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Service Learning as a response to the Church's call for justice, peace, and sustainable development

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8. SERVICE LEARNING AS A RESPONSE TO THE CHURCH'S CALL FOR JUSTICE, PEACE, AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Based on the commandment to love God and one's neighbour, the Church is called to give witness of its faith in the public realm, indicated by its notion of 'social mission'. The Church has never ceased to emphasise the theological groundings for the intrinsic link between faith and commitment to the common good and, as I aim to show, thus implicitly justifies *why* service learning matters for Catholic Higher Education in the first place. As Catholic Social Teaching (CST) also explicitly reflects on the practical ramifications of this social mission, the subsequent question is *how* this rich tradition can inform the concrete implementation of service learning. At least three key notions appear to be crucial. Firstly, there is CST's particular relational conception of justice, which envisions the inclusion of the most vulnerable in society through mutual reciprocity. Secondly, ideas such as the 'culture of encounter', fraternity, and social friendship can be considered an attempt to respond to current conflicts, fragmentation, and polarisation and thus as seeds for peaceful coexistence. Lastly, the shift in CST from the notion of 'integral development' (of each person and every person) to 'integral ecology' signifies a rising awareness of our interconnectedness with the whole of creation. As such, integral ecology challenges service-learning initiatives to foster not only lasting interpersonal relationships (which the three key notions plead for), but also sustainable development.

Through its combination of theory and praxis, reflection and action, service learning offers a unique opportunity to not only become aware of but also concretely embody the social implications of neighbourly love.

In sum, through its combination of theory and praxis, reflection and action, service learning offers a unique opportunity to not only become aware of but also concretely embody the social implications of neighbourly love. This chapter aims to show both why service learning should be considered an indispensable part of a Catholic education and also how the tradition of Catholic social thought inspires the practical implementation of service learning enabling it to respond the Church's call for justice, peace, and sustainable development.

Introduction

In her book *Not for Profit*, American philosopher Martha Nussbaum argues that democracy needs the humanities (Nussbaum, 2016). Although expertise and technical skills are certainly required as well, democracy is at risk when people are no longer able to feel compassion, lack critical thinking, and accept the status quo. As a counterbalance, we need global citizens with bold imaginations capable of critical thinking who develop empathic understanding through diverse experiences that can encompass the complexity of the reality of life on this planet, if we are to survive on it together. The concept of service learning seems a perfect fit here as it supports the 'Bildung' of young people beyond mere education in this way.

From a philosophical point of view, there is much to be said about the value of service learning within educational institutions, but in keeping with the scope of this book, I will approach this matter theologically rather than philosophically, in an attempt to clarify the following question: what elements can we derive from our Christian inspiration to inform our approach to service learning in order to stimulate, nourish, and experience compassion, and create a society in which we do not simply live alongside each other but truly come together?

In this chapter, I will first elaborate on the intrinsic link between faith and a commitment to the common good which implicitly justifies *why* service learning matters for Catholic higher education in the first place. Secondly, I will discuss the implications of this link as seen in Catholic social teaching (CST)'s call for justice, peace, and sustainable development. In conclusion, I will show how this rich tradition consequently informs the concrete implementation of service learning.

1. On the link between Christian faith and social engagement? Theological groundings for service learning

As a theologian with a passion for social ethics, the question why service learning is important for Catholic education seems rather redundant and its answer self-evident. In this section, I aim to elaborate explicitly why including service learning within the framework of the Catholic educational project is not just a good idea, but an absolute 'must'. Hence the consequent question: what are the theological groundings for this claim?

The underlying premise is the unbreakable link between Christian religion and practice,

between professing one's faith and acting on it. Within Christianity, social engagement – or service – is not merely a way of expressing religious belief, but it is in fact an intrinsic component of it. Identifying Himself with 'the least of our brethren' in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus invites us to embody our faith in concrete praxis (cf. Matt 25: 35-45, NRSV). The Letter of James in the Bible teaches us that "*faith without works is dead*" (Jam 2: 14). Exactly five decades ago, the Synod of Bishops in 1971 wrote *Justice in the World*, with its well-known though not uncontroversial statement:

> *Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.* (Synod of Bishops, 1971, 6).

More recently, it is noteworthy that Pope Francis, in his Papal Exhortation on evangelization *Evangelii Gaudium*, dedicates an entire chapter to the 'social dimension' of evangelization. He explicitly states that *"(…) if this dimension is not properly brought out, there is a constant risk of distorting the authentic and integral meaning of the mission of evangelization*" (Francis, 2013, EG, 176). Throughout history, peoples and communities remind us of the importance of the connection between Christian faith and *praxis* or service. But what is the theological rationale to consider service such an essential, constitutive, and integral component of Christian faith?

Firstly, the incarnation depicts a serving God who invites us to follow in His footsteps. American theologian Stephen Pope points out how most religions place God – or multiple gods – at the centre: customs and rituals call on the faithful to honour their God(s) as a means to serve them (cf. Pope, 2015, p. xv). In Christianity, a contrary reversal takes place: Jesus is the human incarnation of a God who comes as a servant to serve human beings. Indeed, *"the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve"* (cf. Mc 10: 45). In their turn, the followers of Jesus are called on to serve God and Jesus by serving each other. Hence the central significance of the commandment to 'love thy neighbour'. The reduction of religious practice to attendance at Sunday Mass is far from satisfactory, as it allows the church to function as some kind of 'spiritual petrol station' where we refuel for the rest of the week. Rituals and liturgy are a necessary but insufficient part of what it means to be Christian, but we also honour God through service; by loving our visible neighbour, we love the invisible God.

