

Patristic Socialism?: Ambrose of Milan and Catholic Social Teaching on Private Property*

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Despite claims that modern Catholic social teaching has supplanted the church fathers' teaching on private property, this article argues for greater continuity with regard to Ambrose of Milan in particular. Ambrose's moral teaching on property is in large measure consistent with that of modern Catholic social teaching. While Ambrose does not affirm the prelapsarian legitimacy of private property, he does (as does Catholic social teaching) affirm its practical, postlapsarian legitimacy, even while emphasizing the duties of property owners toward those in need.

Introduction

United States politics over the past few years has swept the term *socialism* back into the headlines of public discourse. It has also rekindled discussion of Christianity's disposition toward socialism and the legitimacy of private property. Some of the most celebrated documents of Catholic social teaching (CST) specifically condemn socialism and affirm the legitimacy of private property. In *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul II affirms the teaching of Leo XIII that the right to private property derives from human nature and asserts that the right "has always been defended by the Church up to our own day."¹ Although Francis has been taken as more favorable to left-wing ideology, neither he nor Benedict XVI has made pronouncements that would render John Paul II's claim obsolete, though emphasis has certainly shifted under Francis.²

Yet, there have long been challenges that this teaching on private property has supplanted earlier Catholic thinking and has for some time led to controversies regarding the Church's social teaching.³ Arthur O. Lovejoy identifies a

“communistic strain” within early Christianity and describes Ambrose of Milan (340–97) as one of its most radical proponents.⁴ Lovejoy’s perspective is no outlier, but rather exemplifies a tendency in mid-nineteenth- through mid-twentieth-century scholarship to view early Christianity as proto-communist.⁵ Significantly, this scholarly corpus developed around the same time as CST. Since the Roman Catholic Church considers Ambrose as both a father and doctor of the Church, his alleged communism represents a sizable, though not definitive, challenge to claims of continuity in the Church’s position on private property. The father of modern CST, Leo XIII, grants “supreme authority” to unanimity in the fathers’ interpretation of Scripture, but also presents their individual teachings on Scripture as strongly directive.⁶ Ambrose’s scriptural exegesis regarding private property carries weight, even on its own, for Catholics; it also provides an instantiation of a dominant current within patristic teaching—a current that appears to challenge continuity in the Catholic position on private property.⁷

In this article, I investigate whether Ambrose’s theory of private property is compatible with that found in CST.⁸ Theorizing about the origins of private property marks both CST’s and Ambrose’s accounts. They both also consider how private property ought to be considered and treated in this present world. The compatibility of these theories will here be judged as regards private property’s origins and its proper use. I begin by delineating CST’s account of private property, since it is more systematic and consequently sets a stronger framework for judging compatibility. I then turn to Ambrose’s account and make the comparison. In discussing Ambrose’s account, I also note other examples from the patristic corpus that give context to his thought and that show variations in and departures from the current of which he is a part. These examples are by no means exhaustive.

Catholic Social Teaching on Private Property

Three principles underlie CST’s theory of the origins of private property: (1) that the right to private property derives from nature; (2) that created goods originally become private through human labor; and (3) that these goods were created to benefit all people, and not just their owners.

When CST declares that the right to private property derives from nature, it means human nature. Leo XIII indicates this denotation when he describes the right as “one of the chief points of distinction between man and animal creation, for the brute has no power of self direction [*sic*].”⁹ Intertwined with the power of self-direction are reason and the ability to anticipate the future. Catholic social teaching reasons from these characteristics that the human person has the right

“to possess things not merely for temporary and momentary use, as other living things do, but to have and to hold them in stable and permanent possession; he must have not only things that perish in the use, but those also which, though they have been reduced into use, continue for further use in after time.”¹⁰ The right to private property is thus not of human invention and as such has ontological precedence over the civil law, which confirms it.¹¹

The natural world, however, does not itself distribute property to members of the human race, but rather ownership arises principally from the application of labor to the natural world.¹² John Paul II roots this theory in Genesis where God gives the world to humanity:

When we read in the first chapter of the Bible that man is to subdue the earth, we know that these words refer to all the resources contained in the visible world and placed at man’s disposal. However, these resources can serve man only through work. From the beginning there is also linked with work the question of ownership, for the only means that man has for causing the resources hidden in nature to serve himself and others is his work. And to be able through his work to make these resources bear fruit, man takes over ownership of small parts of the various riches of nature.¹³

Through their labor, humans exercise their right to private property and make the riches of creation serviceable for present and future use. Based as it is on God’s decree to take dominion (given on the sixth day of creation), this account would conceive private property as compatible with the prelapsarian condition, though such a conclusion remains implicit within CST.

