

Roman Catholic Teaching On International Debt: Toward a New Methodology for Catholic Social Ethics and Moral Theology

M. Therese Lysaught

The hungry nations of the world cry out to the peoples blessed with abundance. And the Church, cut to the quick by this cry, asks each and every man to hear his brother's plea and answer it lovingly.

Paul VI, *Populorum progressio* (1967), no. 3

Debt servicing cannot be met at the price of the asphyxiation of a country's economy, and no government can morally demand of its people privations incompatible with human dignity.

Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace,
At the Service of the Human Community (1987)

Christians will have to raise their voice on behalf of all the poor of the world, proposing the Jubilee as an appropriate time to give thought... to reducing substantially, if not canceling outright, the international debt which seriously threatens the future of many nations.

John Paul II, *Tertio millennio adveniente* (1994), no. 51

THE 1999 MEETING BETWEEN JOHN PAUL II AND U2 front man Bono has become an iconic image for the international debt relief movement.¹ From the 1980s forward, the Vatican joined a multifaceted global network, providing visible, public leadership on the question of debt reduction for impoverished countries, particularly by associating the issue with the year 2000 as a year of jubilee. While outcomes rarely meet hopes and expectations in the realm of global economics, it does appear that, as of 2015, a foretaste of jubilee has come to some 36 heavily indebted poor countries in the cancellation of an estimated \$130 billion in international debt.²

¹ "Pope and pop urge cut in debts for poor nations," *The Guardian* (23 September 1999): www.theguardian.com/world/1999/sep/24/debtrelief.development.

² Just World, "Debt relief," www.just1world.org/debt-relief.htm; and Agenzia Fides, "The 'Jubilee USA Network' campaign for finance at the service of man," www.fides.org/en/news/35762-AMERICA_UNITED_STATES_The_Jubilee_USA_Network_campaign_for_finance_at_the_service_of_man#.VN4MKSik7II.

Yet the contribution of the Roman Catholic Church to global action on debt relief for the poorest of the poor remains an unheralded accomplishment, lost amidst the more sensational headlines about sexual abuse, curial reform, and pope-watching. Largely unknown in U.S. parishes, this important legacy of the papacy of John Paul II and the work of the church in the world at the end of the twentieth century has also received scant attention within the literature of Catholic moral theology.³ This paper seeks to address this lacuna, providing a methodological analysis of arguments advanced within Roman Catholic magisterial teaching with regard to international debt.⁴

In the analysis of international debt and the need for massive debt cancellation, we find an exemplar of Catholic social and moral methodology informed by the vision of the Second Vatican Council. Here magisterial writers employ a theologically-rich methodology that utilizes the traditional principles of Catholic social thought yet moves beyond them in key ways. They heed the mandate issued in *Optatam totius* (no. 16) that Catholic moral theology ought to be perfected by being more deeply nourished and grounded in Scripture in their extensive engagement with the biblical image of the jubilee year. No longer do scriptural passages serve merely as proof-texts or rhetorical decoration; rather, the question of debt relief is located within a narrative framework drawn from the gamut of scriptural passages on economics. Magisterial writers echo the liturgical grounding of the Council and its vision of the church in the world in *Sacrosanctum concilium*, recognizing that the jubilee practice of debt relief is foundationally a question of worship. They interface the question of debt relief with liturgical practices such as the examination of conscience, penance, and reconciliation that are required for conversion from idolatry. And driving their advocacy around this issue is the deep commitment to peace that lies at the heart of Catholic social teaching and pervades

³ An extensive bibliographic and database search (ATLA, CPLI) on the topics of debt relief or Jubilee turns up regular reporting on the question of international debt relief within Catholic popular literature—such as the *Tablet*, *Commonweal*, and *National Catholic Reporter*—but no substantive treatment of the question by Catholic theologians in the peer-reviewed literature. The exception would be Karl-Heinz Peschke's, "Debt Crisis and Debt Relief," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 70 (2005): 355-361; Peschke does not, however, engage in a substantive theological or moral analysis of the question. Elizabeth A. Donnelly provides one of the few comprehensive accounts of the participation of the Roman Catholic Church in the debt relief question. The analysis in this paper is heavily indebted to her essay "Making the Case for Jubilee: The Catholic Church and the Poor-Country Debt Movement," *Dealing Fairly with Developing Country Debt*, ed. Christian Barry, Barry Herman, and Lydia Tomitova (NY: Blackwell, 2007), 189-218.

⁴ The arguments of Roman Catholic activists on this question would be worth analyzing, insofar as their work largely laid the groundwork for the magisterial documents examined here. This essay focuses on the latter literature due to its normative status *vis a vis* theological methodology. For more on the activist literature, see Donnelly, "Making the Case for Jubilee."

Gaudium et spes. Debt forgiveness emerges as one antidote to the violence of contemporary economics.

Thus, magisterial writings on debt relief—an issue that remains one of “the least of these” for the theological academy in the U.S.—provide an opportunity for an examination of methodological conscience for Catholic social ethics. Equally, as we continue to work to dismantle the silos between Catholic social ethics and Catholic moral theology, this literature provides a methodological model for moral theologians as well. Although perhaps not yet thoroughly integrated, the method deployed recurrently around the question of debt relief provides a roadmap for making the discipline more theological. Most critically, this methodology was forged in conjunction with a global network of ecumenical and even non-faith-based organizations working together for a specific policy goal. The church walked alongside partners of all stripes, unabashedly speaking the words of principle, policy *and* Scripture, sacrament, and peace to “all persons of good will,” achieving with this coalition remarkable outcomes.

In what follows, I begin with an overview of the history of the debt question, and then review the position of the Roman Catholic Church as it evolved over the last quarter of the twentieth century. I then demonstrate the ways in which the Roman Catholic literature on the debt question integrates the principles of Catholic social thought, Scripture, liturgy, and peacemaking. I close with a series of questions for Catholic methodology, toward a method we might name *evangelii gaudium*.⁵

The International Debt Crisis: A Brief History

The question of debt relief for what later became known as heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC) or severely indebted poor countries (SIPC) and their kin emerged as a pressing issue in the late 1970s. Although “the debt crisis” emerged in a public way in 1982 when the Mexican government threatened to default on its international debt, missionaries and other NGO workers had begun to surface the growing problem in the mid-to-late 1970s. The call for debt reduction and debt relief for HIPC culminated in a worldwide movement known as Jubilee 2000—a movement that was both ecumenical and bridged church and non-faith-based organizations. During the last quarter of

⁵ This essay was originally drafted for the U.S. Anglican-Roman Catholic Theological Consultation in its recently completed dialogue on “Ecclesiology and Moral Discernment: Common Ground and Divergences,” www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/contraception_and_debt_relief_tackled_by_catholicanglican_dialogue/.

the twentieth century, the Roman Catholic Church played a particularly visible role and provided critical leadership for this movement, a role that it has continued to play over the past 15 years.⁶

The history of the “debt crisis” is too complex to recount here.⁷ Its roots lie in the post-WWII context with the development of the Bretton Woods international financial institutions (IFIs), which were created to assist the post-war reconstruction of Europe and Japan, and the simultaneous de-colonization of much of the developing world by their European overlords in the 1950s and 1960s. Many of these newly independent countries had only been in existence ten to twenty years when the first global oil crisis hit in 1974. Highly dependent on imported oil, these economies were far too fragile to absorb the impact of the oil and other economic crises that hit the global economy from 1972 to 1982. A few of these rapid-fire crises are named by the U.S. Bishops in their 1986 pastoral *Economic Justice for All*:

Historically, three major economic actors share the responsibility for the present difficulty because of decisions made and actions taken during the 1970s and 1980s. In 1972 the Soviet Union purchased the entire U.S. grain surplus, and grain prices trebled. Between 1973 and 1979, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries raised the price of oil eightfold and thereafter deposited most of the profits in commercial banks in the North. In order to profit from the interest-rate spread on these deposits, the banks pushed larger and larger loans on eager Third World borrowers needing funds to purchase more and more expensive oil. A second doubling of oil prices in 1979 forced many of these countries to refinance their loans and borrow more money at escalating interest rates. A global recession beginning in 1979 caused the prices of Third World export commodities to fall and thus reduced the ability to meet the increasingly burdensome debt payments out of export earnings.⁸

As a result of this confluence of events, many developing countries found themselves caught in a cycle of massive indebtedness, a cycle from which they could not extricate themselves because of the decline in commodity prices and the insufficient time frame for developing their own economic infrastructures. The result was loan default.

