[*Expositions* 10.1 (2016) 8–16] *Expositions* (online) ISSN: 1747–5376

Catholic Social Teaching: Transforming Students, Transforming Society

JENNIFER REED-BOULEY
College of Saint Mary (NE)

Much innovation has occurred in U.S. Catholic higher education in response to the U.S. Catholic Bishops' 1998 document *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions*.[1] This document and the "Summary Report of the Task Force on Catholic Social Teaching and Catholic Education" agreed both that Catholic social teaching (CST) has not met its intended goal of informing Catholics' moral action, and that Catholic higher education inadequately integrates CST into the curriculum and co-curriculum. The Task Force on Catholic Social Teaching and Catholic Education identified opportunities for Catholic universities to incorporate CST more thoroughly into existing offerings and to create new CST programs. Although many universities have adopted these strategies in creative and exemplary ways, a fundamental and pressing challenge is to identify the resources within CST that both inform and transform students. This challenge raises questions related to how students engage with CST, including the following: How does CST inform and transform students' knowledge, values, and actions? How can faculty and staff at Catholic universities most effectively facilitate the processes of students' transformation in light of CST's own content?

This short paper analyzes only Catholic social teaching (i.e., official documents written by popes and bishops), not wider Catholic traditions. One potential barrier to including CST in the curriculum and co-curriculum is that the official documents themselves do not suggest a particular pedagogy or include plans for how the lessons of CST could be disseminated or implemented.[2] The documents constituting official CST seem to assume that familiarity with the corpus of Catholic social teaching necessarily leads to engagement, integration, and application of principles to particular situations, yielding right social action.[3] Although the shortcomings of this approach have been well-documented,[4] one potential benefit is that Catholic higher education can exhibit a myriad of creative approaches to sharing CST that align with a particular college or university's mission, heritage, context, sponsoring order's charism, and other factors.

As the structure and content of introductory texts in CST indicate, instruction in CST is best accomplished within the broader contexts of the Catholic intellectual and social traditions—studying the lives of holy women and men; being immersed in the Church's rich liturgy, sacraments, and prayer; practicing social action for justice; learning about (historical) and contributing to (contemporary) Catholic social movements; and participating in other facets of the Church's life.[5] Though we can assume faculty teaching university-level courses in CST base their course designs on an implicit sense of how CST functions (in order to present CST in ways that are most effective with university students), currently no empirical research exists on how and to what extent university students learn, appropriate, and engage with CST. However, existing rich descriptions and analyses of courses and programs could serve as a foundation for designing empirical studies of best practices in facilitating educational processes through which CST transforms students.[6]

For university students (mirroring contemporary society at large), arguments from religious authority hold little sway; students are not convinced of the moral rightness or wrongness of particular attitudes and actions solely because these views are promulgated by those who occupy positions of religious authority in the Catholic Church.[7] Moreover, the long history of formation work in Christianity makes clear that telling people what to value, believe, and do is not sufficient to bring about sustainable transformation of people's lives.[8] We cannot expect students to promote particular social policies on immigration, labor, the environment, racism and white privilege, or other issues because they are CST's official recommendations. A further complicating factor for educating students regarding CST is that data on the Catholic Church's influence on 18–24 year-olds (so-called "traditional-age" college students) are discouraging.[9] Recent Pew Research Center polling data document the decline in the number of Catholic (as well as other religious) adherents in the United States. As of 2014, thirty-six percent of 18–24 year-olds in the U.S. describe themselves as unaffiliated with any religion.[10] This compares with nearly twenty-four percent of U.S. adults overall who identify themselves as religiously unaffiliated. Catholics lost the largest share of adherents from 2007–2014, with nearly thirteen percent of American adults reporting that they are former Catholics.[11] These demographic data provide an important context for the challenges Catholic higher education faces.[12] Moreover, Catholic higher education's landscape has changed considerably in the last fifty years in light of ecclesial, cultural, social, and educational factors, leading to a renewed need to consider the ways in which students learn about CST.[13]

For those who do participate in Catholic higher education and remain receptive to learning about CST, what are some possible ways that CST actually transforms students? To answer this question, it is important to recognize the common understanding that CST includes two levels of teaching: (1) general principles (or themes)[14] to which all Catholics are expected to assent, and (2) application of the principles to specific issues, where Catholics in good conscience may disagree. The documents that comprise CST generally employ social analysis (analyzing "the signs of the times") in order to make a case for the policy prescriptions bishops and popes offer for particular issues. Given that the magisterium offers both principles central to the Catholic tradition (such as human dignity, solidarity, and common good) and prudential judgments about policies, how can college students be formed by, appropriate, question, apply, and contribute to developing CST in creative ways?

I sketch in the following the contours of three possible hypotheses regarding the resources within CST that may inform and transform students' lives. These hypotheses are not intended to be exhaustive, and none of them is mutually exclusive.

