SOCIAL CONCERNS AND
THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

The Christian spirit of service to others for the promotion of social justice is of particular importance for each Catholic University, to be shared by its teachers and developed in its students.
— Pope John Paul II, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*

The Church’s social teaching is an important part of Catholic mission and values. This is perhaps most evident in the Kimberley, where the Church seeks to serve our sisters and brothers who are most disadvantaged and in need. In this chapter, I would like to explain the importance of Catholic social teaching for a University, explain the foundations of that social teaching and make some comments about the way that social teaching can and should relate to Aboriginal people.

John Paul II (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, n.31) proposes that a Catholic university’s teaching and research activities are designed to contribute to the practical life of the Church. Moreover, a Catholic university should produce graduates whose lives are grounded in “Christian principles” that not only prompt them to be
active members of the Church, but to also “help the Church respond to the problems and needs of this age.”

From another perspective, John Paul II argues (Ex Corde Ecclesiae, n31-2) that part of the university’s mission is to be “immersed” in society, be devoted to social service and to serve as a medium for the development of individuals and society. Thus, a Catholic university must be dedicated to studying “serious contemporary problems,” which include the protection of the dignity of human life, promoting justice for all people, upholding family life, protecting natural environments, promoting peace and political justice and more equitable distribution of resources.

It must be said, though, that a Catholic university’s concern with social issues is distinctively Catholic. While it may embrace politics, economics and other subjects of study, John Paul II envisages that a Catholic university’s commitment to social teaching will go beyond material concerns, to a serious study of the underlying grounds of social concerns, with special focus being given to the ethical and religious (or lack of religious) dimensions of social problems. Thus, Catholic social teaching is not just a political theory or action embraced by Catholics. Instead, it is a moral theology that addresses the problems of our time.

Moreover, a Catholic university is called to help develop human communities through dedication to the spirit of Jesus Christ. Thus, John Paul II (Ex Corde Ecclesiae, n21) encourages Catholic university communities to be dedicated to their societies, to a common dedication to truth and a desire to uphold the dignity of all human persons. An important part of this dedication is meant to be a spirit of freedom and charity with an underlying, “mutual respect, sincere dialogue, and protection of the rights of individuals.” Thus, the Pope calls Catholic universities to maintain their distinctive Catholic characters while engaging communities in genuine dialogue.

Thus, Catholic social teaching should not be understood purely as a unilateral imposition of Catholic moral principles upon societies. John Paul II’s
vision, as just outlined, calls for Catholic universities to be attentive to the social issues of the cultures in which they find themselves. This point would imply that this teaching would involve a two-way communication between the Church and the people the university seeks to serve. Put simply, if applying the Church’s social teaching means also paying attention to those whom the Church is seeking to serve, then the Church could have avoided catastrophic actions, such as participation in the Stolen Generations. That action, while done for the best of intentions, embraced a one-way and paternalistic view of social action, instead of a more mutual, collaborative approach that would be encouraged by John Paul II’s vision.

There are, however, certain Catholics who do not realise, or who downplay, the importance of Catholic social teaching (US Bishops 1998). In case there is any doubt about that issue, John Paul II (Ex Corde Ecclesiae, n34) makes it very clear that, “The Christian spirit of service to others for the promotion of social justice is of particular importance for each Catholic University, to be shared by its teachers and developed in its students.” This is in line with Paul VI’s insistence in Populorum Progressio (n. 1), that when the message of Jesus Christ is understood and applied through the Church’s social teachings, the Church is called to promote the development of peoples. The Church is thus called to aid, “those peoples who are striving to escape from hunger, misery, endemic diseases and ignorance; of those who are looking for a wider share in the benefits of civilization and a more active improvement of their human qualities; of those who are aiming purposefully at their complete fulfilment.”

John Paul II continues (Ex Corde Ecclesiae, n34) by making it clear that a Catholic university must be dedicated to social justice, in the first place, by making university studies available to capable students that otherwise may have been deprived of educational opportunities through poverty or marginalisation.

