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Catholic Social Teaching and American Politics: How Can a Church Contribute to Civic Dialogue in a Liberal Democracy?

Abstract: This article examines how the Catholic Church has sought over the past 30 years to participate meaningfully in political life and civic dialogue in the US – a nation constitutionally predicated on a strict separation of church and state, but which accommodates compromises, and a society historically hostile to its minority Catholic population.

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Introduction

How can a church make a contribution to civic dialogue in a country in which its followers represent a minority of the total population, and where its moral teachings are strongly criticized by secular society? That is, how does a church pursue its evangelical duty and vocation in an unreceptive milieu? Given civil society's role as an important link between those who govern and those who are governed, and in light of the concerns raised in the recent literature on the increase in political disengagement in American democracy among important sectors of civil society, a critical need now exists for a detailed examination of the role that organized religion plays in the continuing evolution of both newly established and well-established democratic regimes.¹

¹ See Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998). Also see Mark S. Cladis, "Painting Landscapes of Religion in America: Four Models of Religion in Democracy," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 4 (2008), 874–904; Cristina Lafont, "Religion and the Public Sphere: What are the Deliberative Obligations of Democratic Citizenship?," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 35, no. 1/2 (2009), 127–150; Seymour Martin Lipset, "The Social Requisites of Democracy Revisited," *American Sociological Review* 59, no. 1 (1994), 1–22; Michael Minkenberg, "Democracy and Religion: Theoretical and Empirical Observations on the Relationship between Christianity, Islam and Liberal Democracy," *Journal of Ethnic & Migration Studies* 33, no. 6 (2007), 887–909; Antonin Wagner "Religion and Civil Society: A Critical Reappraisal of America's Civic Engagement Debate," *Nonprofit & Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2008), 626–645.

The success or failure of efforts by a religious grouping to participate in the more general civil discourse may deepen or weaken democratic legitimacy in a society. The Roman Catholic Church in the US is an interesting case through which to examine these questions. Our specific focus will be on how the Catholic Church has sought to participate meaningfully in political life and civic dialogue in the US – a nation constitutionally predicated on a strict separation of church and state, but which accommodates compromises, and a society historically hostile to its minority Catholic population. In the process, we will also look at the relationship between Catholic Social Teaching (CST) and American politics.

Three Key Questions

Let us examine the import of the Roman Catholic Church in the political life of the US by use of the following, nested, three-level framework of analysis. First, the *density* of the religious grouping matters: how big it is and how many citizens it incorporates. Second, the church's *self-identity* is important: the role and function it wants to play in the larger political dynamic. Last but most centrally here, it is important to look at *linkages between different religious associations* to see whether there are consensual or conflictual relationships. Such linkages can have important ramifications for to the prospects of wide-scale adoption of the church's agenda. In other words, is there a serious effort at enunciating a public theology that can attract support from other religious groupings?²

Question One: What is the Density and National Presence of the Catholic Church?

As opposed to the social and cultural reality in many European countries, where the Roman Catholic population represents a significant majority of the total population, the Catholic Church is a minority church in the US. It is also simultaneously the largest single religious grouping in the US. According to 2013 figures, there are approximately 67 million American Catholics, comprising 21% of the total population, as presented in Table 1. In addition, 24% of the Catholic population, or about 17 million people, attend weekly Mass.³

² See useful discussion on the density of a religious community's self-identity by Hans Urs von Balthasar, translated by Edward T. Oakes, in *Explorations in Theology, Vol. 4: Spirit and Institution* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1995). The work was originally published in German in 1974.

³ <http://www.catholic-action.org/cst.htm>.

Table 1 Catholic Population in the US, 2013.

	1965	1975	1985	1995	2000	2005	2013
Catholic population (<i>The Official Catholic Directory</i>)	45.6 m	48.7 m	52.3 m	57.4 m	59.9 m	64.8 m	66.8 m
Catholic population (self-identified, survey-based)	48.5 m	54.5 m	59.5 m	65.7 m	71.7 m	74.0 m	78.2 m
Mass Attendance CARA Catholic Poll (CCP):	–	–	–	–	22%	23%	24%
Percentage of US adult Catholics who say they attended Mass once a week or more (i.e., those attending every week)							

<http://cara.georgetown.edu/CARAServices/requestedchurchstats.html>.

Although a minority church, the Roman Catholic Church is the largest single religious organization in the US. It enjoys a vast and deep national presence. Map 1 shows that Catholics make up more than 5% of the population in all areas of the country, save for parts of Utah and in the Bible belt (a triangle from Virginia to Northern Texas and over Northern Florida). Further, Catholics tend to dominate both the east and west coasts. California has the most Roman Catholics; Massachusetts has the highest percentage of Catholics per 1000 citizens.⁴

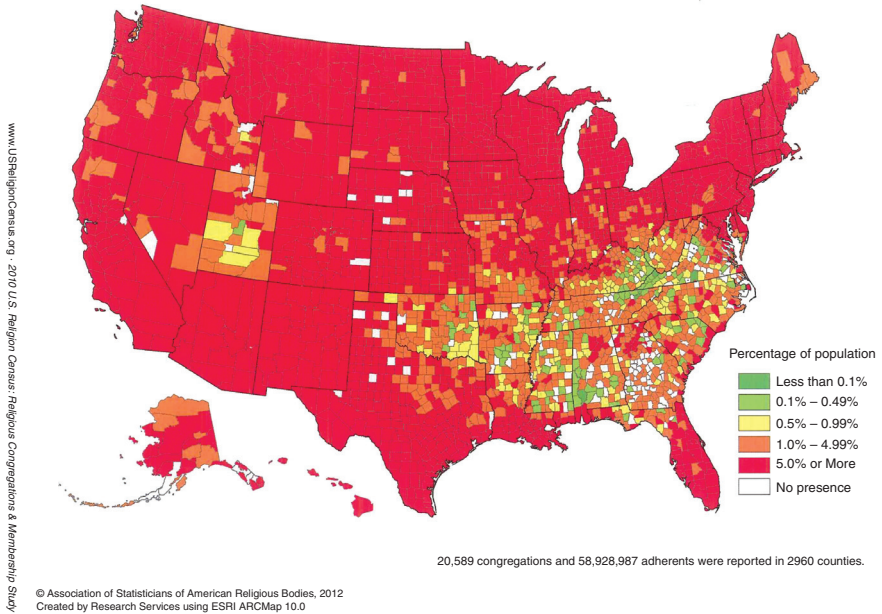
The Roman Catholic Church in the US is divided into 195 dioceses in the 50 states. Including both the active and the retired, there are 19 American Cardinals and 441 American bishops. Five dioceses are currently headed by Cardinals: Boston, Chicago, Galveston-Houston, New York, and Washington.⁵ As indicated in Tables 2 and 3, there are currently 39,600 priests in the US, of which 26,558 are diocesan priests, pastoring 67 million Roman Catholics.⁶ The number of Catholic