Secondly, God's self-revelation shows us the importance of social engagement to our faith. God discloses Godself as a god of the living who is '*close enough to touch*' ('*rakelings nabij*'), in the words of the Dominican Edward Schillebeeckx. Moreover, God is not only nearby but is actively committed to this world as everything is "*supported by God's*

absolute saving presence" (Schillebeeckx, 2018, p. 96) whether or not we are aware of it and explicitly signify it as such. This divine salvation is not exclusivist, but universal and thus 'for all'; neither is it merely eschatological and future-oriented, as it is already perceptible in the present; nor it is merely spiritual, but also material and thus takes all aspects of human flourishing into account. The divine presence is not to be reduced to religions. Rather, it is present in the world and in human history: "*no salvation outside the world*". God promises eschatological fulfilment for every human being, breaking up history to realise it. This grace will, however, not be bestowed on us vertically; it is in and through the world that God is working for human liberation, mediated through the agency of human beings (cf. Schillebeeckx, 2016, p. 112). Traces of God's active and salvationist presence can be found in any struggle against oppression and injustice and wherever more just and peaceful relationships are established. At stake is thus "*not simply the ethical consequences of the religious or theological life; rather, ethical praxis becomes an essential component of a life directed to God, of the 'true knowledge of God'*" (Schillebeeckx, 2018, p. 98). In other words: if we choose to believe and dare to hope that God's presence in a history all too often characterised by suffering and oppression is one of resistance to it, service is not only a response to the life and appeal of Jesus (following in Jesus' footsteps in practice) but also and even more fundamentally a way of finding and encountering God. For Schillebeeckx, "*the most obvious, modern way to God [is] to encounter fellow men and women in a liberating way, inter-personally and through political structures. (...) God is not accessible outside a praxis of justice and love*" (Schillebeeckx, 2018, p. 96). In following in Jesus' footsteps and his liberating praxis, we ourselves also reveal God. As the title of his book *The Human Story of God* suggests, people are the words with which God tells God's story– especially when they are working towards liberation and justice.

Introducing service learning in Catholic higher education, is of crucial importance to do justice to the importance of praxis, neighbourly love, and social commitment as an indispensable part of our Christian faith.

In sum, though important for the mission of the Church and thus for any organisation working in its inspiration such as Catholic education, to reduce evangelization to preaching and introducing people to the Christian narrative and its liturgy is to curtail the Church's mission. For it runs the risk of "*diakonia forgetfulness*" (Decoene, 2016, p. 158): focusing on religion as merely the transfer of knowledge, rituals, and liturgy, risks losing sight of service altogether. Introducing service learning in Catholic higher education, is of crucial importance to do justice to the importance of praxis, neighbourly love, and social commitment as an indispensable part of our Christian faith.

2. The Church's social mission as a call for justice, peace, and sustainable development

After having argued that social commitment is an indispensable part of Christian faith, and thus that service learning should be considered a crucial aspect of Catholic education, the next question to be addressed is this: what are the practical ramifications of the Church's social mission according to CST? The answer will shed light on how it informs the concrete implementation of service learning in the following and last step. At least three key notions appear to be crucial, which I will address here. Firstly, there is CST's particular relational conception of justice. Secondly, ideas such as the 'culture of encounter', fraternity, and social friendship can be considered an attempt to respond to current conflicts, fragmentation, and polarisation and thus as seeds for peaceful coexistence. Lastly, the shift in CST from the notion of 'integral development' to 'integral ecology' signifies a rising awareness of our interconnectedness with the whole of creation and thus the need for sustainable development.

(1) *A relational understanding of justice*

Broadly speaking, the call for neighbourly love can be expressed and embodied as either charity or justice. While the former involves meeting needs immediately and directly, the latter offers more structural solutions to tackle the root causes of the problems rather than merely the symptoms. Within Catholic social thought, a continuing debate about which form of neighbourly love or service is the 'essence' of religious practice puzzles theologians, bishops, and even popes. Though it was not the starting point of the discussion, the aforementioned statement of the Synod of Bishops of 1971 is as relevant today as it was 50 years ago when they argued that pursuing justice and transforming the world is a "*constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel*". The bishops unquestionably linked this concern for justice to neighbourly love:

> *Christian love of neighbour and justice cannot be separated. For love implies an absolute demand for justice, namely a recognition of the dignity and rights of one's neighbour. Justice attains its inner fullness only in love. Because every person is truly a visible image of the invisible God and a sibling of Christ, the Christian finds in every person God himself and God's absolute demand for justice and love.* (Synod of Bishops, 1971, 34).

While each argues that both charity and justice are important for society, there is a notable difference in emphasis and tone in the social teachings of recent popes Benedict

and Francis. The former stresses charity as the "*opus proprium*" of the Church (Benedict XVI, 2005, DCE, 29) – he calls it the Church's most specific and typical task, a task which should be carried out at "all levels" (Benedict XVI, 2005, DCE, 32). Pope Francis, on the other hand, insists that taking part in building a more just society and world lies at the essence of being a church. In *Evangelii Gaudium* he writes, for instance that,

> *the Gospel is not merely about our personal relationship with God. Nor should our loving response to God be seen simply as an accumulation of small personal gestures to individuals in need, a kind of "charity à la carte", or a series of acts aimed solely at easing our conscience. The Gospel is about the kingdom of God (cf. Lk 4:43); it is about loving God who reigns in our world. To the extent that He reigns within us, the life of society will be a setting for universal fraternity, justice, peace and dignity.* (Francis, 2013, EG, 180).