Here it bears noting the common distinction between the prelapsarian and postlapsarian conditions. The fall—the lapse from original innocence—sets a boundary between prior and posterior states of human existence. Human life has changed since the fall; discord has ruptured the original harmony. In Genesis’s account of the fall, sweaty toil, painful childbirth, and death now enter the world. Even human behavior has changed. Adam and Eve now sense their nakedness and adopt clothing. Yet the prelapsarian condition still has bearing on proper human behavior in a postlapsarian world. Moses may have permitted divorce because of the Israelites’ hardness of heart (Matt. 19:8), but Christ recalls the prelapsarian intention of the spouses’ becoming “one flesh” and from this prelapsarian intention insists that “what therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder” (Matt. 19:4–6 RSV). Similarly, CST—and Ambrose for that matter—while recognizing the distinction between humanity’s prelapsarian and postlapsarian conditions, discusses private property in this present, postlapsarian world in light of the prelapsarian condition.

According to CST, from the creation—and thus in the prelapsarian condition—the right to private property finds its origin and its limit. Even though each person has a natural right to private property, God through nature did not bestow portions of the world on individual human beings. Rather, CST conceives the natural world as a divine gift to the whole of humanity. The divine purpose expressed in this gift it calls *the universal destination of goods*. In *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul II captures these two sides of CST's theory:

God gave the earth to the whole human race for the sustenance of all its members, without excluding or favouring anyone. This is the foundation of the universal destination of the earth's goods. The earth, by reason of its fruitfulness and its capacity to satisfy human needs, is God's first gift for the sustenance of human life. But the earth does not yield its fruits without a particular human response to God's gift, that is to say, without work. It is through work that man, using his intelligence and exercising his freedom, succeeds in dominating the earth and making it a fitting home. In this way, he makes part of the earth his own, precisely the part which he has acquired through work; this is the origin of individual property. Obviously, he also has the responsibility not to hinder others from having their own part of God's gift; indeed, he must cooperate with others so that together all can dominate the earth.¹⁴

Private property is thus a means for fulfilling God's intention of providing for all of humanity;¹⁵ it is an extension of the principle of the universal destination of goods insofar as it is through the exercise of the right of private property that the wealth of creation in fact sustains the human race.¹⁶ Both the universal destination of goods and the right to private property can promote the same goal—a goal that the seventh commandment (you shall not steal) continues to promote in a postlapsarian world: “For the sake of the common good, it [the Seventh Commandment] requires respect for the universal destination of goods and respect for the right to private property.”¹⁷ Despite being yoked to this common goal, the universal destination of goods and the right to private property may at times be in tension or in need of balance.

The tension or balance between the right to private property and the universal destination of goods forms the basis for how CST envisions private property's being treated in this present, fallen world. While maintaining that the right to private property is derived from nature, CST also holds that the use of the earth's resources was meant for all.¹⁸ This right to use the world's resources has precedence over the right to private property: “Private property, in fact, is under a ‘social mortgage,’ which means that it has an intrinsically social function, based upon and justified precisely by the principle of the universal destination of goods.”¹⁹

This “social mortgage” requires a proper attitude toward one’s possessions, one that reflects the instrumental role of private property in God’s plan for creation.²⁰ Catholic social teaching insists that holders of possessions should consider their property, though private, as if it were common.²¹ In *Gaudium et Spes*, the fathers of the Second Vatican Council explain this attitude: “In using them, therefore, man should regard the external things that he legitimately possesses not only as his own but also as common in the sense that they should be able to benefit not only him but also others.”²² In quoting this passage, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains that “the ownership of any property makes its holder a steward of Providence, with the task of making it fruitful and communicating its benefits to others, first of all his family.”²³ Francis goes even further, underscoring that ownership must be exercised as a form of administration for universal benefit: “If we make something our own, it is only to administer it for the good of all. If we do not, we burden our consciences with the weight of having denied the existence of others.”²⁴

Catholic social teaching expects more than the proper frame of mind or even that others benefit to some degree from one’s possessions. It goes so far as to set limits to the amount of property that one should use for personal benefit. Personal benefit is only justified up to the point of satisfying one’s own needs and those of one’s household.²⁵ These needs seem to include more than just the necessities required for mere survival. On the one hand, CST encourages moderation in consumption as well as “reserving the better part [of goods for use and consumption] for guests, for the sick and the poor.”²⁶ On the other hand, it permits reasonable requirements for keeping up one’s condition in life.²⁷ Since conditions in life differ from person to person and from household to household, so do the needs associated with those conditions. In discussing such needs, Leo XIII offers in explanation a quotation from Aquinas’s *Summa theologiae*: “for no one ought to live other than becomingly.”²⁸ In the passage from which this quotation is drawn, Aquinas nonetheless highlights some cases in which “it would seem praiseworthy to forego the requirements of one’s station, in order to provide for a greater need”²⁹—praiseworthy, though not necessarily obligatory. Nevertheless, CST insists that, once necessities are met, “it becomes a duty to give to the indigent out of what remains over.”³⁰ The source of this duty arises either from justice or charity, depending on the extremity of the circumstances.³¹ Sometimes the betterment of others will call on Christians to give even of what they need for their own support.³²

Catholic social teaching’s approach to private property in practice thus closely follows its theory regarding the origins of private property. Since the right to private property is limited by the demands of the universal destination of goods,

personal possessions should then benefit not only their owners but others as well. Once one's own needs are met, a duty exists to fulfill the needs of others, and in instances when those needs are sufficiently great, it may become a duty to give even from one's own necessities.

