

Freedom and Its Limits, 1891–2015

How Does Catholic Social Doctrine React to New Challenges?*

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Limiting and Protecting Freedom

Freedom and its limits has been a theme of Catholic social doctrine since the first social encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (1891), on the question of workers. Looking at the development of this teaching in the past 125 years, one might at first glance get the impression that it places the emphasis more on limits to freedom than on protections of freedom. Didn't *Rerum Novarum* limit the contractual freedom between workers and employers (34)?¹ Forty years later, didn't *Quadragesimo Anno* declare that freedom of competition "clearly cannot direct economic life" (88)? And, another thirty years later, didn't *Mater et Magistra* limit the freedom of an entrepreneur by demanding the participation of workers (82, 92)? Didn't *Pacem in Terris*, John XXIII's encyclical on human rights and peace, qualify human rights with an all-encompassing list of duties (28–33)? In *Gaudium et Spes*, didn't the Second Vatican Council limit the freedom to private property with the universal purpose of goods (69, 71)? Didn't Paul VI, in *Populorum Progressio*, restrict the freedom of international trade with his demands for social justice? In their call for public bans on biomedical research that kills embryos, didn't John Paul II and Benedict XVI limit the freedom of science? And in his criticism of how resources are used in *Laudato Si'*, didn't Francis restrict the freedom of consumption?

The emphases of the social encyclicals mentioned here do not so much present a false picture as an incomplete one. It is true that limits on freedom can be found in all social encyclicals since *Rerum Novarum*, but the converse observation is no

less true: in all social encyclicals, protecting freedom matters a great deal. *Rerum Novarum* rejected the socialist response to the “social question” of the nineteenth century—the nationalization of property—because it would lead people into a dependence of “slavery” on the state (15). *Quadragesimo Anno* declared that the state should “furnish help to” but must “never destroy and absorb” people and their associations in civil society (79). *Mater et Magistra* stressed that when it comes to the economy, the sphere of private initiative has priority over the state (51, 55), and *Pacem in Terris* declared that a government’s decrees are “wholly lacking in binding force” if they do not recognize human rights (61). According to *Gaudium et Spes*, the purpose of the state lies in advancing the common good—a common good that should enable “men, families and associations” to “attain their own perfection” (74)—and, for the sake of the common good, the Council placed an expiration date on every restriction on freedom because “freedom should be restored immediately” as soon as the conditions behind the restriction no longer obtain (75).

In all the social encyclicals we can find these emphases, which not only limit the state’s power over freedom for the sake of human persons but also limit a person’s freedom for the sake of the common good. To understand how this “on the one hand . . . on the other” of limiting freedom and protecting freedom works, we must direct our glance beyond the state and politics and onto the person who lives in various dimensions or spheres of tension: between individuality and living in society, between liberty and responsibility, and between being a bearer of the *imago Dei* and ambivalence. All spheres of tension have consequences for how society and the state should be ordered; however, when it comes to the dialectic between protecting freedom and limiting freedom what is critical above all is the last tension: that between being a bearer of the *imago Dei* and ambivalence. Bearing the *imago Dei* means that a person is a unity of body and mind, created by God and called to God, gifted with reason and free will, given the charge and able to subdue the world. Ambivalence about human nature means that one is able to use one’s freedom to bring success as well as failure to one’s life: we are able to act constructively—and also destructively. We can misuse our liberty by asserting our own interests at the cost of our fellow humans; we can harm them and thus destroy rather than further the common good.² The social doctrine of the Church (like jurisprudence and political science) does not react to this ambivalence primarily with appeals to improving human character or to repentance and virtue, though these are important. Instead, it responds with a series of structural and institutional measures that limit political control: the horizontal and vertical separation of powers, a democratic constitution, limitation of the mandate, the

accountability of those in office, and the basic rights of citizens. The purpose of these is to prevent the abuse of political power—or, when this is not possible, to limit its harmful consequences.

