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Catholic Social Teaching Reframed: One Fruit of a Culture of Encounter

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Abstract

Catholic social thought and teaching is sometimes conceptualised using an historical or principles-based approach. This paper proposes an alternative framing, construing Catholic social teaching (CST) as a multi-layered phenomenon that can be grouped into three broad tiers, each with a distinctive role. This framing is not intended to supercede the others, nor is it inconsistent with them. The proposal emerges out of a series of discussions hosted by the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, a Catholic UK-based development agency, member of Caritas Internationalis, and an official agency of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. The paper operates on two levels simultaneously: it attempts a distinctive reframing of CST using a distinctive source, and it attempts an enactment of CST methodologically and structurally. Construing CST as a multi-layered phenomenon that can be grouped into three broad tiers provides a clarity that empowers us in two ways. First, it clarifies the distinctive role of CST at each level. Second, it makes clear that CST is a work of the Spirit rather than a human phenomenon. Such an understanding of CST brings out with particular clarity a vision of the role, purpose, and even the *agency* of Catholic social thought in relation to a troubled world.

Keywords: CAFOD; Catholic social teaching; climate change; culture of encounter; Global South; Laudato Si; Pope Francis; technocratic paradigm

Catholic social teaching (CST) is sometimes conceptualised using an historical framing. On this reading, the papal social encyclicals from *Rerum Novarum* (1891) to *Fratelli Tutti* (2020) are generally taken as the milestones of its development. Conversely, it is sometimes conceptualised thematically around a set of core principles, often articulated as: dignity, solidarity, the common good, the option for the poor, peace, creation and the environment, and the dignity of work and participation.¹ This paper proposes an alternative framing, construing Catholic social thought and teaching as a multi-layered phenomenon that can be grouped into three broad tiers, each with a distinctive role.

¹This list is taken from Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD), and the principals are sometimes grouped differently. CAFOD, 'Seven Catholic social teaching principles', <<https://cafod.org.uk/pray/catholic-social-teaching>> [accessed 21 June 2023].

This framing is not intended to supercede the others, nor is it inconsistent with them. It does, however, bring out with particular clarity a vision of the role, purpose, and even the *agency* of Catholic social thought in relation to a troubled world.

The proposal emerges out of a series of discussions hosted by CAFOD, a Catholic UK based development agency, a member of Caritas Internationalis, and an agency of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.² It is an international non-governmental organisation that works with partners on a range of development issues.³ It works through locally based partners who can access 'some of the most hard-to-reach communities across Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East'.⁴ Listening to CAFOD partners, therefore, offers a cross-section of views, which, although not comprehensive,⁵ do provide something of a condensed view of today's world from voices largely peripheral to its centres of power.⁶ This act of listening is here conceived of as an embodiment of the sort of culture of encounter Pope Francis has repeatedly asked for.⁷

Interviews were conducted by the author and a member of CAFOD's Theology Team between November 2021 and September 2022. Many of CAFOD's partners work in politically sensitive or dangerous contexts so anonymity has been preserved. Three topics were discussed: lives and livelihoods, climate change, and Covid-19. A bank of questions was developed collaboratively, drawing on the decades of experience within the CAFOD Theology Team. Each interview began with the same three open questions.⁸ Generally, interviewees spoke at length with little need for follow-up questions. Partners were selected for geographical and vocational breadth. Voices from four countries in Asia, three in Africa, and two in Latin America were heard. There was a range of secular and church/Caritas partners. Partners work with diverse groups such as people with disabilities, migrant workers, fisheries, land and human rights defenders, agricultural reform, and education. In most cases, partners organised group interviews with around 5–15 voices, including staff, volunteers, and 'clients'. Power dynamics were sometimes noticeable, either between group members (e.g., deference to a director by a junior staff member) or deference to the interviewers because they were perceived as representing CAFOD. However, the opposite was also observed. In one series of interviews consisting largely of 'clients' from a country in a politically dangerous

²The project was supported by both CAFOD and The Centre for Catholic Studies at Durham University. I am grateful for the support of Linda Jones, Head of Theology Programme at CAFOD, and Francis Stewart, Theology Programme Advisor. I am also grateful for the academic supervision of Professor Karen Kilby, Bede Professor of Catholic Theology at Durham University. My thanks also go to Porticus who generously funded the project.