I did mention above that the Church was previously complicit in the horrors of the Stolen Generations. It bears mentioning that at one time, forced removal of children was seen by society as a good thing for Aboriginal people. So that
attitude makes even more important John Paul II’s point (Ex Corde Ecclesiae, n32) that, “a Catholic University must have the courage to speak uncomfortable truths which do not please public opinion.”

So, part of the mission of a Catholic university is to foster in students and staff an awareness of their responsibilities to those in society who are suffering; whether they suffer for material or spiritual lack (Ex Corde Ecclesiae, n40). Thus, the Pope’s statements on social teaching resonate with what we have said above about the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. It is not a purely academic tradition, but one that has the purpose of serving humanity in both our concrete needs and in our ultimate goals.

Having said that, the cause of social justice for a Catholic University in the Kimberley requires a special response from a Catholic University. The approaches to justice taken in other contexts and in other parts of the world may not work in the Kimberley. One would have in mind some ideas contained in Noel Pearson’s Light on the Hill speech from 2000. Pearson makes it clear that paternalism and distributionist ideas of welfare, which have been problematic enough for white society, have been an utter disaster for Aboriginal people. Thus, instead of using “white welfare” models to try to achieve social justice for Aboriginal people, a Catholic university should embrace models of social development that respect the dignity of people and take advantage of local wisdom. This is reflected in the principle of subsidiarity, which will be discussed below. Thus, part of the social mission of a Catholic university in the Kimberley is to increasingly articulate social justice in a way that does justice to the needs, aspirations and traditional wisdom of the people of the Kimberly.

There are two key challenges we need to face when dealing with Catholic social teaching. The first is that in the 1980s and 1990s many advocates of Catholic social justice embraced a Marxist perspective that was incompatible with Catholic faith and values. Among other things, Marxism encouraged class warfare rather than solidarity between people. That perspective was rejected by the Catholic hierarchy (CDF, Instruction, 1984) and the negative experience of
Marxist ideology left many Catholics wary of Catholic social teaching. Yet, social teaching does remain an important part of Catholicism as seen above. Not only did John Paul II see Catholic social teaching and the pursuit of justice as vital to the life of a Catholic university, he dedicated a number of encyclical letters to social themes, including *Laborem Exercens* (1981), *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987) and *Evangelium Vitae* (1995).

The second challenge is that Catholic social teaching does not exist in a vacuum. It exists on the foundation of Catholic theology, especially our theology of the human person. This is why Vatican II stated that “the beginning, the subject, and the goal of social institutions is and must be the human person” (*Gaudium et Spes* n25). This is also why John Paul II says that Catholic social teaching begins with the dignity of persons, with individuals and peoples (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, n41). As noted above, when discussing the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, Catholic tradition holds that people have an inalienable dignity because of their being made in the image and likeness of God, as taught in the first Chapter of Genesis.

So, within the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, as stated by John Paul II, Catholic social teaching will always be important because, “The Christian spirit of service to others for the promotion of social justice is of particular importance for each Catholic University” (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, n34).

*Important elements of Catholic Social Teaching*

If there is a need for a Catholic university to embrace and live out Catholic social teaching, the question is, “What is that social teaching?” In other words, most people are committed to justice, they may recognise justice or injustice where they exist, but they may have a difficult time articulating what social justice is. So, I would like to turn now to some important foundations, principles, rights and duties of Catholic social teaching.
Dignity of the human person

The Christian vision of the intrinsic dignity and value of the human person fundamentally distinguishes Catholic Social Teaching from the more popular social systems of recent times. In *Laborem Exercens* (n13), Pope John Paul II identifies materialism as the guiding philosophy of our age. Materialism, which has different manifestations and which pervades both capitalism and socialism, effectively places goods, services, and possessions as the most important of values. Materialism goes hand in hand with what John Paul II calls *economism*, which is seen in both capitalist and socialist systems. Economism treats persons primarily as labour. The value of people then, is seen as subordinate to the economy. In classic socialism, people are not regarded as intrinsically valuable. So there are no individual rights nor are there inherent personal human values. The individual's value exists only for the good of the state, and people are used, even disposed of, as best suits the state. We note that the same principle applies in capitalism. Classic capitalist philosophy presumes that people exist as *labour* for production. That is, people's value lies in their being a means for producing goods and services. Capitalism and socialism then, begin not with human values, but with either the good of the State, or the good of the economy.

