Opinion



Pope Francis listens as Domingo Sugranyes Bickel, president of the Centesimus Annus Pro Pontifice Foundation, speaks during an audience with business leaders and Catholic social teaching experts at the Vatican May 13, 2016. The foundation works to promote and implement the social teachings of the church. Those at the audience were attending a conference sponsored by the foundation. (CNS/L'Osservatore Romano)



by Michael Sean Winters

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This week, I am in Warsaw for a conference on Catholic social teaching. At last year's event, the following paper by Msgr. John Strynkowski, a priest of the Diocese of Brooklyn, set the stage for the conference and captured the imagination of all present. Too often, we speak and write as if Catholic social teaching just dropped from the sky with Pope Leo XIII and his seminal encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, but that teaching is built on Scripture and doctrine and Strynkowski explored those foundations. He has graciously agreed to permit NCR to publish his talk here at Distinctly Catholic. —Michael Sean Winters

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Scriptural and doctrinal foundations of Catholic social teaching

"I am who I am" (Exodus 3:14). We are here because of those words, the words that God spoke to Moses out of the burning bush on Mount Horeb three thousand and two hundred years ago. These are the words that God used to respond to Moses' question about his name. By these words God defined and identified himself not only to Moses, but to all who would come to believe in him for centuries to come. We too have heard and received these words, which have become part of our deepest being as Christians.

> To engage in the right worship of the true God means doing the deeds of justice and mercy and to do the deeds of justice and mercy is know the closeness of the true God.

Generation after generation of Jews and Christians has pondered these words in order to have some insight into their mystery, into the very mystery of God. But for our purposes today these words must be seen in the entire context of the encounter between God and Moses as described in the third chapter of the Book of Exodus.

God reveals his name in the context of giving a mission to Moses. God says to Moses: "I have witnessed the affliction of my people and have heard their cry against their taskmasters, so I know well what they are suffering. Therefore I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians and lead them up from that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey ..." (Ex. 3:7-8). God wants Moses to be his instrument in leading his people out of the land of slavery and oppression.

There is, however, another aspect of Moses' mission in that same chapter of Exodus. God commands Moses to go to "the king of Egypt and say to him: 'The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has come to meet us. So now, let us go for a three days' journey in the wilderness to offer sacrifice to the Lord, our God' " (Ex. 3:18). God's intention is to rescue his people not only from slavery but also from idolatry. Egypt was for the Israelites a land filled with the darkness of both oppression and false gods. God wanted to free his people from the bondage of injustice and idolatry.