³CAFOD, 'We Are CAFOD – The Catholic Agency for Overseas Development', <<https://cafod.org.uk/>> [accessed 5 May 2023].

⁴CAFOD, 'Where We Work', <<https://cafod.org.uk/about-us/where-we-work>> [accessed 5 May 2023].

⁵The qualification is important. CAFOD's partners are very diverse but equally the agency would be unlikely to sponsor a partner who in some way opposed its core values, so some selection bias is inherent.

⁶Going to the peripheries is a dominant refrain in the teaching of Pope Francis who suggests that we should be '[...] finding ways to include those on the peripheries of life. For they have another way of looking at things; they see aspects of reality that are invisible to the centres of power where weighty decisions are made'. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2020), § 215.

⁷Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, § 216, 217.

⁸'In your local context, what has helped to improve people's quality of life and what has made it worse?' 'What are the environmental problems in your area and how do these affect people's lives?' 'How far has the pandemic exposed existing problems and/or created new ones?'

situation, the CAFOD Programme Officer present commented that he had never heard people speak so freely. The resulting mix was eclectic and generally interviewees spoke for themselves rather than mediating the voices of others.

The paper operates on two levels simultaneously: it attempts a distinctive reframing of CST using a distinctive source, and it attempts an enactment of CST methodologically and structurally. First, the suggested reframing of CST flowed from their insights of partners and could not have arisen from a 'desktop theology'. Second, this methodology was deliberately chosen as an enactment of a CST that reflects upon their insights but avoids any attempt to 'embellish' or 'domesticate'.⁹ This methodology also determined the paper's structure. Following Pope Francis, the three sections are: contemplate, discern, and propose.¹⁰ The first section describes what we see when we contemplate the world today through the eyes of CAFOD partners. The second section uses theological resources to caution against technocratic solutions. The third section attempts a reframing of CST as a multi-layered phenomenon that could invert the top-down power-leveraged solutions associated with a technocratic approach and provide increased intentionality and agency in response to the problems partners describe.

1. Contemplate

When we look at today's world through the eyes of CAFOD partners, two things are apparent: the concrete situations people find themselves in are diverse, but, thematically, the issues facing people across the Global South are remarkably similar. Individually, none of the themes are new, but, in their amalgamation and repetition, a distinctive picture of today's world begins to emerge.

The first theme is land. Many partners pointed to a cycle of dependence caused by chemical pesticides and fertilisers.¹¹ They described negative effects in the present: 'We have no system for controlling pesticides—they find their way through the runoff into water systems'¹² and predicted future negative effects: 'Our land, our soil has lost its productivity because our people are depending on this [chemical inputs]'.¹³ Interviewees described inputs as economically problematic: 'They have to buy everything like the seed, the fertilizer, the pesticide from the company ... the price of the resources and the price of the product, the company already set everything and so here the farmer only make a little profit, sometimes they even lose their investment'.¹⁴ One partner said this cycle of dependence cannot be suddenly broken, describing the

⁹Pope Francis, *Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Grand Chancellor of the 'Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina' for the 100th Anniversary of the Founding of the Faculty of Theology* (3 March 2015), <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150303_lettera-universita-cattolica-argentina.html> [accessed 13 July 2023].

¹⁰Austen Ivereigh/Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2020). (Postscript by Austen Ivereigh), pp. 142–43.

¹¹CAFOD, 'The Life Blood of the Earth', <<https://blog.cafod.org.uk/2018/05/10/soil-matters/>> [accessed 14 September 2023].

¹²All quotations for which no references are provided are the anonymised direct comments of partners.

¹³Christian Aid and CAFOD, *New Pathways out of Poverty in Africa*, p. 12. [accessed 20 September 2023].

