

# Reviving the Social Order through Catholic Social Teaching

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Your Excellency, my Lords, Ladies, distinguished guests:

You have just heard from our President about the history, purpose and direction of the Fondazione Centesimus Annus pro Pontifice. That's the elegant Roman view.

Now we turn to the UK Chapter. How, in post-Brexit, recession-prone, politically unstable Britain can anything positive be said about it, here in the Embassy of one of the founding member states of the European Union? After all, we are churning prime ministers nearly at an Italian pace, aren't we?

Well, London is Europe's most cosmopolitan city; it remains one of the top 3 global financial centres; Westminster is home to one of the oldest parliamentary assemblies in the world and exported probably the most stable legal framework that exists, English Common Law; England is one of the only remaining countries in Europe with an official state religion, although that ruffled a few feathers in Rome quite a while ago; London is a global hub for innovation, learning and the arts. At the same time, as the preferred playground of the global uber-wealthy, it suffers from some of the most extreme wealth inequality of any major city in the developed world. As a saving grace perhaps, it is also home to one of the most vibrant mass volunteering traditions in the world, rekindled in Victorian and Edwardian times, but deeply rooted in the Medieval tradition of guilds, hospices, confraternities, beguinages and other concrete expressions of social solidarity. And we have representatives of some wonderful charities here with us tonight. Thank you for coming, and, more importantly, for what you are doing.

All these specific attributes make London a uniquely interesting place to study Catholic Social Thought and to put it into practice.

## The UK Group Activities

With its constantly shifting skyline, London is quite literally a living, breathing example of Shumpeter's creative destruction at work. But what precisely are we busy creating, and what are we destroying? Will the generations ahead be impressed with the shape of our economy? With our moral and environmental and societal legacy? Is it right that some unfortunate young people will inherit fortunes of many billions when hunger and deprivation persist here under our noses? That the next generations cannot afford a home and will be burdened with excess debt from decades-long over-consumption and under-investment? That they will suffer the consequences of the

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earth's resources being plundered? Is it right that many young people suddenly question their gender identities, will never have known a stable or loving family, a father and mother, that some humans may be created literally because a payment was made, conceived asexually in laboratories, carried to term by a surrogate, because another payment was made, and delivered to some people who may have no biological connection to them, but who paid for the 'service'? So when we hear the term 'progress' – whether it's techno-scientific or political or economic or social 'progress' and we automatically ascribe a positive connotation to the term, do we never stop to think about our direction of travel? Whether such 'progress' is moral or immoral? Whether it allows mankind to enjoy greater ontological freedom in line with our unique identity as sons and daughters of the Creator, or whether it further commodifies and enslaves the human person and worsens the human condition? What precisely are we doing to our world and to each other, and for what gain? And aren't there any viable alternatives?

These are some of the questions that our UK Chapter group grapples with, in bi-monthly meetings led by a range of subject-matter experts.

Over the past 3 years, we have hosted over 20 meetings organised around year-long thematics:

- In 2021 our theme was the unique challenges presented by the public policy responses to Covid and how the power of the state can contribute to, or detract from, public interests and the common good.
- In 2022, we embarked on a theological reading of Creation centred on the Christian anthropology of man and woman created in the image and likeness of God, and what that means for our understanding of our place in the order of Creation and how we relate to the earth, to all living things, and to each other.
- Last year, we studied Pope Francis' Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* in the context of migration, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, ecumenical dialogue and intensifying polarisation in our societies.
- This year, we are exploring a yearlong theme on AI and the future of humanity, which will also be the subject of our annual conference at the Vatican.

We have also built bridges to a range of different organisations that share a common vision – several of whom presented at this afternoon's Workshop, not least Together for the Common Good, and St Mary's Twickenham University, which has launched a Master's programme in Catholic Social Thought and runs a CST blog. A number of our members and friends have recently published books on Catholic Social Thought, and the UK Chapter plays an important role in a charity accelerator launched under the auspices of the Fondazione.