⁴ The Association of Religion Data Archives: <http://www.thearda.com/mapsReports/maps/Ar-damap.asp?GRP=1&map1=15>.

⁵ The American Cardinals heading a diocese in 2013 include Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo (Galveston-Houston); Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan (New York); Cardinal Francis E. George (Chicago); Cardinal Seán P. O'Malley (Boston); and Cardinal Donald W. Wuerl (Washington). The three cardinals are not currently diocesan bishops include Cardinal Raymond L. Burke (Prefect, Apostolic Signatura); Cardinal James M. Harvey (Archpriest of the Basilica of St. Paul Outside-the-Walls); and Cardinal Edwin F. O'Brien (Pro-Grand Master of the Equestrian Order of the Knights of the Holy Sepulcher). There are also eleven retired American Cardinals. See <http://www.usccb.org/about/bishops-and-dioceses/>.

⁶ In addition, the Roman Catholic Church has been ordaining permanent deacons since 1967. Prior to that date, the Church only conferred deacon status to those men intending to join Holy Orders (i.e., the priesthood). Today, single men who enter the diaconate may not marry, married men may become deacons only if they have the consent of their wife, and those men may not marry if they are widowed. Information gathered from <http://www.catholic-action.org/cst.htm>.

Catholic Church
Adherents as a percentage of total population, 2010



Map 1 Catholic Presence in the US.

Copyright © The Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, 2012.

priests in the US has decreased by almost 20,000 men from 1965 to 2013, which has led to a shortage of priests in some parishes.

Finally, it is worth noting that Catholic education has long served American society. Its schools are located throughout the US, and just under two million students (elementary to high school) attended these Catholic schools in 2013.

This is a national presence, to be sure. Yet with only 21% of the public identifying themselves as Roman Catholic in the US, it is not by itself an answer to the question of how the Catholic Church might influence public policy and social dialogue in important ways.

Question Two: What is the Role and Function that the Roman Catholic Church wants to Play in the Larger Political Dynamic of American Politics?

Having established the density of the Catholic network, our next step is to identify the role that the Catholic Church sees for itself in American politics, and its strat-

Table 2 Priests and Religious in the US, 1965–2013.

	1965	1975	1985	1995	2000	2005	2013
Total priests	58,632	58,909	57,317	49,054	45,699	42,839	39,600
Diocesan priests	35,925	36,005	35,052	32,349	30,607	27,250	26,558
Religious priests	22,707	22,904	22,265	16,705	15,092	14,137	12,350
Priestly ordinations	994	771	533	511	442	454	511
Graduate-level seminarians	8325	5279	4063	3172	3474	3308	3694
Permanent deacons	na	898	7204	10,932	12,378	14,574	17,325
Religious brothers	12,271	8625	7544	6535	5662	5451	4407
Religious sisters	179,954	135,225	115,386	90,809	79,814	68,634	51,247
Parishes	17,637	18,515	19,244	19,331	19,236	18,891	17,413
Without a resident priest pastor	549	702	1051	2161	2843	3251	3554
Here a bishop has entrusted the pastoral care of the parish to a deacon, religious sister or brother, or other lay person (Canon 517.2)	na	na	93	314	447	553	428

<http://cara.georgetown.edu/CARAServices/requestedchurchstats.html>.

Table 3 Catholic Schools in the US.

	1975	1985	1995	2000	2005	2013
Catholic elementary schools	8414	7764	6964	6793	6122	5636*
Students in Catholic elementary schools	2.557 m	2.005 m	1.815 m	1.800 m	1.559 m	1.441 m*
Catholic secondary schools	1624	1425	1280	1297	1325	1205*
Students in Catholic secondary schools	884,181	774,216	638,440	653,723	653,226	590,883*

*Most recent estimates of the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA). School data for previous years is from the ASE.

<http://cara.georgetown.edu/CARAServices/requestedchurchstats.html>.

egy for implementing that role. Over the past 30 years, the Catholic Church has made its views known in many policy areas, including the questions of abortion, the arms race, capital punishment, health care, welfare, school vouchers, and traditional marriage. Not surprisingly, those Catholics identifying themselves as political liberals tend to agree with some of these teachings, and those Catholics who consider themselves political conservatives tend to agree with others.

It was not always that way. As an immigrant institution, the Catholic Church kept itself out of many political debates during the course of American history, for fear of an anti-Catholic backlash by the majority population. John McGreevy

argues that given the Protestant background of those who founded the Mayflower colony, “in a certain sense, of course, anti-Catholicism is integral to the formation of the US.”⁷ Further, Gene Burns astutely observes that the immigrant, lower-class Catholics in this country experienced sporadic nativist attacks (e.g., anti-Catholic riots and burning of churches) into the early 20th century, sometimes inspired by groups such as the Know-Nothings and the Ku Klux Klan. “One of the most common accusations was that they could not be true patriots because their allegiance to a foreign pope necessarily took precedence over their allegiance to the US.”⁸ As such, the Catholic Church has historically been very careful to respect the Constitutional separation of church and state as a strategy for survival in a Protestant country.⁹