The social doctrine of the Church does not derive its suggestions for limiting political control from the belief in divine revelation. Its suggestions are the object of rational discourse. The social doctrine of the Church seeks what is inherent to all humans and what this means for how society and the state should be ordered. It seeks what is natural, what is normal, what is reasonable. This approach, which facilitates communication with both the secular social sciences and also other religions, is summarized in natural law. In contrast to the secular social sciences, the social doctrine of the Church defends religion's claim to the public square. Religion is neither an ornament to be assigned to the private sphere or to feeling, nor is it an opiate that people and the common good must be protected from. It is another way to approach the truth about human beings, their origins, and their destiny; it is a way that combines faith and reason. Reason deepens faith just as faith purifies reason.³ This both/and characterized the work of Joseph Ratzinger starting with his inaugural lecture in Bonn (1959), and it characterized John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et Ratio* and Benedict XVI's pontificate. In *Rerum Novarum*, the Church's social doctrine raises the claim that it should play a role in how the public order is structured (13).

***Rerum Novarum* (1891)**

The ambivalence of human nature and its relevance for the social and political order force the Church's social doctrine to a balance between protecting and limiting human freedom. Finding just such a balance was especially important in the nineteenth century in the area of labor and economy, the character of which had radically changed through industrialization, the elimination of guilds, the liberation of serfs, the freedom of the labor market, and free trade. Both the separation between work and capital and also wage labor played a decisive role in this development. Labor and the economy stood in the shadows of the "social question." (The expression *social question* referred to the squalor and poverty of workers who had no property and had to finance their living with their wages alone.) This social question was the central social problem in the last third of the nineteenth century. As a solution, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had called for a revolution of ownership rights in the *Communist Manifesto*, back in 1848, a solution that was controversial in the Catholic debate as well. In contrast to this denunciation of capitalistic development, which considered wage labor itself

immoral and advocated a return to a society of estates,⁴ there could be found positions that did not reject wage labor and, in fact, emphasized individual rights and wanted to keep the state at a distance.⁵

If property “should be regarded as an extension of human freedom,”⁶ then the necessity of finding a balance between protecting and limiting human freedom requires above all that our dealings with property be regulated. *Rerum Novarum* defends the right to personal property as a natural right against all socialist attacks. This is why Oswald von Nell-Breuning, SJ, in a commentary on the encyclical, objects that “it is a blemish for the encyclical dealing with workers to begin with an apology ... for property.”⁷ But it was not just the socialist nationalization of property that would result in a slavish dependency of people on the state; the property of a wealthy few in production and trade, too, can mean “a yoke little better than that of slavery itself” for those who own nothing (2). Leo XIII does not appeal primarily to the property owners’ virtue; rather, he urges the state to encourage the broad creation of wealth and to attend to wage laborers in particular (27, 29). *Rerum Novarum* establishes the preferential option for the poor. But what *Rerum Novarum* says about the obligations of the state is precisely where we see the balance between the protections of freedom and the limits on freedom—and where we see Leo XIII’s sovereignty over against the various positions in the Catholic debate. Interventions into the economy by the state are not illegitimate, but they are *ultima ratio*; regulations that affect the concerned employers and employees themselves are better. This is why *Rerum Novarum* leaves no doubt as to the legitimacy of organizations in civil society that are run by or serve the interests of craftsmen and workers. The state is to afford them a protecting hand but not interfere in their internal affairs (52). *Rerum Novarum* does not share the widespread skepticism about the state’s interventions into the economy or about a social policy of the government. But the state must always play a support role. Its duty is to pass laws to prevent workers from being exploited by inhumane working conditions or labor contracts that amount to enslavement (42–45), but it does not have the authority to prohibit private societies (51), to interfere with families (14), or to develop into a welfare state (30). This hints at the principle of subsidiarity, with which *Quadragesimo Anno*, forty years later, would lay a foundation for the balance between protecting and limiting freedom that still endures today.

