



PROPERTY AND COMMUNITY

Colin Miller

Earlier this fall my kids were riding bikes on the sidewalk in front of our house. A neighbor boy, Sam, didn't have a bike of his own and was using one of ours. It got to be time for my kids' naps, but after I'd called them in, Sam just kept on riding. I was just about to say, "Okay, Sam, time to stop riding till next time"—i.e., "Give us our bike back now," when I stopped to think.

At the Catholic Social Roundtable at the Church of the Assumption, we had been reading and discussing the Church's teaching about property. It's fairly well-known that the early Christians practiced a radical sharing of possessions—that they had, in the words of Scripture, "all things in common," and that "no one claimed that anything that they had was their own" (see Acts 2 and 5). But it's also fairly widely assumed those early days were the exception and that, now, Christians held their property just like everybody else.

The good of private property was, after all, one of the main points of some of the Church's teaching we had been reading—over and against what communism or socialism maintains. Property, the Popes kept saying, is necessary for humans' creative nature, and property itself is the result of putting one's personal "stamp" on material things the way we do when we plant a field or make wood into a house. It then becomes "yours" in the same way that an artist's painting is "theirs." We often use these materials to support our own bodies,

our families, and our communities, and so it is right that we have a claim to use them that others don't have. This is, basically, a Catholic definition of "property."

And yet, there is always another side to this teaching. For implied in what we've just said is the idea that we have property *for the support of ourselves and others*. In other words, property is always held as a *steward*. Everything in the world is really God's (as the Church also insists), and he just loans it to us temporarily, so that we can take care of our communities and ourselves. This is what Catholic social teaching means when it says that property is *for the common good*. In other words, our title to property cannot ever be separated from our moral imperative to use it well: just like in the Acts of the Apostles, it is given to us for the good of a whole greater than ourselves. We never hold it "absolutely."

This is the big difference from our culture's concept of property. I basically grew up with the idea that if something

was "mine," it means I can do basically whatever I want with it. If I "own" this apple, I can smash it, plant it, let it rot, eat it in front of a starving child, or whatever. Property means, in this common and legal sense, the right to the use *and abuse* of something. It's just purely *mine*; it's "absolute."

But, for the Church, *part of* what makes something "mine" is that it is *for* the community. So, if I eat an apple in front of a starving child, I have forfeited my moral claim to that property. I have ceased to use it for the common good, which is the reason it was given to me on loan in the first place.

Again, the difference with our culture's conception of property is sharp. They are almost two completely different meanings of the word. One means, this is basically just *for me*, and the other, I have this as a *gift to give*.

So perhaps the Church's take on property, I have come to think, has not changed so much after all. Maybe the early Church was just living out what the later

Popes taught, and the Popes were just giving definition to the radical life the Gospel makes possible.

Back, then, to Sam. With all this about property swirling around in my head, I realized that my instinct to "take my bike back" was hardly the spirit of the Gospel. Rather, I "owned" the bike precisely *for* purposes like giving this little boy something good to do on a sunny afternoon.

And what if I rethought my relationship to all my stuff along these lines? The idea I grew up with was that one of my principal duties in life was to acquire for myself a sort of little kingdom of stuff that I would rule over, and that would exist primarily to satisfy *me*, to protect *me*, to entertain *me*, to give *me* an identity, and to secure *my* future. What Sam helped me realize that day was how deeply this idea was ingrained in me, and that the Church was calling me to something different. What if the primary purpose of property really is *community*? What if the world is full of things, not to *get*, but most of all to *give*?

I'll continue my reflections on this topic in the next issue.+

Colin Miller is the Director of the Center for Catholic Social Thought at the Church of the Assumption, St. Paul, MN



Image by Freepik

VOTE, THEN GO BUILD SOMETHING

Sarah Carter

As hard as it is to believe, yet another presidential election cycle is already in full swing. It will be loud, obnoxious, and for the most part, a huge distraction from the real work that Christians are called to do in the world today. We will be expected to think and act as if everything rides on who will occupy the Oval Office for the next four years. It doesn't. It doesn't, because we have so much more influence than we think to build a better politics that serves the common good and magnifies the presence of the Lord in the midst of His people.