Things have certainly changed over the past 50 years. The groundbreaking work of John Courtney Murray, notably *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition*, published in 1960 – the same year that the US elected its first Roman Catholic president – speaks to how Catholic philosophical and theological thinking might positively contribute to American political life.¹⁰ Further, in the time since Vatican II and especially during the pontificate of John Paul II, there has been a renewed emphasis by the Catholic Church on becoming an important actor in American policy debates. In this regard, Michael and Kenneth Himes have argued that:

Throughout the 20th century Catholicism has struggled to define the Church’s place in society. Although the “siege mentality” of the mid-19th century gave way

7 John T. McGreevy, “Anti-Catholicism in the United States: The View from History,” in *American Catholics, American Culture: Tradition and Resistance (American Catholics in the Public Square)*, ed. Margaret O’Brien Steinfels (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004). Also see Gary D. Glenn and John Stack, “Is American Democracy Safe for Catholicism?” *Review of Politics* 62, no. 1 (2000), pp. 5–48.

8 Gene Burns, *The Frontiers of Catholicism: The Politics of Ideology in a Liberal World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 74.

9 See useful discussion in Ted Jelen, “The American Church: Being Catholic and American,” in *The Catholic Church and Nation-State: Comparative Perspectives*, eds. Paul Christopher Manuel, Lawrence Reardon and Clyde Wilcox (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2006), pp. 69–88 (especially pp. 72–74). See also Ted Jelen, *To Serve God and Mammon: Church-State Relations in American Politics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000) and Clyde Wilcox and Ted Jelen, “Religion and Politics in an Open Market” in *Religion and Politics in Comparative Perspective: The One, The Few, and The Many* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 289–314.

10 See John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (Oxford: Sheed & Ward Classic, 1960). Also see the wonderful discussion of five key themes in the work of John Courtney Murray by Gary D. Glenn, “Murray After 50 Years: Five Themes,” *Catholic Social Science Review* 16 (2011), pp. 113–122.

to a less hostile, but still uneasy, relationship of dialogue with secular society, the mission of the Church to the wider world remained unclear.... The public Church is a pointer for such a new strategy. It attempts to combat privatization without denying the legitimate autonomy of social institutions from the Church.¹¹

This change in public profile for the Catholic Church certainly demonstrates that it is a more confident religious organization than at earlier points in American history. Its vast national organization enables it to transmit its teachings to the faithful, and to encourage those individuals to work towards influencing public policy decisions. Its density in civil society is another important factor. Faithful Catholics vote, and otherwise take part in the policy process. Thus, while seldom directly responsible for the specific course of a policy, Church actors are well positioned to play an important role for policy formation.

The Catholic Church and American Politics

Ideological Factions within Catholicism

The contemporary Catholic Church is a complex and complicated grouping of believers. In an insightful article entitled, “Catholicism and American Culture: The Uneasy Dialogue,” the late Jesuit Avery Dulles identifies four distinct and divergent strategies adopted by Catholics in American politics, which he labels traditionalism, neoconservatism, liberalism, and radicalism. Briefly:

1. The *traditionalists* are those Catholics who, in his words, are “highly critical of what they find in the dominant American culture and who wish to restore the more centralized and authoritarian Catholicism of the years before World War II.”¹² Supporters of this approach include James F. Hitchcock and Ralph Martin.¹³

11 Michael J. Himes and Kenneth R. Himes, O. F. M., *Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), p. 3.

12 Dulles, 55–56. Dulles notes that “the importance of an encounter between faith and culture,” as noted by Avery Dulles, S. J., “has been a major theme of the present [John Paul II] pontificate. See Avery Dulles, S. J., “Catholicism and American Culture: The Uneasy Dialogue,” *America* 162 no. 3 (1990), 54–59. Also please see Thomas G. Guarino, “Why Avery Dulles Matters” <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2009/04/why-avery-dulles-matters-1243317340>.

13 See James F. Hitchcock, *The Supreme Court and Religion in American Life*, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004) Ralph Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?: What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New Evangelization* (Cambridge, UK: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012).

2. The *neoconservatives*, such as George Weigel and Michael Novak, believe that democracy can only succeed if human passions are under the control of moral values.¹⁴ They hold that the Church is uniquely suited to provide a moral compass to secular society.
3. The *liberals*, for their part, seek to take lessons from American politics to democratize the church, and to establish procedures of accountability and canons of dialogue that mirror America's open civic society. Proponents of this position, including Father Charles E. Curran and Daniel Maguire, seek to make the hierarchy subordinate to the people, and to have open discussions about changing church teachings on birth control, abortion and divorce, among other issues.¹⁵
4. Finally, the *radicals*, including Daniel Berrigan, S. J. and Matthew Fox, condemn capitalism, militarism, genocide and racism.¹⁶

Dulles's model shows that "the realities of American Catholicism and of American culture are complex and multi-faceted."¹⁷ Catholic traditionalists and neo-conservatives may be more likely to praise the papacies of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, whereas Catholic liberals and radicals may be more in tune with the recent statements by Pope Francis.

To better understand these four positions, Dulles suggests that they be placed in a logical square of opposition. For the neoconservatives, both Catholicism and American secular society are basically good. For the radicals, both are fundamentally corrupt. For the Catholic traditionalists, the ecclesiastical culture is holy, but American secular culture is demonic. For the liberals, the American experiment is fundamentally healthy, but traditional Catholicism is diseased.¹⁸ Although there are wide differences among and between these distinctive understandings, Dulles maintains that it would be a mistake to try and label any one of these

¹⁴ See George Weigel, *Evangelical Catholicism: Deep Reform in the 21st-Century Catholic Church* (New York: Basic Books, 2013); Michael Novak, *Writing from Left to Right: My Journey from Liberal to Conservative* (New York: Random House, 2013).

