What is Subsidiarity?

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My topic is subsidiarity, and what I hope for is that, at the end of this paper, you will all have a better understanding of what the term means and some sense of a direction that you might take in applying it. I will do four things: firstly, I will look at how the term is understood in Catholic social teaching; secondly, I will survey how it appears in broader discussions today; thirdly, I will examine some of its philosophical roots; and fourthly, I will suggest an Aristotelian framework that will help you with its application.

Catholic Social Teaching

The principle of subsidiarity came to international attention when it was named and stated by Pope Pius XI in his social encyclical, Quadragesimo Anno, in 1931 in the following way.

It is a fundamental principle of social philosophy, fixed and unchangeable, that one should not withdraw from individuals and commit to the community what they can accomplish by their own enterprise and industry. So, too, it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and a disturbance to right order to transfer to the larger and higher collectivity functions which can be performed and provided for by lesser and subordinate bodies. Inasmuch as every social activity should, by its very nature, prove a help [subsidium] to members of the body social, it should never destroy or absorb them.

This principle has been reaffirmed by successive popes and has become a central principle of Catholic social theory.

Although the principle of subsidiarity has clear roots in earlier social and political theory, its explicit statement grew out of particular historical conditions. The Church’s response to the laissez-faire economic policies of the nineteenth century had been to support the right and responsibility of government to intervene in the economic and social affairs of its citizens. The purpose of this had been and remains to ensure the protection of the dignity and rights of individual persons. At the same time, by 1931 it was recognised that the state itself was capable of concentrating and controlling not only political but also social and economic power.

The principle of subsidiarity recognises both that the good of the individual person is primary in all discussion of social and political organisation and that persons can live only in communities, which, therefore, have their own specific goods and exercise powers in their own right. Pius XI applied it both to the relationship between individuals and the community and to the relationship between the higher and lower organisations in a more complexly structured society. In summary, the principle states that a government should intervene in the affairs of citizens when help is necessary for the individual and common good but insists that all functions that can be done by individuals or by lower level organisations be left to them. The principle, therefore, has both a positive dimension — help to be given — and a negative dimension — restriction on intervention.

Pius XI applied the principle of subsidiarity specifically to involvement of governments in economic activity. Subsequent popes have applied it both in this way and more broadly. Pope John XXIII in Mater et Magistra applied it to economic activity and also to state ownership of property. In Pacem in Terris he applied it to the relationship between organisations of worldwide public activity and national governments. Pope Paul VI applied the principle to problems of “underdeveloped” countries. Finally, Pope John Paul II applied subsidiarity to both economic activity and to the problems of the welfare state.

Subsidiarity in the Broader Community

The word “subsidiarity”, while remaining important in Catholic discussions of social justice, has been accepted only slowly by the broader community. In fact, the word is found in the English Oxford Dictionary first in its 1989 edition where it is defined as “the principle that a central authority should have a subsidiary function, performing only those tasks which cannot be performed at a more intermediate or local level”. The dictionary attributes its first use to Pius XI in the text quoted above. More recently it has been used in public discussions about the relationship...
between the European Community and its member governments.

There are reasons that the term has not been accepted. The word itself is awkward in English. “Subsidiary” is generally used of something that is less important but that contributes to whatever is primary. A subsidiary stream is a tributary that feeds the main stream. Subsidiary troops are hired to assist the main force. The principle of subsidiarity, on the other hand, uses the word to mean that the higher body has a subsidiary or helping function in relation to the lower and that it has only this function. Another reason seems to be that discussions of the principle are normally had in the language of scholastic social philosophy and natural law theory, which have not translated well into contexts outside the church.

The principle itself, at least in a broad sense and by names such as “decentralisation” or “people-orientation”, has, however, become well-known, particularly in the business world. Peters and Waterman in In Search of Excellence, for instance, in a chapter called “Productivity Through People”, state the following.

There was hardly a more pervasive theme in the excellent companies than respect for the individual. . . . What makes it live at these companies is a plethora of structural devices, systems, styles, and values, all reinforcing one another so that the companies are truly unusual in their ability to achieve extraordinary results through ordinary people. . . . These companies give ordinary people control over their destinies; they make meaning for people. The authors distinguish carefully between sham respect for the individual, which relies on gimmicks, and real respect, and this implies allowing people to perform as intelligent agents, which implies sensitivity to subsidiarity. What is interesting in this case is that they came to the principle empirically by examining the most successful companies.

Today, the principle of subsidiarity has also become of interest to governments, albeit under titles like “devolvement” or “reprivatisation”, because of the recognition that governments cannot effectively run either massive business enterprises or universal welfare agencies. Government activity in these areas becomes lost in the paper-work of bureaucracies. Government is also sometimes forced by political considerations to continue engagement in costly yet ineffective enterprises. Peter Drucker, a management consultant, defined a role for government within the terms of the principle of subsidiarity.

We need government as the central institution in the society of organisations. We need an organ that expresses the common will and the common vision and enables each organization to make its own best contribution to society and citizen and yet express common beliefs and common values.