⁶ The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, for example, has remained actively engaged with the issue since 2000. Debt Relief is a subhead under their website’s “Human Life and Dignity” menu; here they keep a record of ongoing writing and advocacy around the issue. www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/debt-relief/index.cfm.

⁷ For an excellent summary of the factors contributing to the debt crisis, see Jim Yong Kim and Joyce V. Mullen, eds. *Dying For Growth: Global Inequality and the Health of the Poor* (ME: Common Courage Press 2002), 1–43.

⁸ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy* (Washington, DC: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1986), no. 272.

One might ask: for whom was this a “crisis”? In the early 1980s, as the situation gained public notice, the “crisis” in question was the threat of default. The possibility of default presented a “crisis” for creditor nations and agencies—that they might not continue to make their profits. The framing of the issue tended to ignore two aspects of the situation, namely, that because of the high rates of interest on these loans (18-25%), most of the money being paid to the international lenders covered only interest or “debt service,” and that consequently in many cases, debtor countries actually repaid the equivalent of the original principle many times over.

Correlatively, the “solution” that emerged was designed to address the problem as framed. In the early 1980s, the IFIs—primarily the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, GATT and the Inter-American Development Bank—developed a series of policies known as “structural adjustment programs” (SAPs). These programs sought to restructure the economies of developing countries so that they could meet their debt service obligations. Informed by the emerging economic ideology of neoliberal economics, they imposed with a highly non-invisible hand a number of conditions that developing countries were required to meet in order to have their debt restructured and to secure additional debt.⁹ Developing countries were required to deregulate the private sector, to privatize government-controlled industries, to privatize government services, to cut government budgets, and to “reduce trade barriers” on their markets. The IFIs imposed, in other words, economic policies not dissimilar to policies imposed in the U.S. in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly deregulation, privatization, and cuts in social services. In the developing context, this required debtor countries to abolish their minimum wage laws, tariffs, and subsidies, to deregulate utilities, and to slash spending for social infrastructure like roads, health care, and education.

In many ways, therefore, the “solution” created an even greater crisis for indebted countries. Many found themselves devoting “an inordinate portion of their national budgets to making interest and principal payments on their debt, leaving too little available for desperately

⁹ Neoliberal economics—sometimes referred to as neoclassical economics—emerged out of the work of Milton Friedman and the Chicago School of Economics. It became the dominant economic ideology in the West around 1980, with the political administrations of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. For historical perspectives on neoliberal economics, see Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Social Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001); Daniel Stedman Jones, *Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman, and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); and Noam Chomsky and Robert W. McChesney, *Profit Over People: Neoliberalism & Global Order* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2011); as well as Kim and Mullen, *Dying For Growth*.

needed outlays for health, education, housing” and other essential services.¹⁰ Zambia is a case in point: “During the 1990s, the country paid out approximately 20 percent of GDP in debt service, but budgeted only 2-3 percent of GDP for health and education.”¹¹ Or, as the U.S. Bishops noted in *Economic Justice for All*:

The aggregate external debt of the developing countries now approaches \$1 trillion, more than one-third of their combined GNP; this total doubled between 1979 and 1984 and continues to rise. On average, the first 20 percent of export earnings goes to service that debt without significantly reducing principle; in some countries debt service is nearly 100 percent of such earnings, leaving scant resources available for the countries’ development programs (no. 271).

Thus, by 1986, the question of international debt had become significant enough to merit careful attention by a major magisterial body in the Roman Catholic Church, the (then) National Council of Catholic Bishops.¹²

Widening awareness of the debt problem was due in large part to the efforts of a growing but loosely organized network of NGOs and church-affiliated relief organizations that began to coalesce in the mid-to-late 1980s.¹³ This network gained momentum in 1990 when the All African Council of Churches called for a year of jubilee to cancel Africa’s Debt.¹⁴ In 1994, Pope John Paul II issued *Tertio millennio adveniente*, his apostolic letter calling the Roman Catholic Church to

¹⁰ Donnelly, “Making the Case for Jubilee,” 190.

¹¹ Donnelly, “Making the Case for Jubilee,” 205.

¹² The USCCB’s advocacy on this issue is particularly important given the influence—and at times, direct control—exercised by the US over the international financial landscape, particularly via the World Bank, IMF, and other international financial institutions. Although 158 countries are members of the IMF, for example, the US holds 17% of the voting power. Similarly, the US is the largest shareholder in the World Bank, with the president of the World Bank traditionally being a US citizen, and holds almost 16% of the vote.

¹³ See Elizabeth A. Donnelly, “Proclaiming the Jubilee: The Debt and Structural Adjustment Network,” Sanjeev Khagram, James V. Riker, and Kathryn Sikkink, eds., *Restructuring World Politics: Transnational Social Movements, Networks, and Norms* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 155-180.

¹⁴ Bishops around the world actively advocated around this issue. See, for example, Bishop Medardo Joseph Mazombwe, “A pastoral perspective for Africa on international debt,” *Origins* 28 (Nov 12, 1998): 381-384; and “The Bishops of Africa, “Forgive Us Our Debts: Open Letter to Our Brother Bishops in Europe and North America,” in *The African Synod: Documents, Reflections, Perspectives*, ed. Africa Faith and Justice Network (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996). Statements by the Mexican bishops (1987), Cuban bishops (1986), and Ecuadoran bishops (1986) can be found in Edward Cleary, O.P., ed. *Path from Puebla: Significant Documents of the Latin American Bishops since 1979*, trans. Philip Berryman (Washington, DC: U. S. Catholic Conference, 1989). Both African and Latin American bishops have continued

begin preparation for the jubilee of the year 2000; in this letter debt relief figured centrally. In 1996, a joint Anglican-Catholic effort resulted in the Jubilee 2000 UK. From here the energy spread exponentially, to a global grassroots effort of consciousness-raising, including the founding of some sixty-nine national Jubilee 2000 networks.¹⁵

While debt relief certainly has not come to all the HIPCs, progress has been made and the work continues. In 2005, the G-8 pledged to cancel all the debt owed by eighteen HIPCs to the IMF, World Bank, and African Development Bank with up to twenty-two more countries eligible for debt cancellation. And, as noted at the outset, by 2015, thirty-six countries had received debt cancellation. But \$130 billion is only a start. The campaign continues.¹⁶

The International Debt Crisis: Roman Catholic Teaching

The Literature

The Roman Catholic literature on the debt question is finite but substantial. As mentioned earlier, very little has been authored by academic Catholic theologians or moral theologians. Elizabeth A. Donnelly is one of the few contemporary theologians who offers a comprehensive summary and analysis of the Roman Catholic position on debt relief. On the other hand, Catholic magisterial bodies—from national bishops' conferences to the Vatican—have provided significant and ongoing leadership with regard to the question. These magisterial bodies have integrated their analyses with activism, contributing to the efforts of the debt relief movement at various levels across the globe. Even more importantly, as Donnelly notes “the global coalition’s most extensive and best-known moral arguments for debt reduction originated at Catholic bishops’ conferences and the Vatican.”¹⁷

The magisterium’s exhortative analyses are located within the larger corpus of Catholic social teaching, which began to turn its attention to the international dimension of economics in the encyclical *Mater et magistra* (John XXIII, 1961), attending with increasing urgency to these questions through the Second Vatican Council (*Gaudium et spes*, 1965) and *Populorum progressio* (Paul VI, 1967). The corpus of magisterial writings most relevant for the current study include: two encyclicals of John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (1987) and *Centesimus annus* (1991); the analysis of the Pontifical Council

advocacy since 2000. For just two examples, see “Bishops Plea for African Debt Relief,” *Zenit* (May 2005): www.zenit.org/en/articles/bishops-plea-for-african-debt-relief; and Mark Engler, “Debt Relief: Historic Victories, New Challenges,” *Global Policy Forum* (2005): www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/210-debt/44780-debt-cancellation-historic-victories-new-challenges.html.