Ambrose on Private Property

At the core of Ambrose's account of private property are creation and the fall. The fall for him hinders but does not thwart entirely the purposes set for created goods. In Ambrose's assessment, private property is a postlapsarian artifact. A right to it does not derive from nature, nor does its creation, at least principally, arise from human labor. Ambrose presents greed as the origin of private property. Despite this perceived origin, Ambrose does not call for the abandonment of the institution of private property. Instead, private property must conform to purposes set from the creation of the world.

As does CST, Ambrose repeatedly affirms that God intended creation to benefit the whole of humanity. Embedded in these affirmations, however, is Ambrose's purported rejection of private property. In *De officiis*, for example, Ambrose states: "God ordained everything to be produced to provide food for everyone in common; his plan was that the earth would be, as it were, the common possession of us all. Nature produced common rights, then; it is greed [*usurpatio*] that has established private rights."³³ The passage is clearly compatible with the all-embracing, divine largesse expressed in CST. Yet, it also contains elements that suggest that Ambrose considers the origin of private property in a negative light. *Natura*, as the source of common rights to the earth's goods, is juxtaposed to the origin of private property rights, *usurpatio*, a term that at first glance appears to be a pejorative. To determine whether this account is in fact incompatible with CST, we must attempt to determine what these terms here signify.

Even though *natura* in Ambrose's account produces a common right to the earth's goods, the term here signifies something other than the rational nature of humans.³⁴ From the statement's immediate context, the term seems to indicate the order of the natural world, whose fruits God has intended for the benefit of all.³⁵ This interpretation is certainly in harmony with CST, which also declares that nature's gifts were, at creation, available to all and for the benefit of all. One must look elsewhere for conflict, which the word *usurpatio* would seem to provide.

Besides the pejorative meaning of *usurpatio* (usurpation), it can also have the neutral meaning of *use* or *usage*. Some scholars have argued that the neutral sense is intended here.³⁶ Luciano Orabona, for example, reads this passage as a Christian reformulation of a corresponding passage in Cicero's *De officiis*.³⁷ After

declaring that no property is private by *natura*, Cicero describes the variety of ways by which it became so: occupancy, conquest, law, purchase, or other means.³⁸ Cicero here appears to use *natura* as a catchall, allowing different meanings to be attached to the term without committing to a specific denotation.³⁹ Cicero does, though, appear to have a historical sense in mind, as can be seen later in the passage; he consequently does not appear to pass moral judgment on the shift from common property to private property.⁴⁰ In Orabona's view, Ambrose agrees with Cicero that private property does not have its source in nature, while asserting "nothing about the legitimacy of private property."⁴¹

Evidence, however, suggests that *usurpatio* should be viewed as a pejorative. Elsewhere within the Ambrosian corpus, the term has predominantly, if not exclusively, a negative import.⁴² Although *De officiis* 1.132 could be an exception to this trend, context and other indications suggest otherwise.⁴³ The replacement of *occupatio* with the rhyming *usurpatio* suggests that Ambrose intended a juxtaposition of his position with that of Cicero.⁴⁴ This reading is in accord with the general tenor of the passage, which is one of rejection of particular views of justice advanced by the "philosophers." Ambrose first rejects the view that "a person should do no harm to anyone unless provoked by some injury."⁴⁵ He considers such a view as inharmonious with the gospel. Ambrose then considers the notion that justice demands that people should consider public property as being common while considering private property as being their own.⁴⁶ Ambrose declares this attitude to be not in accord with nature, since "nature generously supplies everything for everyone in common."⁴⁷ Since it is a nature that produces common right to the earth's goods, it would appear that Ambrose considers this attitude as related to the establishment of private rights through *usurpatio*. This interpretation is confirmed by a similar passage in Ambrose's exposition of Psalm 118.⁴⁸ In this passage, Ambrose clearly views the origin of private possessions as stemming from avarice.⁴⁹ The weight of the evidence thus appears to be on the side of a pejorative sense as regards the origin of the right to private property.

Other church fathers likewise perceive avarice as the origin of private property, especially of superfluous property. Basil of Caesarea, for example, presents greed as a driving force for the rich who justify their ownership of superfluous goods based on mere possession.⁵⁰ Similarly, Gregory of Nazianzus highlights the disparity between divine bounteousness and human greed.⁵¹ For him, *wealth* and *poverty* were terms without existence at creation, but which later sprung from evil.⁵² Although John Chrysostom admits that legitimate wealth is obtainable through labor, he presents the covetousness of human forebearers as often the origin of private property, an origin that for Chrysostom delegitimizes the property so derived.⁵³

For Ambrose and these other fathers, then, private property (often) does not have the wholesome origin conceived in CST: private property arises not from labor, nor are rights to it derived from human nature; rather, the sin of avarice is their origin.⁵⁴ Private property is thus incompatible with the prelapsarian condition. On these accounts, it seems clear that Ambrose and CST present divergent theories concerning the origin of private property.