More significant political interest in subsidiarity arose in the late nineties after the European Union used subsidiarity as a principle governing relations between the European Union and its member states. The 1992 Maastricht Treaty of European Union states:

In areas which do not fall within its exclusive competence, the [European] Community shall take action, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, only if and in so far as the objectives of the proposed action cannot be sufficiently achieved by the Member States and can, therefore, by reason of the scale or effects of the proposed action, be better achieved by the Community.

The principle was endorsed and developed in a Protocol of the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam. This has generated a considerable literature as European scholars and policy-makers have attempted to work out the implications of the principle in the context of the European Union.

Philosophical Foundations of Subsidiarity

The popes came to the principle of subsidiarity through a concern for the dignity of the human person. Pius XI’s theoretical base was the thought of the German social philosopher, Gustav Gundlach. Business and government, on the other hand, have probably justified it on more pragmatic grounds: either the simple recognition that it works or as a response to the problems of size and complexity and of rapid communication. Often they have discovered the principle empirically through analysis of successful undertakings. A third way of coming to the principle is through an understanding of power, and this is the course we will follow here. It implies a shift from social philosophy to political philosophy. We will first consider three general ways in which power can be viewed.

The first and most commonly accepted view of power is that it is something that belongs to persons that rule. It may be theirs by virtue of position or knowledge or some personal quality, but it is strictly their own. The study of power becomes the development of a technology of how to gain, hold and use power. The great exponent of such technology was Machiavelli, who, in The Prince, set out to “lay down the law about how
princes should rule”. Power belongs to the Prince, who needs to be astute about the various ways in which people can be compelled to act so as to further his interests. Fundamental to Machiavelli’s position is the rejection of classical ethics in favour of “what is actually done” and the corresponding separation of the discussion of power from ethics. Virtù, which for Machiavelli can be translated “prowess” and which is etymologically associated with “strength” and also “power”, becomes the sum of those qualities that will enable the ruler to have his way with those under his dominion.

A second way of dealing with power is to view it as something that is articulated in the structures of an organisation or a state. This is found in constitutional discussions, whether they be those of the philosophers, those surrounding the development of modern written constitutions, or those following the various constitutional crises that occur from time to time. Essential to each of these discussions is the fact that various powers to act are divided among different offices and authorities in an organisation. The “balance of power” is a means of protecting the rights of members and of ensuring effective operation. If the organisation is well constituted, it will usually function well in relation to its goals and the interests of those who compose it, and with a minimum of conflict.

A third way of viewing power is fundamental to the other two but less frequently acknowledged. Hannah Arendt tells us that “power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert”. It is, therefore, a coming together of human energy in such a way that the ability of a group is focused and that the group is able to get things done. In other words, power is the-energy-of-the-group-brought-to-bear. It is essential to this view that power belongs to the group, not to the one leading the group. Arendt distinguishes power from strength, force, authority and violence, and laments the fact that they are generally confused in contemporary discussions as, indeed, they often are in practice. She claims that “when we speak of ‘a powerful man’ or a ‘powerful personality’, we already use the word ‘power’ metaphorically; what we refer to without metaphor is ‘strength’.”

If power is taken in the third sense, as the ability of a group to get things done, it soon becomes evident that some kind of organisation and, in fact, subordination is necessary for it to function. A group becomes capable of concerted effort only when individuals rise out of the group to command and so to coordinate its activities. This can happen either because of the strength of the individuals or because of some choice of the group, but those persons will be capable of thinking out and initiating the performances to be undertaken by the group. Such persons are said “to have power” or “to be in power”. We might call this exercised power.

We are now in a position to put the three views of power together. Power in its fundamental sense belongs to a group and is the ability to bring energy to bear in a particular way, that is, to undertake a particular form of action. That a group do this demands that its efforts be coordinated by someone who is said to have power or to exercise power. This is the kind of power that is articulated in constitutional discussions. A person exercising power has a difficult and complex task, and the value of Machiavelli’s study was that it initiated discussion about how power might be effectively used. His failing was to attribute power simply and solely to the person exercising it. Such exercise necessarily relies on compulsion and can only be violent. It soon loses contact with the energy of the group.

One of the problems of exercised power is that it tends to expand, so that those in power draw more and more power to themselves. This may be because of the success or the desire of those holding power or because of outside influences such as danger or threat. This is bad for the group because it locates power with those in power rather than with the action of all the members of a group, with the result that the flow of energy in the group is constricted. At this point, it is useful to articulate two principles. The principle of subordination (or authority) says, as we have just seen, that actions of persons in a group need to be coordinated by some single authority for the sake of the common good and so that a group can, in fact, act in concert. The principle of autonomy, on the other hand, acknowledges the value of individual persons or smaller groups acting effectively for the general good, and it recognises that this kind of action is part of being a human person. When communities are functioning well, the two, in fact opposed, co-principles balance one another.