¹⁵ See Charles E. Curran, *Loyal Dissent: Memoir of a Catholic Theologian* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1986); Daniel Maguire, *Sacred Rights: The Case for Contraception and Abortion in World Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

¹⁶ Daniel Berrigan, *And the Risen Bread: Selected and New Poems 1957–1997* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998); Matthew Fox, *A New Reformation: Creation Spirituality and the Transformation of Christianity* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2006).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 57. See also Avery Cardinal Dulles, *Church and Society: The Laurence J. McGinley Lectures, 1988–2007* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

approaches as “right” or “wrong” or, more importantly, “more Catholic” or “less Catholic.” Rather, in his view, all of the approaches represent something distinctive in Catholicism, and all could contribute to the civic dialogue in American culture. His main point is that there is no one “Catholic” approach to American politics, nor one “Catholic” model of civic engagement.

E. J. Dionne famously noted in a 2000 *Washington Post* op-ed piece that “there is no ‘Catholic vote’ in the sense that a bloc moves predictably toward one party or the other.”¹⁹ Similarly, in their recent work, *American Catholics in Transition*, William V. D’Antonio, Michele Dillon and Mary Gautier argue that “for some years now, the American Catholic laity no longer composes a single political or voting bloc.”²⁰ They also found that the Catholic community does not hold one view on the issues of abortion, same-sex marriage, or welfare programs.²¹

Table 4 supports these findings. It is based on surveys conducted by Gallup, and shows that although a majority of voters self-identifying as Roman Catholic have chosen the Democratic candidate for president over the Republican candidate 12 times over the past 15 presidential elections, many of these elections have been very close. As Catholics have become more assimilated into the mainstream of American culture, they have ceased to vote as a coherent religious block. Catholics now tend to vote like other Americans: a majority of Catholics have voted for the winning candidate ten times in those same 15 elections.

In eight of the 15 elections in Table 4, the Catholic vote was closely split. In seven elections, a large majority of Catholics voted for one candidate. Arguably, there were only two times when religion made a significant *difference* in the Catholic vote during the last 56 years: 1960 and 1964. As a Roman Catholic, Jack

Table 4 Catholic Voting in US Presidential Elections, 1956–2012.

% of Vote	1956	1960	1964	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012
Democratic	51	78*	76*	59	48	57*	46	39	51	47*	55*	52	52	53*	49*
Republican	49*	22	24	33*	52*	41	47*	61*	49*	35	35	46*	48*	47	48

*=victor in that election.

Source: Gallup. The percentages sometimes add up to under 100% given other candidates. For more, see <http://cara.georgetown.edu/presidential%20vote%20only.pdf>.

¹⁹ E. J. Dionne, “There is no ‘Catholic Vote.’ And Yet, it Matters,” *Washington Post* B1 (18 June 2000).

²⁰ William V. D’Antonio, Michele Dillon and Mary L. Gautier, *American Catholics in Transition* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012), p. 154.

²¹ *Ibid.* See discussion on pp. 134–138.

Kennedy commanded most of the Catholic vote in the 1960 election. His assassination, loyalty to the memory of JFK, and the poorly-run Goldwater campaign, were perhaps three factors helping LBJ claim 76% of the Catholic vote in 1964. Ted Jelen has argued that the election of 2004 shows just how much the Catholic community has changed. Like the 1960 election, the Democratic nominee in 2004 was also a Catholic senator from Massachusetts, with the initials JFK – John Forbes Kerry. Kerry did win the Catholic vote by a slight 52–48 margin, but religious identity was not much of a factor in that election.²²

The other four Catholic landslides over the past 50 years also did not have much to do with religion. The assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, as well as the Vietnam War and associated social turmoil of 1968, were factors helping Vice President Hubert Humphrey win 59% of the Catholic vote that year. The Watergate scandal helped Jimmy Carter claim 57% of the Catholic vote in 1976. Ronald Reagan's charisma along with his reelection themes of peace and prosperity helped him to attract 61% of the Catholic vote in 1984. Bill Clinton's well-run national campaigns against George Bush in 1992, and again against Bob Dole in 1996, enabled him to win a majority of the Catholic vote both times.²³

Catholic Social Teaching and American Politics

Although these voting patterns indicate a clear ideological divide among Catholic voters, E. J. Dionne maintains that Catholic voters are similar in one fundamental way: they seek to influence public policy in the direction of social justice.²⁴ He may indeed be right: even with the great diversity of opinion within and among Catholics, Catholic Social Teaching (CST) has emerged as a contemporary strategy of civil engagement by the Roman Catholic Church in American politics.

There is no one seminal book on CST: it is not revealed truth, and not all Catholics accept it. Rather, it is, as the Commission on Catholic Community Action has stated, “a collection of teaching on key themes which have evolved in response to the challenges of the day that are designed to reflect the Church's

²² See Ted Jelen, “The American Church: Of Being Catholic and American,” in *The Catholic Church and the Nation-State: Comparative Perspectives*, eds. Paul Christopher Manuel, Lawrence C. Reardon and Clyde Wilcox (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2006), pp. 69–89.

²³ Notably, Reagan was the only republican to win a Catholic landslide in these fifteen elections, all of the others were democrats.

²⁴ Dionne, “There is no ‘Catholic Vote.’ And Yet, it Matters,” *Washington Post* B1 (18 June 2000).

social mission.”²⁵ In other words, it is part of the long conversation and dialogue within Catholicism over the best way to emulate Christ. CST offers believers a way that they might pragmatically act on their spiritual convictions.²⁶

Originally presented as a Catholic response to the social challenges posed by industrialization, and more recently inspired by the teaching of Vatican II, CST represents pragmatic solutions to the serious economic, social, and political problems plaguing industrialized societies. Among other steps, CST focuses pastoral and relief efforts on the poor, and seeks to make the Catholic Church itself a more welcoming, open, and just place for all. American Catholic Bishops have identified CST as an important element to the role that they see for the contemporary Roman Catholic Church in American politics:

Catholic social teaching is a central and essential element of our faith. Its roots are in the Hebrew prophets who announced God’s special love for the poor and called God’s people to a covenant of love and justice. It is a teaching founded on the life and words of Jesus Christ, who came “to bring glad tidings to the poor ... liberty to captives ... recovery of sight to the blind” (Lk 4:18–19), and who identified himself with “the least of these,” the hungry and the stranger (cf. Mt 25:45). Catholic social teaching is built on a commitment to the poor. This commitment arises from our experiences of Christ in the Eucharist. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church explains, “To receive in truth the Body and Blood of Christ given up for us, we must recognize Christ in the poorest, his brethren” (no. 1397).²⁷

The American Catholic Bishops hold that CST emerges directly “from the truth of what God has revealed to us about himself.”²⁸ Accordingly, they want the Church to perform at least five distinct roles in politics. First, it is to educate the faithful regarding the teachings of the Church and their responsibilities. Second, Church leaders are to analyze political and public policy issues to ascertain their social

²⁵ <http://www.catholic-action.org/cst.htm>.