¹⁵ Donnelly, “Making the Case for Jubilee,” 207.

¹⁶ Jubilee USA Network, “Debt, Poverty, and the Millennium Development Goals,” www.jubileeusa.org/whatwedo/other-issues/millennium-development-goals.html.

¹⁷ Donnelly, “Making the Case for Jubilee,” 187.

for Justice and Peace, *At the Service of the Human Community: An Ethical Approach to the International Debt Question* (1987),¹⁸ two pastoral letters of the National Conference and later U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All* (1986) and *Relieving Third World Debt: A Call for Co-Responsibility, Justice, and Solidarity* (1989);¹⁹ a number of addresses for the World Day of Peace given by John Paul II; and his apostolic exhortation to begin preparations for the year 2000 as a year of jubilee, *Tertio millennio adveniente* (1994). To this could be added a variety of statements by African, Latin-American, and German bishops conferences throughout the 1980s and 1990s.²⁰ As we shall see, debt relief became a signal focus of the work of John Paul II, appearing not only in the documents mentioned above, but also in *Ecclesia in America* (1999) and his many public sermons and addresses throughout the 1990s and the early years of the new millennium.

From Structural Reform to Debt Forgiveness

Donnelly notes that the international anti-debt movement has been somewhat polarized along more radical versus reformist camps—i.e., calls for complete debt forgiveness versus calls for “financial architecture reform.”²¹ The Catholic position has generally attempted to balance concerns of commutative justice and social justice. They maintain the *prima facie* moral principle that contracts should be honored and debts should be paid, but they acknowledge that this principle can and should be overridden if the debtor is in a situation of extreme need or when broader structural conditions remain unjust (in fact, sinful), e.g., if the loan rates are usurious.

Earlier documents in the Catholic literature on debt relief tend to emphasize the need for financial architecture reform (and, in fact, fundamental reformation of the system of international finance). Without losing their commitment to these ends, the magisterial recommendations increasingly emphasize debt cancellation as they move toward 2000 and beyond.

¹⁸ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *At the Service of the Human Community*, Introduction, www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/PCJPDEBT.HTM.

¹⁹ U.S. Catholic Conference, *Relieving Third World Debt: A Call for Co-Responsibility, Justice, and Solidarity* (Edison, NJ: Hunter Publishing, 1989).

²⁰ In addition to the items cited in footnote 14 above, see also the World Church Commission of the German Bishops, “The International Debt Crisis: An Ethical Challenge. The Role of the Federal Republic of Germany” (Bonn: Secretariat of the German Bishops Conference, 1988); and the Joint Conference on Church and Development (GKKE) of the German Commission for Justice and Peace of the German Bishops Conference and Church Development Service, an Association of Protestant Churches in Germany, “The International Debt Crisis Concerns Us All,” *GKKE* 16 (September 1988).

²¹ Donnelly, “Making the Case for Jubilee,” 191.

We see this attempt at balancing in the U.S. Bishops' 1986 pastoral, *Economic Justice for All*. Here the Bishops propose a two-tier solution: "longer repayment periods, lower interest rates, and modification of IMF adjustment requirements for middle-income debtors; and extensive debt cancellation for the poorest, chiefly sub-Saharan African countries."²² Of particular concern in early documents (in *Economic Justice* and *At the Service of the Human Community*) is the call to restructure the international economic system to allow for greater participation of developing countries in policy-setting and decision-making.²³ They also call for the revision or elimination of most structural adjustment policies. Counsel is directed not only toward the U.S. government, U.S.-based commercial banks, and the IFIs; the Catholic magisterium directs recommendations for reform to developing countries as well, calling for greater accountability, a reduction in corruption, and more evidence that "debt relief resources are actually dedicated to poverty eradication."²⁴

While continuing to call for structural reform and repayment of debt where possible, in their 1989 document, the USCCB shifts toward debt cancellation:

We believe that in many instances the presumptive obligation to repay should be overridden or modified because of the social costs imposed on the poor. When the social costs erode personal dignity, causing hunger, homelessness, sickness and death, the principles of justice point not toward repayment by the debtors, but toward remission, even if partial, by creditors. Remission in complex cases like this does not mean "forgiveness" for all states. A range of remedies is possible and necessary; a scale of redress is needed to judge different situations. At times partial forgiveness will be a fair response, as we noted in *Economic Justice for All*, or at times renegotiation or partial rescheduling.²⁵

The shift toward debt cancellation is fueled by John Paul II in *Tertio millennio adveniente* (1994) where he exhorts: "Christians will have

²² Donnelly, "Making the Case for Jubilee," 196.

²³ For example, voting power at the IMF is based on the size of each country's economy. Thus, the U.S. vote counts for almost 17% while Venezuela's vote, for example, is only worth 1.2%. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Monetary_Fund.

²⁴ Donnelly, "Making the Case for Jubilee," 206. The Pontifical Council calls developing countries to own their own responsibilities for the situations in which their countries find themselves. This would include not only mismanagement but also the significant divide between rich and poor within developing countries themselves. They name as possible factors in the problem negligence, tax fraud, corruption, kick-backs, currency speculation, nationalism, and more. As they say, "it is therefore necessary to work for the conversion of hearts and for the improvement of structures" (11). Developing countries are reminded that "economic growth is not an end in itself" and that at issue must always be "a concern for the common good" (12).

²⁵ USCCB, *Relieving Third World Debt*, no. 312.

to raise their voice on behalf of all the poor of the world, proposing the jubilee as an appropriate time to give thought, among other things, to reducing substantially, if not canceling outright, the international debt which seriously threatens the future of many nations.”²⁶ John Paul II maintains this position until the end of his papacy.

In 1999, in preparation for the jubilee year, the USCCB issued a follow-up statement to their 1989 analysis, “A Jubilee Call for Debt Forgiveness.”²⁷ As the title indicates, the focus of this document is on debt forgiveness as the primary policy strategy. Donnelly sums up the Bishops’ recommendations:

First, include the full range of poor countries that now have to make unacceptable sacrifices to human development in order to repay their debt; second, ensure that resources freed through debt relief are, in fact, used for poverty reduction; third, foster the active participation of civil society in decision-making processes; fourth, ensure economic reform policies associated with debt relief make adequate provision for those adversely affected and have poverty reduction as a central goal; fifth, include mechanisms of accountability, so as to overcome corruption and other obstacles that prevent debt relief from benefiting the poor; sixth, be fully funded, with costs shared equitably among creditor governments and international financial institutions, and seventh, be part of a much broader, coordinated effort to promote sustainable development for the poorest countries.²⁸

In sum, then, this series of magisterial documents include a range of more specific recommendations for the various parties to the crisis, but in general they cluster around the twin needs for structural reform and debt remission, never failing to champion structural reform but becoming increasingly committed to immediate debt forgiveness as a primary policy strategy.

The International Debt Crisis: A Post-Vatican II Method for Social Ethics

Catholic reasoning on the question of international debt explicitly locates itself within the broader and well-established framework of Catholic social teaching (hereafter, CST). Consequently, it shares much in common with and draws explicitly on that tradition. The tradition of CST is an evolving tradition, always building on its forebears but integrating new questions and expanding methodological loci. The debt question, I would argue, represents a significant moment in the

²⁶ *Tertio millennio adveniente*, no. 51.