This gives us a fresh way of looking at subsidiarity. In the way that Pius XI used it, subsidiarity adds something to the principle of autonomy – an impetus, a demand. It emphasises that the principle of autonomy ought to be promoted in such a fashion that it will be presumed that what can be done effectively at a lower level ought to be done there. Historically, Pius XI was reacting to the centralised power of the modern state, and here we can name another principle, the principle of sovereignty or what Philip Camara has called the principle of superiority – an impetus towards subordination. Again, these principles are opposed. When the modern state so imposed its sovereignty that persons and smaller communities were crushed or unable to function
effectively, it became necessary to insist on subsidiarity.

An Aristotelian Framework

What you have with subsidiarity is an impetus, a principle that demands change on sound grounds. This is very useful, but it still leaves work to be done, namely the real political work of designing good political structures and putting them in place. I want to suggest briefly that, in the Philippines, you would do well to turn to the Greek philosopher, Aristotle, and his work, The Politics. Unlike modern political theorists, who viewed human beings as atomic individuals and calculators of self interest, Aristotle viewed human beings as intelligent agents, who could discern truth and seek good. His politics began with natural communities – families, clans, tribes, villages and towns – and recognised another form of human life that could be added to these, namely political life. He examined the possibilities for this kind of life always keeping in mind that its purpose was to bring about a better and, indeed, more virtuous life for those who composed the community. The activity of this life involves participating in judgements both about what is best and about how to achieve it. It means being active in the working out of our own futures.

Conclusion

This concludes my all too brief exposition of the Principle of Subsidiarity. It is a principle that has been at the centre of Catholic social teaching for some time and that was articulated by Pius XI specifically to deal with dehumanising aspects of the modern state. What the principle intends is that individual human beings and smaller communities be able to act effectively drawing on their full human potential and that they be able to live in a dignified manner. I hope it will inspire you to work to achieve that goal in the Philippines.

1 This paper was requested by Philip Camara for the conference conducted by Subsidiarity Movement International. It is a reworked and updated version of an earlier paper, “The Principle of Subsidiarity and the Church”, Australasian Catholic Record 71/3 (July 1994): 352 – 359. I am grateful to the Movement for sponsoring my visit to the Philippines.


4 Various attempts have been made to give the term specific historical roots such as that of Alain de Benoist, “The First Federalist: Johannes Althusius”, Telos: A Quarterly Journal of Critical Thought 118 (Winter 2000): 25 – 58. See also Kent A. Van Til, “Subsidiarity and Sphere-Sovereignty: A Match Made in…?”, Theological Studies 69 (2008): 610 – 636. A reply to Benoist and others by M. R. R. Osswaarde, ‘Three Rival Versions of Political Enquiry: Althusius and the Concept of Sphere Sovereignty’, The Monist 90/1 (January 2007): 106 – 125, shows that attempts to find specific roots can lead to confusion. For the purposes of this paper, I will take the notion of subsidiarity as an idea first publically articulated by Pius XI working out of scholastic and classical political theory in response to human suffering under some of the excesses of modern sovereign states.

5 See Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church #186, p. 94.


7 Pope John XXIII, Pacem in Terris (1963), #140, Catholic Social Thought, p. 153.

8 Pope Paul VI, Populorum Progressio (1967), #33-34, Catholic Social Thought, pp. 247-248.


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14Treaty of the European Community (1992), Article 3b (2).


19Machiavelli, The Prince, Chapter 15, p. 91.


21The primary sense of “constitution” is the structure of powers or authorities within a state or organisation, whether or not it is written down in a single document that we call a constitution.


23This is closely analogous to the understanding of physics which defines power as the energy expended divided by the time taken.

24Arendt, On Violence, p. 44.

25I am indebted to Robert Sokolowski, Catholic University of America, who helped me clarify the issues in this section.


27Philip Camara has used this term in private correspondence but see also ‘Primer on the Subsidiarity Movement’, http://www.bayannatin.net/BayanNatin/adWithUs.html. Accessed 10/03/2009. The coined term ‘principle of superiority’ points keenly at the problem of the centralising and dehumanising power of the modern state. My similarly coined term ‘principle of sovereignty’ locates this problem in the modern notion of sovereignty, pioneered by Jean Bodin (1530 – 1596), but brought to term by Thomas Hobbes (1588 – 1679) in his Leviathan, which remains a stark statement of the assumed power of the modern state.

28Michael Oakeshott offers an excellent definition of politics. “Politics is the activity of attending to the general arrangements of a collection of people who, in respect of their common recognition of a manner of attending to its arrangements, compose a single community. To suppose a collection of people without recognised traditions of behaviour, or one which enjoyed arrangements which intimated no direction for change and needed no attention, is to suppose a people incapable of politics. This activity, then, springs neither from instant desires, nor from general principles, but from the existing traditions of behaviour themselves. And the form it takes, because it can take no other, is the amendment of existing arrangements by exploring and pursuing what is intimated in them.” Michael Oakeshott, “Political Education” in Rationalism in Politics and other Essays, revised edition, (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991), p. 56.


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