

2001

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Recommended Citation

John J. Coughlin, *The Practical Impact of the Common Good in Catholic Social Thought*, 75 St. John's L. Rev. 293 (2001).
Available at: https://scholarship.law.nd.edu/law_faculty_scholarship/745

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THE PRACTICAL IMPACT OF THE COMMON GOOD IN CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT

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As an introduction to the general panel discussion, I would like to pose the following question. Is the notion of the common good in Catholic social thought merely a nice sounding theory, or does it have any real and practical impact?

The Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes* offers this definition of the common good: “the sum of those conditions” which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.¹ This notion of the common good places a primacy on the flourishing of individual human beings—spiritually, intellectually, culturally, and financially—through participation in solidarity with others. It stands in direct opposition to any system of government which denies the conditions for human flourishing.

Perhaps, without fully appreciating it, I believe that we witnessed an astounding and unexpected practical consequence of Catholic social teaching in the not so distant past. Affirmed during the 1960s at Vatican II, I would like to suggest that the concept of the common good percolated throughout the Catholic world, and would bear a special fruitfulness in Eastern Europe at the end of the twentieth century. It started in Poland with a trade union known coincidentally enough as “Solidarity,” which proved the primal energy in the transformation in the lives of million of human beings in Eastern Europe, the whole of the Soviet empire, and throughout the world.

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¹ THE DOCUMENTS OF VATICAN II 225 (Walter M. Abbot, S.J. ed., Vatican Council 2d ed. 1962-65) (1966).

In 1991, John Paul II issued the encyclical *Centesimus Annus* to commemorate the one-hundredth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, the first in a series treating Catholic social doctrine. Referring to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Pope observed that “[t]he fall of this . . . empire was accomplished almost everywhere by means of peaceful protest, using only the weapons of truth and justice This disarmed the adversary, since violence always needs to justify itself through deceit and to appear, however, falsely, to be responding to a threat posed by others.”² Subsequently, in his best selling book, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, Pope John Paul described Catholic social doctrine as the “medicine” that healed the disorder that was the structures of oppression imposed by Marxism.³

In 1992, Mikhail Gorbachev wrote: “Everything that happened in Eastern Europe during the past few years would have been impossible without [Pope John Paul II].”⁴ The last head of the former Soviet Union attributed to the Pope “a turnaround that culminated in the approval of freedom of conscience . . . a liberalization with a strong moral significance for all citizens believers and nonbelievers”⁵

Responding to questions about his role in the fall of Soviet Communism, Pope John Paul cautioned against an “oversimplification” that would posit any one factor or person as singularly responsible. Rather he noted that Communism fell “as a consequence of its own mistakes and abuses.”⁶ With a characteristic humility, the Holy Father remarked: “I think that if any role was decisive, it was that of Christianity . . . of its content, its religious and moral message, its fundamental defense of the human person and his rights.”⁷ The Holy Father added: “I have done nothing other than to call to mind, repeat and insist that this principle is to be observed.”⁸ What the Pope

² JONATHAN KWITNY, MAN OF THE CENTURY 593 (1997) (quoting POPE JOHN PAUL II, *CENTESIMUS ANNUS*, ON THE HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY OF *RERUM NOVARUM* (1991)).

³ POPE JOHN PAUL II, *CROSSING THE THRESHOLD OF HOPE* 131-32 (Jenny McPhee & Martha McPhee trans., Vittorio Messori ed., 1994).

⁴ KWITNY, *supra* note 2, at 592 (quoting Michael Gorbachev, *La Perestrojkae Papa Wojtyla*, *LA STAMPA* (Mar. 3, 1992)).

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ POPE JOHN PAUL II, *supra* note 3, at 132.

⁷ KWITNY, *supra* note 2, at 592 (quoting interview by Jas Gawronski with Pope John Paul II (Nov. 1, 1993)).

⁸ *Id.*

repeated was the fundamental notion that the conditions for individual flourishing as well as solidarity in participation with others are best met in a human society marked by a profound respect for the common good. This core teaching of Catholic social tradition most certainly contributed in no small way to a non-violent transformation of an oppressive social, economic and political system right before our post-modern eyes.