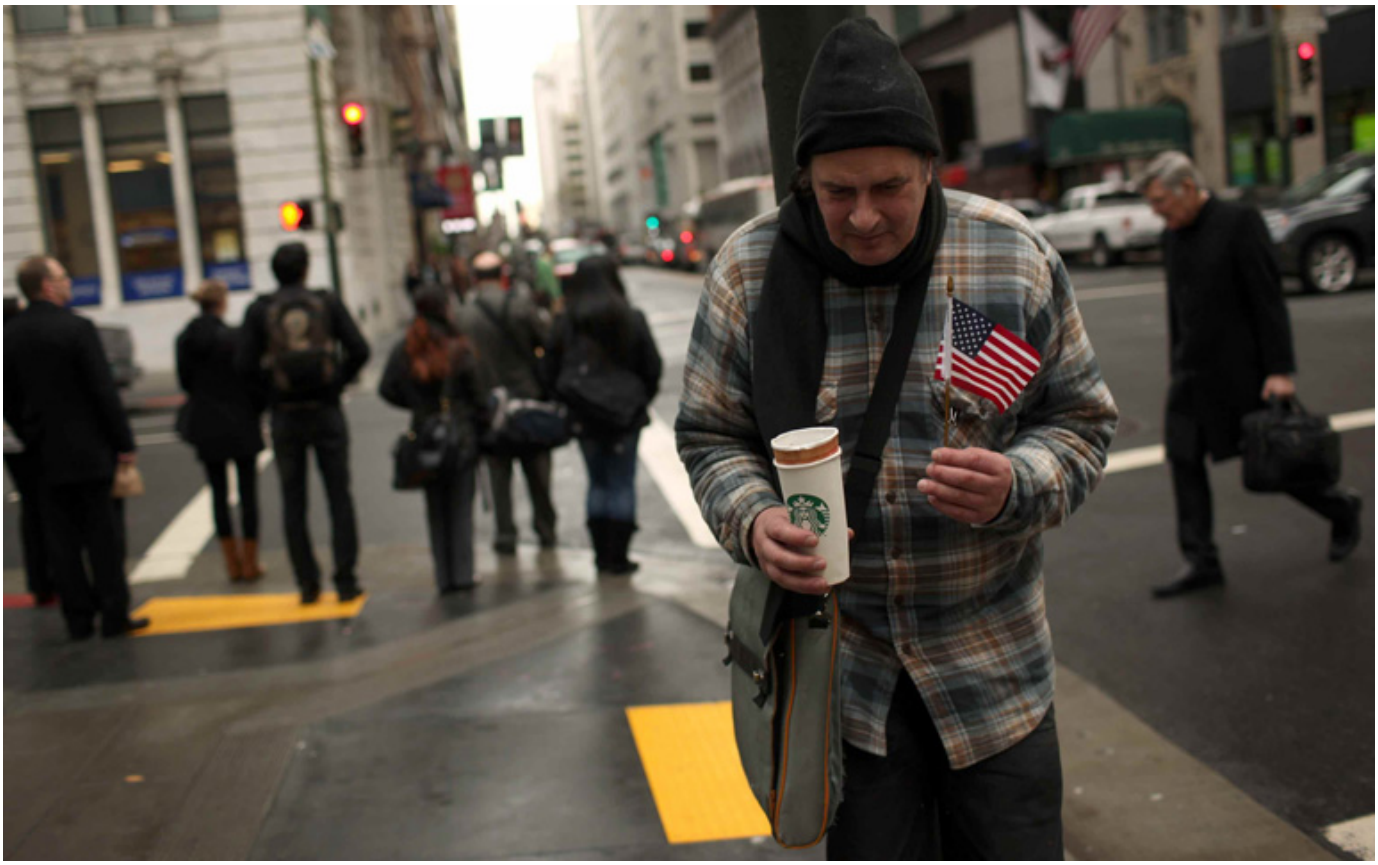
What this means is that there is no conflict between the worship of the true God and the struggle for justice. On the contrary, there is an intrinsic link between worship and justice. To worship the God who reveals himself to Moses is to accept his will for the liberation of the afflicted, and to seek the liberation of the afflicted is to make them into a people that worships the true God as happened in ancient Israel's rescue from Egypt.

What we learn from God's revelation to Moses is that God wants the salvation of the whole person, the spiritual unbinding of the person from ignorance of the true God and the corporal unbinding of the person from whatever diminishes the dignity and well-being of the person. If I remember correctly, one of the Polish words for salvation is "ocalenie." This comes from an old Polish verb, "calic" — to maintain something in its wholeness. This expresses well the principle that salvation is integral: God seeks the salvation of the entire person.

The subsequent history of salvation confirms this. Over and over again the people of ancient Israel wandered off into idolatry and over and over again through the prophets God was unrelenting in calling them back to himself. Such was his infinite mercy. But he also demanded that the mercy he showed them should be shared with others. Listen to the prophet Isaiah as he describes the fasting that worship of the true God means: "Is this not, rather, the fast that I choose: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; setting free the oppressed, breaking

off every yoke? Is it not sharing your bread with the hungry, bringing the afflicted and the homeless into your house; clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own flesh? ... Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer, you shall cry for help, and he will say: 'Here I am' " (Isaiah 58:6-7,9). To engage in the right worship of the true God means doing the deeds of justice and mercy and to do the deeds of justice and mercy is know the closeness of the true God.

This intrinsic connection between the identity and worship of the true God and the works of justice and mercy for the integral salvation of the person is furthered by Jesus. For example, John the Baptist sends two of his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" Jesus replies, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news proclaimed to them" (Luke 7:20 and 22). Jesus as the one sent by God makes his own the concern of God for the liberation of human beings from bonds that threaten their wholeness. In the Gospels we see Jesus freeing people from the burden of sin, the ultimate spiritual diminishment of the person, but his concern for the whole person extends to the body as well and to the relationships among people. Thus when he cleanses lepers he enables them to return to their communities from which they had been banned because of their disease.



A panhandler holding an American flag is seen in San Francisco's financial district, in a March 2012 file photo. (CNS/Robert Galbraith, Reuters)

The identity between God and Jesus is made clearest in the Gospel of John: "The Father and I are one" (John 10:30). When his opponents accuse him of blasphemy, Jesus replies: "If I do not perform my Father's works, do not believe me; but if I perform them, even if you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may realize and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father" (Jn. 10:37-38). Jesus calls upon his works as the Father's works to demonstrate his oneness with the Father. And what are those works? In the Gospel of John Jesus gives sight to the man born blind, enables the paralytic to walk, raises Lazarus from the dead, feeds the hungry. These are the saving and liberating works of the Father that Jesus has made his own for the integral salvation of humanity. Not only does he free people of their sins, not only does he proclaim the true worship of God in spirit and truth, but he also heals and restores life. Jesus as the good shepherd came to give life in abundance (cf. Jn. 10:10).