²⁷ The Administrative Board of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “A Jubilee Call for Debt Forgiveness,” (April 1999), www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/debt-relief/jubilee-debt-forgiveness.cfm.

²⁸ Donnelly, “Making the Case for Jubilee,” 210.

development of CST. Here we see three important post-Vatican II developments. First, especially in its reference to jubilee, we see the turn by the magisterium to a greater engagement with Scripture. In addition, the literature makes explicit the sacramental-liturgical context of Catholic social teaching. And finally, the corpus as a whole makes increasingly explicit an essential aspect of Catholic social teaching, namely its deep interconnection with peacemaking.

The Hungry Nations of the World Cry Out: The Principles of Catholic Social Thought

As one would expect, the literature on debt relief is firmly located within the Catholic social tradition. It continues the church's advocacy for the poor and voiceless. The statements from grassroots activists and church leadership are addressed both to the church and to the general public, to Catholics and Christians of other denominations, in short, to all people of good will.²⁹ And it appeals explicitly to the developing corpus of Catholic social principles.³⁰

At the root of this tradition is a common core: an integrated theological anthropology and theological sociology—a vision normed by the flourishing of human persons-in-community. Thus, the foundational principles—those around which all the other principles cluster—are *the respect for the life and dignity of the human person* and *the principle of the common good*.³¹

²⁹ For example, the Pontifical Council addresses itself “first and foremost to the principal agents in the financial and monetary worlds [as well as]... to all peoples, especially those most in need, who are the first to suffer the repercussions of these disorders,” (PCPJ, *At the Service of the Human Community*, Introduction). The USCCB addresses an introductory pastoral message to “Brothers and Sisters in Christ” but makes clear that the audience is primarily citizens of the United States as they add their “voice to the public debate about the directions in which the U.S. economy should be moving” (no. 1; no. 27).

³⁰ The USCCB 1999 statement cites, for example: the respect for the life and dignity of the human person; the common good; subsidiarity; solidarity; the preferential option for the poor; justice; and care for creation. The Pontifical Council identifies their six principles as: solidarity; co-responsibility; trust; shared effort and sacrifice; full participation; and the identification of emergency and long-term measures. The US Bishops name yet a different list in *Economic Justice for All*: the dignity of the human person; the social nature of the human person; the right to full participation; the preferential option for the poor; the protection of human rights—civil, political, and economic. Finally, in *Sollicitudo rei socialis* John Paul II analyzes the question of poverty and underdevelopment according to the principles of the dignity of the human person, the need for solidarity, and idolatry (no. 37). Most of the documents employ an array of additional principles in their analyses.

³¹ Catholic moralists disagree about which of these two principles is the foundation of Catholic social teaching. I would argue that the priority of these principles has shifted over time. The principle of the common good stands as the primary norm in *Rerum novarum*. With the Second Vatican Council, attention to human dignity assumes a more dominant focus, coming to full clarity in the work of John Paul II. But even this way of stating the issue—as evidenced by the structure of this subsection—points to

From *Rerum novarum* forward, a driving impetus of documents in the Catholic social tradition has been the situation of the poor, their abject and worsening plight, of those “living in conditions incompatible with human dignity.”³² In the analysis of the debt question, the poor equally stand as starting point and norm. The literature notes again and again how “the burden of the external debt of the poorest countries is crushing the lives and dignity of vulnerable children, women, and men.”³³ Thus, as the USCCB notes:

The basis for all that the Church believes about the moral dimensions of economic life is its vision of the transcendent worth—the sacredness—of human beings. The dignity of the human person, realized in community with others, is the criterion against which all aspects of economic life must be measured. All human beings, therefore, are ends to be served by the institutions that make up the economy, not means to be exploited for more narrowly defined goals. Human personhood must be respected with a reverence that is religious. When we deal with each other, we should do so with the sense of awe that arises in the presence of something holy and sacred. For that is what human beings are: we are created in the image of God (Gn 1:27). Similarly, all economic institutions must support the bonds of community and solidarity that are essential to the dignity of persons. Wherever

a hiccup in the Catholic social tradition, namely that the principles are generally presented in a list, as separate principles which could potentially conflict, at least *prima facie*. Too often, then, they are deployed as if they are separate and potentially incommensurable. What is needed is a more integrated and adequate articulation of the principles as a mutually-interpreting whole. The richer theological infrastructure presented in the debt relief literature moves us in that direction.

³² Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *At the Service of the Human Community*, Introduction. A similar starting point is signaled at the beginning of *Rerum novarum*: “Some opportune remedy must be found quickly for the misery and wretchedness pressing so unjustly on the majority of the working class... by degrees it has come to pass that working men have been surrendered, isolated and helpless, to the hardheartedness of employers and the greed of unchecked competition. The mischief has been increased by rapacious usury, which, although more than once condemned by the Church, is nevertheless, under a different guise, but with like injustice, still practiced by covetous and grasping men. To this must be added that the hiring of labor and the conduct of trade are concentrated in the hands of comparatively few; so that a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of the laboring poor a yoke little better than that of slavery itself” (no. 3). This is not to suggest that the image and role of the poor in *Rerum novarum* is the same as in later documents. Certainly the church’s framing of “the poor” develops over time.

³³ Administrative Board of the USCCB, Introduction. Or, Paul VI: “If a brother or a sister be naked and in want of daily food,” says St. James, “and one of you say to them, ‘Go in peace, be warm and filled,’ yet you do not give them what is necessary for the body, what does it profit?” Today no one can be unaware of the fact that on some continents countless men and women are ravished by hunger and countless children are undernourished. Many children die at an early age; many more of them find their physical and mental growth retarded. Thus whole populations are immersed in pitiable circumstances and lose heart” (*Populorum progressio*, no. 45).

our economic arrangements fail to conform to the demands of human dignity lived in community, they must be questioned and transformed. These convictions have a biblical basis. They are also supported by a long tradition of theological and philosophical reflection and through the reasoned analysis of human experience by contemporary men and women.³⁴

This position—that social and financial institutions are meant to serve the human person rather than vice versa and that just solutions will be judged by how well they “respect the dignity of those who would be most strongly affected by its consequences”³⁵—is fundamental. Economic structures that create or sustain subhuman living conditions or undermine the flourishing of human persons are judged to be immoral, unjust, and sinful.

Yet insofar as this understanding of human dignity is rooted in the social nature of the person, it can never be separated from a commitment to *the common good*. Poverty dehumanizes not only by preventing access to the most basic necessities for life (e.g., food, clean water, adequate shelter, health care) but also to the fundamental social goods required for persons to reach their full potential (e.g., education, freedom).³⁶ Debt policies, via both total debt burden and structural adjustment conditions, undermine the common good by undermining the flourishing of human persons. As the USCCB notes:

The common good is the sum total of those conditions in society that make it possible for all persons to achieve their full potential.... Ultimately, debt policies must take into account the good of the whole society, not just segments of it, and the global common good, not just that of individual nations. A moral assessment of debt policies, therefore, must include the extent to which the debt burden undermines the ability of governments to fulfill their obligation to promote the com-

³⁴ USCCB, *Economic Justice for All*, no. 28.

³⁵ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *At the Service of the Human Community*, Introduction.

³⁶ Paul VI captures the relationship between poverty and human dignity succinctly: “What are less than human conditions? The material poverty of those who lack the bare necessities of life, and the moral poverty of those who are crushed under the weight of their own self-love; oppressive political structures resulting from the abuse of ownership or the improper exercise of power, from the exploitation of the worker or unjust transactions. What are truly human conditions? The rise from poverty to the acquisition of life’s necessities; the elimination of social ills; broadening the horizons of knowledge; acquiring refinement and culture. From there one can go on to acquire a growing awareness of other people’s dignity, a taste for the spirit of poverty, an active interest in the common good, and a desire for peace. Then man can acknowledge the highest values and God Himself, their author and end. Finally and above all, there is faith—God’s gift to men of good will—and our loving unity in Christ, who calls all men to share God’s life as sons of the living God, the Father of all men” (*Populorum progressio*, no. 21).

mon good, forcing them to spend their scarce resources on debt service rather than on critical investments in health, education, or clean water. Debt policies cannot be judged solely in terms of their impact on individual countries or institutions but must take into account the interests and needs of all those affected by debt, at home and abroad. From this broader perspective, the debilitating debt of poor countries far removed from our own is a problem because it erodes the global common good.³⁷

While the principles of human dignity and the common good can sometimes appear deployed as separate, two additional principles which emphasize and clarify their interconnectedness play a central role in Catholic arguments on debt relief.