It would, however, be a mistake to conclude from Ambrose's views on the origin of private property that he is some sort of proto-Marxist.⁵⁵ Even Lovejoy admits that "to assert that 'by nature,' or in the state in which man was originally created and was meant to remain, all things were to have been possessed in common, did not for a Christian theologian, necessarily imply that private ownership is not an inevitable accompaniment of man's present depraved condition."⁵⁶ Ambrose does admit that the force of justice was weakened by the fall and humans "lost the principle of showing kindness to all in common."⁵⁷ Private property was incompatible with the absolute altruism present before the fall. Yet, Ambrose's writings and life also suggest that he accepts that this altruism becomes relative in humanity's weakened condition, even after the incarnation, and allows some possession of property.⁵⁸

Although Ambrose lauds those who embrace complete poverty, he also considers private property as compatible with Christian living, not requiring his clergy to renounce all possessions.⁵⁹ He even declares that the cleric who retains enough of his possessions so as not to burden the Church "can hardly be described as less than perfect," so long as he gives "whatever is necessary for him to discharge his duty appropriately."⁶⁰ Ambrose himself seems to have retained some of his property after his episcopal ordination, as can be seen from his eulogy for Satyrus, his brother.⁶¹ We learn that Satyrus had managed the property that he, Ambrose, and their sister shared, and Ambrose praises his wise management of that property.⁶² Thus, it becomes clear from Ambrose's teaching and practice that he accepted private property as part of the present condition and considered it compatible with the Christian life.⁶³

Ambrose does not merely admit private property's compatibility with the Christian life; he also defends the rights of owners against dispossession. The inspiration for this defense comes from the story of Naboth, whose vineyard was seized by King Ahab and his wife Jezebel (1 Kings 21).⁶⁴ In *De Nabuthae* 2.5, Ambrose condemns Ahab not for his wealth, but for his covetousness and lack of contentment.⁶⁵ Nor does Ambrose blame Naboth for laying claim to property, namely a vineyard.⁶⁶ Ambrose even indicates that Ahab confesses that the vineyard belongs to another and therefore is not his own.⁶⁷ If Ambrose rejected the legitimacy of private ownership in a postlapsarian world, Ahab and Naboth

would each be worthy of blame, since each lays claim to the vineyard, which would be rightful property of all. Instead, Ambrose takes Naboth as a model in defending his claim to Church property against Arian encroachments.⁶⁸ Vincent Vasey notes how “Ambrose invoked the example of Naboth as a case parallel his own struggle against the Emperor over the Portian Basilica.”⁶⁹ Just as Naboth considers his vineyard as an inheritance from his fathers, so too Ambrose considers the Church—and in particular the Portian Basilica—as his inheritance from Christ.⁷⁰ Although Ambrose clearly equates surrender of the church building with surrender of the faith to the Arians, he justifies his actions by recalling Naboth’s example. Praise and imitation of Naboth indicate that Ambrose considers private claims to property as *per se* legitimate in this present state.

Nevertheless, for Ambrose, even in the postlapsarian condition, the right to private property must be exercised in light of the original plan for creation. For him, there is a connection between the prelapsarian ideal and how we ought to treat our possessions in this fallen world.⁷¹ Peter Garnsey argues that Ambrose’s account of the primal state was for the very purpose of making a “theological point with practical, that is, pastoral significance.”⁷² While not advocating a return to communism, Ambrose “was urging a change in the behaviour of men of property.”⁷³ As noted above, the account of property’s origins in *De officiis* 1.132 is preceded by Ambrose’s rejection of the notion that private property should be treated as private. Instead, Ambrose directs owners to consider their property as common and to give to the poor.⁷⁴ Ambrose’s position is compatible, if not identical, with that found in CST.⁷⁵ Other fathers embrace positions comparable to Ambrose’s.⁷⁶

Just as in CST, the proper attitude toward property is accompanied by limits to the use of property. It is use, or *usus*, that “perpetuates, to some degree, at least, the altruistic element in man’s original relationship to private possessions.”⁷⁷ In speaking of the utility of money, Ambrose reveals his concept of what it means to possess: “After all, we possess something if we use it; but if it is beyond our ability to use a thing, there is clearly nothing to be gained from possessing it: all we have is the risk of looking after it.”⁷⁸ Superfluous possessions are not beneficial to their owners, but rather detrimental. By giving alms, one escapes servitude to riches: “For a possession ought to belong to the possessor, not the possessor to the possession. Whosoever therefore does not use his patrimony as a possession, who does not know how to give and distribute to the poor, he is a servant of his wealth, not its master; because like a servant he watches over the wealth of another, and not like a master does he use it as his own.”⁷⁹ Since one cannot truly possess goods in excess of what is useful, one becomes a servant to ostensible possessions, unless those possessions are given away. By dispensing

of superfluities in this manner, the original intention of the Creator is served, even in this fallen world.⁸⁰ In practice, then, the duty to give away any excess is comparable to the doctrine of CST, wherein the universal destination of goods demands that superfluities be given to the poor. For both, the original intent that earth's riches benefit everyone is preserved through largesse.⁸¹

