

## FOOD AID AND SOCIAL POLICY IN EUROPE: THE TENSION BETWEEN WARM AND COLD SOLIDARITY

Abstract of my opening remarks:

The distinction between warm and cold solidarity has many ancestors. Aristotle provides one in the distinction between the *oikos* and the *polis*, the household and the city. Catholic Social Thought provides another, that is also found in the European Union's categories, namely in the distinction between subsidiarity and solidarity. Especially in any engagement to foster integral development protagonists will encounter the tension and must navigate a path that respects both poles and negates neither. The provision of food aid is a typical instance, but one which reflects the complexities in a unique manner because of the symbolisms involved.

Aristotle

Solidarity is not a term we expect to find in Aristotle, but we do find its equivalent, namely, friendship. Friendship for Aristotle is found in many forms, including the business relations of people doing trade deals, or the collaboration of athletes and sportspeople who play against each other. The political community is united by a form of friendship, political friendship, on the assumption that citizens endorse the vision of the good life that animates the *polis*. This is its common good. The household also has its common good, oriented to the production and reproduction of life, both on a daily and a generational basis. Aristotle sees the relation between household and city as complementary. The distinction between them has been transformed into a contrast by Hannah Arendt, who wanted to emphasize the dynamics of action in politics, in contrast to the dynamics of work and labour, assigned to the household. She emphasizes the point made by Aristotle himself in contrasting the domains of necessity and of liberty. What is needed for survival, for life itself, is provided in the household; the good life is pursued in freedom in the city, released from the bonds of necessity. *Oikos* and *polis*, economy and polity. However, in our western developed world, any such distinction is largely conceptual. The household economy that directly produces for itself what is needed, in a form of subsistence economy, growing and processing its own food, constructing its own shelter, is a thing of fantasy. The business of feeding, clothing and housing households presupposes complex networks of supply chains and markets and production units, and these all presuppose legal

systems of contract enforcement and property protection. There is no economy without polity today. However, one theme from Aristotle's discussion of polity carries over into our appreciation of economy. Aristotle claims that the feature which characterizes a polity as distinct from a collaboration to exchange goods and services, or to protect rights, or to ensure non-aggression, is that members of a polity care for the people, not just for the product. Aristotle's emphasis is on the moral character of citizens, and members of a city care about the quality of life enjoyed by fellow citizens. Political friendship in this sense is not exclusively focused on issues of character: the preconditions for good functioning, what we might characterize as the satisfaction of needs, the concern of the household, will equally be the concern of the polity when relevant household, i.e. economic, structures have failed. The provision of food aid must be read as part of an Aristotelian commitment to political friendship.

In Aristotle's world, the city or polis is close enough to the household and to the individual to be warm, in its concern for the wellbeing of the individual. But in our world, the distance between individuals and institutions has become so great that many complain of alienation, Politikverdrossenheit, frustration with the state and political elites and bureaucracy, a source of the wave of populism in Europe. The care of the polis for the wellbeing of individuals at the margins can indeed be cold.

## CST

In Catholic Social Thought since the Second Vatican Council the common good is used to refer to the complete set of conditions that would enable persons and groups to achieve their fulfilment. This extends across the full range of human activities and human aspirations. Accordingly, the complete set of conditions for human flourishing, including economic, social, cultural, legal, political, international and global, reveal how complex the reality is. What exactly needs to be done in any of these areas can be a matter of dispute.

While the situation of workers has always been a matter of concern in CST, we now face a particular problem for which a new word is coined. 'The precariat' names the phenomenon that increasing numbers of people in employment are unable to earn sufficient to meet their needs, and that in the context of widening inequality between the extremes of wealth and poverty. This

is clear evidence of the absence of a common good in the economy, in which enormous wealth for some is produced alongside poverty for many others.

Such a scandalous situation calls for solidarity. Pope John Paul II wrote in his encyclical letter *Sollicitudo rei socialis* 'On Social Concern' (1987) that solidarity 'is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all' (SRS 38). In the Catholic tradition of upholding the common good the focus can be directly on those groups which are vulnerable to exploitation or discrimination. Hence the adoption of the language of preferential option for the poor. The Church wants to place itself at the side of those who are victims, who suffer, who bear a disproportionate burden either as a result of natural catastrophe or human irresponsibility.