The first of these is *solidarity*. Solidarity is less a principle than a virtue based on a robust notion of the shared humanity and interconnectedness of persons. As the USCCB notes:

Pope John Paul II described solidarity as “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all” (*Sollicitudo rei socialis*, no. 38). In the case of debt, solidarity is the virtue that motivates people around the world to work toward alleviating the debt burden in order to give new hope to the poorest of the poor. Solidarity also calls for co-responsibility on the part of debtors and creditors in finding fair and workable solutions to this crisis, as part of a broader commitment to protect human life and respect human dignity. They are co-responsible not because they share the blame for the debt crisis, though that is often the case, but because solidarity demands that those who have a capacity to resolve the crisis work together to find a just and effective solution. The failure to do so is not only a technical or political mistake, but also a failure of solidarity.

The Pontifical Council calls for the creation of “new norms of solidarity” based on “the equal dignity of all peoples” as well as “the increased interdependence between countries as well as the need for international collaboration.” Beginning with dialogue and cooperation, they envision such solidarity as helping “to transform economic relations (commercial, financial, and monetary) into relations of justice and mutual service, while at present they are often relations based on positions of strength and vested interest.”³⁸

The second clarifying principle is *subsidiarity*. In some contemporary discourse, subsidiarity can be wielded in opposition to solidarity.

³⁷ Administrative Board of the USCCB, “A Jubilee Call for Debt Forgiveness.”

³⁸ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *At the Service of the Human Community*, no. III.1.

As the USCCB makes clear, however, subsidiarity properly understood is in fact a specification of solidarity:

The principle of subsidiarity helps define the different responsibilities for promoting the common good of individuals, private groups, governments, and international authorities. Subsidiarity has a two-fold significance for international debt. First, individuals, the family, and voluntary associations are the building blocks of society. Ensuring that the needs of the most vulnerable are met in a particular country or region requires the participation of civil society—individuals and non-governmental organizations who stand with and serve the poor—in decision-making processes around the debt issue.

Second, nothing should be done by a higher or larger entity that can be done as well by a lower or smaller one; conversely, problems that cannot be solved by individuals, civil society, or even individual nation states must be addressed by international structures. In the case of debt, international institutions and movements have a critical role to play in fostering authentic development in countries unable to do so themselves. In some areas, this will require the establishment of new international norms and structures that can better address the global economic factors that have contributed to the debt crisis. At the same time, international institutions and creditor countries must be careful not to impose solutions on debtor nations without respecting the legitimate role of local governments and civil society in shaping their future.³⁹

Thus, the Pontifical Council makes clear that responsibility for the crisis lies on both sides of the divide and outlines key responsibilities for each of the parties involved—industrialized countries, developing countries, creditor and debtor countries, national and international commercial banks, large transnational corporations, and multilateral financial organizations (e.g., the World Bank, the IMF, regional development banks). But responsibility is not equally weighted. As they note repeatedly, “Due to their greater economic power, the industrialized countries bear a heavier responsibility which they must acknowledge and accept.”⁴⁰ This perspective is echoed by the U.S. Bishops and John Paul II.

³⁹ Administrative Board of the USCCB, “A Jubilee Call for Debt Relief.”

⁴⁰ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 8. The Pontifical Council uses analogous language with multilateral corporations. Multilateral Financial Organizations are called to take decisions “in a spirit of justice and solidarity at the service of all” (15). Priority, they counsel, must be granted to people over financial mechanisms. MFOs are called to “respect the dignity and sovereignty of each nation... while remembering that the interdependence of national economies is a fact which can and must become an acknowledged bond of solidarity” (16). They call for a reorganization of these MFOs, particularly to allow for full participation of developing countries in the decision-making processes.

The Word Made Flesh: A Scriptural Starting Point

The tradition of Catholic social teaching has been characterized, like the broader moral tradition of which it is a part, by a lack of explicit use of Scripture as a source. The tradition emerged in a context dominated by a Neoscholastic approach to natural law and which attempted to ground its arguments common human realities, putatively to be accessible to the reasoning faculties of all persons of good will. Over the course of its 150-year history, the tradition also becomes somewhat self-referential, grounding itself intertextually via references to prior papal and curial documents. We see this methodology continued in the Pontifical Council's, *At the Service of the Human Community* and the USCCB's *Relieving Third World Debt: A Call for Co-Responsibility, Justice, and Solidarity*⁴¹

But with *Economic Justice for All*, we see a shift catalyzed by the Second Vatican Council. Following the method employed in their previous pastoral letter, *The Challenge of Peace* (1983), the U.S. Bishops open their analysis of and argument for "The Christian Vision of Economic Life" with an extended reflection on Scripture. They "turn," in their own words, "to the Scriptures for guidance."⁴² They provide a reading of salvation history in the midst of which comes reference to debt and the jubilee:

In the midst of this saving history stands the covenant at Sinai (Ex 19-24). It begins with an account of what God has done for the people (Ex 19:1-6; cf. Jos 24:1-13) and includes from God's side a promise of steadfast love (*hesed*) and faithfulness (*'emeth*, Ex 34:5-7). The people are summoned to ratify this covenant by faithfully worshiping God alone and by directing their lives according to God's will, which was made explicit in Israel's great legal codes such as the Decalogue (Ex 20:1-17) and the Book of the Covenant (Ex 20:22-23:33). Far from being an arbitrary restriction on the life of the people, these codes made life in community possible. The specific laws of the covenant protect human life and property, demand respect for parents and the spouses and children of one's neighbor, and manifest a special concern for the vulnerable members of the community: widows, orphans, the poor, and strangers in the land. Laws such as that for the Sabbath year when the land was left fallow (Ex 23:11; Lv 25:1-7) and for the year of release of debts (Dt 15:1-11) summoned people to respect the land as God's gift and reminded Israel that as a people freed by God from bondage they were to be concerned for the poor and oppressed in their midst. Every fiftieth year a jubilee was proclaimed as a year of "liberty throughout the land" and property was to be restored to its original owners (Lv 25:8-17, cf. Is 61:1-2; Lk 4:18-19). The codes of

⁴¹ The Pontifical Council, for example, appeals primarily to a particular theological anthropology and cites as its theological sources prior magisterial teaching. The word "Gospel" appears twice, but does little work.

⁴² *Economic Justice for All*, no. 29.

Israel reflect the norms of the covenant: reciprocal responsibility, mercy, and truthfulness. They embody a life in freedom from oppression: worship of the One God, rejection of idolatry, mutual respect among people, care and protection for every member of the social body. Being free and being a co-responsible community are God's intentions for us.⁴³

The analysis continues, highlighting the scriptural narrative on economic and social justice, as well as discipleship, with particular attention to Jesus, the poor, and community. The Bishops integrate into their analysis and arguments "biblical themes, such as the treatment of the most vulnerable (widows and orphans) as a measure of the moral character of the early Hebrew community... and Jesus' use of stories about debtors treated mercifully as being revelatory of the quality of God's love and how people should treat each other."⁴⁴

The turn to Scripture and the highlighting of the practice of jubilee outlined in Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15 was not original with the Bishops. By 1986, this scriptural referent was already a main interpretive framework of the debt relief movement, a central image originally brought to bear on the question by the early missionaries and relief workers who surfaced the issue in the late 1970s and around which the grassroots movement for debt relief in the late 1980s coalesced.⁴⁵ Thus, from the beginning, Scripture played an important role in the analysis and argumentation of this particular question. This turn to Scripture becomes increasingly prominent through the 1980s and 1990s.