²⁶ The Catholic Community Action Commission notes that “(Catholic Social) Teaching is rooted in biblical orientations and reflections on Christian tradition. It is a living tradition of thought and action. This tradition calls on all members of the Church, rich and poor alike, to work to eliminate the occurrence and effect of poverty, to speak out against injustice, and to shape a more caring society and a more peaceful world.” <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/foundational-documents.cfm>.

²⁷ Excerpted from “Political Responsibility: Revitalizing American Democracy” and “Political Responsibility: Proclaiming the Gospel of Life, Protecting the Least Among Us, and Pursuing the Common Good.” Statements of the United States Catholic Conference Administrative Board, September 1991 and September 1995. <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/>.

²⁸ <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/> See useful discussion in Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, S.J., *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985).

and moral dimensions. Third, the Church must continually measure public policy objectives in the political realm against gospel values. Fourth, the Church is to participate with other concerned parties in debate over public policies. Finally, the Church is always to speak out with courage, skill, and concern on public issues involving human rights, social justice, and the life of the Church in society.²⁹

The 1986 Catholic Bishop's Pastoral Letter on the American Economy

To illustrate the contemporary Catholic effort to contribute to civic dialogue in the US, let us briefly examine the 1986 pastoral letter by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops entitled *Economic Justice for All*.³⁰ Although it was issued 27 years ago, the letter still serves as an important example of the Catholic effort to contribute meaningfully to civic dialogue in the US.

Originally published as a response of sorts to the economic policies being pursued by the Reagan administration at that time – arguably, policies rooted in Lockean economic theory – this letter sought to direct the attention of policymakers in Washington to the plight of the poor and disenfranchised. Extending the traditional Catholic concern with human rights and human dignity to the American social reality, the letter challenged the dominant liberal modes of thinking about justice and the economy in the US. This letter also built upon a 100 year-old tradition of Catholic teachings about social justice.³¹

The Jesuit David Hollenbach observed that the pastoral letter is an important example of the modern Catholic tradition of social justice thought, which can be traced back to the papacy of Leo XIII (1878–1903), who wrote the important encyclical *Rerum Novarum: The Condition of Labor* in 1891.³² Later, Pius XI picked up where Leo had left off, and penned the encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno: After 40 Years* in 1931. John XXIII built on these works with two additional encyclicals, *Mater et Magistra* in 1961, followed by *Pacem in Terris* 2 years later. Combined,

²⁹ <http://www.catholic-action.org/cst.htm>.

³⁰ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Economic Justice for All* (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 1986).

³¹ In line with previous papal encyclicals, and inspired by the teaching of Vatican II regarding the role of the Roman Catholic Church in the modern world, the pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All* was issued in 1986. It was preceded by a long process of discussion with experts, and was an important event in the life of the church.

³² David Hollenbach, S. J., *Claims in Conflict: Retrieving and Renewing the Catholic Human Rights Tradition* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), p. 42.

these encyclicals focused the attention of the Church squarely on key social justice issues of the modern and industrializing world. This body of work manifests a Catholic wariness with the Lockean emphasis on individualism and views of private property, and seeks to reconcile Christian and Catholic concerns for the dignity of human life with demands for political freedom and economic equality.³³

For the first part of the 20th century, subsequent popes (Pius X and Benedict XV) did not immediately pick up on Leo XIII's work. However, *Rerum Novarum* did make a difference. For example, Monsignor John Ryan wrote extensively about social justice issues, directing moral attention to the economy.³⁴ Ryan was a progressive Catholic social theorist who supported the idea that the State has the moral obligation to solve social problems.³⁵ Similarly, Dorothy Day worked throughout her life to blend her devout Catholic beliefs with political advocacy and social justice. Day continued this work from the early 1930s until her death in 1980.³⁶ The 1986 pastoral letter contains five main themes, which are, very schematically:

1. *Every economic decision and institution must be judged in light of whether it protects or undermines human life.*³⁷ The bishops accept that a liberal capitalist state with free markets has advantages over command market states. However, they also emphasize that the capitalist model has clear limits, and that government has crucial responsibilities to ensure the proper working of the market. In their view, human life precedes economic considerations. This starting point supports the rest of the argument.

2. *Human dignity can be realized and protected only in community.* In their view, there are also clear limits to individualism. All people, whatever their place in the economic system, are *moral agents* in economic life. That is, all of us have a moral obligation to work for the basic human needs of all in society. Our choices

33 See discussion in Paul Christopher Manuel, "The United States-Vatican Relationship: "Parallel Endeavors of Peace, Competing Visions of Justice," in *Catholics and Politics: The Dynamic Tension Between Faith and Power*, eds. Kristin E. Heyer, Mark J. Rozell and Michael A. Genovese, (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2008), pp. 201–212.

34 John A. Ryan, *A Living Wage* (New York: Macmillan, 1906); John A. Ryan, *The Church and Labor* (New York: Macmillan, 1920); John A. Ryan, *Distributive Justice: The Right and Wrong of our Present Distribution of Wealth* (New York: Macmillan, 1927); John A. Ryan, *A Better Economic Order* (New York: Harper, 1935).

35 Philip Gleason, "American Catholics and Liberalism, 1798–1960," in *Catholicism and Liberalism: Contributions to American Public Philosophy*, eds. R. Bruce Douglass and David Hollenbach (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 57.