***Quadragesimo Anno* (1931)**

In *Quadragesimo Anno*, forty years later, the economic order and labor conditions are no longer the issue; liberty and justice in the overall ordering of society and state are. Against the background of political developments—like Soviet Communism, Italian Fascism, and National Socialism, which was on the horizon—that were leading to the construction of totalitarian or authoritarian systems of rule in their countries, Pius XI advances a principle of limited rule that protects liberty in the form of the principle of subsidiarity:

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 to the members of the body social, and never destroy and absorb them. (79)

The principle of subsidiarity is grounded both in social theory and in anthropology. It arises from the view of the human person: humans are the source, support, and goal of all social institutions. Public, social, and economic organizations have a contribution to make to the success of human life. But they can contribute to the success of life only when they bear in mind that this success depends above all on a person's readiness and ability to seize the initiative, to undertake an endeavor, to take risks, and to make achievements. Accomplishing one's work on one's own brings joy, it demands recognition, and it spurs us on to new and greater deeds. Those forms of the state, society, or enterprise that hinder people's own initiatives, hamper their endeavors, and punish their achievements restrain the development and success of human life just for that reason. They violate not only the principle of subsidiarity but human dignity too. If the principle of subsidiarity is to protect the areas of human initiative and action with and by the state on the one hand, and from the state on the other, then clearly it must proceed from an independent, active citizen—not from a subject who is passive and needs to be taken care of.

According to the view of humanity that is at the root of the subsidiarity principle, humans are not primarily creatures in want who create the state in order either to supply what they lack or to satisfy their needs. On the contrary, they are rational beings, created according to the image of God, who in spite of their inherent imperfection and ambivalence can contribute to the common good and enrich a community, although they do require the state in order to reach and protect the common good. Each person is at once beggar and patron, debtor

and creditor. In 2009, Benedict XVI wrote in *Caritas in Veritate*, “Subsidiarity respects personal dignity by recognizing in the person a subject who is always capable of giving something to others.” That is why it “is the most effective antidote against any form of all-encompassing welfare state” (57).⁸

Magister et Magistra, Pacem in Terris, Gaudium et Spes, and Populorum Progressio (the 1960s)

The 1960s were the years when Catholic social doctrine emphasized liberty. This was the case with Vatican II and its pastoral constitution, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), as well as with the two social encyclicals of John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra* (1961) and *Pacem in Terris* (1963). Against the background of the Cold War and the confrontation with communism, all three documents stress the connection between liberty and human dignity as well as how the character of Catholic social doctrine protects liberty.

In *Mater et Magistra* the emphasis is still entirely on economic freedom; like blows from a hammer, the encyclical strings together declarations about the priority of private initiative over state intervention: “It should be stated at the outset that in the economic order first place must be given to the personal initiative of private citizens” (51). When the state does take initiatives of an economic and political nature, which it is empowered to do for the common good, then “the influence of the State on the economy ... must never be exerted to the extent of depriving the individual citizen of his freedom of action. It must rather augment his freedom while effectively guaranteeing the protection of his essential personal rights” (55). Our consistent experience teaches “that where personal initiative is lacking, political tyranny ensues and, in addition, economic stagnation in the production of a wide range of consumer goods and of services” (57) and “in those political regimes which do not recognize the rights of private ownership of goods, productive included, the exercise of freedom in almost every other direction is suppressed or stifled. This suggests, surely, that the exercise of freedom finds its guarantee and incentive in the right of ownership” (109).

In *Pacem in Terris* the emphasis is on the political order—within the state and between states. The encyclical deals with the conditions for a form of government that preserves liberty: legal philosophy, respect for human rights, and a democracy with separation of powers (68) and elections on a regular basis (73, 74). Having legal philosophy is paramount: laws can only demand obedience—that is, be legitimate—when they are based in the moral order that arises from human nature (6); accords with proper reason (51); and, for Christians, finds its origin

in God (47). The legal philosophy in *Pacem in Terris* is based in natural law. The final source of law is not the will of the majority, nor even the Scriptures, but the order that has been inscribed by God in human nature from which both rights and obligations proceed. This source of law, which has nothing arbitrary about it, is the central condition for the protection of liberty.