In his compassionate healing Jesus also acted as the just one. One of the meanings of justice is that it is the restoration of the right order between God and humanity and human beings among themselves. Thus Jesus restored the right order between ourselves and God through his death and resurrection. He restored the right order among human beings by establishing the Church as a community of love. But he also restored the right order for human beings in themselves when he re-established the wholeness of those who were diminished in their lives because of some infirmity. Compassion flows from justice and justice flows from compassion.

The Church after the death and resurrection of the Lord continued in this path of recognizing that knowledge of the true God means accepting God's concern for the salvation of the whole person. A striking example of this is Saint Paul's sharp criticism of the Christians in Corinth when they gathered for the Lord's Supper. The wealthy members of the community ate a full meal on their own while ignoring the hunger of the poor. He says to the wealthy: "… do you show contempt for the church of God and make those who have nothing feel ashamed?" After recalling the tradition of the Lord's institution of the Eucharist, he encourages the wealthy Corinthians to examine their behavior toward the poor so that they eat the bread and drink the cup worthily. Jesus' gift of himself in the sacrifice of his body on the

Cross made present in the Eucharist requires care for the body of Christ which is the Church. (Cf. 1 Corinthians 11:17-32)

Thus far I have been presenting some of the scriptural foundations of Catholic social teaching. What I have presented so far underlies the Church's engagement from the beginning of her history in deeds of mercy and charity, at first spontaneous but always inspired by the Gospel, on the part of individuals and communities, but then evolving into more organized apostolates through communities of consecrated men and women and lay associations. But the driving principle in all of this action was God's concern for the integral salvation of human beings, freeing them not only from the darkness and bondage of false gods but also from material and physical conditions that reduced their potential for greater well-being. In the twentieth century this concern became further crystallized in the Church's teaching on the fostering of justice in the political and economic spheres of society. The virtue of justice had always been a part of philosophical, theological, and spiritual discourse in the Church, but in the last century the demand for fostering justice in all of human activity, especially economic affairs, became an essential part of Church teaching and flowed from accepting as a Christian imperative God's concern for the integral salvation of human beings. But there are also doctrinal principles that underlie the Church's social teaching and it is to these that I now turn.

"The Word became flesh." By his Incarnation Jesus restored in himself God's creation of man and woman at the beginning of human history in his own image. Jesus is the perfect image of the Father and thus becomes the source of restoring all of humanity as the image of God. Jesus renews the original dignity of the human being, indeed now raising it to a still higher status. Recall what the priest prays during the Preparation of the Gifts at Mass when he pours a little water into the chalice of wine: "By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity." Humanity is called now to deeper share in the life of God and this intensifies the regard that men and women have for one another. Because of the Incarnation all human beings are connected to Christ and destined to find eternal fulfillment in him. In his Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio* St. John Paul II wrote: "Jesus came to bring integral salvation, one which embraces the whole person and all mankind, and opens up the wondrous prospect of divine filiation."

> In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus commands the cultivation of virtues which ennoble not only one's own self but, even more, enhance the well-

being of others.

The Church's defense and protection of all human beings and human rights flows not simply from a philosophical principle, or from the natural law, but even more profoundly from its belief in the connection of all human beings to Christ and their destiny in him because of the Incarnation. This connectedness and destiny of all humanity to and in Christ is also the foundation of the Church's solidarity with all peoples. Respect for the dignity and rights of others entails more than just the observance of the Ten Commandments. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus commands the cultivation of virtues which ennoble not only one's own self but, even more, enhance the well-being of others. Thus, for example, we are commanded not only not to kill another, but also not to be angry at someone or call a person a "fool" (cf. Mt. 5:21-22).

All of this requires of the Christian the cultivation of empathy as the basis for compassion, mercy and justice. One of the Italian words for the verb "empathize" is "immedesimarsi" — to make one's self similar or identical to the other. It is the ability to put one's self in the shoes of one who is suffering. The chief source of cultivating empathy in a Christian is contemplation of Christ crucified. To have a profound spiritual, indeed existential, knowledge and experience of Christ crucified leads to the ability to comprehend with the heart the suffering of others. Recall the paintings of founders of religious orders who are seen contemplating the Cross of Christ. From that contemplation flowed their efforts to come to the assistance of the poor.