Solidarity is paired with another important principle related to the common good, namely, subsidiarity. The principle of subsidiarity insists that assistance motivated by solidarity should not replace the efforts of recipients themselves to address their problems and find solutions. It entails a willingness to help, with an expectation that those being helped take responsibility to find and implement their own solutions to their problems. In a hierarchically structured governance system the principle of subsidiarity requires that the higher level authorities assist but do not replace those operating on the ground. This is opposed to all centralising tendencies which are inclined to draw all power to the centre of institutions or organisations, depriving people of the opportunities to manage their own affairs. Of course, it should apply to the Church itself also.

In his 2009 encyclical letter, Love in Truth, *Caritas in veritate* Pope Benedict writes: '*The principle of subsidiarity must remain closely linked to the principle of solidarity and vice versa, since the former without the latter gives way to social privatism, while the latter without the former gives way to paternalist social assistance that is demeaning to those in need*'.<sup>1</sup> By 'social privatism' Benedict means the attitude that everyone should be left alone to mind their own business, and by its opposite, 'paternalistic social assistance', he means the paternalistic attitude of acting on the assumption that one knows what is best for others. This statement is made

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<sup>1</sup> [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20090629\\_caritas-in-veritate.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html) §58, emphasis in original.

originally in the context of reflection on international development aid. There are two important values which are to be respected, and disregard of one in favour of the other can lead to distorting or objectionable outcomes.

### Basic Goods

How are we to help in a world in which millions of people lack basic food, clean water, basic health care or access to education? Kenneth A. Reinert in his book *No Small Hope* explores the scale of need and highlights the urgency of the problems.<sup>2</sup> He draws attention to a heated debate about development strategies between two groups of academics, those who focus on growth, and those who focus on human capabilities.

Advocates of growth argue for the expansion of economic activity so that resources can be generated to address the identified need. On the other side of the acrimonious debate are defendants of human capacities as key to development strategies. Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum have been the principal theorists of capacities for functioning and have inspired many followers. Reinert dismisses these debates as unhelpful and argues instead for the identification of basic goods, corresponding to basic human needs, and the commitment to a programme of universal provision of these goods. He lists the goods in question as 1. Nutritious food, 2. Clean water, 3. Sanitation, 4. Health services, 5. Education services, 6. Housing, 7. Electricity, and 8. Human security services. A separate chapter is devoted to the elaboration of each one of these basic goods and services. In defending this account, he shows how the arguments in favour of the capacities approach end up with vague aspirational claims, but nevertheless must opt for some realisation of basic goods if implementation is to occur. The focus on basic goods relies on a minimalist ethics, in contrast with an overdemanding aspirational approach which is unrealisable in its idealism. Similarly, commitment to providing basic goods does not deny the relevance of growth but avoids the danger of endorsing growth strategies that succeed in increasing overall gross domestic product (GDP) or average consumption levels, while leaving millions still without the necessities for subsistence.

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth A. Reinert, *No Small Hope: Towards the Universal Provision of Basic Goods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Reinert acknowledges the element of paternalism in any global strategy that aims at providing a minimum of essential resources to people in need. He does not shy away from the challenge, arguing that it is better to risk usurping the autonomy of those being helped, whose values are ultimately to be fulfilled, rather than to shirk responsibility in choosing to do nothing.

Along with the aspirational quality of the capacities approach the vagueness and imprecision of the UN's sustainable development goals (SDGs) are criticised. 'First, the SDGs, with their seventeen goals and an astonishing 169 targets, are simply *too broad* in scope to be effective. Second, many of the targets themselves are *too vague*' (228). As examples of the latter he cites Target 12.8: 'By 2030, ensure that people everywhere have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature'. In contrast to vague and aspirational ambitions he proposes dramatically reducing the list of SDGs to a list of seven Basic Development Goods 'set out in the form of basic goods and services, the things that would actually help meet the stated goals of the UN system' (229).

The very tangible goods identified in the study of Basic Goods are common goods in the sense of means for a decent human life. All the more to be included as common goods are the structures, processes and institutions, put in place to deliver basic goods to satisfy subsistence needs for everyone. But other studies remind us that without those intangible common goods of shared meaning and shared values, the other goods will not suffice to deliver the flourishing of individuals and societies, which is their ultimate purpose.

## Conclusion

And so from a reminder of Aristotle and recalling the key terms of Catholic Social Thought, via a contribution to development studies, we arrive at the specific focus of today's conference. Solidarity is the theme, and the consideration of the appropriate structures and institutions, local, national and European, to realise it, at least in the case of food aid. For the members of the Scribani Network, this is an appropriate topic, and while many of us will not be directly working on the topic of food aid, it is a typical application of the values that are at the heart of the network. We hope that participation in this conference will both broaden our appreciation of the issues at a European level and reinforce our commitment to our founding values.