Catholic social teaching does not begin with the State or production, but as Vatican II states, “the beginning, the subject, and the goal of social institutions is and must be the human person” (*Gaudium et Spes* n25). That is, as John Paul II states, Catholic social teaching begins with the dignity of persons, with individuals and peoples (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, n41). Goods, services, and material things come second. This perspective on the social economy ties in with Aboriginal social values, as shown in Eugene Stockton’s research (1982, 1994), to which further reference will be made below, in which human culture is valued over the accumulation of material goods.

Up until the pontificate of Pope Francis, Catholic social teaching did not offer technical solutions to social problems. Even when the Pope did offer certain technical solutions in *Laudato Si* (2015, n169), they were not nearly as
important as the ethical and moral teachings put forward by the Pope. The Church’s social teaching results from its expertise in human values. This focus on human values prompts the Church to understand and promote the happiness and dignity of human all persons. The Church’s social teaching, then, is grounded in belief in the dignity of individuals and peoples. It holds, importantly, that the solutions to people’s dignity cannot be simply reduced to technical solutions, such as economics or strictly social strategies. For, as John Paul II notes (Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, n41), if this was the case, then humans would be reduced to merely material beings.

Priority of persons over goods.

If we turn to principles of Catholic social teaching, the first explicit principle that should be noted is The Priority of Persons Over Goods. This principle seems to resonate strongly with Aboriginal cultures, which value the liberal development of people over the accumulation of material wealth (Stockton 1982, 31-2). This principle is especially true of the priority in Catholic social teaching of “labour” over “capital” in industry. Economic and social goods are meant to be for the advancement and realisation of the dignity of persons, not the other way around (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, n2, 172). Unfortunately, our materialist society too frequently views goods, services and possessions as being of utmost value, without critically asking just how these serve human values. The US Bishops (Economic Justice for All, n92) express this point clearly when they say that resources, especially capital investment, should be directed to those who truly need them the most. Decisions of investment thus require more than profit estimates. Catholic social morality demands that decisions be evaluated in the light of whether they will create dignified work, whether a venture will improve people’s positions, or whether they will push people over the edge of poverty. In short, as the US Bishops say (Economic Justice for All, n20), this raises a significant question mark over policies that put enormous amounts of resources into producing luxury goods and military technology while failing to
invest in education, health, and economic sectors that provide much needed jobs, goods and services.

**Commutative Justice**

Commutative justice applies generally between two individuals or groups in specific situations. It calls for fairness in all agreements and exchanges between persons, whether they are individuals or social groups (*Economic Justice for All*, n69). That is, the basic dignity of all people must be respected in all human relations. In a simple example, workers are obliged to work diligently for their employers who pay their wages. The other side of commutative justice here is that employers are bound to treat their employees with the respect due to their dignity, to provide them with a fair wage, and to ensure that their working conditions and the type of work done is not degrading. In sales of goods, be it by individuals or corporations, the purchaser is obliged to pay a fair price. On the other hand, the seller is obliged to provide goods commensurate with the price paid. Commutative justice is, from one perspective, just basic common sense; it is basically saying that one party should not exploit another in his or her exchanges with another.

The concept of commutative justice can explain one of the many reasons why the treatment of Aboriginal land has been so unjust. Apart from the dispossession of Aboriginal people from their lands, current Native Title law often sees Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people treated unequally. This is seen particularly when Native Title has been acknowledged over the lands of Aboriginal people, but companies can still mine those lands.

It should also be said that fairness in exchange assumes some sort of commensurability; that is, a fair price for a proportionately fair product. But, as John Finnis points out (1980, 1997), some human goods are simply incommensurate. While in white culture, land is a commodity that can be bought and sold fairly; in Aboriginal culture, land/country over which Aboriginal people have custodianship, not ownership, is an incommensurate
good and thus cannot be traded fairly in the manner typical of white culture. Thus, this principle explains why material compensation for the taking of Aboriginal land may be difficult, or even impossible.