And it becomes a signal component of the methodology of John Paul II. While extended scriptural reflections are included in earlier writings (e.g., *Sollicitudo*), with *Veritatis splendor* (1993), John Paul II shifts to opening his encyclicals with an extensive exegetical reflection on Scripture.⁴⁶ He utilizes this methodology in *Tertio millennio adveniente*, his apostolic letter calling the Roman Catholic Church to begin preparation for the jubilee of the Year 2000. Here he opens with St. Paul's claim that the incarnation happens in the "fullness of time" (Gal 4:4-7) and a scriptural meditation on the fullness of the mystery of redemptive incarnation.

Again, narrating salvation history, John Paul II locates "the custom of Jubilees" within this notion of the fullness of time and particularly

⁴³ *Economic Justice for All*, no. 36.

⁴⁴ Donnelly, "Making the Case for Jubilee," 201.

⁴⁵ Donnelly elsewhere provides a history and assessment of the informal, grassroots network of missionaries, NGOs and churches that catalyzed the debt relief movement in "Proclaiming Jubilee: The Debt and Structural Adjustment Network" (2002).

⁴⁶ A secondary study would analyze the ways that John Paul II used Scripture, particularly in encyclicals. For the purposes of this essay, I am leaving aside the evaluation of his hermeneutical approach.

within the Judeo-Christian “duty to sanctify time” (no. 10). He interprets Luke 4:16-30, Jesus’ reading from Isaiah, as the fulfillment of the jubilee: “All Jubilees point to this “time” and refer to the Messianic mission of Christ.... In this way he ushers in a “year of the Lord’s favor,” which he proclaims not only with his words but above all by his actions. The jubilee, “a year of the Lord’s favour,” characterizes all the activity of Jesus; it is not merely the recurrence of an anniversary in time” (no. 11).

Jesus, thus, in word and deed represents the fulfillment of the Old Testament jubilee tradition, a tradition of which the pontiff offers a beautiful exegetical reflection (no. 12). Not only does he identify the jubilee as a requirement of justice, since according to the Law of Israel, justice “consisted in protection of the weak” (no. 13). He notes particularly its theological focus, that the jubilee was a time dedicated in a special way to God and that the cancellation of debt and freeing of slaves was to be done in honor of God (no. 12). He continues, rooting the principle of the universal destination of goods in Scripture, creation, and jubilee:

The foundations of this tradition were strictly theological, linked first of all with the theology of Creation and with that of Divine Providence. It was a common conviction, in fact, that to God alone, as Creator, belonged the “dominium altum”—lordship over all Creation and over the earth in particular (cf. Lev 25:23). If in his Providence God had given the earth to humanity, that meant that he had given it to everyone. Therefore the riches of Creation were to be considered as a common good of the whole of humanity. Those who possessed those goods as personal property were really only stewards, ministers charged with working in the name of God, who remains the sole owner in the full sense, since it is God’s will that created good should serve everyone in a just way. The jubilee year was meant to restore this social justice (no. 13).

In the end, he makes two critically important claims. First, at the end of his analysis of Israel’s practice of jubilee he notes:

The social doctrine of the Church, which has always been a part of Church teaching and which has developed greatly in the last century, particularly after the Encyclical *Rerum novarum*, is rooted in the tradition of the jubilee year (no. 13).

Second, he claims the centrality of this image for his own work:

Since the publication of the very first document of my Pontificate, *I have spoken explicitly of the Great Jubilee*, suggesting that the time leading up to it be lived as “a new Advent.” This theme has since reappeared many times, and was dwelt upon at length in the Encyclical

Dominum et vivificantem. In fact, preparing for the Year 2000 has become as it were a hermeneutical key of my Pontificate (no. 23).

Jubilee—this theologically thick and scripturally rich practice—according to John Paul II is at the root of the tradition of Catholic social teaching and is the hermeneutical key to his whole pontificate.

Have No Other Gods Before Me: Worship as the Heart of Morality

For John Paul II and the U.S. Bishops, the practice of jubilee is located within the context of the identity of the people of Israel and worship. Jubilee is a practical structure of grace that reminds Israel that they are a people freed by God from bondage and slavery, and that they “embody a life in freedom from oppression: worship of the One God, rejection of idolatry, mutual respect among people, care and protection for every member of the social body.”⁴⁷ It was “a time dedicated in a special way to God” where sins, debts and enslavement were forgiven in honor of God.⁴⁸ Jubilee—the forgiveness of debt, the forgiveness of sin, the canceling of inequalities, the restoration of equality and dignity, the recreation of community, the reconciliation of all accounts—is at its heart a practice of worship.

It should come as no surprise, then, that John Paul II’s exhortation for the preparation of the jubilee year of 2000 is set within a sacramental framework. *Tertio millennio adveniente*, written in 1994, sets out a six-year program for individual and ecclesial preparation for the coming of the third millennium. The first three years is to be a time of examination of conscience—a preparatory practice for reconciliation. The second three years are structured in a Trinitarian and sacramental mode. Year One (1997) is dedicated to Jesus Christ, emphasizing the “distinctly Christological character” of the jubilee. It is a year dedicated to a “renewed appreciation of baptism.”⁴⁹ Year Two (1998) is the year of the Holy Spirit, dedicated to “a renewed appreciation of the presence and activity of the Spirit, who acts within the Church both in the Sacraments, especially in Confirmation, and in the variety of charisms, roles and ministries which he inspires for the good of the Church.”⁵⁰ Year Three is the year of God the Father: “In this third year the sense of being on a “journey to the Father” should encourage everyone to undertake, by holding fast to Christ the Redeemer of man, a journey of authentic conversion.... This is the proper context for a renewed appreciation and more intense celebration of the Sacrament of

⁴⁷ *Economic Justice for All*, no. 36.

⁴⁸ *Tertio millennio adveniente*, no. 12.

⁴⁹ *Tertio millennio adveniente*, no. 40-1.

⁵⁰ *Tertio millennio adveniente*, no. 45.

Penance in its most profound meaning.”⁵¹ These six years of preparation culminate in the year 2000, in the year of jubilee. This is the year of the Eucharist, the year of celebration, the year of rejoicing.

It is within the discussion of the sixth and final year of preparation, the year of the journey to the Father, of penance and conversion, that John Paul II locates the issue of debt relief:

It will therefore be necessary, especially during this year, to emphasize the theological virtue of *charity*, recalling the significant and lapidary words of the First Letter of John: “God is love” (4:8, 16). Charity, in its twofold reality as love of God and neighbor is the summing up of the moral life of the believer. It has in God its source and its goal. From this point of view, if we recall that Jesus came to “preach the good news to the poor” (Mt 11:5; Lk 7:22), how can we fail to lay greater emphasis on the Church’s preferential option for the poor and outcast? Indeed, it has to be said that a commitment to justice and peace in a world like ours, marked by so many conflicts and intolerable social and economic inequalities, is a necessary condition for the preparation and celebration of the Jubilee. Thus, in the spirit of the Book of Leviticus (25:8-12), Christians will have to raise their voice on behalf of all the poor of the world, proposing the Jubilee as an appropriate time to give thought, among other things, to reducing substantially, if not canceling outright, the international debt which seriously threatens the future of many nations.⁵²

Thus, *Tertio millennio adveniente* sets the issue of debt relief within a liturgical framework, a practice of penance, conversion, and charity, moving from Baptism toward Eucharist through a constant practice of examination of conscience.

This correlation of the seemingly secular question of debt relief and the Christian practice of examen and penance is not entirely unheralded. Rather, it reflects an emerging methodological move within magisterial attention to economic questions. Consider, for example, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, written seven years earlier. Here John Paul II attends to issues of global economics more broadly, officially sanctioning the growing understanding within Catholic theology that sin is not only individual but can be structural as well. And he pulls no punches in identifying the sin at the heart of those structures that dehumanize and asphyxiate the poor: “the idolatry of money, ideology,

⁵¹ *Tertio millennio adveniente*, no. 50.

