

The Principle of Subsidiarity and the Church

Andrew Murray

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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.¹

Since then it has been reaffirmed by successive popes and has become a central principle of Catholic social theory.²

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 [164]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.

¹Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), n. 79, in *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, edited David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1992), p. 60.

²A study of Catholic Church social thought can be found in Jean-Yves Calvez and Jacques Perrin, *The Church and Social Justice* (London: Burns & Oates, 1961). On subsidiarity see pp. 118-124, 328-337. See also Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Vatican Social Teaching*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992).

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 government, therefore, has a subsidiary or helping role in relation to lower organisations or individuals.

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.³ In *Pacem in Terris* he applied it to the relationship between organisations of worldwide public activity and national governments.⁴ Pope Paul VI applied the principle to problems of underdeveloped countries.⁵ Finally, Pope John Paul II applied subsidiarity to both economic activity and to the problems of the welfare state.⁶

Subsidiarity Outside the Church

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

³Pope John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra* (1961), #51-53, #152, #117, *Catholic Social Thought*, pp. 92, 103, 109.

⁴Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* (1963), #140, *Catholic Social Thought*, p. 153.

⁵Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* (1967), #33-34, *Catholic Social Thought*, pp. 247-248.

⁶Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (1991), #15, 48, *Catholic Social Thought*, pp. 450-451, 475-476.

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.⁷ 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.⁸

The authors distinguish carefully between sham respect for the individual, which relies on gimmicks, and real respect, which implies allowing people to perform as intelligent agents and therefore some form of subsidiarity. What is interesting in this case is that they came to the principle empirically by examining the most successful companies.

Peter Drucker, in *The Practice of Management*, develops an understanding of the structures of large

⁷William Bertrams, "Subsidiarity in the Church", *The Catholic Mind* 59 (July 1961): 358-363 and Arthur Utz, "The Principle of Subsidiarity and Contemporary Natural Law", *Natural Law Forum* 3 (1958): 170-183 make this clear. See also Jack Mahoney, "Subsidiarity in the Church" *The Month* v. 21, n. 11 (Nov 1988): 968.

⁸Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman, *In Search of Excellence* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), pp. 238-239.

business organisations along the lines of the principle of subsidiarity.

A manager's job should be based on a task to be performed in order to attain the company's objectives. It should always be a real job--one that makes a visible and, if possible, clearly measurable contribution to the success of the enterprise. It should have the broadest rather than the narrowest scope and authority; everything not expressly excluded should [166] be deemed to be within the manager's authority. Finally, the manager should be directed and controlled by the objectives of performance rather than by his boss.⁹

More recently we find that the word "empowerment" has become a buzz-word in management practice. A recent training video on empowerment makes a statement of principle that is very close to that of Pius XI. "The manager's role is supporting and enabling rather than managing and controlling."¹⁰

When the principal of subsidiarity was stated in 1931, its use was motivated by concern for the dignity of individual human persons in the face of the centralising power of modern governments. Today, it has 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.¹¹ Government activity in these areas becomes lost in the paper-work of bureaucracies. Government is also forced by political considerations to continue engagement in costly though useless enterprises. Drucker again defines 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.¹²

⁹Peter Drucker, *The Practice of Management* (London: Pan, 1968), p. 169.

¹⁰"The Green Movie", Melrose: The Training Company, UK.

¹¹See, for instance, Industry Commission, *Charitable Organisation in Australia: An Inquiry Into Community Social Welfare Organisations*, Draft Report, 27 October 1994, pp. L, 29-33, 35-36, 268-270. The Commissions uses "devolvement" in the Overview but adopts "partnership" for the general discussion. This term seems to have come from the submissions by charities and seems to have been preferred because of its friendliness.

¹²Peter Drucker, *The Age of Discontinuity*, p. 210.

It is worthy of note that what governments seem to be pursuing was offered by Pius XI:

It [the State] then will perform with greater freedom, vigor and effectiveness, the tasks belonging properly to it, and which it alone can accomplish, directing, supervising, encouraging, restraining, as circumstances suggest or necessity demands.¹³

Subsidiarity in the Church

Interest in applying the principle of subsidiarity to the Church followed two statements by Pius XII. On 20th February 1946, while addressing a group of newly created cardinals, he discussed Pius XI's statement of the principle [167] and concluded: "These are surely enlightened words, valid for social life in all its grades and also for the life of the Church without prejudice to its hierarchical structure".¹⁴ On 5th October 1957 in an address to the Second World Congress on the Lay Apostolate, he applied the principle to ecclesiastical authority in relation to the work of the lay apostolate.¹⁵ The principle was widely used in the discussions of Vatican II, although it was explicitly mentioned only a few times in the documents.¹⁶ It was also part of the discussions prior to the reform of canon law¹⁷ and was approved by the 1967 Synod as one of the principles governing the reform.¹⁸ In what follows we will consider subsequent developments in the role of the laity in parish and diocesan life and discussions about the role of episcopal conferences and their relationship to Rome.