*Distributive Justice*

*Distributive justice* applies over a more general social context. It refers to a requirement that a society ensures that the distribution of resources, income, wealth, and power is evaluated in respect to the needs of people, especially of those whose are in need (*Economic Justice for All*, n70). As Vatican II stated:

... the right to have a share of earthly good sufficient for oneself and one's family belongs to everyone. The fathers and doctors of the Church held this view, teaching that we are obliged to come to the relief of the poor and to do so not merely out of our superfluous goods (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church*, n69).

In other words, Church teaching means that if people are organised into a community, then that community has an obligation to meet the basic needs of its members. Importantly, though, this obligation does not apply only to the basics of life, such as food, clothing and shelter. That obligation also applies to the needs of a person or group to function as a member of any community. Thus, for example, distributive justice would ensure the equitable distribution of educational opportunities. I would emphasise here, however, that Catholic social teaching means that distributive justice is determined by the needs of people, rather than their capacity for production, their social situation, or any other factor.

Within the Kimberley context, I would argue that distributive justice should apply not just to people's material needs, but also their spiritual needs. Perhaps this latter set of needs may have been neglected in justice projects that focus only on material needs. From another perspective, this wider view of distributive justice would consider the example of a mining project on Aboriginal land. While it could be argued that the resultant royalties or rent could redistribute
material wealth favourably to Aboriginal people, the equally important issue is how the treatment of land/country will meet or harm the spiritual needs of the people.

Additionally, a deeper appreciation for distributive justice will note that what is important is not just the fact or even the amount of distribution of resources, but how that distribution occurs. Is it done paternalistically, or authentically with respect to the community? Is it enough for a government to say that it is “spending” a large amount of money (or more correctly redistributing tax money) on services for Aboriginal people? The answer would seem very clear to Aboriginal people. To give just one example, a report by the West Australian Department of Premier and Cabinet determined that in 2013, $53,600,000 had been spent on services intended for about 800 Aboriginal residents of Roebourne. Despite that sum, about $68,000 for every Aboriginal person in Roebourne, most of the “Closing the Gap” indicators showed that life was getting substantially worse for Roebourne Aboriginal people, rather than better (Laurie 2017).

Legitimate criticisms are often leveled at the distribution of government-funded services to non-Indigenous people. However, one would argue that in the case of Roebourne, and Aboriginal people in general, governments have also often been afflicted by a paternalistic mentality that is manifested in “Canberra solutions” for problems in the Kimberley, Cape York, or other areas removed from the seat of Government. In that light, and the light of the principle of subsidiarity, which will be discussed below, I would argue that distributive justice, to be both fair and effective, should involve not just a distribution of material goods, but also involve a distribution of the power, authority and decision-making processes that go into the service of people’s needs.

**Contributive Justice**

Besides the broader range of Catholic social teaching that is often called by the same name, the duty of “social justice” relates to the way that larger social
institutions of society are organised. Social justice means that individual people have the duty to participate and contribute to the life of their society (Economic Justice for All, n71). On the other side of social justice, society has the duty to enable people to participate or contribute to their society. This is why it is often called “contributive justice.” This duty means that all people have the obligation (and right) to contribute, as their talents allow them, to the creation of goods, services, as well as non-material values of the whole community. Thus, social justice calls on every person to make their contribution to the common good, and that society is called on to foster this contribution by all people. This means that even if one is fortunate enough to be materially rich and self-sufficient, they have an obligation to work for the good of our society. On the other hand, society's responsibility is to allow everyone to make their own worthwhile contribution to human development (Economic Justice for All, n71).

Social justice thus implies that there is a social obligation for economic and social conditions to be organised so that people can make their contribution to society in an atmosphere of freedom and dignity. Work, especially, cannot be dehumanising or exploitative of a person, nor must certain work be imposed upon a person, for that imposition violates a person's freedom (Economic Justice for All, n72-3).

Again, contributive justice raises serious questions about the way that aspect of “justice” has been applied to Aboriginal people. Under a paternalistic outlook, justice is often seen as something that is done for Aboriginal people. However, contributive justice turns paternalism on its head and asks (i) What contribution to society can be made by Aboriginal people? and (ii) What social conditions need to be changed to enable that contribution?