Despite all these interesting meetings, the Centesimus Annus Foundation isn't meant to be a talking-shop. And CST isn't meant to be political theory, underpinning either capitalism or socialism. It completely transcends these ideological concepts. Rather, CST should be seen as a framework, a mindset, a prism through which we look at the created order, at our relationships with each other, and how we connect with the 'other' who is different. It is a 'hook' to prompt the privileged into action, with a sense of urgency; and it is a lifeline to catch the most marginalised, who are left stranded in a winner-take-all economic system. Without succumbing to a false humanistic messianism, it is a call to build the kingdom of God on earth, by living virtuously and orienting the entire socio-politico-economic order towards the common good. This holds true

equally for the political, charitable, ecclesiastical, educational and business realms. All of these 'spaces' need to be 'converted' through the living witness of CST.

### **CST contributes to a just society**

When we think about the big trends in Western history, they can be defined in terms of major shifts in collective thought and lived experience. That's why they are often referred to as 'revolutions,' because in a short span of time they completely upended the existing order. The Protestant Reformation was the first major revolution in the West. A break from Rome. The French Revolution and the Enlightenment was the second. A break from God. Then came the Industrial Revolution. A break from nature. After it came the Sexual Revolution. A break from relational commitments and from the societal norms that bind us. This sequence of revolutions, or structural breaks, has progressively deconstructed the established order, and inevitably leads to the final revolution: the Digital and AI Revolution, through which dehumanising tendencies and transhumanist impulses could fundamentally undermine and deconstruct human nature itself, the very essence of the human person, permanently altering what it means to be human. All of these 'breaks' may appear on the surface to be 'progress' – they can be seen as a cry for freedom, an emancipation from the shackles of the past. But the reality is that they all dismantled a pre-existing order and left indelible scars in the collective Western psyche.

Interdependence is the hallmark of relational beings. We are dependent upon God as created beings. But by allowing mankind to participate in the redemptive process, God also depends upon us too: to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, comfort the afflicted. We are dependent on nature, but nature requires careful stewardship for the earth to yield the fruits that God intended. And of course, we depend upon others, much as they depend upon us. All of these interdependencies can either be opportunities for ordered, loving and respectful relationships to flourish, or temptations to oppress the vulnerable and rebel against God. When we commodify that which we didn't earn, but which we received as gifts freely given by God: human life, the planet, our relationships with others, reducing every human relationship to a networking opportunity, to a factor of production, a body to be used, a consumer to be sold to, a data point to be monetised, such a mentality at a systemic level leads to the 'throwaway society' of our times that Pope Francis has warned of multiple times, where nothing is sacred, nothing is built to last, and nothing counts but the individual and his/her own pleasure and 'utility maximisation,' in economic speak. Catholic Social Teaching tell us that all this isn't emancipation: it's slavery. And it has catastrophic consequences for the social order, as the rapid decline of our civilisation illustrates.

We are living in particularly interesting and challenging times. Everyone can feel that change is in the air, that we are at a tipping-point. The power of the State is greatly weakened by excess debt as the era of easy monetary policy is over, and yet the death of privacy ushered in by the digital age gives the state unprecedented surveillance powers as we barrel towards a CCP-styled 'big brother' police state, supported by Central Bank Digital Currencies (CBDCs), an integrated digital infrastructure and social credit scores, which can and will be used to ensure compliance – by force. Globalisation is reversing in real-time. Geopolitical tensions are making daily headlines and the drums of war have been beating for a while. The social fabric of the nation has been carved out by rampant greed, rapid and excess urbanisation, the absence of architectural and cultural beauty, a collapse in religious practice, and moral decline. In the face of external conflicts, our societies are more divided and less resilient than at any point in recent memory. These things all have one thing

in common: radical individualism. The answer isn't collectivism, as the Left would have it. Collectivism failed miserably in the former Soviet bloc countries and elsewhere, with catastrophic collateral damage, whose reverberations are still felt generations later. Rather, the answer is solidarity and subsidiarity, those two lynchpins of Catholic Social Thought. Decentralisation. Family. Community. Responsibility. Duty.

### **Religion in the public square**

At a time when radical secularist tendencies aim to push religion out of the public square, the historical legacy of CST is a reminder that religion is not a social construct, nor the opium of the masses, but a **fundamental pillar of any ordered society**. Respect for the dignity of the human person, from conception to natural death, the free exercise of conscience and religion, together with the freedom of speech, freedom of association, and the freedom of movement, are non-negotiable as preconditions for a happy, prosperous and just society. They are our inheritance from many generations of the Judeo-Christian moral and social order, a civilisational triumph which we must preserve at all costs!

We must be grateful for the witness of past generations in Teaching, Living and Implementing Catholic Social Thought. May we live up to it!

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