¹⁴CAFOD, 'Sowing the Seeds of Poverty', 24 April 2023, <<https://assets.ctfassets.net/vy3axnuecuwj/1qQHddSJ74v5KmuFAsD0EA/35b3ef1587a12b52dd9b3c4fd7a01714/Sowing-the-seeds-of-poverty-2023.pdf>> [accessed 20 September 2023], p. 9–10.

sudden ban on imports of fertilizer in Sri Lanka as ‘a disaster for the farmers and other people depending on agriculture’.¹⁵ Partners complained of increasing government regulation prohibiting seed sharing and instead mandating the use of certified seeds.¹⁶ Many partners described farmers as constrained by the global economic system; one said farmers ‘have their local plants and their local wisdom but the demand is the market. They are living in a competitive world’.¹⁷ They said these push factors lead to farmers selling or abandoning land. At the same time pull-factors, such as the profits to be made in cash-cropping mean large swaths of land are given over to monocrops like pineapple and soy or to beef cattle for export markets. Overall, partners reported an unsustainable and damaging agricultural environment in which the link between people and the land is broken and people are no longer embedded within rural communities in the way previous generations had been. Fewer people own more land, and this land is used in a way that hurts life today and in the future.

The second theme is Covid-19. For most partners, the worst effects of the pandemic were not the health effects but its exposure of underlying economic and social problems.¹⁸ Many said lockdowns most directly affected day labourers who need to work today to eat tomorrow. They said the closure of markets also affected farmers and market-gardeners whose produce were left to rot. Inevitably, partners talked of food shortages and price rises affecting the most vulnerable.¹⁹ Many partners were clear that the issues were not localised but rather it was a flawed global economic model that the pandemic exposed. Long supply chains did not work under pandemic conditions. Fertilisers, pesticides, herbicides, and seeds became scarce: ‘inputs increased and security decreased’. Centralised food distribution and export-led sales broke down. In addition to hunger, many partners related mental and spiritual health issues, including experiences of isolation, depression, alcoholism, and gender-based violence (GBV).²⁰

The theme of a flawed global economic model was widespread: ‘for survival people don’t have much choice, the system is driving them’.²¹ Partners’ critiques can be grouped into two main areas. The first is that the global economic system is inequitable, and the second is that it is unstable. That the system is inequitable has long been established beyond reasonable doubt. In 2022 Credit Suisse stated that top 1% of individuals owned 46% of the world’s wealth and the bottom 50% owned less

¹⁵See CAFOD partner: MONLAR, ‘Letter to President Regarding Chemical Fertiliser Ban’, 5 May 2021, <https://viacampesina.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/05/Letter-to-President-Regarding-Chemical-Fertilizer-Ban_English.pdf> [accessed 15 September 2023].

¹⁶CAFOD, *Sowing*, p. 17.

¹⁷CAFOD, *Sowing*, p. 9.

¹⁸International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank, *World Development Report 2022*, ‘Chapter 1. The Economic Impacts of the COVID-19 Crisis’, <<https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2022/brief/chapter-1-introduction-the-economic-impacts-of-the-covid-19-crisis>> [accessed 19 July 2023].

¹⁹CAFOD, ‘How Coronavirus is Affecting South Sudan’, <<https://cafod.org.uk/news/international-news/coronavirus-south-sudan>> [accessed 20 September 2023].

²⁰CAFOD, ‘CAFOD’s Response to Coronavirus’, <<https://cafod.org.uk/news/emergencies-news/coronavirus>> [accessed 20 September 2023].

²¹See Stan Chu Ilo, ‘Poverty and Economic Justice in Pope Francis’, *International Bulletin of Mission Research*, 43 (2019), 38–56, 46–49. <<https://doi.org/10.1177/2396939318810698>>.

than 1%.²² Partners described the experiences of those at the bottom of the wealth pyramid who struggle to survive day to day.²³ Partners' reports of the effects of the instability of the global economic system were also striking. Those without a reserve of savings or assets were exposed to enormous difficulties by issues such as imports affected by currency fluctuations, trading in commodities, inflation, a parallel dollar economy in some countries, and middlemen who pass on price rises but not falls.

Partners reported serious and continuing gender inequalities as the norm.²⁴ Many of these had been exacerbated by the pandemic.²⁵ GBV was widespread. Some men took out their frustrations at being forced to stay indoors on women. In some cultures women were expected to work both inside and outside the home. This dual role became more difficult during the pandemic. One partner said 'they were the ones expected to provide for their families and to look for food for the families so it has increased the cases of wife battery and violence'. Financial difficulties caused by the pandemic were sometimes ameliorated by the gains from supplying girls for child marriage.²⁶ Several partners said that where the opportunities for education are limited, the norm is to educate male children.