Solidarity and thus the social engagement of Christians should be more impactful than "*sporadic acts of generosity*" (Francis, 2013, EG, 188); it should pave the way for fundamental solutions getting to the root of problems (cf. Francis, 2013, EG, 59 and 202). Most recently, he repeated in a similar vein in *Fratelli Tutti*:

> *There is a kind of love that is "elicited": its acts proceed directly from the virtue of charity and are directed to individuals and peoples. There is also a "commanded" love, expressed in those acts of charity that spur people to create more sound institutions, more just regulations, more supportive structures. It follows that "it is an equally indispensable act of love to strive to organise and structure society so that one's neighbour will not find himself in poverty". It is an act of charity to assist someone suffering, but it is also an act of charity, even if we do not know that person, to work to change the social conditions that caused his or her suffering. If someone helps an elderly person cross a river, that is a fine act of charity. The politician, on the other hand, builds a bridge, and that too is an act of charity. While one person can help another by providing something to eat, the politician creates a job for that other person, and thus practices a lofty form of charity that ennobles his or her political activity.* (Francis, 2020, FT, 186).

This does not mean that charity is unnecessary, but it is not sufficient in the long run. At first, charity can appear to be vitally important, often literally saving lives in concrete situations where people in need require immediate support. Yet reducing the service of neighbourly love to charity alone risks depoliticising compassion and thereby creating a blind spot for the underlying causes of problems such as poverty, inequality, and marginalisation – especially in our society, which all too easily blames structural problems on personal shortcomings.

If not only implementing charity, but also pursuing justice is part of the public role of Christians, the next question becomes: what concept of justice do we aim to realise? I find it illuminating to consult the biblical view on justice, which can be found in both the First and Second Testament (cf. Kammer, 2004). When confronted with *anawim* – meaning literally: 'the small', 'those who are overwhelmed by need', which the Bible tends to identify as widows, orphans, refugees, and the poor – the Bible calls on God's people to provide justice, namely by restoring the right relations.

Commonly understood as 'giving to each his or her due', justice is often conceived as something measurable that can be balanced, symbolised by the Lady Justice with her blindfold and scales. Biblical justice transcends this view and broadens its scope because of its relational understanding. Grounded in the experience with and revelation of God as Creator and Liberator, who established a covenant with a people – not just an individual –, the community is requested to strive for the 'right relationships', treating each other with love and justice as God is loving and just. Prophets like Amos for instance seemed well aware that the problem with poverty is not only, and maybe not even principally, a problem of hunger and need, but rather and maybe more importantly, of a distortion of human relationships: the original connectedness and relationality is disturbed and thus exclusion and not-belonging is the key problem. Jesus Christ himself showed concern for the excluded and marginalised, and was determined to include them in society as he did not hesitate to eat with them, forgive their sins, heal them, etc. Moreover, by his self-identification with those people (cf. Matt 25), he turned the encounter with the outcasts and the excluded into a *locus theologicus*, a place where we can encounter God. Justice is thus not only ensuring that people can lead dignified lives, but that a community arises in which people connect with each other and feel connected, in which they are concerned for each other, and in which relationships flourish.

The vision of a just society based on 'right relationships' according to Catholic tradition tends to translate into the concept of common good, 'integral development' (implying *"the development of the whole person and of every person*" (Paul VI, PP, 14) or 'the good life for all'.[37] This good life for all has to be more than the sum of the welfare of all the individuals in a society; one's personal well-being is inevitably connected with the well-being of others, even globally. Mutual flourishing is its benchmark. Moreover, it also concerns the good of the community itself, as a whole, *and* the relationships people share and which shape the community. Put differently: what is at stake for Christian ethics is a relational approach to justice as acquiring, developing, and fostering "relational goods" (Bruni, 2012, p. 88): it

37 For an overview how this notion of 'justice for all' is understood in Catholic social thought, see my "How to Link Fullness of Life and Justice for All: Theological Explorations Inspired by Schillebeeckx and Lebret", in E. Van Stichel, et al. (ed.), Fullness of Life and Justice for All: Dominican Perspectives (Adelaide: ATF Press 2020), pp. 95-114.

is about living together, creating and enabling reciprocity, mutuality, participation, and inclusion within and among communities. The public life itself is a common good, for it enables "*the realisation of the human capacity for intrinsically valuable relationships*" (Hollenbach, 2002, p. 81). Relationships are thus not merely a means to foster justice but are ends and goods in themselves. We nurture non-instrumental values which are only attained in our communal life and our interrelationships. Hence the question: in what way do our common day-to-day interactions create, foster, and sustain these relational goods and thus contribute to justice and the good life for all which envisions justice for all... with all... and among all.

This presents us with a number of challenges.

First, the benchmark for measuring the level of justice in a society is its treatment of the most vulnerable as the preferential option for the poor indicates. This justice is partial, as it chooses the side of the most vulnerable, not because God loves them more than others but because their welfare is most under threat. It requires awareness of how broken relationships (in the form of poverty, exclusion, marginalisation) affect people, how the erosion of their personal integrity can harm them more than the deprivation itself: "*The principle suffering [...] is not that they can't pay their rent on time but rather a toxic sense of shame – a global sense of failure of the whole self*" (as quoted in Pope, 2015, p. 153). In most of our societies, increasingly characterised by meritocratic thinking, people's problems such as poverty and marginalisation are treated as a personal failure and as isolated issues, which blinds us to the systemic and structural mechanisms – social sins – that cause them (cf. Sandel, 2020). As a consequence, our compassion is often conditional: only if misfortune cannot be traced back to personal guilt or omission, is help required. By contrast, biblical justice is unconditional: we do not have to prove that we are worthy of help; we simply are a member of the community and society should be constructed in such a way that its institutions, schemes of distribution, policies, etc. reflect this underlying and foundational assumption.