In this regard, one might note the lack of contribution of Aboriginal people as members of the Australian Parliament. Until now, Australia has had only six Aboriginal senators and two members of the House of Representatives. Another three members of Federal Parliament have Aboriginal ancestry but have not identified as Aboriginal. This lack of representation has, to say the least, stymied
the possible contribution of Aboriginal people to Australian society. One might add to that situation the recent rejection of a national Indigenous advisory body; a rejection that simply exacerbates the lack of representation and contribution of and by Indigenous people in Australia (Conifer et al. 2017). It is clear that such violation of contributive justice for Aboriginal people leads to a vicious cycle of paternalism, lack of contribution and dependence.

One might contrast the Australian situation to the New Zealand Parliament, which has established four specific Maori seats to represent the Maori electorate (New Zealand Electoral Commission 2014). It is not the place here to debate whether it would be best to establish Aboriginal seats in Parliament, set quotas or take any other specific measure. What can be said, though, is that contributive justice demands that concrete steps be taken to ensure a greater presence of Aboriginal people in Parliament, not only to ensure that Aboriginal constituents are better served, but also to enhance the contributions of Aboriginal people to the broader Australian community.

**Preferential Option for Poor**

A simple principle, but one with profound effects, is the Church’s “Preferential Option for the Poor.” This principle has often been mistaken as a Marxist option for the proletariat or a privileging of certain classes of person. That would be a mischaracterisation. Instead, the “Preferential Option for the Poor” is an obligation on society that reflects Christ’s command to love one’s neighbor as oneself. The Option for the Poor, as the US Bishops explain (Economic Justice for All, n87-9) is a Christian imperative to subject social activities to the criterion of how they affect the poor and the powerless in society. In other words, the poor and marginalised are made the social conscience of a nation or society. The way that we treat the poor is an indicator of how well or poorly that a society is living up to the values of Jesus Christ.

In the Kimberley, as in other parts of Australia, the Preferential Option for the Poor means that a society is challenged to go beyond economic rationalism.
and the making of wealth for “the big end of town” and instead to evaluate social activity in terms of how it affects the poor and powerless.

Subsidiarity

I have already mentioned paternalism in the context of Catholic social teaching. Certainly, one sees in Noel Pearson’s work (2000) the realisation that paternalistic welfare, while well-intentioned, is actually an enemy of Aboriginal people. In this context, the principle of subsidiarity is even more important. Subsidiarity, as a principle of Catholic social teaching, is the polar opposite of both paternalism and micromanagement. Subsidiarity holds that it is quite wrong for a higher authority to take away an initiative or endeavour from an individual or group that they can reasonably achieve themselves.

Thus, as Pope Pius XI stated (Quadragesimo Anno, n79),

Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do. For every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help [subsidium] to the members of the body social, and never destroy and absorb them.

The most concrete application of this principle is that decisions and endeavors should be undertaken at the lowest reasonable level in order to ensure human freedom and also to allow for reasonable participation by people in the social affairs of their society.

Subsidiarity, for Aboriginal people, can be seen as a pivotal principle that ties together contributive and distributive justice. It explains one reason (among many) why the practices of the Stolen Generations were wrong. While removing children from parents may have been done with the best of intentions, the
policies of the Stolen Generations took away from these Aboriginal people the right to self-determination and to make their own decisions for their families.

Subsidiarity also explains why some seemingly similar social programs have failed while others have succeeded. If we consider alcohol restrictions, we can compare the failure of the “Northern Territory Intervention” with the success of June Oscar and the people of Fitzroy Crossing. It is now widely accepted that, even though it was well-intentioned, the Northern Territory Intervention, which involved restrictions on alcohol, failed due to its “top-down” approach to local issues. As Federal Indigenous Affairs Minister Scullion acknowledged (Everingham 2017),

I think it would have been far better to do some of the same things with the full compliance of the community rather than the community having the sense that it was imposed on us, so yes of course we could have done it better.

The efforts of June Oscar and other local people in Fitzroy Crossing were far more successful. After a community-based effort to restrict the sale of take-away alcohol, the objective results were that “alcohol-related injuries in hospital presentations had fallen from 85 per cent down to below 20 per cent and alcohol-fuelled domestic violence incidents also fell by 43 per cent” (Clarke 2016).