Migration was a significant theme. Almost all partners reported a high level of migration in their contexts.²⁷ These were often people moving from non-viable rural communities to urban centres. In addition, localised conflicts often result in large number of internally displaced persons.²⁸ There is also much movement between countries. In some cases migration is forced by conflict or climate change. In other cases, migration is for economic reasons. Many families survive on remittances sent from family members working abroad.²⁹ Partners felt that migration was a necessity, not a choice: 'they are going abroad and to the border zone for their survival'. Particularly difficult to hear were the stories of women migrants who had been trafficked or subjected to modern slavery conditions, torture, and sexual violence.³⁰

²²Credit Suisse Research Institute, *Global Wealth Report 2022*, 1 September 2022, <<https://www.credit-suisse.com/about-us/en/reports-research/global-wealth-report.html>> [accessed 22 March 2023], p. 32.

²³CAFOD, 'Debt, Finance and Economic Justice', <<https://cafod.org.uk/about-us/policy-and-research/debt-and-economic-justice>> [accessed 20 September 2023].

²⁴CAFOD, 'Gender Justice and Inclusion', <<https://cafod.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/gender>> [accessed 21 September 2023].

²⁵UN Women, 'The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against Women During Covid-19', <<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19>> [accessed 19 July 2023].

²⁶UNICEF, '10 Million Additional Girls at Risk of Child Marriage due to COVID-19', <<https://www.unicef.org/eap/press-releases/10-million-additional-girls-risk-child-marriage-due-covid-19-unicef>> [accessed 19 July 2023].

²⁷CAFOD, 'Refugee Crisis Explained', <<https://cafod.org.uk/news/emergencies-news/refugee-crisis-q-a>> [accessed 21 September 2023].

²⁸71.1 million people were living in internal displacement worldwide at the end of 2022, a 20 per cent increase in a year and the highest number ever recorded'. Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), *GRID 2023: Internal Displacement and Food Security*, April 2023, <<https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2023/>> [accessed 19 July 2023].

²⁹International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank, *World Development Report 2023: Migrants, Refugees, and Societies* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2023), pp. 2–4.

³⁰CAFOD and OKUP, *Access to Justice for Bangladeshi Migrant Workers: Opportunities and Challenges*, March 2021, p. 17, <https://okup.org.bd/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Access_Justice_Report_2019-1.pdf> [accessed 19 July 2023].

Forming a backdrop to these themes is the relentless climate breakdown.³¹ Partners across the Global South described an increase in extreme weather since the year 2000.³² Distortions in the patterns of the seasons make agriculture difficult. Soil degradation is a concern in many areas because of both farm inputs and climate factors such as salination from sea level rises or loss of topsoil due to deforestation and rainwater runoff. Partners noted an increase in pests, the most dramatic of which were the globally reported plagues of locusts in East Africa in 2020.³³ One partner admitted 'our lifestyle here is contributing to climate change' because people are more concerned with surviving day to day than with the long-term impacts of their actions. Some partners described the human rights abuses and environmental damage caused by mining in their areas.³⁴

The final theme that can only be mentioned briefly is war.³⁵ Conflict destroys all semblance of order: 'the country is ruled by law not the rule of law'.³⁶ Partners in those areas where there is conflict necessarily see everything through this lens. Even though they face many of the issues already described, the immediacy of the conflict and the resulting trauma is so great that it eclipses everything else. In addition, the invasion of the Ukraine took place during the interview phase of the project and the resultant rises in energy and food prices exacerbated many of the issues partners faced.³⁷

Contemplated through the eyes of CAFOD's partners, we see a world writhing in anguish. Everywhere there are people on the move, fleeing war, famine, and poverty and doing so against the backdrop of a denuded ecosystem and collapsing climate. The overwhelming impression left by the conversations with partners is of a pattern repeated around the globe in which people are no longer embedded within their environment but have been detached.³⁸ As the vulnerability of individual people has

³¹For example, Christian Aid, *The Cost to Africa: Drastic Economic Damage from Climate Change*, November 2022, <<https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-11/the-cost-to-africa.pdf>> [accessed 19 July 2023], and CBM, *Missing in Climate Action: Stories of Persons with Disabilities from the Global South*, 2022, <<https://www.cbmun.org.uk/resource/missing-in-climate-action-stories-of-persons-with-disabilities-from-the-global-south/>> [accessed 19 July 2023].