Conclusion

Even if Ambrose's theory regarding the origin of private property remains incompatible with CST's, his treatment of private property in this fallen world certainly is compatible with it. Catholic social teaching takes a positive view of the origin of private property, considering it as arising from rational nature and work. Private property is part of God's original plan benefiting all humanity and is thus compatible with the prelapsarian condition. Ambrose, however, takes a negative view of the origin of private property and sees it as incompatible with God's original intention for benefiting all humanity. Arising from the sin of avarice, private property is therefore incompatible with the prelapsarian condition. Communism is left behind with Eden, and Ambrose advances no program for return to either. Instead, he recognizes humanity's weakened condition, accepts private property as part of the new state of affairs (even for Christians), and defends the right to hold property. Nevertheless, the recollection of that original communism plays the role taken by the universal destination of goods in CST. Both demand that the rich give to the poor whatever is superfluous. Ambrose does defend private property, but, like CST, only to the point of sufficiency. Although Ambrose's and CST's theories of the origin of private property are divergent, the practical implications derived from these theories are deeply consonant.

Notes

- * I am grateful for the support of the Acton Institute and its Calihan Fellowship, which funded research that contributed to this article.
1. Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus* (May 1, 1991), no. 30. After the initial reference, documents from Catholic social teaching will be referenced by their initials, for example, *CA*, no. 30.
 2. Even though Pope Benedict XVI does not discuss private property in depth in his social encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, his comments therein seem to presuppose the legitimacy of private property (see, e.g., Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate* [June 29, 2009], nos. 21, 38, 46–47). American commentators were quick to perceive leftist leanings in Pope Francis’s apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*; one rightwing commentator even describing the document as “pure Marxism.” (For examples of American commentary, see Gregorio Guitián, “*La economía y las finanzas en Evangelii gaudium: una reflexión sobre algunas reacciones en Estados Unidos desde la Doctrina Social de la Iglesia*,” *Teología y Vida* 55, no. 4 [2014]: 668–77). Francis’s comments in the exhortation, though critical of abuses of property, imply private property’s legitimacy. See Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (November 24, 2013), no. 189. In *Laudato Si’*, Francis’s encyclical on the environment, the pontiff underscores a social function for private property, while repeatedly quoting passages from John Paul II that highlight this aspect. See Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si’* (May 24, 2015), no. 93.
 3. Arnold F. McKee, “That ‘Natural’ Right to Private Property,” *Review of Social Economy* 49, no. 4 (1991): 484.
 4. Arthur O. Lovejoy, “The Communism of Saint Ambrose,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 3, no. 4 (1942): 458n1.
 5. See Brian Matz, “The Principle of Detachment from Private Property in Basil of Caesarea’s *Homily 6* and Its Context,” in *Reading Patristic Texts on Social Ethics: Issues and Challenges for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Johan Leemans, Brian J. Matz, and Johan Verstraeten (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2011): 162 and 162n1.
 6. Pope Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Providentissimus Deus* (November 18, 1893), no. 14:

The Holy Fathers, We say, are of supreme authority, whenever they all interpret in one and the same manner any text of the Bible, as pertaining to the doctrine of faith or morals; for their unanimity clearly evinces that such interpretation has come down from the Apostles as a matter of Catholic faith. The opinion of the Fathers is also of very great weight when they treat of these matters in their capacity of doctors, unofficially; ... Wherefore the expositor should make it his

duty to follow their footsteps with all reverence, and to use their labours with intelligent appreciation.”

Leo XIII’s teaching here follows the Christian tradition on the authority of patristic consensus, a tradition that can be traced back in nascent form to Irenaeus of Lyons (130–202), in a more developed form to Vincent of Lérins (d. c. 445), and through to the Council of Trent (1545–63).

7. Ambrose of Milan developed his thoughts as part of this current. In *De Nabuthae*, for example, he draws on the homilies of Basil of Caesarea in discussing property. See Martin R. P. McGuire, introduction to *De Nabuthae*, by Ambrose of Milan (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 1927), 3.
8. “Catholic social teaching” by convention identifies the Roman Church’s social doctrine beginning with Leo XIII’s Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum* (1891), though it is by no means the first papal pronouncement on social issues—for example, Pope Benedict XIV, *Vix Pervenit* (1745). Nevertheless, *Rerum Novarum* is certainly a wellspring of further development, with several subsequent documents appearing as anniversary pieces: for example, *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) and *Centesimus Annus* (1991). Since different canons exist of the documents comprising CST, I have selected those documents directed to the universal Church, as they are most clearly authoritative in representing the Roman Catholic position.
9. Pope Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum* (May 15, 1891), no. 6.
10. *RN*, no. 6. Cf. *RN*, no. 7; Pope Pius XI, Encyclical Letter *Quadragesimo Anno* (May 15, 1931), no. 45; Pope John XXIII, Encyclical Letter *Mater et Magistra* (May 15, 1961), nos. 19, 30, 108–9, 122; Pope John XXIII, Encyclical Letter *Pacem in Terris* (April 11, 1963), no. 21; *CA*, no. 30.
11. *RN*, nos. 47 and 11. Cf. *QA*, no. 45. As will be briefly discussed in note 31 *infra*, the Church acknowledges that the state has a right to regulate the use of private property for the sake of the common good; however, it may not “absorb” private property altogether (*RN*, no. 47).
12. Cf. *QA*, no. 52. Here Pius XI allows occupancy, in addition to labor, as a source of ownership.
13. Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens* (September 14, 1981), no. 12. Cf. *LE*, no. 14: “As mentioned above, property is acquired first of all through work in order that it may serve work.”
14. *CA*, no. 31. Cf. *LS*, nos. 93–95.
15. Cf. *MM*, no. 119.