Lots of folks would prefer to keep religion and politics neatly separated, but for us Catholics that separation is impossible; the Church has a robust tradition of engagement with modern political and social life, officially inaugurated by the publication of *Rerum novarum* by Pope Leo XIII in 1891. The roots of this tradition, however, go all the way back to the Old Testament and God's express desire for Israel to do the works of justice and mercy (Cf. Micah 6:8). In recent history, Pope John Paul II played an instrumental role in the fall of Communism in Europe; Pope Benedict XVI contributed immensely to the Church's body of social teaching and to Catholic political thought; Pope Francis, for his part, has emphasized on many occasions that politics is "one of the highest forms of charity" and that "a good Catholic meddles in politics." Clearly none of our three most recent pontiffs have a problem mixing religion and politics. Neither should we.

But the current two-party regime of American politics ultimately leaves Christians with a short list of blunt instruments with which to meddle in public affairs, and this presents a real challenge for Catholics who desire to be faithful

citizens. Neither the Republican nor the Democratic Party platform represents a bundle of goods that the Catholic can ultimately accept. So, while Catholics are permitted to affiliate with any political party insofar as their choice is "rooted in charity and tend[s] towards the attainment of the common good," their allegiance to any party must be subordinated to the demands of the Gospel. As the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church states,

Christians cannot find one party that fully corresponds to the ethical demands arising from faith and from membership in the Church. Their adherence to a political alliance will never be ideological but always critical; in this way the party and its political platform will be prompted to be ever more conscientious in attaining the true common good, including the spiritual end of the human person.

Thus it has become fashionable for Catholic bishops and leaders to speak of "political homelessness" as an important concept for the American Church. To place our hope for justice and peace in a political party is an error, and to the extent that Catholics have properly ordered their loyalties, they will always tend to be the black sheep in their own political ranks.

This is all well and good, except for the fact that that is precisely what is *not* happening in the American Catholic Church. A recent Pew Research study compared Republican and Democratic Catholics on the

issues of abortion, climate change, government aid to the poor, and the border wall, and found that Catholics, on the whole, appear to take no exceptions with their own party platforms. Republican

Catholics overwhelmingly side with other Republicans, and Democratic Catholics overwhelmingly side with other Democrats, on each and every one of these issues (<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/01/24/like-americans-overall-u-s-catholics-are-sharply-divided-by-party/>). In other words, they seem to have melted into the broader political and cultural landscape, borrowing from the environmentalists and the social justice warriors on the left, and from the Evangelicals and the cultural warriors on the right. As a voting bloc, we fail to hold our shape in any meaningful way against the prevailing two-party framework for policy decision making. In other words, we have lost our sense of contributing something distinct to public life, of possessing something of value to be shared with all people. Jesus tells us that we are to be the "light of the world and the salt of the earth," illuminating and intensifying the presence and glory of God in the midst of a fallen world, but by the looks of it, we have lost our saltiness.

Partisanship seems to have eclipsed discipleship for the American Catholic Church so that party allegiance all-too-often becomes the ultimate standard for discerning Good and Evil, and if this is true, then the Church—as much as we profess to love and adhere to it—is in reality just a Trojan horse, smuggling in the donkey or the elephant. Then our politics is an exercise in what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace"—the outward accessories of faith, lots of talk about God and His Love—but a lack of true conversion to the Christian way of seeing the world.

Now, a clarification is in order at this point. Just because the current political divide among Catholics is unsatisfactory doesn't mean that there can be *no* political divide in the Church. Catholic social teaching has never promoted the idea that Catholics should vote and act in the public square as a homogenous group—that there is one "right way" to do politics from a Catholic perspective—but rather offers a set of principles for discernment. There is plenty of room for disagreement on policy matters among Catholics (since policy is always an application of principles), and sometimes those disagreements can be pronounced. One Catholic might vehemently disagree with another, for example, on the best policy solution to bring down the number of abortions in our communities, or on a just and effective reform of immigration law. But what I think we might expect to see from Catholics whose consciences are well-formed by Catholic social teaching are fault lines that, overall, differ dramatically from the ascendant Left-Right paradigm.

Continues on the next page...