Second, these vulnerable people should not be treated as objects of assistance, but as subjects, which Gustavo Gutièrrez already pointed out five decades ago (Gutierrez, 1971). There should be no *power over* but rather *power with* in order to empower and support participation, inclusion, and co-creation.

Lastly, this vision of a just society – or by extension a just world – involves not merely ensuring that everyone has the goods they need to lead a decent life. The goal is to create a community where people connect with each other and feel a sense of belonging. So how do we work together towards an inclusive society where everyone matters? Where mutual benefit allows every person to make their unique contribution and create the

community together? Important to notice is that it is not about inclusion as assimilation, as if the society is a fixed, unchangeable given to which people just have to adapt. Nor it is about shaping our common life and society as a hotel in which various groups are given their own space, in which to build their good life separately from each other, characterised by non-interference and possible indifference. it must be the "*house we build together*".[38]

(2) *Peace*

With regard to peace, one can distinguish a negative and a positive meaning (cf. Himes 2010, p. 268). While the negative perspective considers peace as the absence of war and violence, the positive perspective is much more demanding and harder to achieve because it is not sufficient to simply end violent conflicts. Its Christian, biblical definition entails that "*the conditions for the flourishing communal life [are] in place for all to enjoy*" (Himes, 2010, p. 268). This positive – political – peace is distinguishable from inner peace on the one hand and eschatological peace in the Kingdom of God on the other hand, and it is closely linked to Christianity's relational justice. Its absence, for instance in situations of gross inequality and resentment, hardly surprisingly and at the very least understandably gives rise to a violent response. Pope Francis recently remarked this was "threatening the fabric of society" (Francis, 2020, FT, 168). Hence the idea: "*if you want peace, work for justice*" (Paul VI, 1972, WDP).[39]

Gradually CST has come to realise that even justice, supported by the call for solidarity, would not be sufficient. For even within a more fair and equal society, one might still lack the feeling of really belonging to the community. As Roger Charles claimed: *"Justice alone will not produce the needed social cohesion, solidarity; that comes only from the* vis unitiva *of society, charity"* (quoted in Himes, 2010, p. 273). Himes continues:

> *What often prevents us our building a better society, a better international order, is not lack of data or strategies for action, but the visceral desire to pursue the good even at the expense of forsaking convenience and narrow self-interest* (Himes 2010, p. 273).

During his pontificate, John Paul II did not cease to emphasise the role of solidarity as "*a path to peace*", as it

> *helps us to see the "other" – whether a person, people or nation – not just as some kind of instrument, with a work capacity and physical strength to be exploited*

38 The metaphor is taken from Stephen Pope who quotes Jeffrey Sachs in A Step Along the Way, pp. 126-127.

39 A close look at the papal World Day of Peace Messages, shows how peace is considered to be a much broader category then merely the end of violence. Solving issues such as ecological concerns, development, human trafficking etc. are considered an indispensable aspect of sustainable peace.

at low cost and then discarded when no longer useful, but as our "neighbour", a "helper" (cf. Gen 2:18-20), to be made a sharer, on a par with ourselves, in the banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God (John Paul II, 1987, SRS, 39).

Theological grounding for this solidarity is the recognition of other human beings as the 'neighbour', bearer of the image of God and thus children of God, which makes us aware of our *"common fatherhood (...) and the brotherhood of all in Christ*" (John Paul II, 1987, SRS, 40).

It is not a coincidence then that both Pope Benedict XVI and especially Pope Francis increasingly focused on the importance of fraternity.[40] In *Caritas in Veritate*, Benedict XVI distinguishes between reason and fraternity, seemingly implying that reason can make us aware of the principles of justice, fairness, and equality, but lacks the motivational aspect which is granted by fraternity as bestowed on us by God (cf. Benedict XVI, 2009, CV, 19). In his turn, as early as 2014, Francis proclaimed on the occasion of the World Day of Peace that "*fraternity extinguishes war"* and is the *"foundation and pathway to peace"* (Francis, 2014, WDP, 7). In his latest encyclical, which centres on fraternity in a time characterised by the physical virus of Covid-19 and the more hidden but equally destructive 'viruses' of 'radical individualism' and 'racism' (Francis 2020, FT, resp. 105 and 97), he considers fraternity the proverbial vaccine. Confronted with huge fragmentation, increasing nationalism, and the closing of borders and minds (enforced by digital communications), Pope Francis calls for a fraternity which does not merely consider others as 'associates' (resulting in a close group of likeminded and connected people) but as true neighbours (cf. Francis, 2020, FT, 101-104).