³²CAFOD, 'Policy and Research: Climate and Environment', <<https://cafod.org.uk/about-us/policy-and-research/climate-and-environment>> [accessed 21 September 2023].

³³BBC, 'The Biblical Locust Plagues of 2020', 7 August 2020, <<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200806-the-biblical-east-african-locust-plagues-of-2020>> [accessed 23 March 2023].

³⁴CAFOD, 'Gold Mining in Yanomami Indigenous Territory (TIY)', 2023, <<https://cafod.org.uk/about-us/policy-and-research/private-sector/gold-mining-in-yanomami-indigenous-territory>> [accessed 19 July 2023]. Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator describes resource extraction in Africa particularly as being 'insidious manifestations of external manipulation' a new kind of proxy conflict between Eastern and Western blocs. Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, 'Caritas in Veritate and Africa's Burden of (Under) Development', *Theological Studies*, 71 (2010), 320–34. <<https://doi.org/10.1177/004056391007100203>>, p. 325.

³⁵CAFOD, 'Ukraine Crisis Update', <<https://cafod.org.uk/news/international-news/ukraine-appeal-donations-thank-you>> [accessed 21 September 2023].

³⁶By 'law' the partner meant 'power'.

³⁷See United Nations, 'One Year Later: The Impact of the Russian Conflict with Ukraine on Africa', 13 February 2023, <<https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/february-2023/one-year-later-impact-russian-conflict-ukraine-africa>> [accessed 19 July 2023].

³⁸This phenomenon can be seen in the very structure of our language (at least in English). Older texts tend to describe people as being 'in the Earth' more modern texts describe them as being 'on the Earth': the change of preposition is revealing.

increased through uprooting from human contexts, the problems they face also seem to have broken free from the human contexts in which they were created and become overwhelming globalised forces out of the control of people and nations. These forces have swept the globe in a series of paradigmatic catastrophes since the beginning of this millennia and dramatically increased in frequency since 2020: the financial crisis of 2008, the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, the locust plagues and wildfires of 2020, the 0.67 billion people facing hunger or famine in 2023,³⁹ and the ‘third world war fought piecemeal’.⁴⁰ In short, ‘we are moving from periodic crises to a protracted crisis’.

2. Discern

A wide range of potential resources are available to the theologian to bring to the discernment necessarily provoked by these stories. The process of discernment involved reading widely in theological sources, including academic theology, the papal magisterium and bishops’ conferences documents, and reflecting with CAFOD and academic colleagues on the insights of partners. The principal researcher also had the privilege of giving talks for the London Jesuit Centre, the World Forum on Liberation and Theology, CAFOD Day for Religious, and Durham University, which provided opportunities for a wide range of people to respond to the emerging findings. It is acknowledged that this middle section traces one of many possible pathways. The pathway does not start at an arbitrary point but rather follows organically from contemplation of the structural similarities between the experiences of partners in diverse geographical places and their insight that ‘the system is driving them’. The section therefore begins by viewing the stories through the lens of ‘structural sin’.⁴¹

Since the latter half of the twentieth century, CST has acknowledged a social as well as personal dimension to sin. The idea of ‘structural sin’ emerges from the writings of the CELAM bishops and liberation theologians who used it to describe the continent-wide injustice, oppression, and dehumanisation arising from the societal structures they found themselves living in.⁴² However, the problems described by the interviewees were not so much caused by structures as by the breakdown of structures. The migrant, the civilian in a war zone, the landless *campesino* (farmer) are all made vulnerable by the lack of protective structures. Applying Aristotle’s insight, we could say that ‘nature abhors a [structural] vacuum’. Into these vacuums pour a variety

³⁹World Food Programme, ‘Hunger Map’, <<https://hungermap.wfp.org/>> [accessed 23 March 2023].

⁴⁰Pope Francis, ‘Message for the 2016 World Day of Peace’ (8 December 2015), 2: AAS 108 (2016), 49, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20151202_messaggio-xlxi-giornata-mondiale-pace-2016.html> [accessed 23 March 2023].