16. Cf. *QA*, no. 53: “And in the application of natural resources to human use the law of nature, or rather God’s will promulgated by it, demands that right order be observed. This order consists in this: that each thing have its proper owner.”
17. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2401.
18. Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*, December 7, 1965), no. 69. Cf. *CA*, no. 6: Here John Paul II describes this notion as “the characteristic principle of Christian social doctrine.”
19. *CA*, no. 6. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2403: “The right to private property, acquired by work or received from others by inheritance or gift, does not do away with the original gift of the earth to the whole of mankind. The universal destination of goods remains primordial, even if the promotion of the common good requires respect for the right to private property and its exercise.”
20. Francis writes that “the private ownership of goods is justified by the need to protect and increase them, so that they can better serve the common good” (*EG*, no. 189).
21. *RN*, no. 22; *CA*, no. 30.
22. *GS*, no. 69.
23. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2404. Cf. *RN*, no. 22.
24. *LS*, no. 95.
25. *RN*, no. 22.
26. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2405.
27. *RN*, no. 22.
28. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II-II, 32.6, quoted in *RN*, no. 22.
29. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II-II, 32.6, trans. Laurence Shapcote (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012).
30. *RN*, no. 22. Cf. *QA*, no. 50; Pope Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Populorum Progressio* (March 26, 1967), no. 23.
31. *RN*, no. 22. In the same section, Leo XIII emphasizes that “it is a duty, not of justice (save in extreme cases), but of Christian charity—a duty not enforced by human law.” In *Populorum Progressio*, Paul VI follows Ambrose and emphasizes the character of justice in such largesse (*PP*, no. 23). While not necessarily advocating the seizure of superfluous wealth, Paul VI calls for the involvement of public authorities, in conjunction with private citizens and groups, in seeking solutions to conflicts between private gain and the common good. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 2406 and 2425.

32. *Gaudium et Spes* refers with approbation to the opinion of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, who taught that “men are obliged to come to the relief of the poor and to do so not merely out of their superfluous goods” (*GS*, no. 69). Cf. Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (December 30, 1987), no. 31.
33. Ambrose of Milan, *De officiis* 1.132 (PL 16.62), ed. and trans. Ivor J. Davidson, vol. 1, *Oxford Early Christian Studies*, ed. Gillian Clark and Andrew Louth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 194–195: “*Sic enim Deus generari iussit omnia ut pastus omnibus communis esset et terra ergo foret omnium quaedam communis possessio. Natura igitur ius commune generavit, usurpatio ius fecit privatum.*” All further references to Ambrose’s *De officiis* will be from this edition and will be cited by book, paragraph, and page number; volume and column numbers from *Patrologia Latina* are provided for ease of reference: Ambrose of Milan, *De officiis* 1.132 (PL 16.62), 194–95.
34. In book 3 of *De officiis*, Ambrose presumes that *homo* is derived from the *humus* (soil or earth), and thus humans should imitate the generosity of the bountiful earth, who gives “everything to everyone alike,” “*omnia largitur omnibus*” (*De officiis*, 3.16 (PL 16.149), 362–63). It is thus humans’ materiality that makes *humanitas* a virtue particular to them. Thus, even though human nature can be seen as coming into Ambrose’s account of the origin of common right to the earth’s goods, it is only insofar as humans are part of the natural, material world.
35. Cf. Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 132: “What Ambrose had in mind was no cold carving up of a dead and abstract ‘nature.’ Behind his views on the common rights of nature lay an ancient person’s sense of the numinous fecundity of the earth, a view shared by Christians and pagans. Mother earth had barely ceased to be divine.”
36. Louis J. Swift gives a useful overview of scholars who argue that the term should be understood in this neutral sense. See Louis J. Swift, “*Iustitia and Ius Privatum: Ambrose on Private Property,*” *The American Journal of Philology* 100, no. 1 (1979): 179.
37. Luciano Orabona, “*L’«usurpatio» in un passo di S. Ambrogio (De Off., I, 28) parallelo a Cicerone (De Off., I, 7) su «ius commune» e «ius privatum»,*” *Aevum* 33, no. 5 (1959): 502.
38. Cicero, *De officiis* 1.7.21, ed. and trans. Walter Miller, vol. 21 in *Loeb Classical Library*, ed. E. H. Warmington (London: William Heinemann, reprint 1968), 22–23; cf. idem, 1.17.54, 56–59. Andrew R. Dyck suggests a “Panaetian” influence for the view that private property was not part of humanity’s original state. See Andrew R. Dyck, “On the Composition and Sources of Cicero ‘*De officiis*’ 1.50–58,” *California Studies in Classical Antiquity* 12 (1979): 80.