In this light, the notion of 'the culture of encounter' shows its importance as a way to foster such fraternity, a notion which from the beginning of his pontificate Pope Francis has not ceased to emphasise. Theological grounding for this encounter is our faith, which is "*an encounter with Jesus, and we must do what Jesus did: encountering others*", as God is close to us seeking encounter (resp. Fares, 2015, p. 17 and 49). The source of this culture of encounter is thus to be found in God who "*by his closeness, by his accompaniment, creates a culture of encounter which makes us brothers, children and not just members of an NGO or proselytes of a multinational organisation*." (Francis as quoted in Fares, 2015, p. 49) Hence the link with fraternity. Creating this culture of encounter, in which we seek out the other as our brothers and sisters who all belong to God, is believed to be a response to the 'culture of conflict', 'of fragmentation', 'of waste' and 'of indifference' (cf. Francis, 2013, VPC; Francis, 2013, FCE). Fostered by attitudes of openness, receptivity, and humility, such an encounter helps people to accept diversity, create relationships of belonging, and become willing to cooperate for the global common good which excludes no one.

40 Note that in the latest encyclical, Fratelli Tutti, Pope Francis referred twice as much to fraternity as to solidarity, respectively 55 and 26 times.

This encounter is tied to our embodiment, as it should touch people and it does touch us. It holds a silent *"revolution of tenderness"* as we are called by the gospel to "*run the risk of face-to-face-encounter with others, with their physical presences which challenges us, with their pain and their pleas, with their joy that infects us in our close and continuous interaction"* (Francis, 2013, EG, 88). It is thus direct and interpersonal. However, encounter transcends interpersonal relationships, so that as a 'culture' its implications are social, institutional and collective. As Mescher comments:

> *Even though an encounter might be envisioned as taking place between two individuals, a culture of encounter implies a collective approach, a commitment shared by cultivating dispositions, which become habits, which become normative practices for community life* (Mescher, 2020, p. xvi).

It is also an ecclesial undertaking: rather than hiding behind its walls, the Church should risk being "bruised" and changed by the encounter with others which enriches its perspective and life (cf. Francis, 2013, EG, 49). Building bridges has political significance – a task of the Church at the service of politics as the word 'Pontifex' indicates; opening the doors in our closed minds is a political act (cf. Francis, 2018b, p. 11/13).

Understood in this way, the culture of encounter contributes to peace:

Peace is a good that overcomes every barrier, because it belongs to all of humanity. (...) It is neither a culture of confrontation, nor a culture of conflict that builds harmony within and between peoples, but rather a culture of encounter and a culture of dialogue; this is the only way to peace (Francis, 2013, Angelus, 1 September 2013).

This is a task entrusted to everyone as we are all called to be an *"artisan of peace"*. Non-violence and "*just peace*" *(*Francis, 2018, p. 27*)* are key for Pope Francis, taking the increasing Catholic presumption against war to a next level.

In sum. Peace is not merely the absence of violence but implies a commitment to more justice grounded in fraternity. In a similar way non-violence is not merely refraining from violence but is actively promoting peace. It is not necessary to be directly involved in restoration, reconciliation, and peacebuilding after the appearance of violence, to work for long-term and sustainable peace. Even the smallest acts which aid to deconstruct the real, virtual, or mental walls, are a crucial step in the direction of this peace and to a world where "*God willing, after all this, we will think no longer in terms of 'them' and 'those', but only 'us'"* (Francis, 2020, FT, 35).

(3) *Sustainable development*

Although the 'Club of Rome' predicted as early as the 1970s that we would face environmental disaster if we continued to pursue economic growth on the same scale globally, it took the world a few more decades to discover the truth of this prediction. The same is true for CST. From the 1960s onwards there were hints of a growing ecological awareness, but it took until the publication of the first social encyclical on ecology by Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*' in 2015 to really address the issue in a systematic and profound way. The ecological theme was hardly mentioned in *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), the document on the relationship with the world by the Second Vatican Council; and where it did discuss the issue, it used an anthropocentric paradigm, upholding a biblical interpretation in which human beings are granted the task of 'dominion' over the earthly realm (cf. Massaro, 2018, p. 73). Quite visionary were the bishops who gathered in Rome in 1971 for a synod on global justice, when they critically assessed the limits of our planet:

> *Such is the demand for resources and energy by the richer nations, (…) and such are the effects of dumping by them in the atmosphere and the sea that irreparable damage would be done to the essential elements of life on earth, such as air and water, if their high rates of consumption and pollution, which are constantly on the increase, were extended to the whole of humanity* (Synod of Bishops, 1971, 11).

Much later, John Paul II surprisingly chose the "ecological crisis" as the topic for his Message for the World Day of Peace in 1990, and argued that nature has its "own integrity", which was a first major shift away from a merely anthropocentric paradigm (John Paul II, 1990, PWG). In the same vein, he expressed his concern in his encyclical *Centesimus Annus* in which he criticised the destruction of the environment (John Paul II, 1991, CA, 37). Pope Benedict XVI expressed similar theoretical insights, writing an entire section on the topic in *Caritas in Veritate* (Benedict XVI, 2009, CV, 48-51), and made practical decisions as well – he even acquired the nickname 'the Green Pope'. Some argue he paved the way for the in-depth analysis and topical elaboration by his successor Francis (cf. Massaro, 2018, p. 75-76; Ngolele, 2019, p. 173-174).