Jesus' exaltation in his Resurrection was the Father's vindication of his Son's sacrifice on the Cross. As we pray in one of the acclamations after the consecration at Mass: "Save us, Savior of the world, for by your Cross and Resurrection you have set us free." Jesus has freed us from sin and death, but he has also freed us to embrace his way of self-sacrifice for the sake of others. It is this freedom that underlies the Church's insistent proclamation of principles of justice and peace today. It is this freedom that gives the magisterium the impetus to courageously defend those who are poor and vulnerable in today's world, even if it means condemnation from worldly powers. It is this freedom that enables individuals and communities of Christians to work for justice and peace even to the shedding of blood.



Brent Fernandez, who teaches Catholic social teaching at Father Ryan High School in Nashville, Tenn., tends the school garden with some of his students Aug. 12, 2015. Fernandez was one of many theology and science teachers at the three Catholic high schools in the Diocese of Nashville who planned to incorporate Pope Francis' encyclical, "Laudato Si'," into their curriculum for the school year. (CNS/Theresa Laurence, Tennessee Register)

The Risen Lord has taken possession not only of all of humanity but also of all creation. The universe belongs to him and for this reason we must cherish and care for it. This is one of the sources of the Church's concern today for the environment, for "our common home," in the words of Pope Francis. Nowhere is the Lord's possession of creation more manifest than in the sacraments. Jesus takes the elements of the earth — water, olive oil, bread, wine — and human action — imposition of hands, conjugal union — and uses them to convey his presence, grace, and compassion. All the earth is holy ground and deserves our awe and respect.

The crucified and risen Lord makes known the Father and gives us the enlivening and empowering Holy Spirit. Thus he brings us into communion with the Triune God

— the God who himself is a communion of three persons, a unity with the distinction of the three who are Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This divine communion is the foundation and constantly embracing circle of the communion of the Church, which, as the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Vatican II declares, "is a sacrament — a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race."

The Church reflects the Trinitarian unity in diversity. Bound by faith in one Lord, brought into new life and kept in that life by the same sacraments, professing the same Creed, the Church nonetheless is enriched by the diversity of her members. But unity in diversity and diversity in unity is not easily maintained, just as it not easily maintained among and within the nations of the world. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* St. John Paul II insists that the Church must be seen as a community that itself is reconciled and reconciling. The call to this mission of reconciliation by the Holy Father is obviously most relevant in a Church where there is not only inevitable and necessary diversity but also tension because of conflicting ideologies and pastoral practices, and in a world where there is the wonderful complementarity of ethnicities, languages, and cultures, but also conflict due to economic inequality, age-old hostilities, and opposition to tyranny.

In that same Exhortation St. John Paul II defines social sin as "the collective behavior of certain social groups, big or small, or even of whole nations and blocs of nations," but adds that this is "the result of the accumulation and concentration of many personal sins" (Number 16.9). He goes on to describe what I consider to be a powerful examination of conscience that must be undertaken by Christians in the effort to confront injustice and to implement the social teaching of the Church: "It is a case of the very personal sins of those who cause or support evil or exploit it; of those who are in a position to avoid, eliminate or at least limit certain social evils but who fail to do so out of laziness, fear or the conspiracy of silence, through secret complicity or indifference; of those who take refuge in the supposed impossibility of changing the world; and also of those who sidestep the effort and sacrifice required, producing specious reasons of a higher order."

It is obvious from the Holy Father's words that Christians cannot be passive in the face of evil. The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* notes that it is the Church's duty and right "to develop a social doctrine of her own and to influence society and societal structures with it by means of the responsibility and tasks to which it gives rise" (# 69). Note that the social teaching of the Church is a call to

action. Some might think that action in defending human rights, fighting injustice, and promoting peace is opposed or marginal to the Church's mission of evangelization. The Synod of Bishops in 1971 made clear that such is not the case in its concluding document *Justice in the World* approved by Blessed Paul VI: "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation." Just as the liberation of his people from slavery in Egypt was integral to God's self-revelation to Moses, so today not only deeds of charity but also action for the liberation of human beings from the violation of their dignity and rights, from injustice and war, is integral to evangelization today. To proclaim the true God means to actively promote the well-being of persons in every aspect of their being.

Can we say that the emergence of Solidarity in Poland some thirty-five years ago was an "action on behalf of justice" that emerged from a people who had been evangelized very specifically on the dignity of human beings as revealed and established by God at the very beginning of human history? And can we not say also that Solidarity was an action of evangelization manifesting to the whole world the power of the Gospel in challenging and overcoming injustice?

