



# Is Catholic Social Teaching communitarian?

Patrick Riordan SJ

Many Catholics struggle to understand Catholic Social Teaching, about which they hear so much. Is it supposed to be a third way between capitalism and communism? Is it a programme for government and for running the economy? Is it an alternative social and political theory? Patrick Riordan SJ explains one thing that Catholic Social Teaching is not.

As 'social' is to 'socialism', so is 'community' to 'communitarianism'. Socialists can't avoid using the term 'social', and communitarians can't do without the term 'community'. However, not everyone who uses the term 'social' in a political context can be labelled a socialist, nor can everyone who uses the term 'community' in a political context be labelled a communitarian. While this point might be widely accepted with regard to 'social' and 'socialism', there is less clarity about the other pair of terms. This is possibly because 'communitarianism' is a newcomer to the language available for political discourse, and its meaning is only gradually being clarified.



Since the term has come into use for political analysis, Catholic Social Teaching (CST) has often been identified as exemplifying a communitarian stance. It is understandable that commentators would make this connection because the tradition emphasises so strongly the social aspect of human persons along with the dignity of the human individual. There is a marked emphasis also on community in its various dimensions as intrinsic to persons' wellbeing. For instance, the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004) has many entries, as a glance at the index will confirm, mentioning 'civil community', 'political community', 'Christian community', 'family community', 'international community' and 'social community'.<sup>1</sup> But the label 'communitarian' is not applied by the authors of the *Compendium* to the Church's presentation of her own position.

A recent book on social justice from the standpoint of CST explicitly makes the connection between CST and communitarianism, explaining that CST 'specifically brings to light the communitarian nature of the human person' as a counter to excessive individualism, and CST stresses the 'intrinsic worth of each individual person' as a counter to all forms of collectivism.<sup>2</sup> The author is not alone in doing so; he can cite a number of other commentators

who present CST as 'communitarian', including Michael Schuck<sup>3</sup> and John Coleman SJ.<sup>4</sup> McGrath claims that this idea is unifying for the stance taken on many topics such as 'freedom, equality, human rights, and social justice', since 'from the perspective of social Catholicism these will be viewed in the distinctive light of this communitarian moral vision'.<sup>5</sup>

Everything depends on what is meant or implied by 'communitarian' as a qualifier. As noted, if it only means valuing or emphasising community, then there is no difficulty. But what else might it mean? Debates through the 1980s and 1990s relied on a polarisation between liberalism and communitarianism, through which the meaning of the latter term was clarified.<sup>6</sup> In the course of the debate it became clear that many of those labelled as communitarian had nothing in common other than a critical stance over against certain strands of liberalism. 'Communitarianism' was used first of all to label an assortment of philosophical positions critical of liberalism. Just as there is a range of liberal political positions, not all of them consistent with one another, so also is there a range of critical

positions, again without consistency between them. While the critique of liberalism can be identified as a common activity, it is not a shared project, and different thinkers from various standpoints focus on different issues. 'Communitarianism' in this sense did not name a unified school.

Various criticisms of liberalism focused on (1) the liberal conception of the human person as 'unencumbered', *i.e.*, their social involvement is not constitutive of their identity, (2) the neglect of inherently communal goods in the liberal view of the asocial individual, (3) the liberal assumption that individuals' choices of ends are ultimately a matter of arbitrary preference, involving will and not reason, and (4) the liberal avoidance of a thick conception of the good, aiming at a neutrality which it cannot attain. Michael Sandel is one of those responsible for positing communitarianism as a critical stance over against liberalism.<sup>7</sup> While various such criticisms were common to critics of liberal thought, being critical of one or other liberal theorist does not constitute a school of thought.