In this "groundbreaking" (Massaro, 2018, p. 70) document, the title *Laudato Si'* immediately sets the tone: Praise to you, God. It leads with the joy and wonder of the mystery of nature, which presents itself as a gift to us. Describing creation as 'our common home', which we share in common but also of which we as human beings are an integral part, indicates a fundamentally different viewpoint than the technological or economic views which introduced a distinction – and thus distance – between nature and humankind, between object and subject, and which frame what happens in nature as a problem human beings must confront. A similar

perspective used to characterise earlier Catholic social teaching, when popes distinguished human ecology and natural ecology (cf. Dorr, 2016, p. 422), based on the anthropocentrism of dominion over and mastering of nature, separating nature from society, "*perhaps in the interest of underlining the uniqueness of humankind among all other creatures of God*" (Massaro, 2018, p. 80). While the foregoing presumed a gap that must be bridged, Francis advances the idea of connectedness and interconnectedness as well as the intrinsic value of nonhuman creatures (cf. Francis, 2015, LS, 33).

Starting from the wonder and awe for creation does not imply that Pope Francis is blind to the challenges we face. Inspired and informed by scientific and political findings, he is clearly aware of the impact and urgency of issues such as pollution and climate change, (lack of access to) water, loss of biodiversity, etc. However, he is critical of the idea that science and technology will solve everything (cf. Francis, 2015, LS, 102 ff). The problem is in fact more fundamental, namely a distorted view of our relationship with nature. The crisis is both practical and moral. A new perspective forces itself upon us.

Pope Francis summarises his vision in the term "integral ecology", thereby enriching the notion of 'sustainable development' which is commonly used as an alternative for the current situation and CST's notion of 'integral development'.[41] In a first sense, integral ecology means that concern for the environment on the one hand and commitment to more inclusion to fight poverty and inequality on the other hand are in fact two sides of the same coin:

> *We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature* (Francis, 2015, LS, 139).

The environment on the one hand, and the most vulnerable people on our planet on the other, are both victims of a wasteful and disposable society. The most vulnerable are the first to suffer from the effects of climate change and the ecological crisis as they are confronted with health problems due to pollution, forced migration pushed by ecological degradation, the already noticeable effects of climate change in the South, the privatisation of water, etc.

A closer look shows how integral ecology also expresses a deeper – theological – vision, particularly a relational vision in which everything is interconnected and interdependent. What this means for our interhuman relationships has already been made clear in the

41 Note that while Pope Francis uses 'sustainable development' 4 times, and 'integral development' as well, he refers 9 times to 'integral ecology'.

discussion on relational justice above. *Laudato Si'* extends this perspective: the fate of human beings and the rest of creation is connected – which is not a negative thing or a cause for fear, but rather something positive. Together with one another and in relationship with creation, our life is more beautiful and valuable than alone. For it is not just human beings, but all creatures that show something of the greatness and goodness of God and have value within themselves – a clear departure from the anthropocentric conceptualisation (cf. Francis, 2015, LS, 69). Or in Francis' words:

> *When we speak of the "environment", what we really mean is a relationship existing between nature and the society which lives in it. Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it* (Francis, 2015, LS, 139).

The underlying assumption can be summarised as follows, according to the Dutch theologian Erik Borgman: "*People are not only relational among themselves. They are part of a relational universe"* (Borgman, 2017, p. 93).

Through 'contemplation', our awareness of this interconnectedness and the discovery of God in all things can grow. Contemplation implies a specific way of looking. Do we look at nature as an object that we may use or misuse for our own needs and desires? Or do we look with an *"awe-filled contemplation"* (Francis, 2015, LS, 125), a gaze that takes that relational perspective, that connectedness of all creation as its starting point? Contemplation will also help us to see the traces of God's presence in the midst of these crises. Pope Francis describes the condition of the earth today as the whole creation "*groaning in travail*" and suffering (Rom 8:22; Francis, 2015, LS, 80). For the pope, the environmental issue is like a sign of the times, requiring sharp analysis in the light of the Gospel. Though the situation is serious, it is not hopeless and we should not start to panic and doom-monger, but rather trust in God's nearness (cf. Francis, 2015, LS, 12), as a veto against the degradation of the environment by humankind and as the source of our hope.

However, Francis' call for contemplation does not imply that we should just be passive, contemplative bystanders. On the contrary: God may be with us, but that should not make us close our eyes to the current challenges. We must participate in the change that is urgently needed, as the ecological crisis is at its roots a moral problem. Hence Francis' idea of the need for an "*ecological conversion*" (Francis, 2015, LS, 217), which is a universal call, because non-Christians also realise that we must turn the tide. This ecological conversion is therefore practical and concrete, according to Francis, and it is at the same time structural and personal. Structural, because it requires economic, political, social, and cultural institutional changes, which take ecology into account as well and not just the market, profit, and self-

interest (cf. Francis, 2015, LS, 109). Personal, because all of us must seek a new lifestyle that is more sustainable and inclusive. Although individual efforts are needed, this conversion must also be a communal task: "*a community conversion*" is required: *"Social problems must be addressed by community networks and not simply by the sum of individual good deeds,"* Francis clarifies (Francis, 2015, LS, 219). If the ecological crisis shows us anything at all, it is the fact that the realisation of the good life is interdependent: it will be the good life for all, or for none. Fundamentally what is needed, is a *'culture of care'* (Francis, 2015, LS, 231).