Catholics involved in lay action and social justice during the 1940s, 50s and 60s were well schooled in the principle by their reading of the social encyclicals. Their expectations that the principle would apply to their own involvement in the Church were given further foundation by Vatican II's

¹³*Quadragesimo Anno*, n. 80, in *Catholic Social Thought*, p. 60.

¹⁴Pius XII, Allocution to the College of Cardinals, 20th February 1946, in *The Catholic Mind* 44 (April, 1946): 196. See *AAS* 38 (1946): 144.

¹⁵Pius XII, Allocution of 5th October 1957, *AAS* 39 (1957): 926.

¹⁶*Gaudium et Spes* 86, *Gravissimum Educationis* 3, 6.

¹⁷For a survey of these discussions and also for an example of what was hoped for in the reform of canon law see William W. Bassett, "Subsidiarity, Order and Freedom in the Church", in *The Once and Future Church: A Communion of Freedom*, edited by James A. Coriden (New York: Alba House, 1971), pp. 205-265.

¹⁸*Code of Canon Law*, "Preface to the Latin Edition" (Washington DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1983), p. xxi.

emphasis on the laity and by its recognition of the Church as the People of God. It has taken time for the practical implications of this to be worked out, but there is evidence that some progress has been made. One example is found in the development of parish and diocesan councils.

The formation of early parish councils cannot be regarded as an exercise of subsidiarity. These councils had little effective decision making power. They could be dismissed at the whim of the parish priest and often passed out of existence at the end of a parish priest's term. They had little protection in law. Historically, they can be best viewed as part of a learning process.

A recent and very positive development has taken place in the Diocese of Maitland. On 27th November, 1993, Bishop Leo Clarke promulgated as law a new Diocesan Pastoral Plan that had been developed by a Diocesan Synod.¹⁹ After articulating a mission, goals and principles, the plan establishes Councils, Assemblies and Teams at the parochial and diocesan levels and Councils for Deaneries. It envisages further statutes at each level.

The Plan cites the principle of subsidiarity as governing referral of matters from the Diocesan Pastoral Council to other bodies,²⁰ but the principle could also be said to inform other provisions. Two of the three goals have to do with the opportunity of all members of the diocese to contribute to the life of the diocese. A clear majority of the members of a Parish Council is [168] elected by the parish at large, and the Parish Team, which includes the pastor, is accountable to the Council for its implementation of the Plan. Pastors are obliged to convene the Council, and it is envisaged that the Council would continue to operate during the extended or permanent absence of a priest. The Plan maintains the hierarchical nature of the Church by reserving the appropriate decision making to the pastor, but enriches the life of the community by placing that decision in the context of preparation and evaluation by the Council.

Episcopal Conferences were given new life by Vatican II's renewed understanding of bishops as vicars of Christ rather than of the pope and by its recognition of the importance of local churches.²¹ An extraordinary assembly of the Synod of Bishops was called in 1969 specifically to study the relationships between conferences of bishops and the Holy See and between conferences themselves. A further extraordinary assembly took up the issues again in 1985.

¹⁹Diocese of Maitland, *Diocesan Pastoral Plan*, 21st November, 1993.

²⁰*Diocesan Pastoral Plan*, p. 17.

²¹See *Lumen Gentium* 23, 28.

In the 1969 Synod Paul VI raised the issue of the application of the principle to episcopal conferences. This was partly in response to submissions made by bishops prior to the Synod. It was referred to during the Synod and there was some general agreement that it should be applied, although in a way that respected the nature of the Church. Paul VI, himself, indicated towards the end of the Synod that he was ready to respond to suggestions about its implementation.

Prior to the 1985 Synod Cardinal Hamer, in a speech to the College of Cardinals but no doubt with the Synod in mind, argued that the principle, which came from social philosophy, was not needed since the Church's own ecclesiology was sufficient for working out the relationships between the curia and conferences. In the Synod, the principle was again used in the discussion of the relationships, but a report at the end of the first week questioned whether the principle applied to the Church. The responses to this challenge varied across language groups, the English group being most supportive of the principle, the Latin group calling for most caution. In its Final Report the Synod recommended that a study be made about whether "the principle of subsidiarity, so applicable throughout human society, may be applicable to the Church, and in what sense and to what extent such application may or should be made".²²

One outcome of this call was an international colloquium at Salamanca in January 1988.²³ An important paper by Joseph Komonchak called [169] "Subsidiarity in the Church: The State of the Question"²⁴ outlined the history of the discussions attempting to apply subsidiarity to the Church and examined the question both in its practical and theoretical aspects. He concluded that at the theoretical level further study is needed to clarify a number of ecclesiological, social-philosophical questions. At the practical level he noted that the same people who promoted subsidiarity in the state also promoted it in the Church and for same reason, namely, the centralising tendencies of the modern world. He also noted that the recurrence of appeals to the principle in the Church over a long period indicate that there are problems to be faced.

²²1985 Synod, "The Final Report", *Documents of the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops November 28 - December 8, 1985*, trans. J. Muirhead (Homebush NSW: St Paul Publications, 1986), p. 43.