First, CST's principles may teach students by complicating their habits of moral reasoning. The principles call into question the common sensibilities most students hold by turning contemporary American values on their heads. For example, the principles of option for the poor, common good, human dignity, and solidarity appeal to persons' highest aspirations, noblest visions of the good, and most elevated sensibilities regarding human responsibilities. But these principles contrast with the highly individualistic ethos that assumes all people in the U.S. have equal life chances and that individual effort yields fair outcomes in individuals' lives. To be sure, the principles of CST significantly differ from the prevailing view of traditional-age university students. Christian Smith and others' studies of 18–23 year-olds indicate that their dominant faith orientation, "moralistic therapeutic deism," mirrors that of the majority of U.S. adults. This view deemphasizes religious doctrine and values each individual's autonomy in acting according to a personal sense of what is right.[15] By contrast, the principles of CST provide standards for judgment and affirm that a different and better world—and a different way of viewing the world—are possible. The first hypothesis about how the principles of CST function differs from CST's "default pedagogy"[16] (to borrow Roger Bergman's apt term) that the faithful should simply apply principles to particular situations. Rather, the first hypothesis suggests that prior to students' (or anyone's) application of

principles, it must be the case that the principles offer an attractive way of viewing oneself, society, and communal responsibilities.

Second, after complicating students' moral reasoning and proposing a more adequate set of values or principles than the highly individualistic view that most students hold, CST incorporates social analysis, which it terms "reading the signs of the times," that can help to extend students' thinking in systematic ways. CST assumes that social structures are not immutable. They can be transformed, so that they become less sinful and more reflective of God's grace. Students can learn to use social analysis to examine both social problems and the policy prescriptions that flow from the general principles of CST. These policy prescriptions are often at odds with what students have been previously taught, and may *prima facie* seem at odds with narrow understandings of self-interest. Bryan Massingale and others note that CST's social analysis of economic issues is more comprehensive than its social analysis of some other issues CST takes up, particularly the issue of U.S. racism. Without adequate social analysis, CST can slip into "pious exhortations that do not persuade critical readers."[17] Conversely, however, when CST provides adequate social analysis, students can learn both from its method of social analysis and its conclusions. For example, "Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope," the 2003 pastoral letter written by the bishops of Mexico and the U.S. on immigration, includes analyses of immigration from historical, economic, political, and religious perspectives. Students who read this document learn multiple dimensions of what is often portrayed in public discourse as a simple issue. The rich social analysis of immigration provides a strong foundation for the policy prescriptions the bishops offer, and provides a model for how students can approach other complex social issues.[18]

Why is the social analysis in CST distinctive from other methods of social analysis that students may learn in a standard sociology course or other courses? While courses in the social sciences provide excellent complements to the study of CST, the third resource in CST that may potentially transform students is its Catholic sacramental worldview. Students may adopt (or have already been informed by) this lens for seeing and interpreting reality. The sacramental worldview that suffuses and underlies all of CST—both principles and policies—provides a frame of reference that influences the way students interpret contemporary society and relationships. "Sacramental worldview" refers to the understanding that the sacred and profane are linked, with the upshot that we have sacred obligations to improve the world and contribute to the kingdom of God. All creation is suffused with the holy, by God the Creator and sustainer of all life, with the implication

that we may experience God's love through ordinary and extraordinary events, persons, and the natural world.[19] A sacramental worldview implies that all is interconnected, and that humanity really is one family. The holy is accessible through all creation, and we must transform social structures marked by sin into graced, just social structures. The sacramental worldview affirms a positive engagement with society and public life, which encourages students to engage in action for transforming the world.

CST has much to recommend it for informing students' moral imaginations and decision-making: its attractive principles for judgment, social analysis, and sacramental worldview. Identifying the elements within CST that inform and transform students' knowledge, values, and actions related to social justice represents one facet of a larger process. The ultimate goal for Catholic higher education with regard to CST is not only for students to appropriate it (though this is a challenging and worthy goal in itself), but for students to be so formed by CST that they can question its adequacy to particular social challenges, participate in the Church's and other groups' efforts for social transformation, and suggest how the Church could more robustly respond to injustice and participate more fully in healing itself and society.

Notes

1. See the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, "Catholic Higher Education and Catholic Social Teaching: A Vision Statement," appendix 1, in Sullivan and Pagnucco 2014. The book offers reflections on Catholic social teaching as well as examples of how faculty and staff integrate it into particular programs and courses at various universities.

2. United States Catholic Conference of Catholic Bishops 1998, 3.

3. Bergman 2011, 14. A significant and recent exception to this general rule is the 2015 website *We Are Salt and Light* developed by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Department of Justice, Peace, and Human Development based upon the USCCB document "Communities of Salt and Light." Under the four-fold rubric "act together," "reach out together," "pray together," and "learn together," the website offers not only the principles of CST but also prayers, resources, success stories from parishes, schools, and

Catholic Relief Services, and other information about Catholic social teaching. See http://www.wearesaltandlight.org/.