What will sustain the development of this culture of care? Merely doctrines and principles will not suffice. What is necessary is a spirituality that nourishes the contemplative gaze so that we continue to be aware of that connectedness with everyone and everything (cf. Francis, 2015, LS, 216). Even more importantly, Francis has understood well that spirituality can help one stay motivated to work for change, despite setbacks, doom and gloom. Burnout is a serious problem among activists: after all, what are the sources of our continuing motivation and hope to stay committed? Spirituality, in whatever form, which considers the interconnectedness between people and the environment, can help to keep one's spirits up. Supported by awe, wonder, joy, and gratitude, Francis sees very clearly, Donal Dorr argues, how contemplated love is necessary as it *"will inspire and impel us to change our ecological behaviour, whereas guilt is a poor motivator – it often causes us to bury our heads in the sand"* (Dorr, 2016, p. 420). The challenges are huge, but despite the visible and widely held indifference, Pope Francis has faith in the fact that we are "always capable of going out of ourselves toward the other" (Francis, 2015, LS, 208). With his timely encyclical, Pope Francis broadened the scope of the Church's social mission, arguing that ecology and sustainable development are also an indispensable part of it.

3. Implications for service learning

As a starting point for the reflection on the implications of CST on service learning, I depart from the description as used by my institution, the KU Leuven (Catholic University Leuven, in Belgium) which states the following:

> *Service-learning (sic) is an **educational approach** in which the central concepts are **'serving'**, '**reflecting**' and '**learning**'. Students serve society by engaging themselves to a specific community. Meanwhile, they reflect in a structured and critical way on their experiences. In this way, they learn on an academic, civic, and personal level. Service-learning supports the development of students as '**whole persons**' who have not only acquired academic skills, but also social and personal competences. Furthermore, service-learning helps them to become **responsible and critical citizens*** (KU Leuven, 2020).

If this is the goal we envision, what are the implications of the Church's call for justice, peace, and sustainable development for service learning? In other words: how does service learning contribute to the achievement of those goals?

When service learning is put into practice, charity and justice are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In fact, they can complement each other – as the distinction between indirect and direct service learning indicates – as long as any gap between them is always bridged. Direct service learning will often occur when focusing on directly meeting the needs of people in charitable ways, thus tackling the symptoms of social ills (e.g. volunteering in soup kitchens, refugee camps, care homes, etc.). Indirect service learning will be more suitable when working towards justice through projects which aim to offer sustainable solutions for social ills. Both have value in their own right. A lot will depend on the attitude with which the service learning is executed, as well as on the reflection before, during, and after the experience (in order to foster a holistic understanding of the problem, so that one can see beyond the immediate needs and understand the role of social structures and mechanisms which triggered people to look for direct help in meeting their needs).

The importance of charity and direct service learning should not be underestimated. There is a distinct advantage to providing direct assistance because having a close connection to whomever one has committed to serve, makes it immediately clear who is the most vulnerable, who is falling through the structural or institutional cracks. That is why many forms of charity have an important signalling function, signalling what is going wrong in our societies. Secondly, even in direct service learning, service is never a unidirectional one-way street, never an exercise where the "'haves' help the 'have-nots'" (Pope, 2015, p. 193). Relational reciprocity is fundamental, based on the premise that all can inspire, challenge, discover, ... each other. Whatever the circumstances and form of service learning, any experience provides the opportunity to sample a new way of learning from each other, or even better: *with* each other.

Whatever the circumstances and form of service learning, any experience provides the opportunity to sample a new way of learning from each other, or even better: with each other.

On the other hand, institutions and organisations are not communities. It is important to consider how to commit to justice while making the vulnerable stakeholders visible. Sometimes, it is easier to show solidarity to distant people one never actually meets than to a pesky homeless person that bothers you on the way from home to your work. The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur makes an illuminating distinction between the 'neighbour' and the 'socius' (Ricoeur, 1965, p. 103ff). Neighbours are those we meet face-to-face, those we are connected to in a direct way, who we know very well. A socius is

someone we know via structural relationships, but they remain anonymous. Think for instance of all those fellow citizens we share political institutions and a social security system with: we do not know them directly, but we are connected through those systems so that paying my taxes fairly has an effect on those unknown others. The risk of those institutional connections is, however, that these persons become invisible and anonymous '*on'* (them) to us, presenting us with the challenge of breaking through this anonymity to see '*le chacun'* (literally: the 'each', namely the individual and unique person behind and affected by structures and institutions). How can we shape institutions with room for love and commitment, especially towards the most vulnerable in our societies and in the world at large? How do we make sure the invisible *chacun* does not escape our attention to become merely '*on'*? And how do we become aware of all the important effects we have on people, even if we do not see them directly? How can we foster motivation and care for cold solidarity and justice? Lastly, if justice is relational, the question for service learning should be: which relationships do we develop? Which relationships would contribute to improving our service – close and distant, visible and invisible?

With regard to sustainable development, the crises we face are both practical and moral. Service-learning projects could be developed in order to meet the practical demands of the crisis that challenge students to think about how their scientific, technical, and technological expertise can contribute to solving a part of the problem – taking into account both the social and ecological aspect, the integral and sustainable development of both the natural world and human beings. It is essential not to forget the impact of certain evolutions on the most vulnerable global citizens. What are for instance adequate, concrete, practical, and pragmatic solutions to safeguard sustainable food security for all, sustainable housing, etc.