Vatican II picks up on the legal philosophy in *Pacem in Terris*. *Gaudium et Spes* leaves no doubt that democracy is preferable. It states that participation in creating a political will is the necessary consequence of personal dignity. The development of legal and political structures gives all citizens, without discrimination, the possibility “of freely and actively taking part in the establishment of the juridical foundations of the political community and in the direction of public affairs, in fixing the terms of reference of the various public bodies and in the election of political leaders,” and this development “is in full conformity with human nature” (75). The political order in which this is best possible, is democracy. Yet the council sees no reason to enlist the principle of popular sovereignty when arguing for democracy. Oswald von Nell-Breuning notes this with a hint of regret in his commentary on *Gaudium et Spes*, as if the council had lacked the courage to go all the way in its commitment to the principle of democracy.⁹ This regret comes from his fixation on the continental European principle of democracy. The principle of popular sovereignty cannot guarantee a liberal-democratic constitutional state, because such a state always is dependent on limits to political rule that could conflict with popular sovereignty. In this sense, *Gaudium et Spes* was wise to base its preference for democracy on the image of the human person and on human rights, instead of on popular sovereignty—that is, to proceed from the Anglo-Saxon understanding of democracy rather than that of the French Revolution and its totalitarian implications.

Gaudium et Spes is more than a reference manual of political ethics, though. It locates the person in modern society and is thoroughly shaped by the emphasis on freedom of the 1960s. Individual freedom is a recurring theme of the council; it does not appear only in *Gaudium et Spes*. “Only in freedom can man direct himself toward goodness,” seek his Creator, and achieve perfection in union with God (17). Freedom *for* is what it means to have freedom *from*: freedom for the good that corresponds to one’s calling is what it means to be free from oppression, from all external acts of compulsion that harm one’s dignity, and from “all captivity to passion” (17). That is why, in addition to *Gaudem et Spes*, the council also adopted a declaration on religious freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae*. But the council is under no illusions when it comes to the intrinsic threat to liberty from the ambivalence of human nature, to which section 13 of *Gaudium et Spes* is devoted: “Therefore man is split within himself,” and “all of human life,

whether individual or collective, shows itself to be a dramatic struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness.” Thus, human freedom continues to be dependent on God (17).

Paul VI presents a balance between guarantees for freedom and limits on freedom—a balance that is easily overlooked—in *Populorum Progressio* (1967). Now the discussion is of relationships between states, and no longer of order within the state. Paul VI urges international solidarity (44); a broader concept of development, one that must not be limited to economic growth; and the limiting of international competition as long as “a certain equality of opportunity” between partners is missing (61). Even the expropriation of landed property (24) and revolution against those who have ruled for too long can be necessary for the common good (31). But Paul VI also mentions the limits on the duties of solidarity, which proceed from the principle of subsidiarity: as “the architects of their own development,” the developing nations themselves are to bear the primary burden and responsibility for their development (77); each one is responsible first for its life and complete development. “Endowed with intellect and free will, each man is responsible for his self-fulfillment even as he is for his salvation. He is helped, and sometimes hindered, by his teachers and those around him; yet whatever be the outside influences exerted on him, he is the chief architect of his own success or failure” (15). This statement is uncomfortable: not a few Christians, Catholic societies, and *Katholikentag* lay gatherings have taken offense at it, because it tends to make the individual a victim of social conditions.

Centesimus Annus, Evangelium Vitae, and Caritas in Veritate: A Culture of Life and a Culture of Death

When it comes to striking a balance between protecting freedom and limiting freedom, John II’s encyclicals *Laborem Exercens* (1981), *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1988), *Centesimus Annus* (1991), and, last but not least, *Evangelium Vitae* (1995) are the high points in the history of Catholic social doctrine. With his pontificate, his travels to his Polish homeland, his advocacy for human dignity and freedom of religion, John Paul II contributed substantially to the liberation of central and eastern Europe from Communist oppression. His courage, boldness, and apostolic office resulted in liberation for numerous other dictatorial systems too. Yet he kept on reminding the free societies in the West, too, of the limits on freedom that proceed from the dignity of the person (*Centesimus Annus*, 40).