⁵² *Tertio millennio adveniente*, no. 50-1.

class and technology.”⁵³ Here, at the root of issues related to “development” is the question of idolatry or worship.⁵⁴

The U.S. Bishops make this same claim the previous year, though somewhat more subtly. As noted above, *Economic Justice for All* provides an extended scriptural narrative on economic and social justice. A recurring theme in this narrative is that of idolatry. The bishops highlight that the prime sin in much of the biblical tradition is idolatry (no. 33); that idolatry encompasses not only the overt worship of idols, “but also manifestations of idolatry, such as the quest for unrestrained power and the desire for great wealth (Is 40:12-20; 44:1-20; Wis 13:1-14:31; Col 3:5)” (no. 33); that the prophets see how the rich are prone to idolatry and apostasy, both of which are tied to violence and oppression (no. 49); and so forth. For the bishops, the sin of idolatry is central to the biblical perspective on economics.

In identifying the heart of the sin, they also identify the heart of the solution: conversion. The call to conversion frames their entire document, from the preface (no. 23) to their final chapter, where conversion is named as the first step in the “Christian Vocation in the World Today.” As they note, “The transformation of social structures begins with and is always accompanied by a conversion of the heart” (no. 328).⁵⁵ Conversion is necessary for ourselves, to overcome our own “idolatry of accumulating material goods and seeking safety in them” (no. 328). Likewise, conversion is one necessary antidote to the idolatry named in *Sollicitudo* as well (no. 38).

For the U. S. Bishops, a first and ongoing step in the lifelong process of conversion is that of worship and prayer, particularly in the

⁵³ *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, no. 37. John Paul II, though commenting on *Populorum progressio*, expands here on Paul VI. Pope Paul, in criticizing the emergence of neo-liberal economics argued: “This unbridled liberalism paves the way for a particular type of tyranny, rightly condemned by Our predecessor Pius XI, for it results in ‘the international imperialism of money’” (no. 26). What was identified as imperialism in 1967 has been recognized as idolatry in 1987.

⁵⁴ Critics might object that invoking the term “idolatry” will alienate secular interlocutors. However, the term idolatry—when understood in the context of ancient Israel—illuminates a key aspect of many of these questions. For a key objection to idolatry in the Hebrew Scriptures concerned the often allied practice of human sacrifice, see, for example, Jon Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). To invoke the question of idolatry today is to ask the question: does a particular practice entail the sacrifice of human persons? Secular texts, such as Kim and Mullen, *Dying For Growth* (cited earlier), understand this linkage. In the conclusion of their chapter, which is subtitled: “The Idolatry of Growth,” they state: “the pattern of growth that shapes (and that can destroy) real human lives is to a considerable extent the fruit of political choices, which are not magical but quite mundane” (*Dying for Growth*, 42-43).

⁵⁵ In this section, the US Bishops explicitly cite the insights of liberation theology, as captured in *Justice in the World* (1971) and the documents of Medellín.

context of the Eucharist (no. 329).⁵⁶ As they note: “Worship and common prayer are the wellsprings that give life to any reflection on economic problems and that continually call the participants to greater fidelity to discipleship” (no. 329). These are also the practices necessary to meet one of the central mandates of the Second Vatican Council, named here as the “Call to Holiness in the World.” For at its core, the issue of debt relief—or any economic engagement by Christians or the church—is not simply one of following the particular social or moral principles; it is about embodying the worship of God in the world. As they note:

Holiness is not limited to the sanctuary or to moments of private prayer; it is a call *to direct our whole heart and life toward God* and according to God’s plan for this world. For the laity, holiness is achieved in the midst of the world, in family, in community, in friendships, in work, in leisure, in citizenship. Through their competency and by their activity, lay men and women have the vocation to bring the light of the Gospel to economic affairs, “so that the world may be filled with the Spirit of Christ and may more effectively attain its destiny in justice, in love, and in peace” (citing the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 36) (no. 332, emphasis added).

Thus, in this post-Vatican II engagement on questions of economics in general and debt relief in particular, liturgical practices from the Eucharist to the examination of conscience emerge as a critical methodological component. They are understood as epistemologically necessary for conducting a “theological reading” of modern problems (in the words of *Sollicitudo rei socialis*); by illuminating new dimensions of particular issues (e.g., sin) or perhaps redescribing them entirely (e.g., idolatry), they point to necessary dimensions of authentic and effective solutions (e.g., conversion and reconciliation).

And we see a growing recognition of deep interconnections between liturgical practices, character, and social action—that liturgy is crucial for cultivating virtues, training vision, realizing connectedness:

The liturgy teaches us to have grateful hearts: to thank God for the gift of life, the gift of this earth and the gift of all people. It turns our hearts from self-seeking to a spirituality that sees the signs of true discipleship in our sharing of goods and working for justice. By uniting us in prayer with all the people of God, with the rich and the poor, with

⁵⁶ The bishops use a similar methodology in their pastoral letter *The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response* (1983), opening with an extended scriptural reflection and closing with a turn to worship. For an analysis of their method here, see M. Therese Lysaught, “From the Challenge of Peace to the Gift of Peace: Reading the Consistent Ethic of Life as an Ethic of Peacemaking.” In Thomas A. Nairn ed., *The Consistent Ethic of Life: Assessing its Reception and Relevance* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2008), 109-131.

those near and dear, and with those in distant lands, liturgy challenges our way of living and refines our values. Together in the community of worship, we are encouraged to use the goods of this earth for the benefit of all (no. 331).

The New Creation has Come: Peacemaking as the Context

Examen, penance, conversion, and reconciliation—these are all ingredients of the church's practice of peacemaking. Standing in the tradition of Catholic social thought, the literature on debt relief reflects the deep commitment to peace that lies at the heart of that tradition. While sharing the tradition's concern to forestall social unrest and conflict, we find here a growing recognition of the violence that has become inherent in contemporary economic structures.

The connection between economics and peace has been present in the Catholic social tradition since *Rerum novarum*. Leo XIII, with a prescient eye toward the bloodshed to come in the twentieth-century, urged attention to the social ills of industrialization not only because they were an affront to human dignity but because therein lay the seeds of social instability, of revolution, of violence. Leo's concept of peace reflects his neo-Thomistic commitments and perhaps his time, insofar as he seems to equate peace with social harmony—the benign humming of civil society that occurs when various members of the social hierarchy exercise their duties and responsibilities relative to those positioned elsewhere in the social order.

A steadfast commitment to peace can be traced through the Catholic social tradition as it develops over the twentieth century. As the tradition develops, so does the church's discourse on peace. Post-World War II, the focus shifts from localized revolutions to Cold War and the grim prospects of nuclear engagement.⁵⁷ Equally, the intrinsic connection between peace and economics evolves, culminating in Paul VI's now famous insight in *Populorum progressio* that "Development [is] the New Name for Peace." As he notes there:

Extreme disparity between nations in economic, social and educational levels provokes jealousy and discord, often putting peace in jeopardy... When we fight poverty and oppose the unfair conditions of the present, we are not just promoting human well-being; we are also furthering man's spiritual and moral development, and hence we are benefiting the whole human race. For peace is not simply the absence of warfare, based on a precarious balance of power; it is fashioned by efforts directed day after day toward the establishment of the

⁵⁷ See, for example, *Pacem in terris*, *Gaudium et spes*, and *The Challenge of Peace*. Even *Sollicitudo rei socialis* engages the problematic of the Eastern and Western blocs. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the context—and therefore conversation on peace—shifts.

ordered universe willed by God, with a more perfect form of justice among men.⁵⁸

Yet here we still see neo-Thomistic traces—one that equates peace with proper social ordering. Moreover, the conceptual categories of the industrial revolution and the Cold War still hold sway. In *Tertio millennio adveniente*, for example, John Paul II gives a review of Catholic social teaching on the “relations between labor and capital.” He concludes this summary with the following:

In my Encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis* I had earlier offered a systematic reformulation of the Church’s entire social doctrine against the background of the East-West confrontation and the danger of nuclear war. The two elements of the Church’s social doctrine—the safeguarding of human dignity and rights in the sphere of a just relation between labor and capital and the promotion of peace—were closely joined in this text. The Papal Messages of 1 January each year, begun in 1968 in the pontificate of Paul VI, are also meant to serve the cause of peace.⁵⁹

Thus, international debt relief, for John Paul and the Pontifical Council, are not simply matters of economic justice; the debt crisis of the developing world is an impediment to world peace.⁶⁰

Much of the impoverishment of the developing world, as the U.S. Bishops and pontiff note repeatedly, is intricately enmeshed with the massive squandering of financial resources on unnecessary armaments and military expenditures and debt service. Both budget lines divert resources from basic human and social goods, exacerbating the extreme poverty of the countries caught in bondage to international financial structures. Such poverty, which is directly correlated to morbidity and mortality, is one of the chief forms of structural violence worldwide.