Service learning is also well-suited to tackle the moral challenge of the ecological crisis and can contribute to the much-needed 'ecological conversion'. SL takes place as a service within society, it is an expression and embodiment of the call to form 'community networks' to enhance this kind of conversion. At a more fundamental level, service learning is not only about the service experience, but also about the reflection which offers a perfect opportunity to reflect on the broader world view and paradigms underlying our current treatment of

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nature and its resulting utilitarianism, individualism, consumerism, and competition. (cf. Francis, 2015, LS, 210). To truly bring about sustainable change and create an "*ecological citizenship*", it is not enough to merely provide information; we also need to install good habits so that through small daily actions our lifestyles will change. This will directly but also indirectly, without us even being conscious of it, affect the world around us. (cf. Francis, 2015, LS, 211/212). At a deeper level, this reflection can foster an awareness and integration of one's personal spirituality and world view: what is my particular calling and my task in this work? What are the sources of my motivation? What are my desires and dreams, but also my fears? Service learning offers, through its pillar of reflection, an opportunity for contemplation in practice, enriched and grounded in the experience of concrete service. As such, this ecological education goal can help people "*to grow in solidarity, responsibility and compassionate care*" (Francis, 2015, LS, 210).

Although students engaged in service learning might not be directly involved in peacebuilding, restoration and reconciliation, we could argue that whatever service-learning activities they engage in that encourage them to collaborate and co-create in order to foster communities that promote integral development, integral ecology, and fraternity, can be considered to be peacebuilding. Every time service learning challenges students to go to the margins, get out their comfort zone, encounter people and concerns they might otherwise never encounter, we are fostering mutual understanding, dialogue and thus – in the end – peace. If in our all too often fragmented, polarised, and conflictual communities, "*social separation [appears as] a sin (a failure to love God by loving our neighbour) then redemption lies in encounter* (Mescher, 2020, p. xiii).

At a personal level, service learning confronts students with at least a triple challenge. First, a prerequisite for true openness to the vulnerable is being able to confront one's own vulnerability. For some, this will entail coming to terms with their vulnerability as belonging to the social group that service learning aims to work for; they are themselves the 'vulnerable'. For others, their vulnerability is somewhat more abstract. To be prepared to 'willingly experience the chaos of others', means to face your own vulnerability to get a true sense of how people are affected (both physically and emotionally). The encounters fostered in service learning will be an opportunity for students to broaden their horizons through experience, to become more conscious of their own vulnerability and more empathic towards the vulnerability of others. A second and related requirement is the ability to critically observe and consequently confront one's social position and the privileges that position may entail. In other words, it is important for students to become aware of their own privileged position, which gives them the tools to deal with their own vulnerability while at the same time increasing the vulnerability of others. In her insightful analysis, American theologian Elisabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo explains the underlying

dynamics of these processes (O'Donnell Gandolfo, 2015). The starting point is our natural reflex to react to our human vulnerabilities with fear and how, led by fear, we seek to protect ourselves. However, this often leads to a situation where some people have the privilege of being able to shield themselves from their own vulnerabilities, at the expense of the well-being of others. The prime example being the closing or protecting of our national or community borders. But a similar phenomenon exists *within* our society. This should lead us to question how our own lifestyle, how the social position we hold, may be compounding the vulnerability of others and contributing to their adverse situation. Moreover, it is crucial to uncover the structural, institutional, and systemic character of these dynamics: how do our societies both internally and externally take measures and implement policies which safeguard the well-being of some, thus granting them privileges, at the cost of adding to the vulnerabilities of others, thus installing 'social sins'? What action should we then take? The key issue is not to determine whether or not we are privileged, but which choices to follow up with: we can comfortably take credit for those privileges – possibly leading to fatalism and indifference – or we can commit to proactive social transformation by deliberately confronting our privilege.

Finally, these encounters and insights challenge young people to envision societal change and consider their future role herein. Following Hannah Arendt, our education is not geared to reproduce what already exists or to change the world only according to a preordained schedule. Instead, it is intended to give young people insights into themselves and the world, giving them the tools to shape it for themselves, to create the future in an original way, using the legacy that was passed on to them to understand and grasp the world. At the same they are aided by the unexpected along the way – arising from their meetings with others on the same journey who also wish to contribute (cf. Arendt as elaborated in Borgman, 2017 pp. 190-191). Such education will do what education is supposed to do, namely "*fostering one's longing to make the world, together with others, a place where living a flourishing, fulfilling life is better possible than it is now*" (Borgman, 2017, 191).

I would hope service learning can move students from possible indifference to increased indignation, with an "open yes" to envision another future (Schillebeeckx, 2018, 5-6). I would love to broaden their scope, by considering how both our rationality and our emotions inform our reason, so that students can learn to experience and trust their emotions as that which literally moves them to act. And moves them beyond the confines of their comfort zones, to feel engaged with people, situations, and social problems that they may have initially thought were none of their concern. I have faith that if service learning is able to both give students the insights in the particular Christian understanding of justice, peace, and sustainable development and make them hear the call for a personal response in their future life, it will become an important way to contribute to the "*educational challenge*" we face today (cf.

Francis, 2015, LS, 210) as "*integral education seeks to shape more enlightened and responsible ways of thinking, feeling and behaving*" (Dorr, 2016, p. 429).

Conclusion

With this chapter, I hope I have clarified *why* service learning is a crucial element of the Catholic identity of Catholic higher education and *how* it can be implemented in order to respond to the Church's call to justice, sustainable development, and peace.

To conclude, I would like to share one of my favourite theological quotes by the political theologian Johann Baptist Metz, who wrote in his *Faith in History and Society*:

> *The much discussed identity crisis of Christianity is not primarily a crisis of its message, but rather a crisis of its subjects and institutions which have pulled back all too far from the inevitable practical meaning of its message and in so doing have undercut its intelligible power* (Metz, 2007, xi).

Given the above, I believe it to be self-evident that service learning is not only essential to revealing this 'inevitable practical meaning' of the Christian message, but also to further embody, shape, and develop it.

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2
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