Up until now I have been presenting some, though by no means all, Scriptural and doctrinal foundations of Catholic social teaching. At this point I want to suggest still another source of this teaching and the action that flows from it: popular devotion. Permit me to introduce this theme with a personal experience.

In the fall of 1969 I was a priest studying in Rome for a doctorate in theology. I decided to visit my cousins in Poland for Christmas, my first visit to Poland and the first time I would meet my cousins. I flew from Rome to Warsaw on December 23, and from there I was supposed to fly to Katowice. Because of bad weather the flight was cancelled, but I met a couple from Australia who were going in the same direction and so we hired a car with a driver.

After about three hours of riding through almost total darkness, the driver told us that we were getting close to Czestochowa and that it was his practice to stop there briefly. We agreed to honor his wish. We entered the chapel that houses the image of Our Lady just before 9 p.m. I discovered in later days that at that time the image

was exposed to the veneration of pilgrims from 6 a.m. to noon and then again at 9 p.m. when the monks who care for the shrine gather for Night Prayer. With recorded trumpet music the silver shield in front of the image was raised and we were able for the first time in our lives to view this icon of Polish faith, history, and unity. It was the image that had offered hope to generations of Poles, including my grandparents who had emigrated to the United States in the early twentieth century.

After that we continued our journey and I arrived at the house of one of my cousins at 1 a.m. They received me with great joy and immediately wanted to begin planning for my stay. "Of course, you will want to go to Czestochowa," my cousin said. They were shocked when I told them I had already been there — and to this day I still marvel at the fact that on the first day of my first visit to Poland I was able to venerate the image of Our Lady of Czestochowa.

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I have been to Czestochowa many times since then. Who are the pilgrims who pray so ardently before the image? For the most part, they are the poor. And indeed, universally, aren't the poor the ones who have the deepest devotion to the Virgin Mary? Is it possible that in their poverty, in the abandonment they experience from society and governments, they recognize that God has not abandoned them but rather has given them the most beautiful of women, the Virgin Mary, the Mother of his Son, who herself shared as no one else could in the abandonment that her Son experienced on the Cross? And isn't it most significant that Mary has appeared to the poor, especially children, in remote places? Is not the Virgin Mary the clearest manifestation of God's special love for the poor? In the stark deprivations of their lives the poor experience the consolation of accompaniment by the Mother of God, who herself had been poor. And isn't it also most significant that she brings healing to the sick at so many of her shrines? She seeks the salvation of the whole person.

> The poor by their faith and devotion become a witness to the wealthy that their salvation too lies not in their possessions but in the mystery of God.

God's preferential love for the poor does not exclude the wealthy. The poor recognize that ultimately they are in the hands of God. Like the poor man Job in the Old Testament, who after all of his questioning of God because of what he is

suffering and who then surrenders to the impenetrable mystery of God, the poor know that the salvation of every human being lies in the depths of God's being, God's love, God's mystery beyond human comprehension and calculation. The poor by their faith and devotion become a witness to the wealthy that their salvation too lies not in their possessions but in the mystery of God.

Possessions can become an obstacle to faith and to care for the poor. They can become a wall to block out the cry of the poor and any threat of intrusion from them into the comfortable enclaves of the wealthy. That is why the Church is unrelenting in her criticism of the rampant consumerism that we see in today's world. Just recently a shopping mall was opened near Ground Zero in New York City and it has been called "a consumer cathedral," especially because of its high walls and opening to the sky that allows abundant light to pour into it. The religion of consumerism encroaches upon land made sacred by the deaths of three thousand innocent victims of terrorism.

Many years ago the philosopher Erich Fromm wrote: "Theologians and philosophers have been saying for a century that God is dead, but what we must confront now is the possibility that man is dead, transformed into a thing, a producer, a consumer, an idolater of other things." Catholic social teaching is a call to conscience, an awakening to the damages of a rampant consumerism that harms "our common home," destroys the sense of the common good, intensifies inequality, and threatens the well-being of vulnerable workers around the world.

God's plan in revealing himself to Moses and through his Son is the integral salvation of human beings. Out of this comes Catholic social teaching with such themes as liberation from oppression and injustice, the healing of whatever diminishes human well-being, defense of human dignity and human rights, solidarity, preferential love and option for the poor, the search for the common good, and care for creation. And from this teaching also comes action that concretizes and makes visible the demands of the Gospel.

We are here because of what God said to Moses: "I am who I am." The rest, as they say, is history.

—Msgr. John Strynkowski

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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