⁴¹As the starting point of structural sin is not arbitrary but follows from the insights of partners, neither is the subsequent elaboration in this section. The paper unashamedly uses resources from within and without the tradition as CST is always ‘in dialogue with the world’. See Anthony Annett, *Cathonomics* (Georgetown: Georgetown University Press, 2022), p. 32. Yet it continues to view the papal magisterium as normative and so the main sources derive from Pope Francis – as the current magisterial exponent of CST. Francis’s thought in general and particularly in regard to the ‘technocratic paradigm’ largely follows Romano Guardini who in turn was indebted to Martin Heidegger.

⁴²The recent PhD thesis of Charlotte Bray provides a clear, full, and up-to-date treatment of social and structural sin, ‘Sin and the Vulnerability of Embodied Life: Towards a Constructive Development of the Idea of Social Sin within the Catholic Tradition’ (PhD thesis), <<http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/14701/>> [accessed 21 September 2023].

of actors. Some, like people traffickers and drug pushers, are obviously malevolent. Conversely, others, like the UN or World Bank, have a 'development' agenda but not necessarily one that is cognisant of nor aligned with the priorities of local communities.⁴³ To capture the dynamism of these situations, this paper proposes the image of the whirlpool or vortex. This image conceives the world as a relatively calm lake with currents and eddies here and there but which overall, when seen from a distance, is pretty flat. The image of a lake is an attempt at a visualisation of the sort of stable, economically marginal but viable subsistence communities once found everywhere. Compare this to the current picture. All over the lake, we see swirling currents, global movements of cash and investment, consumerism driving global trade, and the rapacious search for raw materials and sources of energy. Once the livelihoods and lives of a community become unviable, a mix of destructive economic, social, political, and criminal forces swirl around increasingly vulnerable people. These forces begin to interact with one another in complex ways and gather speed. The resulting complexes create whirlpools or vortices of destructive and sinful currents that suck people out of their environments and drag them down into increasingly desperate and squalid poverties: economic, mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual. This image attempts to capture both the emptiness at the centreline of the vortex (the vacuum where once there had been community) and the dynamism of the destructive forces that enter into that space. These vortices of sin reduce the ability of individuals to make free moral decisions as their lives become a morass of increasingly bad options to choose between: mining or unemployment, drug dealing or destitution, and prostitution or starvation.⁴⁴

This image of whirlpools of sin, perhaps, captures something of the current global reality, seen as a whole. But what does it look like for individuals? In his history of debt, David Graeber talks about the material objects we have in our homes. Our possessions are an intrinsic part of our lives: a source of memory and part of what holds a family together. Graeber poses the question: '[w]ho was the first man to look at a house full of objects and immediately assess them only in terms of what he could get for them in the market? [...] Surely, he can only have been a thief'.⁴⁵ For thieves, material objects have no intrinsic value. What they really want is for the objects to be broken up and commodified, then converted into cash because cash is fungible. Although not writing within the tradition, Graeber's analysis is useful for the light it throws on concerns expressed by theologians about how the human person is understood. For example, John Paul II, in 1981, warned that the worker should not be an 'instrument' or tool of production because the worker was a subject and not an object.⁴⁶ The suggestion that men and women are increasingly being seen as objects was also made by Romano Guardini in his 1956 work *The End of the Modern World*. Guardini does not restrict his

⁴³In her analysis of sin, Bray notes 'structural sin can be created by people with good intentions': the same could be said for vortices of sin. Bray, *Sin*, p. 93.

⁴⁴These three sets of alternatives were given by partners as specific choices faced by people in their areas.

⁴⁵David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, 2014. Ebook, p.416. Presumably the gendered language is intentional.

⁴⁶John Paul II, Pope, *Laborem Exercens*, § 7, 14 September 1981, <https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens.html> [accessed 01 April 2023].

context to labour but rather makes a wider point about the loss of individual distinctiveness in our age. The suggestion here is that we see in CAFOD's partners' stories the outworking of the objectification of human beings. When people are detached from their communities by vortices of sin, they lose their history and uniqueness and become fungible⁴⁷ and interchangeable: tools to be used in the mining industry, mules to carry drugs across the border, and bodies for sexual pleasure.⁴⁸

Pope Francis suggests that the ruin of society and the enslavement of men and women follow from greed and the idolatry of capital.⁴⁹ The bible consistently warns against idolatry because idols are not neutral and inert.⁵⁰ When we invest them with our worship, they begin to have a curious power over us. We become like our idols.⁵¹ If our possessions derive their uniqueness and significance from being embedded within our homes, how much more do we derive much of our uniqueness and significance from our relationality, from being embedded in our families and communities. Looked at in this way, the idolatry of money is a proximate cause of the fungibility of people in today's world. We have become like what we have valued, what we have invested with our spirit, and what we have loved.