39. Arthur O. Lovejoy et al., *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1935), 252, 257.
40. Swift, “*Iustitia and Ius Privatum*,” 178. Cf. Lovejoy et al., *Primitivism*, 257.
41. Swift, “*Iustitia and Ius Privatum*,” 179n8.
42. See Swift, “*Iustitia and Ius Privatum*,” 179–80. For issues of relying solely on lexicographical analysis to determine the meaning of *usurpatio*, see Vincent Vasey, *The Social Ideas in the Works of St. Ambrose: A Study of De Nabuthe* (Rome: Institutum Patristicum “Augustinianum,” 1982), 131–32.
43. See Lovejoy, “The Communism of Saint Ambrose,” note 6.
44. Christopher Pierson, “The Early Christian Church: Property and Sinfulness,” in *Just Property: A History in the Latin West*, vol. 1, *Wealth, Virtue, and the Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 68. Cf. Peter Garnsey, *Thinking about Property: From Antiquity to the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 126.
45. Ambrose of Milan, *De officiis* 1.131 (PL 16.62), 192–93: “*nemini quis noceat, nisi lacessitus iniuria.*”
46. Ambrose of Milan, *De officiis* 1.132 (PL 16.62), 192–95.
47. Ambrose of Milan, *De officiis* 1.132 (PL 16.62), 192–95: “*natura ... omnia omnibus in commune profudit.*”
48. Ambrose of Milan, *Expositio psalmi CXVIII* 8.22 (CSEL 62.163; PL 15.1303): “*cum praesertim dominus deus noster terram hanc possessionem omnium hominum voluerit esse communem et fructus omnium ministrare; sed avaritia possessionum iura distribuit.*” It should be noted that Psalm 118 in the Latin Vulgate and Greek Septuagint often appears as Psalm 119 in English bibles that take the Hebrew Masoretic text as their basis.
49. Garnsey perceives the fall as having “an invisible presence” in the text, which becomes only visible in passages such as *Hexameron* 5.1.2. See Garnsey, *Thinking about Property*, 128.
50. Basil of Caesarea, *Homilia in illud: Destruam horrea mea* 7 (*Homilia* 6) (PG 31.275–78), in *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers*, ed. and trans. M. F. Toal, vol. 3 (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1958), 331–32. All further references to Basil of Caesarea’s *Homilia in illud: Destruam horrea mea* will be from these editions and will be cited by passage and page numbers: for example, Basil of Caesarea, *Destruam horrea mea* 2 (PG 31.275–78), 331–32.
51. Gregory of Nazianzus, *De pauperum amore* 25 (*Oratio* XIV) (PG 35.889–92), in *Select Orations*, trans. Martha Vinson (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America

- Press, 2003), 58. All further references to Gregory of Nazianzus's *De pauperum amore* will be from these editions and will be cited by passage and page numbers: for example, Gregory of Nazianzus, *De pauperum amore* 25 (PG 35.889–92), 58.
52. Gregory of Nazianzus, *De pauperum amore* 25 (*Oratio* XIV) (PG 35.891–92), 58.
53. John Chrysostom, *Homilia in 1 Timotheum* 12.4 (PG 62.562–64), in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 13 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 447–48. All further references to John Chrysostom's *Homilia in 1 Timotheum* will be from these editions and will be cited by passage and page numbers: for example, John Chrysostom, *Homilia in 1 Timotheum* 12.4 (PG 62.562–64), 447–48.
54. See McKee, "That 'Natural' Right," 486. At least one early Christian voice dissented from this view. Lactantius saw private property as compatible with original innocence. He imagines that during what classical antiquity dubbed the "Golden Age," people possessed things as their own. See Garnsey, *Thinking about Property*, 129–30. Instead of establishing property as such, avarice at the fall dissolved the generosity that inspired those with possessions to share with those without them. Thus, Lactantius's formulation bears striking resemblance to that of CST: private property in both formulations has a prelapsarian origin and is perverted when it is not shared with those in need. Yet, as Garnsey states, "This crude rewriting of the Golden Age myth appears to have fallen on stony ground, or at least nobody in late antiquity seems to have taken it up" (130).
55. Ivor J. Davidson, "Commentary," in *De officiis*, by Ambrose of Milan, ed. and trans. Ivor J. Davidson, vol. 2, *Oxford Early Christian Studies*, ed. Gillian Clark and Andrew Louth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 575. Cf. Garnsey, *Thinking about Property*, 126.
56. Lovejoy, "The Communism of Saint Ambrose," 460.
57. Ambrose of Milan, *De officiis* 1.137 (PL 16.63), 196–97; cf. *Expositio psalmi CXVIII* 8.22 (CSEL 62.163; PL 15.1303).
58. Swift, "*Iustitia* and *Ius Privatum*," 185.
59. Ambrose of Milan, *De officiis* 1.149 (PL 16.66–67), 204–5.
60. Ambrose of Milan, *De officiis* 1.152 (PL 16.68), 206–7: "*Sed et si quis ecclesiam nolens gravare in sacerdotio aliquo constitutus aut ministerio non totum quod habet conferat, sed operetur cum honestate quantum officio sat est, non mihi imperfectus videtur.*"
61. Ambrose of Milan, *De excessu fratris Satyri* 1.7 (PL 16.1292–93). From this text it becomes clear that Paulinus exaggerates when stating that, on becoming bishop, Ambrose gave all his riches to the poor. See Vasey, *The Social Ideas*, 115–18.