The debate clarified a second meaning for 'communitarian': to designate a political movement rooted in a philosophical position, which seeks to be realised in some political regime. This is associated with the work of Amitai Etzioni.<sup>8</sup> Attempts have been made to produce a manifesto and a political agenda. It may not be particularly significant as a political movement in its own right, but it reinforces some right-wing tendencies in the USA, particularly those of the religious right, including Catholic integralists. It espouses a vision of the state that can reflect the unity of community, bonded by agreement on some core values. Communitarians in this sense advocate a particular style of politics, wanting the nation state to embody community to some degree, as if politics should arise out of a shared vision of the good. The basis of community might be ethnic, nationalist, religious or ideological, and examples of these stances are easily identifiable in the contemporary world, whether in Orban's Hungary, or in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Seyla Benhabib fears that communitarians' 'emphasis upon constitutive communities' in practice might become indistinguishable from 'an endorsement of social conformism, authoritarianism and, from the standpoint of women, of patriarchalism'.<sup>9</sup>

It is because he expressed such criticism of liberal analysis and liberal institutions that Alasdair MacIntyre was frequently labelled a communitarian, giving priority to the social and the communal, over the emphasis on individualism in liberal thought. However, he always rejected this label, denying that he is a communitarian.<sup>10</sup> The polarity in this debate, he thought, was on the question of the modern state: is the state grounded on the interests of individuals whose consent is the source of legitimacy, or is the state ideally grounded on a pre-existing community whether formed around ethnic or religious bonds? MacIntyre rejected both positions.

The long-running dispute between liberalism and communitarianism finally ran out of steam.<sup>11</sup> The criticisms levelled against liberalism were found to be misplaced. The targeted liberal accounts of the human agent were not intended to be a description of the human person, nor a phenomenology of choice, nor an anthropology, nor an ontology.

Still, the label 'communitarian' survives, perhaps as a fossil from the debates of the last century. It cannot be useful as a qualifier of CST, since neither of its two meanings is properly applicable to the Catholic Church's present stance in relation to politics or political theory. In upholding the intrinsic dignity of the human person, the Church is not entering a philosophical debate to criticise one or other liberal theory, but is espousing a value that she articulates in her own way but finds resonances of in the contemporary secular liberal emphasis on human rights. This was the theme repeated by Pope Benedict XVI before the United Nations General Assembly (2008), before the Houses of Parliament in Westminster (2010), and before the German Bundestag in Berlin (2011).<sup>12</sup> Even if at some points in the past, in the Constantinian settlement, the Church has sought to have the structures of secular rule subordinate to her religious authority, that is now explicitly excluded by the declarations of the Second Vatican Council, in particular the Declaration on Religious Liberty. In this Declaration, the Church commits never to rely on the state's coercive power to ensure conformity to the truth.<sup>13</sup>

Michael McGrath is indeed correct in drawing out the twin concerns that animate CST, stressing the dignity of the individual over against any possible exaggerated prioritising of the collective, and at the same time stressing the social dimension of human nature and the importance of relationships in community for human well-being over against any exaggeration of the autonomy of the isolated individual. These ideas are best communicated without risking the misunderstandings that arise when the label ‘communitarian’ is invoked.

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<sup>1</sup> Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004), p. 376.

<sup>2</sup> Michael J. McGrath, *Acting for the Common Good: Social Justice in the Light of Catholic Social Teaching* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2023), p. 74.

<sup>3</sup> Michael J. Schuck, ‘Modern Catholic Social Thought’, in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought*, ed. Judith A. Dwyer (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), pp. 611-32.

<sup>4</sup> John Coleman SJ, ‘Future of Catholic Social Thought’, in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, ed. Kenneth R. Himes OFM (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005), pp. 522-44.

<sup>5</sup> McGrath, *Acting*, 75.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift, *Liberals & Communitarians* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

<sup>8</sup> Amitai Etzioni, *Rights and the Common Good: The Communitarian Perspective* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1995); *The Common Good* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), p. 74.

<sup>10</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, ‘A Partial Response to my Critics’, in *After MacIntyre*, eds. John Horton and Susan Mendus (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p. 302.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Taylor, ‘Cross-Purposes: The Liberal-Communitarian Debate’, in Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> Patrick Riordan, *Human Dignity and Liberal Politics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2023), pp. 105-110.

<sup>13</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Dignitatis humanae*, ‘Declaration on Religious Freedom’, 1965, §§ 10, 12, 13. [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651207\\_dignitatis-humanae\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html).