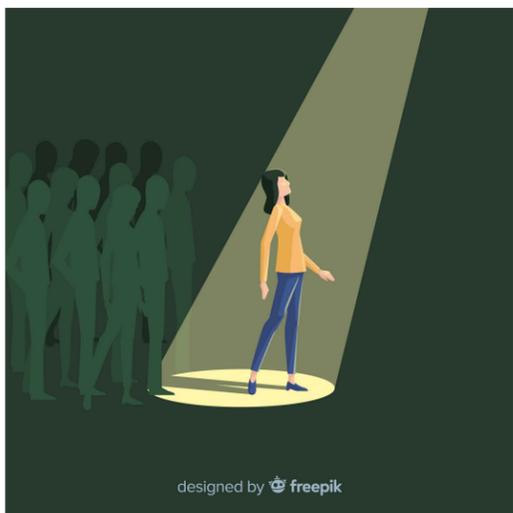


Image by Vectorarte on Freepik

LEARNING TO SEE PERSONS

Mark K. Spencer

Documents of Catholic social teaching can leave readers a bit bewildered. The papal encyclicals, the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, and similar texts are rife with prescriptions and prohibitions that can seem unduly onerous, arbitrary, obscure, or even contradictory. We are taught that the goods of the earth are universally destined for all people, but that we also have a right to private property. Popes have insisted on the importance of local community but also on large-scale political and economic development. A range of often hard-to-reconcile claims are made about moral matters from the treatment of criminals to sexuality. And all of this is often couched in rather abstract philosophical and theological language. How is one to make sense of all of this? What does this all have to do with living a more truly Christian life?



our being members of the human family, and, more particularly, of the Church.

An image—like a picture—is meant to be perceived. All the claims and demands of Catholic social teaching are supposed to help us see the image of God in each one of us. By requiring us to live out that teaching, the Church is *training* our perception so that we will more perfectly perceive each person as they fully are. Human perception is not merely a passive receiving of information. Rather, as modern psychology has shown but as the

Christian philosophical tradition has always known, perception is both receptive and responsive, cognitive and affective. To really perceive human persons as images of God is to *really experience* each person as a sort of sacrament worthy of the greatest reverence and love. The Church doesn't just want us to *believe* these things about persons. Rather, she wants us to *directly experience* each person in this way. She wants to bring us to the point where experiencing persons as images of God is as natural and automatic as any other perception.

For this reason, Catholic social teaching is *not* just a bunch of abstract claims to be believed, or a set of arbitrary rules. All the abstract claims are meant to head off ways of seeing persons that would lead us to see them as something less than

their full selves. All the moral requirements are meant to prevent actions and feelings that would respond to persons as less than their full selves. So often we don't really see each other (or ourselves) as *full persons*, but rather just see people as things to be used, parts of the economic machine, or mere organisms. We need each of the different claims and teachings to guide us to fully perceive and respond to each person as they fully are. The Church teaches the universal destination of goods because we are images of God as members of the human community, and so we must be seen and treated as members of that community. The Church teaches the right to private property because we image God as unique, creative individuals, and that aspect of the image of God in us also must be honored. To avoid either teaching would be to avoid fully seeing the image of God in each of us. The same is the case for all the other teachings.

But the Church doesn't give us these teachings just to perceive and respond to human persons on their own. Rather, the Church is trying to train us to see persons as images of God. When you look at an

image, like a photograph, you don't just see the image; you also see the thing depicted in the image at the same time. What the Church ultimately wants to lead us to is *deification*, becoming like God and seeing God as He is. By living out her social teaching, we learn to see as God sees, to see persons as they fully are. We thereby come to live more like God lives. We are also thereby trained to genuinely *see God*, through the image that each of our brothers and sisters is. When I see a person, I should really see Christ revealed through them, like an icon. This is not just a pious sentiment, but the normal experience of Christian life.+

Dr. Mark K. Spencer is a professor of philosophy at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, MN. He writes on the nature of the human person, beauty and aesthetics, and natural theology. He has written two books, The Irreducibility of the Human Person: A Catholic Synthesis (CUA Press, 2022) and Catholicism and the Problem of God (Cambridge, 2023).

2024 Spring Speaker Series

REBUILDING CATHOLIC COMMUNITY

A series of weekly conversations about rebuilding Catholic community today. Thursdays, 7pm, including reception, at the Church of the Assumption in St. Paul. Free and open to the public. February 15, 22, 29, and March 7. Featured speakers include:

Leah Libresco Sargeant

Author of *Building the Benedict Option*

Bishop Joseph Williams

Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis

Register online at www.catholicsocialthought.org/2024-spring-speaker-series

VOTE, THEN GO BUILD SOMETHING (cont.)