36 Nancy L. Roberts, *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker* (Albany: SUNY, 1984).

37 National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Tenth Anniversary Edition of Economic Justice For All* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1987), p. 17.

and decisions must be geared to enhance and defend human life and protect human rights.

3. *All people have a right to participate in the economic life of society.* The bishops also hold that all able-bodied citizens have a right and duty to provide for the needs of their families as well as to serve their community. Further, and following John XXIII, they claim that all people have a right to secure the basic necessities of life, including food, clothing, shelter, education, health care, safe environment, economic security, just wages and benefits, and to work under decent conditions.

4. *All members of society have a special obligation to the poor and vulnerable.* In accordance with the development of Catholic social justice thought, the bishops make their “preferential option” for the poor. For them, any economy must be evaluated morally against the fate of the poor and vulnerable in society.

5. *Society as a whole, acting through public and private institutions, has the moral responsibility to enhance human dignity and protect human rights.* This proposition holds that the economy is not simply an amoral arena for the exchange of goods and services, but that economic activity contains important ethical and moral content in that it affects human life and solidarity. The bishops contend that all economic life should not only be shaped by moral principles, but further, that it should be judged by how it protects or undermines the life and dignity of the individual, the family and the community.

The bishops do not break new ground in Catholic social justice thinking. Their letter closely follows the general line of argumentation of the papal encyclicals offered by Leo XIII, Pius XI and John XXIII. However, the letter did focus needed attention on the questions of human dignity, human solidarity, and principle of *subsidiarity in contemporary American society*.³⁸ It contains both a political and a philosophical agenda, with the objective of articulating Catholic values and policy priorities in the public square.

First, the *political* agenda. The argument offered by the bishops in favor of an activist government helping the poor clearly favors the views of the progressive wing of the Democratic Party. As Gerry Mara observed at the time, “the bishops’ urgings resemble far more those of Mario Cuomo and John Kenneth Galbraith than they do those of Jack Kemp and Milton Friedman.”³⁹ Of course, their agreement

38 Philip J. Wogman, “Emerging Issues in Economic Ethics,” in *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics*, ed. Larry Rasmussen (1984), pp. 93–122.

39 Gerald Mara, “Poverty and Justice,” in *Catholic Social Teaching and the United States Economy: Working Papers for a Bishops’ Pastoral*, eds. John W. Houck and Oliver F. Williams, C. F. C. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), p. 158.

on policy priorities belies significant differences between them. Whereas progressives place individual choice at a premium (e.g., reproductive rights, marriage equality), the bishops assert the primacy of the Gospel in the public square as a key reason for pursuing just policy priorities.⁴⁰

Secondly, and on a deeper level, is the *philosophical* agenda. The Catholic world-view represents something of a challenge for American society. Unlike much of contemporary American political thinking, which places emphasis on individual rights over community responsibilities, CST challenges citizens to be concerned with, and responsible for, the poor and vulnerable in society. Over the past three decades, the 1986 letter has, at a minimum, increased awareness among Catholics and other people of good will of the important human issues at stake in economic relations. It has targeted consumerism, materialism, selfishness, secularization, and individualism for special criticism. The bishops assert that the American public square needs a strong moral voice in defense of the poor and vulnerable.⁴¹ The 1986 letter represents a significant effort at establishing a Catholic role and function in contemporary American politics. It is also a meaningful aspect of the Catholic Church's contemporary self-identity.⁴²

Question Three: Is there a Serious Effort at Enunciating a Public Theology that can Attract Support from other Religious Groupings?

CST and Political Coalitions

Having established the size of its national operation and its self-identity, the third step is to see to what extent the Catholic Church has linked up with other groups

⁴⁰ David Hollenbach, S. J. "The Bishops and the US Economy," in *Theological Studies*, 111 (June, 1986), 101–114. See also Oliver F. Williams and John W. Houck, eds. *The Common Good and US Capitalism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987).

⁴¹ The bishops confront the key assumptions of American liberalism (e.g., individualism and private property). For the bishops, social justice is best defined as a relational concept (i.e., the ability to fully participate as members of a community.) In a related point, this Catholic challenge is also directed against what they view as "excessive individualism" of American politics and society. See also Andrew Yuengert "Economics and Interdisciplinary Exchange in Catholic Social Teaching" in *Journal of Business Ethics*, 100, Supplement 1: and the encyclical-letter "*Caritas in Veritate: Ethical Challenges for Business*" (2011), pp. 41–54.

⁴² There are many Episcopal letters which encompass CST objectives, including *Economic Justice for All*, *Brothers and Sisters to us*, *Statement on Capital Punishment*, *The Challenge of Peace*, and *To the Ends of the Earth*. See <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/foundational-documents.cfm>.

of good will, and to ascertain whether there has been a serious effort at enunciating a public theology. The short answer to these questions is that yes, CST is an effort at articulating a public theology; the Catholic Church has indeed courted people of good will to join in this effort since the release of the 1986 *Pastoral Letter on the Economy*. The bishops decided not to use their teaching authority to oblige Catholics to follow their directives. Rather, they addressed their letter to Catholics *and* to people from all other confessions.

Given the fact that the US is a predominately Protestant society, and the fact that American Catholics have, in many respects, been assimilated into American political culture values of liberalism, the bishops had to use the language of reason to get their point across. This was an important and necessary strategic decision:

... in the wake of the Second Vatican Council and the political-economic assimilation of Catholics in the US, the American Catholic Church – led by able and talented bishops – has found a voice in American public life and has addressed issues at the national level. ... If the Church is to continue to address the moral dimensions of policy issues, then the Church must continue to use rational ethics rather than scriptural precepts to speak to a religiously diverse society.⁴³

In addition, since contemporary secular society itself tends to look at public actions by religious groups with great suspicion, and tends to tune out all of Church teachings, the bishops have responded as follows:

Unfortunately, our efforts in this area are sometimes misunderstood. The Church's participation in public affairs is not a threat to the political process or to genuine pluralism, but an affirmation of their importance. The Church recognizes the legitimate autonomy of government and the right of all, including the Church itself, to be heard in the formulation of public policy. A proper understanding of the role of the Church will not confuse its mission with that of the government but rather, see its ministry as advocating the critical values of human rights and social justice.⁴⁴

It is worth noting that since his election on March 13, 2013, Pope Francis has engaged secular society in the tradition of CST. He has denounced the “idolatry of money,” the “economy of exclusion and inequality,” and the “crude and

⁴³ Mary C. Segers, *Church Polity and American Politics: Issues in Contemporary Catholicism* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990), p. 12.