In *Laborem Exercens* John Paul II discusses the moral and social protections of and limits on freedom in the realm of work. One requirement for the

right balance is to recognize that, independently of social value or rank, work is always the activity of a person (6) and that it is a means both of procuring one's living and of playing a part in creation and becoming "more a human being" (9). Work therefore can never be viewed as merchandise, nor is it ever a mere force necessary for production (7). The labor system requires that the opposition between capital and labor be overcome (13) and that labor be given priority over capital (12), since capital itself is "the product of the work of generations." Among the social conditions for a humane labor system are just labor laws; a respect of free unions, even for agricultural workers,¹⁰ that have the right to strike as long as it is not misused for class conflict (20); and the protection of rest on Sundays and holy days (25). In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* John Paul II brings the social doctrine of Vatican II and *Populorum Progressio* up-to-date regarding the developing nations. This encyclical deals with freedom and justice in the relationships between industrialized and developing nations. In order to overcome "the notorious inequalities in the situations of ... people" and accommodate the principle of the universal purpose of goods, the developed nations are obligated to practice solidarity with the less developed and to overcome the conflict between East and West (7, 39); but the developing nations, too, are obligated "to replace corrupt, dictatorial and authoritarian forms of government by democratic and participatory ones" (44), to make allowance for "the spirit of initiative" (15), and to exercise solidarity among themselves (45). All are called upon to overcome the narrowing of the meaning of "development" to a merely economic sense, because "having" goods and services only perfects a person when "it contributes to the ... enrichment of that subject's 'being'" (28).

In 1991, on the one hundredth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, John Paul II published *Centesimus Annus*. After the largely nonviolent collapse of Communism in 1989, the twentieth century's *annus mirabilis*, the path seemed clear for a way of organizing states and constitutions that would protect freedom. For John Paul II, the cause of the collapse was less in the political oppression of Communist systems of rule and their supply shortfalls and more in their false, atheistic views of the person, which reduced humans to a collection of social relationships and tried to separate them from God (13). *Centesimus Annus* stresses that the Church "values the democratic system," but that "authentic democracy is possible only in a State ruled by law, and on the basis of a correct conception of the human person" (46). "A correct view of the human person and of his unique value," it claims, was "the guiding principle" of *Rerum Novarum* and is the guiding principle of the Church's entire social doctrine (11, emphasis original). The concern of *Centesimus Annus* is freedom and justice in the relationships between East and West and between North and South. A free economy is an essential component of

a liberal state and constitutional order. Unlike any document on Catholic social doctrine before it, *Centesimus Annus* praises economic freedom and the function of competition, of private property, of the entrepreneur, and of profit (32, 40, 42). *Centesimus Annus* is a plea for a market economy integrated into a system of law (known in Germany as a social market economy). This economic system is clearly distinguished from a welfare state, which results in “a loss of human energies and an inordinate increase of public agencies” and violates the principle of subsidiarity (48). *Centesimus Annus* calls the West to exercise solidarity with the postcommunist countries, but—as *Populorum Progressio* did in regard to the developing nations—it stresses that the postcommunist countries themselves are “the primary agents of their own development” (28). The subsidiarity principle applies even in international solidarity.

The encyclicals of John Paul II reject the widely held view that, for the sake of liberty, a constitutional system may not favor any values, namely, that it must be developed on a foundation of agnosticism or skeptical relativism (*Centesimus Annus*, 46; *Evangelium Vitae*, 69). The *ceterum censeo* of the entire pontificate of John Paul II, and also of Benedict XVI, is the warning “that freedom which refused to be bound to the truth would fall into arbitrariness ... to the point of self-destruction” (*Centesimus Annus*, 4; cf. 17, 41, 44, 46). The chief value of a human society that a democratic legislator must respect is human life. The prohibition against killing the innocent is the basis for a constitutional system that safeguards freedom and for a state that observes the rule of law. For John Paul II, the disregard of this prohibition was the most important social-ethical challenge of his pontificate. The Church’s task of giving a voice to the voiceless, which applied to workers at the end of the nineteenth century, now applied to unborn children at the end of the twentieth (*Evangelium Vitae*, 5). John Paul speaks in *Centesimus Annus* and then, more so, in *Evangelium Vitae*, of the culture of death, in which the self-destruction of a liberty without obligations is evident (*Evangelium Vitae*, 24, 26, 28, 50, 64, 87, 95).