Sarah Carter

...continued from the previous page.

The failure of Catholics to engage in “critical political alliance,” as the *Compendium* puts it, and the choice to embrace political ideology instead, has consequences. Above all, the naturalization of Catholics into the American political environment is devastating for the missionary witness of the Church. It dilutes our testimony to God's love and justice, which, as the Biblical writers constantly remind us, do not often resemble the “love” and “justice” of the world. It also ends up turning us into slightly-more-religious versions of our non-Christian counterparts, which in my experience has the net result of simply annoying people.

More importantly, it alienates us from one another. It creates the conditions for “liberal” and “conservative” Catholics to segregate themselves into “liberal” and “conservative” parishes, for both sides to equate politics with orthodoxy and to hold contempt for their political opponents inside the Church. Jesus prayed on the night before He died, “that they may be one even as We are one” (John 17:22), but look around: Democrats and Republicans do a better job of answering that prayer than God's own people. Disunity is a scandal that renders Christian witness impossible.

So until we Catholics have the courage and integrity to break out of U.S. party politics and begin building different forms of cultural and political engagement that do not ape the existing narratives of the Left or the Right, let's just expect to have absolutely no impact on the wider culture in which we live. Let's not be surprised when we are impotent in our evangelistic efforts, when we do nothing but reinforce the existing echo chambers around us, and when we only attract people who already think and act just like us. Let's not be

shocked when nobody really cares what we have to say.

Parishes would be a good place to start the reform. While I sympathize with the desire to choose one's parish based on criteria other than where one lives, it's also worth considering which goods we are seeking when we look elsewhere, and who we are siloing ourselves off from in the process. In other words, look around: if your parish is healthy, you should find in the pews each Sunday people of different temperaments, proclivities, and yes, political persuasions. The Christian community is bound together by something more important than these things: namely, a lived encounter with Christ and a commitment to sharing the Gospel. This is why the Church discourages its priests from directly engaging in politics and forbids them from endorsing political parties; taking a hard stance in these ways prevents priests from improperly imaging the “ecclesial communion” and “spiritual fraternity” of which they, in union with their bishop, are a sign.

So, what would it look like if our parishes became seedbeds of the new kind of politics and social charity that Pope Francis has consistently called for? If we held town halls with local candidates from both parties, or nominated parishioners to run for city council each year, or held roundtable events to discuss the unmet needs in our neighborhoods and worked together as Christians to come up with solutions? What if Catholic parishes became places where liberals and conservatives shared a common life together, organized meal trains for each other in times of need, helped each other move, celebrated each other's successes and mourned with each other in our losses? Maybe then the unchurched would have a

reason to say, “see how they love one another!”

Moreover, how might our Catholic parishes be different if we started seeing them as outposts of mission and ministry to the spiritual and material needs of the entire community? Could we have volunteers staff a 24-hour food pantry across the hall from our 24-hour Adoration chapels? Could some of our homeschool moms host free childcare for single parents once or twice a week? Could the lawyers and business owners and doctors and therapists among us offer their service to community members in need at no charge?

In short, could we break the cycle of divisive political flare-ups every four years and actually build something between one Election Day and the next?+

Sarah Carter works in the area of Catholic theology and Catholic social teaching. She holds a masters degree from St. Paul Seminary and lives in South St. Paul, MN with her husband, Will, and their two children. This article has been adapted from a previously published essay on Sarah's Substack, Recovering Catholic.

2024 Spring Course

RADICAL DISCIPLESHIP AND CATHOLIC COMMUNITY

What does Catholic social teaching look like embodied in daily life? This free course, taught by Colin Miller (Ph.D., and Director of the Center for Catholic Social Thought), seeks to offer a compelling vision of a Church deeply engaged with the liturgy, each other, our communities, and the poor. The course meets for 10 Weeks from March-May at Assumption Church in St. Paul. Monday or Thursday meeting times are available. For more info and to register: www.catholicsocialthought.org/radical-discipleship-community

Contact Us

Colin Miller, Director
Center for Catholic Social Thought
cmiller@assumptionsp.org
Church of the Assumption
West 7th Street
St. Paul, MN 55102
651-224-7536

Web address:
catholicsocialthought.org