²³The proceedings of this colloquium are found in Hervé Legrand, Julio Manzanares, and Antonio García y García, *The Nature and Future of Episcopal Conferences* (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988).

²⁴In *The Nature of Episcopal Conferences*, pp. 298-349. This paper is the source of this discussion on episcopal conferences.

While the issues remain unresolved, some of the discussions seem to indicate that the participants require some form of metaphysical and theological certainty in even practical matters before reaching agreement or instituting change. It is, however, questionable whether such certainties could exist at all levels of action. That it is natural for human beings to be associated does not imply the necessity of a particular form of association. Similarly, that the Church is divinely instituted does not mean that every detail of how it operates is divinely decreed and so beyond human decision. The pity of this situation is that change is likely to come only in the face of more painful necessities, namely, those of crisis.

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.²⁵ 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 philosophy²⁶ and leaves aside the theological discussion. Assumed in the latter move is the fact that the discussion of order in the Church can be enlightened by a variety of disciplines, each operating within its own proper [170] limits to critique and complement existing thought and practice. 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

²⁵See Komonchak, "Subsidiarity in the Church", p. 300.

²⁶On the medieval confusion of the social and the political see Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (The University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 22-28. I take the political question in relation to the Church to be the following. In the light of divine revelation and of the goods, ultimate and otherwise, for which the Church exists, and given its history, the particular characters of its members and the issues of the moment, what is the best way for it to be constituted, how should its institutions function, and what activities should it most pursue and in what way? The question is both philosophical in the sense that there is need of analysis of the general lines that a response might take and practical in the sense that it is directed to particular action in a particular context.

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”.²⁷ 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.²⁸ *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 state. This is found in constitutional discussions, whether they be those of the philosophers²⁹, those surrounding the development of modern written constitutions³⁰, 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 officers 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”.³¹ 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 energy-of-the-group-brought-to-bear.³² 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 [171] 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’”.³³

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.³⁴

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 of 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. It is bad for the group because again it locates power with those in power rather than with the action of all the members of a group, so that the flow of energy in the group is constricted. Part of the solution to this problem is to have many centres of

²⁷Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. George Bull (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961/81), Epistle Dedicatory, p. 30.

²⁸*The Prince*, ch. 15, p. 91.

²⁹See, for instance, Aristotle, *Politics*, Book IV, and John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Civil Government*, chapters 10-14.

³⁰The 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.

³¹Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), p. 44.

³²This is closely analogous to the understanding of physics which defines power as the energy expended divided by the time taken.

³³*On Violence*, p. 44.

³⁴I am indebted to Robert Sokolowski, Catholic University of America, who helped me clarify the issues in this section.

power and to have the exercise of power dispersed across them.

In this context we can understand subsidiarity as an opposed co-principle to subordination. Subordination is necessary if a group is to act in concert, but exercised power tends to expand to the point where subordinated individuals and groups lose the possibility of action. The principle of subsidiarity states that whatever action can be accomplished by individuals or subordinate bodies ought be left to them and not subsumed by higher organisations. It thus protects the possibilities of action at all levels of a group. It does this not only for the sake of the individual but also for the sake of the vitality of the group. To act in contrary fashion is to invite stagnation. [172]

Conclusion

The political life of the Church consists in it attending to its own general arrangements.³⁵ These necessarily change in response to changes in self-understanding, to specific needs or crises of particular epochs, to changes in technology and the like, and to developments in the characters and situation of the peoples who make up the Church. It is a life that is intensely practical and that demands deliberation and prudence at every level. Its developments, therefore, take time and care and often involve wrong turns. They certainly call for new learning in response to new situations.

Our time has seen enormous changes for the Church in the things that affect the way people organise themselves. Vatican II provided a new self-understanding for the Church--among other things, the People of God immersed in the world. We are faced with a crisis of disaffiliation. Developments in the technology of transportation and communication have made possible extraordinary centralisation of power in even very large and widely dispersed groups. The people who make up the Church are,

particularly in the West, well-educated and expect to live with equality and freedom and to participate fully in the things that are meaningful to them.

It is the purpose of this paper to propose the principle of subsidiarity as an important aid to deliberation and decision as the Church works out how it is going to live in response to these challenges. The principle is well-founded. In the formulation of Pius XI it promotes the freedom and dignity of the individual against the centralising tendencies of the modern world. It can further foster the energy and vitality of individuals and groups in the Church and so of the Church itself. Finally, it offers protection against the misunderstanding and abuse of power, something from which the Church is not immune.

None of this is to say that the principle of subsidiarity is the only principle to guide the Church at this time. Nevertheless, in a time that calls for rapid change, it has some secondary advantages: it is well-known; it addresses serious concerns of our age; it was used in the discussions of the Council that brought about the changes whose implications we are still working out; it has been promoted by the magisterium. While the hard work of clarifying particular arrangements has still to be done, the principle can provide a source of common agreement on a direction to be pursued.

Father Andrew Murray SM, PhD lectures in Philosophy at the Catholic Institute of Sydney, Manly, NSW.

³⁵“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 Oakshott, “Political Education” in *Rationalism in Politics and other Essays*, rev. ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991), p. 56.