“Culture of death” is an unwieldy concept. It describes a behavior, on the one hand, and social as well as legal structures, on the other, that seek to make killing socially acceptable by disguising it as a medical service or as social welfare. The goal of a culture of death is to liberate killing from the curse of being a crime. With the legalization of abortion in the 1970s in many Western countries, followed by the legalization of euthanasia in the twenty-first century in the Benelux countries and in some states of the United States and in Canada, the questions of protecting life have become a—indeed, *the*—social-ethical problem. But the Church is still having difficulty (and not just in Germany) reacting to this challenge, and academic social ethics is so focused on the problems of labor

and the economy, war and peace, and the environment and development that it does not notice the significance of this challenge. It is ignoring the fact that the legalization of abortion and assisted reproduction; of embryonic stem-cell research, preimplantation genetic diagnostics, and gene surgery; and of assisted suicide and euthanasia thwart the condition of the constitution in a democracy devoted to the rule of law: protecting the lives of the innocent.¹¹ But “there is no true freedom where life is not welcomed and loved” (*Evangelium Vitae*, 96); there is no democracy where the right to life is not acknowledged (70, 72). Thus the field of biomedicine is not just a moral and theological problem; it also is a social-ethical one. It is of central importance for the common good in a democracy devoted to the rule of law and not just for those immediately affected by it. When the Church issues a statement on this, when it advocates for a culture of life, then we are not dealing with a question of faith. “When the Church declares that unconditional respect for the right to life of every innocent person—from conception to natural death—is one of the pillars on which every civil society stands, she ‘wants simply to promote a human State. A State that recognizes the defense of the fundamental rights of the human person, especially of the weakest, as its primary duty’” (*Evangelium Vitae*, 101).

The consequences of biomedical developments are also a central theme of *Caritas in Veritate*, the 2009 encyclical of Benedict XVI that is limited mostly to the problem of globalization. Benedict XVI speaks, as did John Paul II, of the dramatic choice between the culture of life and the culture of death. The Church must “forcefully maintai[n] this link between life ethics and social ethics” (15). “A particularly crucial battleground in today’s cultural struggle between the supremacy of technology and human moral responsibility is the field of bioethics, where the very possibility of integral human development is radically called into question.... We are presented with a clear *either/or*” (74, italics original).

The social question has become a radically anthropological question, in the sense that it concerns not just how life is conceived but also how it is manipulated.... Yet we must not underestimate the disturbing scenarios that threaten our future, or the powerful new instruments that the “culture of death” has at its disposal. To the tragic and widespread scourge of abortion we may well have to add in the future—indeed it is already surreptitiously [sic] present—the systematic eugenic programming of births ... [and] a pro-euthanasia mindset.” (75, emphasis original)

The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* had intimated these problems in 2004 because it recognized that the methods of assisted reproduction would lead to “a form of total domination over the reproduced individual on the part of the one reproducing it” (235–36).

Laudato Si'

In *Laudato Si'*, Francis, following the example St. Francis of Assisi, makes a plea for “an integral ecology” (10). Francis describes in detail the environmental damage that threatens to turn the earth into “an immense pile of filth” (21); to clean up this damage, he follows Romano Guardini in calling us away from a technological paradigm that sees the earth as material for *homo faber*, rather than as creation, and that seduces people with “a Promethean vision of mastery” (101–16). “There can be,” he says, “no ecology without an adequate anthropology” (118). Regarding the political and economical requirements for cleaning up the damage to the environment, Francis emphasizes public solutions. In a peculiar reversal of the principle of subsidiarity, “society, through non-governmental organizations and intermediate groups, must put pressure on governments to develop more rigorous regulations, procedures and controls” (179). Francis pleads like Benedict XVI in *Caritas in Veritate* for “a true world political authority” (175), a plea that was criticized even in 2009, because a political authority that is supposed to direct the world economy, bring about complete disarmament, guarantee environmental protections, and regulate the flow of migration, not only is difficult to reconcile with the subsidiarity principle—it makes claims that are unachievable.¹² As far as the functions of the market are concerned, we find predominantly negative appraisals in *Laudato Si'* (56, 144, 190, 215); no reference is made to the positive description of the market in *Centesimus Annus* (40) as a mechanism for optimizing the allocation of resources.

