

TEACHING AND LIVING PRACTICAL REASONING: THE ROLE OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT IN A CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY CURRICULUM

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My task is to address the role of Catholic social thought in a Catholic university curriculum. Stated in brief, my response is that the role of Catholic social thought in such a setting is to provide a tradition-centered context within which students can learn and engage in practical reason. Now, that sounds very erudite, even stuffy. However, I submit that it concerns even the smallest and seemingly mundane of our actions in everyday life. In what follows, I aim to show how this is the case.

I will do so first by giving a brief account of a tradition of practical reason that extends from Aristotle through Thomas Aquinas to modern Catholic social teaching. This is the tradition-centered context that is most fitting for Catholic universities. Then I will set out what I think are the primary obstacles to this tradition of practical reasoning being engaged at Catholic colleges and universities. This will allow me, in the final section, to discuss avenues of programmatic and pedagogical response that might overcome or at least partially offset the obstacles to practical reasoning.

I. The Aristotelian-Thomist Tradition of Practical Reason

It may seem odd to begin by talking about a mode of reasoning when addressing Catholic social thought. Most persons have in mind a constellation of substantive concepts like the common good, human rights, and the option for the poor. These concepts are indeed crucial, and all the more so given John Paul II's description of Catholic social teaching as constituting doctrine. In the Pope's words, "[T]o teach and to spread her social doctrine pertains to the church's evangelizing mission and is an essential part of the Christian message, since this doctrine points out the direct consequences of that message in the life of society and situates daily work and struggles for justice in the context of bearing witness to Christ the Savior. . . The 'new evangelization,' which the modern world urgently needs and which I have emphasized many times, must include among its essential elements a proclamation of the church's social doctrine."¹