4. See Bergman 2011 and also Massingale 2010, 74.

5. For examples of these approaches in chronological order of publication, see texts frequently used in university courses on CST, including Kammer 2004, Kelley and Weigert 2005, Mich 2008, Massaro 2012, and Brigham 2013.

6. See, for example, Sullivan and Pagnucco 2014 and Eifler and Landy 2015.

7. In fact, students may resist CST on the basis of religious authority if they sense that its authors are not informed by dialogue with others.

8. See Kyle 2014.

9. See, for example, Smith et al. 2011, 19. For analysis of the extent to which 18–23 year old Catholics identify with Catholicism more generally, see Smith et al. 2014, 68 on "beliefs about the relevance and authority of religious institutions." This book includes a fascinating and sobering study of University of Notre Dame (arguably the "most Catholic" institution of higher education in the US) undergraduates' religious knowledge and perceptions of the value of Catholicism; see 255–263. Thomas Massaro briefly addresses several challenges to CST's public credibility with lay Catholics of all ages in Massaro 2012, 218–225.

10. See "Millennials Increasingly Are Driving Growth of 'Nones,'" May 12, 2015, available at http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/12/millennials-increasingly-are-driving-growth-of-nones/.

11. See "New Pew Research Center Study Examines America's Changing Religious Landscape," May 12, 2015, available at http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/new-pew-research-center-study-examines-americas-changing-religious-landscape/.

12. Catholic theologians and sociologists have hypothesized various reasons the institutional Catholic Church has lost adherents as well as why the magisterium's credibility has declined among Catholics and the public at large. According to a 2010 Pew Research Center study, more than 25 percent of former Catholics who were religiously unaffiliated

(i.e., did not join another church after leaving Catholicism) cited the clergy sexual abuse scandals as a reason for leaving the Church. See "Clergy Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church," March 29, 2010, available at http://www.pewresearch.org/daily-number/clergy-sexual-abuse-and-the-catholic-church/.

13. For an analysis of these factors, see Killen 2015, 80–82.

14. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching," available at http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/seven-themes-of-catholic-social-teaching.cfm.

15. Smith and Denton 2005, 171–172.

16. Bergman 2011, 15.

17. Massingale 2010, 74. In particular, Massingale contrasts the more thorough social analysis found in "The Challenge of Peace" on war and nonviolence and "Economic Justice for All" on the U.S. economy with the inadequate social analysis in "Brothers and Sisters to Us" on racism.

18. See "Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope," available at http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/immigration/strangers-no-longer-together-on-the-journey-of-hope.cfm.

19. See, for example, Himes 1995, chapter 7 and his article "Finding God in All Things: A Sacramental Worldview and Its Effects" in Eifler and Landy 2015, 3–17.

Works Cited

Bergman, Roger. 2011. *Catholic Social Learning: Educating the Faith That Does Justice*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Brigham, Erin M. 2013. *See, Judge, Act: Catholic Social Teaching and Service Learning*. Winona, MN: Anselm Academic.

Eifler, Karen E., and Thomas M. Landy, eds. 2015. *Becoming Beholders: Cultivating Sacramental Imagination and Actions in College Classrooms*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.

Himes, Michael. 1995. *Doing the Truth in Love: Conversations about God, Relationships and Seevice*. New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.

_____. 2015. "Finding God in All Things: A Sacramental Worldview and Its Effects." In *Becoming Beholders: Cultivating Sacramental Imagination and Actions in College Classrooms*, eds. Karen E. Eifler and Thomas M. Landy, 3–17. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.

Kammer, Fred. 2004. *Doing Faithjustice: An Introduction to Catholic Social Thought*. New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.

Kelley, Alexia K., and Kathleen Maas Weigert, eds. 2005. *Living the Catholic Social Tradition: Cases and Commentary*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Killen, Patricia O'Connell. "Reflections on Core Curriculum, Mission, and Catholic Identity in Our Time," *Journal of Catholic Higher Education* (2015) 34.1: 77–90.

Kyle, Eric J. 2014. *Sacred Systems: Exploring Personal Transformation in the Western Christian Tradition*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick.

Massaro, Thomas. 2012. *Living Justice: Catholic Social Teaching in Action*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Massingale, Bryan M. 2010. *Racial Justice in the Catholic Church*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.

Mich, Marvin L. Krier. 2008. *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements*. Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications.

Smith, Christian, and Melinda Lundquist Denton. 2005. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers.* New York: Oxford University Press.

_____, Kari Christoffersen, Hilary Davidson, and Patricia Snell Herzog. 2011. *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*. New York: Oxford University Press.

_____, Kyle Longest, Jonathan Hill, and Kari Christoffersen. 2014. *Young Catholic America: Emerging Adults In, Out Of, and Gone From the Church*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Sullivan, Susan Crawford, and Ron Pagnucco, eds. 2014. *A Vision of Justice: Engaging Catholic Social Teaching on the College Campus*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. 1998. *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions, Reflections of the United States Catholic Bishops*. Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.