Yet *Laudato Si'* joins *Centesimus Annus*, *Evangelium Vitae*, and *Caritas in Veritate* in the fight for a culture of life. Francis compares the power brought by biotechnology with the atomic bomb (104). He criticizes the environmental movement for believing that it can make a connection between its defense of nature and the killing of unborn children by abortion (120, 136), and he criticizes the gender movement for refusing to accept that our bodies are a gift of God or a gift of nature. A “genuine human ecology” requires one to accept one’s own body in its femininity or masculinity in order to recognize oneself in an encounter with another (155). Like Benedict XVI, whose speech at the German Bundestag (on September 22, 2011) he quotes, Francis points to the manipulation of nature in the way we treat the environment, which is so often criticized, and accuses the gender movement of the same manipulation in how it treats itself (155; cf. *Amoris Laetitia*, 285).

Looking Ahead

Where does the social doctrine of the Church stand 125 years after *Rerum Novarum*? Its reflections on the ordering of society, state, and international relations are linked to the person. It is characteristic of the view of the human person

to think and speak great things of humans, for they have a great origin and a great destiny. The crucial meaning of this insight, politically as well as in practical life, is that no one first must earn his right to live or his human dignity by his abilities or accomplishments; rather, these are given to him as part of his existence.¹³

This is especially true for the new field of biomedicine. The *Instruction Dignitas Personae on Certain Bioethical Questions* (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2008) encourages Christians to “dedicate themselves to the progress of biomedicine and [to] bear witness to their faith in this field” (3). But keeping in view the ambivalence of the human person is a feature of Catholic social doctrine. Its realism concerning this ambivalence is a safeguard against seeing only the constructive or only the destructive possibilities of human activity. For this reason, the dialectic of protecting liberty and limiting liberty, which characterized the Church’s documents in the past 125 years, will characterize the documents of the future as well.

Notes

1. The references in the text are citations from the respective encyclicals. Quotations come from the English translations at www.vatican.va.
2. Three years before *Rerum Novarum*, Leo XIII published an encyclical on human freedom that begins with the following observation: “Liberty, the highest of natural endowments, being the portion only of intellectual or rational natures, confers on man this dignity—that he is ‘in the hand of his counsel’ and has power over his actions. But the manner in which such dignity is exercised is of the greatest moment, inasmuch as on the use that is made of liberty the highest good and the greatest evil alike depend.” See Leo XIII, encyclical letter *Libertas* (June 20, 1888), 1, http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_20061888_libertas.html.
3. John Paul II, encyclical letter *Fides et Ratio* (September 14, 1998), 5.
4. An example of this position is Karl Freiherr von Vogelsang.

5. An example of this position is Emmanuel von Ketteler.
6. *Gaudium et Spes*, 71
7. Oswald von Nell-Breuning, *Soziallehre der Kirche: Erläuterungen ihrer lehramtlichen Dokumente*, 2nd ed. (Vienna: Europaverlag, 1978), 33.
8. Cf. Manfred Spieker, “Subsidiarität: Anthropologische Voraussetzungen und sozialethische Konsequenzen,” in *Besinnung auf das Subsidiaritätsprinzip*, ed. Anton Rauscher (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2015), 167–77.
9. Oswald von Nell-Breuning, “Kommentar zum 4. Kapitel des II. Hauptteils von *Gaudium et Spes*,” in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, 2nd ed., ed. Josef Höfer and Karl Rahner (Freiburg/Breisgau: Herder, 1957–1968), 14:524; Manfred Spieker, “Die Kirche in der Welt: Anliegen, Inhalt und Rezeption der Pastoralkonstitution *Gaudium et Spes*,” in *Annuario Historiae Conciliorum*, 43, no. 2 (2011): 311.
10. This observation had political significance because in 1981 the Communist government of Poland tried to prevent the Solidarnosc union from expanding to include farmers.
11. This is why *Evangelium Vitae* is missing from many collections of social encyclicals, including the overview of the history of encyclicals in the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace’s *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004, 88–103).
12. The plenary assembly of the Papal Council on Justice and Peace criticized this plea in December 2012 as well.
13. Bernhard Vogel, ed., *Im Zentrum: Menschenwürde; Politisches Handeln aus christlicher Verantwortung, Erklärung von vierzehn katholischen und evangelischen Sozialethikern* (Berlin: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2006), 17.