62. Vasey, *The Social Ideas*, 117.
63. Cf. Swift, “*Iustitia and Ius Privatum*,” 185.
64. Cf. Vasey, *The Social Ideas*, 114.
65. Vasey, *The Social Ideas*, 115.
66. Ambrose of Milan, *De Nabuthae* 2.5, 3.13, ed. and trans. Martin R. P. McGuire (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 1927), 48–51, 54–55. All further references to Ambrose’s *De Nabuthae* will be from this edition and will be cited by passage and page numbers: for example, Ambrose of Milan, *De Nabuthae* 2.5, 48–51.
67. Ambrose of Milan, *De Nabuthae* 2.8, 50–51.
68. Ambrose of Milan, *Contra Auxentium de basilicis tradendis* 17–18 (CSEL 82/10(3).92–94; PL 16.1012–1013).
69. Vasey, *The Social Ideas*, 115.
70. Ambrose of Milan, *Contra Auxentium* 17 (CSEL 82/10[3].93; PL 16.1012): “*Si ille vineam non tradidit suam, nos trademus ecclesiam Christi?*”
71. Lovejoy, “The Communism of Saint Ambrose,” 460.
72. Garnsey, *Thinking about Property*, 127.
73. Garnsey, *Thinking about Property*, 127–28.
74. Ambrose of Milan, *De Iacob et vita beata* 1.8.37 (CSEL 32/2.29; PL 14.613): “*haec enim uita iusti, qui etiam quas habeat facultates communes aestimare debeat, immo etiam inopibus diuidere, dispensare pauperibus.*” Cf. Cyprian of Carthage, *De opere et eleemosynis* 25 (CCSL 3A.71–72; PL 4.620–21), in *The Treatises of S. Caecilius Cyprian*, trans. Charles Thornton (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1839), 248.
75. Leo XIII (*RN*, no. 22) took his position from Thomas Aquinas (*Summa theologiae* 2-2.66.2), who in turn may have derived it from Ambrose, since Ambrose is repeatedly referenced in this section of the *Summa*.
76. For example, Basil of Caesarea, *Destruam horrea mea* 2 (PG 31.263–64), 326–27; John Chrysostom, *Homilia in 1 Timotheum* 12.4 (PG 62.564), 448.
77. Swift, “*Iustitia and Ius Privatum*,” 185.
78. Ambrose of Milan, *De officiis* 2.132 (PL 16.138), 342–43: “*Illud enim possidemus quo utimur; quod autem ultra usum est non utique habet possessionis fructum, sed custodiae periculum.*” Cf. *De Nabuthae* 14.58, 86–89; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 4.13 (PG 8.1301–2), in *The Writings of Clement of Alexandria*, trans. William Wilson, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1869), 182.

79. Ambrose of Milan, *De Nabuthae* 15.63, 92–93: “*Possessio enim possessoris debet esse, non possessor possessionis. Quicumque igitur patrimonio suo tamquam possessione non utitur, largiri pauperi et dispensare non nouit, is suarum seruulus, non dominus facultatem est, quia alienas custodit ut famulus, non tamquam dominus ut suis utitur.*” Cf. idem, 12.52, 80–83; idem, 14.58, 86–89; Clement of Alexandria, *Quis dives salvetur* 14 (PG 9.617–18), in *A Discourse Concerning the Salvation of Rich Men*, trans. J. Jones (London: Philip Gwillim, 1711), 23–24.
80. Ambrose of Milan, *Expositio psalmi CXVIII* 8.22 (CSEL 62.163–64; PL 15.1303–4): “*justum est igitur ut, si aliquid tibi priuatum uindicas, quod generi humano, immo omnibus animantibus in commune conlatum est, saltem aliquid inde pauperibus aspergas, ut, quibus iuris tui consortium debes, his alimenta non deneges.*”
81. Cf. Gregory of Nazianzus, *De pauperum amore* 26 (PG 35.891–92), 58–59.