⁴⁴ Task Force on Catholic Social Teaching and Catholic Education, *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions* (Washington, DC: US Catholic Conference, 1996). See also: <http://www.priestsforlife.org/articles/1192-political-responsibility-proclaiming-the-gospel-of-life-protecting-the-least-among-us-and-pursuing-the-common-good>.

superficial” intolerance of secular society, as he simultaneously reaches out to atheists and others suspicious of Rome.⁴⁵ He has also criticized faithful Catholics for focusing on narrow cultural issues, instead of larger issues more fundamental to the Gospel message. Although his unorthodox behavior has intrigued secular society, it has also brought consternation to many faithful Catholics. In this regard, David Gipson notes that Catholics should not worry:

... the worried observers could have mistaken Francis’ pastoral gesture as an effort to dilute the gospel rather than what he really intended – an evangelical outreach intended to bring nonbelievers closer to Christ, not to introduce relativism into the church.⁴⁶

In other words, the Pope is seen as working towards building new economic policies predicated on the understanding that ultimate justice flows not from human ideologies, but from God.⁴⁷

Three Main Criticisms about CST

Perhaps because its status is a “moral theology in development,” the bishops have had to contend with three main criticisms as they have rolled out this public theology, including *definitional problems*, *consequentialism*, and *naiveté*.

First is the problem with definition. CST, in some ways like Catholicism itself, is admittedly an ambiguous term, meaning many different things to many different people. To the extent that CST obliges the faithful to focus their energies on helping the poor in society, one could reasonably equate it with a more progressive political tradition. To the extent that CST claims that its moral teachings are legitimated by the universal, timeless truths of Christ Jesus, one could argue that it is in harmony with the more conservative understanding of the “absolute.” As a result, CST transcends any easy definition, as it seeks to open us up to a complex understanding of the world, our place in it, our relationship with each other, and with God.

⁴⁵ <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/2013/12/the-pope-on-the-idolatry-of-money.html>; <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/1305014.htm>; http://www.democracynow.org/2013/11/27/the_pope_slams_tyranny_of_capitalism.

⁴⁶ <http://ncronline.org/blogs/francis-chronicles/pope-francis-outreach-atheists-not-controversial-it-seems>.

⁴⁷ See R. Bruce Douglass and William J. Gould, “After the Pastoral: The Beginning of a Discussion,” *Commonweal* 113 (5 December 1986), p. 653. See also Amy Gutmann, “Communitarian Critics of Liberalism,” *Journal of Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14 (1985), pp. 321–322. John Courtney Murray wrote extensively on this subject. See *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960).

Second, the letter has been criticized for its consequentialist emphasis. That is, it dwells on the *symptoms* of capitalism, rather than on capitalism itself, perhaps the root cause of the problem. Donal Dorr has aptly noted that “quite a number of socially committed Christians felt dissatisfied with the letter because it seemed to be critical of the abuses of the system rather than of the whole system of capitalism.”⁴⁸ Acknowledging this criticism, Archbishop Weakland, one of the letter’s chief authors, responded in the following way:

As for the point about consequentialism, in a sense we do examine effects. We choose this at the beginning because we decided not to take capitalism as theory and just analyze theoretical capitalism. Once we made the decision to deal with the effects of capitalism on the society, yes we were consequentialist. That decision, I think, was very important in our thinking processes. The French bishops have been highly critical of that approach, saying that we should have dealt with *l'essence de la capitalisme*. We decided against staying at such an abstract plane, instead dealing with the effects that an economy has on the life of people. Our primary interest is how that economy affects the quality of lives of the people and in particular of the poor.⁴⁹

Third, the bishops were accused of being naïve about both American society and capitalism. Although CST’s emphasis on the poor and vulnerable was generally greeted warmly by progressive Catholics, it was harshly criticized by politically and economically conservative Catholics, who found the 1986 letter lacking. Michael Novak, the conservative Catholic thinker, argued that the pastoral letter profoundly misunderstood American society. Far from being obsessed with individualism, Novak asserts that there exists an “associative instinct” among Americans. In his view, American society would not benefit from the bishop’s proposed liberal anti-poverty policies. Such a governmental overreach would impede the natural tendencies of Americans to help neighbors in need.⁵⁰ The conservative view asserted that the letter makes a rather naïve political case for siding with the progressive wing of the Democratic party, and that the bishops could not seriously expect this letter actually to affect public policy. A number of business publications, including *Fortune Magazine*, *Business Week*, and *The Wall Street Journal* went on to suggest that the bishops misunderstood how capitalism actually works.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000), p. 336.

⁴⁹ Michael Novak, “A Conversation with Archbishop Rumbert Weakland, Catholic Social Teaching and the US Economy” *American Enterprise Institute*, 25 (8 May 1985). See also J. Bryan Hehir, “Church-State and Church-World: The Ecclesiological Implications,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 41, (1986).

⁵⁰ See very useful discussion by David Hollenbach, *Theological Studies* 46, no 1 (1985), 101–114. <http://www.ts.mu.edu/readers/content/pdf/46/46.1/46.1.7.pdf>.

⁵¹ These journals were cited by Gerry Mara, in “Poverty and Justice,” p. 158. See also Oliver F. Williams, “The Making of a Pastoral Letter,” in *Catholic Social Teaching*, *op. cit.* pp. 1–22.

