catholic social teaching played in the first social-democratic moment. As the historian Tony Judt noted, the post-war European Christian Democratic movement—largely inspired by Catholic social teaching—found common cause with left-wing social democracy against laissez-faire economics. Christian democracy supported a “social market economy” to protect families from the vagaries of capitalism. James Chappel has recently argued that during the twentieth century, Catholic social thought was largely divided between two tendencies: what he calls “paternal” Catholicism—which vigorously opposed communism and elevated the family as the basic unit of society—and “fraternal” Catholicism, which tended to be more left-wing. Yet these two strands came together in the domain of economics during the post-war period. Both supported the state’s role in regulating the economy to promote the common good, providing universal social services funded by taxes and social contributions, and empowering unions as a bulwark against excessive corporate power—the kind of power that greased the wheels of fascism. Although there was never a Christian Democratic movement in the United States, President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal was influenced by Catholic social teaching [...]

So, what are the prospects for a new social-democratic moment informed by Catholic social teaching? To answer this question, one must first appreciate the differences between the principles of Catholic social teaching and those of neoliberalism. The latter have had enormous influence in recent decades, so it makes sense to pick them apart.

The first question to ask is what motivates the person. In neoclassical economics—and by extension neoliberalism—the answer is self-interest. This is often traced to Adam Smith’s famous dictum that without self-interest, businesses would not supply the goods we need and want. By contrast, Catholic social teaching elevates such principles as solidarity, reciprocity, and gratuitousness. It insists that a core human motivation is willing the good of the other, including the person on the other side of an economic transaction. Recent evidence from psychology, neuroscience, and evolutionary biology affirms that there is something to this view—that we are deeply social creatures, honed for cooperation. But if society consistently sends the message that people are selfish and care only about themselves, many people will internalize these values.

The next question to ask is what constitutes the good of the individual. For neoclassical economics, the answer is straightforward: you seek to maximize your subjective preferences. Put simply, you try to consume the most you can, in line with your personal tastes, with whatever resources are available to you. This answer has a number of implications. First, preferences are subjective and hedonic: you like what you like, and questioning the value of another’s preferences is ruled out. Under this framework, anything that is legal can be a valid preference, no matter how well or how poorly it contributes to human flourishing. Second, it tends to treat all goods as commodities, things to be bought and sold. It side-lines the non-material aspects of well-being, including relational and spiritual goods. Third, the logic of maximizing one’s preferences has no internal limit. All that restricts you from consuming more is your income. This leads in turn to the goal of endless economic growth, which runs into grave problems on a finite planet.

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When Catholic social teaching ponders the good of the individual, it points in a sharply different direction. It emphasizes instead integral human development, which is the good of the whole person and all people. Thus, it goes beyond the material to emphasize all dimensions of well-being. In an Aristotelian sense, it calls for the fullest development of each person's potential. Implicit in this is a more objective notion of the good, a good common to all people that sets natural limits to their needs and desires. It does not confuse happiness with the maximal satisfaction of appetites. And that means it does not confuse our collective well-being with maximal economic growth.

But neoclassical economics has no concept of a truly collective well-being, a common good worthy of the name; it can conceive of nothing beyond the aggregated well-being of individuals, which it measures by adding up monetary values. This explains why gross domestic product (GDP)—the summation of all production of final market goods and services in a single economy—acts as a stand-in for the common good under neoliberalism. This is an additive standard (what matters is the total) so it is compatible with staggering levels of exclusion and inequality. As Stefano Zamagni has pointed out, the common good is in this respect more geometric, which means that if one person is a zero, the whole thing is zero.

This brings us to the normative standard of judgment. For neoclassical economics, this standard is efficiency—more precisely, Pareto efficiency, the point at which all voluntary trades are exhausted and it is no longer possible to make somebody better off without making somebody else worse off. Economists often argue that this notion of efficiency is rational and value-free, but it really boils down to the best way to maximize your preferences. Notice the implication: Pareto efficiency rules out redistribution and is thus compatible with extreme inequality. As Amartya Sen put it, “A society or an economy can be Pareto optimal and still be perfectly disgusting.” Catholic social teaching flips this standard of judgment on its head, emphasizing the universal destination of goods and the preferential option for the poor. The standard is therefore meeting the needs of all people and giving special priority to those at the bottom.

(To be continued)

### THOUGHT FOR A DAY

The essence of faith must become clearer to us. One may accept the teachings of the whole Bible, but without meeting Jesus himself, it will be of no value. Nor does it help to have a conviction if one has not deeply felt and experienced Jesus' character, his being, and his nature. Each soul must be personally confronted by Jesus himself.

*-J. Heinrich Arnold*

### TAP & GO CHURCH COLLECTION RESULTS

In an attempt to address the drastic fall-off in parish income during the pandemic, the parish, in collaboration with the Archdiocese, introduced a TAP & GO system of collections. Using this system there was only one collection, which was then divided 60/40% by the diocese between the First collection and the Share Collection. In addition to this there were collection boxes in the church as well as online donations, which were similarly divided between the two collections.

The following are the results from 441 donations to the TAP & GO system over the three months October—December

**First Collection: €3,673; Share: €2,449**

**For a total of €6,124.**

The pre-covid for period would have been about €22,000.

We will try to establish a fuller picture in the near future but it can be said that the situation remains very serious. Thankfully physical collections have been partially restored but the overall situation remains very precarious..

As always, the parish is very grateful for the support we receive.

### Masses Times

**Sundays:** Vigil, 6pm (Saturday), 9.30am,  
11am, 5pm

Croatian Community Mass 6.30pm

French-speaking community mass 2nd and 4th  
Sundays of the month at 12.30

Daily masses 10am only for the moment

**-Rosary** daily after 10am mass

### Baptisms:

1st and 3rd Sundays of each month, request  
forms available from parish office

### Marriages

For the use of St Mary's Church and Pre-  
Nuptial Enquiries please contact the Parish Of-  
fice

Parish Office open Monday—Friday, 10.30-  
14.00

### IN MEMORIAM

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11am: Larry & Ita Connaughton & godson John A/v  
5pm: Jack Connor Anniversary

### 20/30 January

11am: Martin Nealon