Yet in addition to these more conventional aspects of the issue, the jubilee movement and the debt relief question introduce a radically new element into magisterial teaching on peace. They do this by returning to the tradition’s scriptural roots. For the vision of peace captured in the scriptural practice of jubilee is not one of mere social harmony, not one of a social balance achieved when hierarchically-ordered members of the social bodies fulfill their proper duties and obligations. It is a vision that recognizes that economic practices—even in ancient Israel—inevitably distort proper social relations over time; that injustices become embedded in communities through economic

⁵⁸ *Populorum progressio*, no. 76.

⁵⁹ *Tertio millennio adveniente*, no. 22.

⁶⁰ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *At the Service of the Human Community*, no. III.4.

practices that are *prima facie* reasonable, and perhaps even necessary. So that even within the space of two generations, radical economic actions are necessary to dismantle social hierarchies (e.g., slavery, servitude, and master) and to *restore* the identity of the poor as full persons and equal members of the community.

Peace, then, is not simply the maintenance of proper relationships between labor and capital or lack of conflict between nations. Peace, here, is redemption, liberation, freedom from economic and social bondage—it is a vision of the Kingdom of God incarnated in the messy materiality of the world, or at least a gesture in that direction.

As such, peace as conceived here involves not only “justice”—it also requires reconciliation. It certainly requires “reconciliation” of financial accounts.⁶¹ But it requires first and recursively reconciliation with God. It requires a turn from idolatry and repentance from our distracted worship of money, power, class and technology. It requires that individuals and communities be restored to right relationship with God as the true God, the God of life, love, justice, mercy and peace.

Reconciliation with God—God’s merciful and gratuitous forgiveness of our debts of idolatry and more—enables merciful, joyful, and gratuitous economic reconciliation between persons in community. Being freed from bondage to money and class is a necessary prerequisite for the *prima facie* non-rational actions of cancelling of debt and the restoration of familial land. This foolishness to the Greeks is a practical manifestation of right worship. Only when persons are rightly ordered to God can money be rightly ordered to those human persons in our communities who we claim to be God’s image. The justice of right worship of God achieved through reconciliation lays the groundwork for reconciliation with our neighbors which moves through yet transcends justice.

Yet the bonds of idols hold us tightly. Such reconciliation is not blithely attained. It requires, as made clear by the bishops and John Paul II, sustained habits of examination of conscience, penance, Eucharist, which are necessary for our ongoing conversion. The peace of the jubilee, therefore, is the fruit of sacramental practice. Just as violence is correlated with idolatry, peace is correlated with right worship.

⁶¹ The constant interplay between economic and religious language throughout the Hebrew and Christian Scripture is no accident yet remains under-recognized by contemporary theologians. From the Levitical Jubilee to the myriad economic analogies and parables used by Jesus, the fundamental binary between God and Mammon, James’s castigation of the economic inequalities in his community, to the central soteriological metaphor “redemption”—the deep interconnections between “religious” reconciliation and economic reconciliation is one of the constant undercurrents of the scriptural witness. That Jesus teaches the disciples to pray “Forgive us our debts,” highlights the material and economic nature of our sinfulness.

With the literature on debt relief, then, the way that peace is conceptualized in the Catholic social literature subtly shifts to encompass a more deeply theological and biblical vision of shalom. This vision stands alongside more conventional notions of peace as lack of overt conflict between players whose identities are established by contemporary economics and politics. And although it is a vision spoken first to the church, there is no presumption that because it is biblical, that because it derives from an understanding of God's Kingdom, that debt forgiveness should not be practiced by secular agents in the secular sphere as a practice of peacemaking.

The Joy of the Gospel: Toward a New Moral Method

Magisterial writings on debt relief provide warrant for the further development of a more theologically integrated and richer practice of Catholic social thought. The method that emerges in this literature outlines a framework for Catholic social ethicists going forward—one in which the principles of Catholic social thought are illuminated by being nested in a theological matrix comprised of Word, sacrament, and peace. Such a matrix enables the conversion of the hearts of individual Christians that is a necessary first step for dismantling the structures of sin that are rooted both in our persons and in our policies.

While the issue of debt relief is currently categorized as a question of social ethics, the method developed here points a way forward for the renewal of Catholic moral theology as a whole. One of the ongoing tasks within our field is to synthesize the discourses of moral theology and Catholic social teaching that developed on parallel tracks from 1891 forward. An enormous amount of work remains to be done in this regard. We have here a roadmap for both a reorientation of moral theology and the reintegration of the too-siloed subdisciplines of ethics.

This emerging method also points toward additional questions. The literature on debt relief advances our method by drawing on Scripture and liturgy, but in the documents, these theological sources generally stand alongside the principles and hard data on the question in discrete sections. Further work needs to be done to integrate the various sources into a wholistic methodology.⁶² Additional questions could be raised about hermeneutics. While it is a great step forward that magisterial authors have reclaimed Scripture as a starting point, the manner in which they invoke and interpret Scripture is worth further study. While I have focused in this paper on the question of debt relief, it would be worth surveying post-Vatican II magisterial writings to see

⁶² *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, promulgated by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace in 2004, makes significant advances in this area.

if these same methodological shifts are made with regard to other issues—if so, what sort of consistency is emerging; if not, why the difference?

As a final observation, Catholic teaching on debt relief was shaped by a contextual methodology, one that exemplifies the Council's vision of the church in the modern world. It was developed in conjunction with a global network of ecumenical and even non-faith-based organizations working together for a specific goal. The movement itself involved an extensive array of actors within the Catholic Church: Maryknolls, Jesuits, and other religious orders particularly those with missionary arms or social action offices; parish-based peace and justice groups; relief agencies; and academics and universities.⁶³ The process used to craft many of these documents in the 1980s was consultative. The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace drew "heavily on the work of laypeople, namely a group of European Catholic bankers and international organization personnel," a method followed by the USCCB in drafting its 1986 and 1989 statements.⁶⁴ Both the Vatican and the USCCB convened meetings with leaders in government and financial institutions, particularly but not solely Catholic leaders, to participate in conferences, consultations, and review processes.

The consultative, contextual approach to issues waned in the church during the 1990s and early 2000s. But with Pope Francis, we see this methodology in full bloom, in action. While we await his first encyclical, we see in Pope Francis a lived embodiment of Scripture, worship, principle and peacemaking in daily actions; his consultative call for all Catholics to weigh in on issues related to marriage and family; his pastoral call for examination of conscience, repentance, and conversion from idolatry across all levels of the church; and his relentless refocusing of the world's attention on the individual faces of the poor, marginalized, and oppressed as the starting point and norm of the church's witness in the world. **M**

⁶³ Donnelly, "Making the Case for Jubilee," 187.

⁶⁴ Donnelly, "Making the Case for Jubilee," 197.