In their defense, it might be said that the bishops were trying to do something more than get legislation passed to limit the negative effects of capitalism: they were trying to reframe the very way society looks at the problem of poverty. As they later state in their voter's guide called *Faithful Citizenship*, "Economic decisions and institutions should be assessed according to whether they protect or undermine the dignity of the human person."⁵²

Faithful Citizenship: Civic Responsibility for a New Millennium

In the tradition of the 1986 letter, the bishops addressed their 1999 voter's guide, *Faithful Citizenship: Civic Responsibility for a New Millennium*, to Catholics and to others of good will.⁵³ Re-released in 2011, the guide covers a wide variety of moral issues facing the electorate, including their opposition to, in their words, "the intrinsic evil" of abortion: "Abortion, the deliberate killing of a human being before birth, is never morally acceptable and must always be opposed."⁵⁴ The guide also explains their support of traditional marriage, immigration reform, universal healthcare, good housing for all, strong public and private education, and good wages for workers:

The family is the basic cell of human society. The role, responsibilities, and needs of families should be central national priorities. Marriage must be defined, recognized, and protected as a lifelong commitment between a man and a woman and as the source of the next generation and the protective haven for children. Policies on taxes, work, divorce, immigration, and welfare should help families stay together and should reward responsibility and sacrifice for children. Wages should allow workers to support their families, and public assistance should be available to help poor families to live in dignity.⁵⁵

The bishops understand that their positions do not nicely fit in with either major political parties – they agree with the Democrats on some issues and with the Republicans on others – so they council Catholic voters, as well as all people of good will, to always vote against intrinsic evil.

Faithful Citizenship seeks to guide citizens to make a moral voting decision. It works something like this: if a voter has the choice between two candidates

⁵² <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/faithful-citizenship/upload/forming-consciences-for-faithful-citizenship.pdf> (see page 21).

⁵³ <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/faithful-citizenship/upload/forming-consciences-for-faithful-citizenship.pdf>.

⁵⁴ <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/faithful-citizenship/forming-consciences-for-faithful-citizenship-document.cfm> (see page 19).

⁵⁵ <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/resources/politics/issues/abortion-and-faithful-citizenship/>.

who both support a policy deemed “intrinsic evil,” a moral voter could still vote for one of those candidates based on another moral public policy issue – as long as the intent of the voter is to further a good public policy (e.g., universal health care), and not the intrinsic evil itself (e.g., abortion). It is certainly reasonable to assume that the bishops do not want to see scores of Catholics retreating from public life because both candidates on any particular ballot may favor abortion – as is often the case in many states, including California, the state with the highest number of Roman Catholics, and Massachusetts, the state with the highest percentage of Catholics among its residents.⁵⁶ Rather, the bishops encourage voters to discern the moral callings of the time, and to vote for the candidate best able to advance the dignity of every human being.

As indicated in Chart 1, *Faithful Citizenship* suggests that Catholics *should never vote* for candidates who only support immoral public policies and/or intrinsic evil; *should always vote* for candidates who support moral policies and who also oppose intrinsic evil; and *may possibly vote* for candidates who support moral public policies, even if they also support an intrinsic evil, if there is no better alternative in a particular election. However, in all cases, Catholic voters *must never vote* to support an intrinsic evil; they *must always vote* to further the common good and moral well-being of society.

		Candidate one	
		Support intrinsic evil	Against intrinsic evil
Moral public policies	Candidate two	Maybe <i>If both candidates are in this box, decide which will best advance the common good</i>	Always <i>If both candidates are in this box, decide among competing goods</i>
	Immoral public policies	Never <i>If both candidates are in this box, maybe sit out the election</i>	Maybe <i>If both candidates are in this box, decide which will best advantage the common good</i>

Derived from *Forming Consciences for faithful Citizenship*, page 11, points 34–37

Chart 1 Towards a Voter’s Guide.

⁵⁶ The Association of Religion Data Archives: <http://www.thearda.com/mapsReports/maps/Ardamap.asp?GRP=1&map1=15>.

Conclusion

So, how can a church make a contribution to civic dialogue in a country in which its followers represent a minority of the total population, and whose moral teachings are strongly criticized by secular society? That is, how does a church pursue its evangelical duty and vocation in an unreceptive milieu? This article suggests that a possible answer to those questions is as follows: a church can make a contribution to civic dialogue by having a strong national network, a well-defined self-identity, and good outreach to people of other faiths.

The Catholic Church measures well in each of these categories. It has an impressive national network, and incorporates some 21% of the American public—not a majority, but not an insignificant minority either. As part of its self-identity, the Catholic Church has sought to influence public policy decisions in a variety of ways – most notably through its Catholic Social Teaching (CST). And the Church has addressed itself not only to Catholics, but to all people of good will. The 1986 pastoral letter was an important step, continued more recently with *Faithful Citizenship*. In addition, Pope Francis has been taking steps to further this dialogue around the world since his March 13, 2013 election, with the goal of articulating Catholic values and policy priorities in the public square.⁵⁷

Acknowledgement: The author wishes to thank Rev. Thomas Massaro, S.J., Ph.D., Dean of the Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University, for his very useful comments on a draft version of this paper.

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⁵⁷ Ericka Costa and Tommaso Ramus, “The Italian ‘*Economia Attendale*’” and “Catholic Social Teaching: How to Apply the Common Good Principle at the Managerial Level,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 106, no. 1, Special Issue on Which Values for Which Organizations? – The EBEN 23rd Annual Conference (March 2012), pp. 103–116.

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Further reading

The following works helped my thinking about this topic: "Atherton (1994), Bernardin (1998), Cochran and Cochran (2003), Curran (1974), Dorr (1992), Douglass (1986), Douglass et al. (1990), Garcia (1996), Glendon (1987), Goodrum (2012), Gaillardetz (2005), Grammich et al. (2012), Gueron (1987), Haughey (1977), Hollenbach (1988), Mahoney (1987), Massaro (2008), McDonough (1996), Moore (1994), Mott (1982), Murray (1984), Novak et al. (1976), O'Brien and Shannon (1992), Pope John XXIII (1992), Pope Leo XIII (1992), Pope Pius XI (1992), Starin (1989), Starin (1994) and Steinmo et al. (1992).

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