June Oscar makes clear why her efforts worked. Instead of accepting a paternalistic, top-down approach from outside the community, Ms. Oscar took initiative from within the community. Her approach was to have Aboriginal people as active partners, “with government, and other stakeholders, [so] we can make some serious inroads into the solving and addressing those challenges” (Hutchens 2017).

Thus, not only is subsidiarity a key principle of Catholic social teaching, it would seem that, pragmatically, respecting subsidiarity is not only more humane and just, it works much more effectively than paternalism.
Land

Before leaving Catholic social teaching, I would like to highlight land as a particular social concern for Aboriginal people. I would argue that in Aboriginal culture, concern for land or country unites all of the principles of Catholic social teaching.

Land is essential to Aboriginal people. The connection of Aboriginal people with their land has been appreciated as a “spiritual” reality for some time now. However, recent research has shown that Aboriginal people are tied to country on even a genetic, biological level. Recently published research (Tobler et al. 2017, Cooper 2017) shows that over the 50,000+ years of connection to country, Aboriginal people have adapted biologically to their country. In other words, Aboriginal connections to land are not only spiritual or metaphysical, they are in the people’s DNA.

One could say that, contrary to widespread white misinterpretation, Aboriginal people do not own their land. Instead, it “owns” them and they see themselves as the custodians of the land to which they are bound. In this way, Aboriginal people and the Jewish people have much common ground; sharing as it were, analogous identities and spiritualities that connect them to their lands.

This is why, as John Paul II noted (Alice Springs Address, n10), Archbishop Polding of Sydney rejected the legal fiction of terra nullius and advocated for Aboriginal people’s rights to their traditional lands. At the time, Polding argued before a Parliamentary Committee that in being dispossessed of their land, Aboriginal people were “subjected to the grossest barbarities” (Russell-Mundine and Mundine 2014, 99).

In our current day, John Paul II (Alice Springs Address, n10) has committed the Church to supporting the cause of Aboriginal people’s land rights. It is a cause that he sees as important and urgent. He argues that the dispossession of Aboriginal people from their lands resulted in family break-ups, alienation from their cultures and many of the problems that Aboriginal people face today.
Indeed, as John Paul II notes, (Alice Springs Address, n11), Aboriginal society cannot be advanced without firm agreements on land rights. One would wonder whether the Pope was thinking of a treaty or some similar measure. But regardless of the medium by which land rights could be achieved, he stated that the proper recognition of land rights for Aboriginal people would be crucial to their dignity and growth.

Conclusion

This chapter has explained the teaching of Pope John Paul II that Catholic social teaching is a vital part of the Church’s mission and identity. We have also explored the characteristics of that social teaching with reference to the different sorts of justice and the key principles and responsibilities that come from this teaching.

Within the Kimberley context, the most important and urgent parts of Catholic social teaching would concern paternalism, subsidiarity, the preferential option for the poor and the value of land. It is clear that paternalism, whether it has been consciously exploitative or a benevolent paternalism that keeps Aboriginal people dependent and impoverished, must be overcome with a commitment to subsidiarity, and the recognition that Aboriginal people must be in control of their own destinies and decision-making. In this way, Catholic social teaching would clearly advocate for the sovereignty and self-determination of Aboriginal people.

A Catholic social theology of land would be a distinctive and essential concern of a Catholic university in the Kimberley. While land is a concern to many people around the world, it is uniquely important to Aboriginal people who are tied to land not as owners, but as custodians; that is, those who belong to the land. It would seem that a Catholic university in the Kimberley can and should be a place where this unique theology is developed.

I would also emphasise the point that the contribution of the Catholic university to social justice cannot be just a matter of advocating for increased
material resources to Aboriginal people. As we have seen, justice is not just about distributing material wealth, but it is about ensuring that people have the power and authority to make a difference in their own community. Thus, the mission of the campus should be to assist and to enable Aboriginal people not just to adopt “white” programs of justice, but to seek and develop Aboriginal solutions to the problems of Aboriginal people.