Perhaps this also gives us an alternative way of looking at the climate crisis. Often our analysis of climate breakdown relies to a greater or lesser extent on causality. Put crudely, we emit too much carbon and the planet reacts badly. But the bible never presents a deterministic world. Instead, it describes a fallen creation. Guardini describes a subtle relationship between humans and the rest of creation:

The moment that energy or matter or a natural form is grasped by man, it receives a new character. No longer is it simply a part of nature; it has become part of the world surrounding man, which world is man's own 'creation'. The thing of nature becomes involved with, even partakes of, human freedom; in so doing it partakes of human frailty. It has become ambivalent, carrying a potential for evil as well as good.⁵²

If nature⁵³ seems no longer 'sacred' but has become 'ominous and distant', perhaps it is not simply a case of the estrangement of humanity and environment but rather a partaking by the environment in the estrangement of humanity from being itself.⁵⁴ Put crudely, if, when nature glances our way, it does not see the image of God described in Genesis but something that looks like an idol, fungible, and having no intrinsic

⁴⁷Rowlands, *Dark Times*, pp. 15–46.

⁴⁸These are specific examples provided by partners.

⁴⁹Pope Francis, 'Address of The Holy Father, Participation at the Second World Meeting of Popular Movements, Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Pope Francis to Ecuador, Bolivia and Paraguay (5–13 July 2015)', 9 July 2015, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/july/documents/papa-francesco_20150709_bolivia-movimenti-popolari.html>.

⁵⁰1 Cor. 10:7; 1 Cor. 10:14; 1 Jn. 5:21; Col. 3:5; Isa. 45:20; Jon. 2:8; Jdg. 10:14 etc.

⁵¹Ps. 135:18.

⁵²Romano Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*, (Eastford: Martino Fine Books, 2019), p. 104.

⁵³I follow Guardini in using 'nature' but acknowledge it is a more problematic term than it was in 1956. See, for example, Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climactic Regime* (Cambridge: Ebook, Polity Press, 2017), 'First lecture: on the instability of the (notion of) nature', pp. 14–42.

⁵⁴*Modern World*, p. 92 and 89.

worth, why should nature not rebel against us in exactly the same way we have rebelled against God?⁵⁵

What is this power that we invest in our idols and from where does it come? In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis issues a corrective to what he sees as a misreading of the Genesis injunction to dominate the Earth, teaching instead that the intention was that we “‘till and keep” the garden of the world’.⁵⁶ Yet, if Genesis asks us to till the garden, we must first create it. For the ancient Israelites, the world was no Eden, rather they were hemmed in on all sides by wilderness.⁵⁷ In this context, perhaps, dominating the Earth was felt to be synonymous with dominating the wilderness:⁵⁸ a chaotic place of dark forests and desert wastes in which there lurked much that was hostile to humanity.⁵⁹ Seen in this way, what was really being dominated were the chthonic forces felt to be at large in the Earth. Unfortunately, our conspicuous success in dominating these forces in the world at large has not been matched by our mastery over ourselves – and particularly over our will. Guardini suggests that the power, with which we dominated the wilderness, has now turned on us and has got the upper hand.⁶⁰ He gives us the option to look at this psychologically; if we did this, we might say that the unconscious through ruling much of our psyche is therefore ruling much of our world.⁶¹ Alternatively, he suggests that once humanity abdicates responsibility and refuses submission to the creator, we become ruled by the fallen spiritual beings who oppose the Incarnation on almost every page of the New Testament.⁶² Either way, Guardini’s conclusion is that the chaos of the wilderness has sprung up once more in the least expected of places: in the midst of the power with which we dominated its external manifestations so successfully.⁶³

If this analysis does not immediately give us a roadmap for what to do next, it does at least indicate what not to do. In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis suggests that at its root, the current ecological crisis has been caused by the unbalanced and unhealthy way we have embraced technology. He calls this the ‘technocratic paradigm’.⁶⁴ He defines this paradigm as the idea that the human subject dominates malleable external objects using rationality and the scientific method. Francis recognises the extreme difficulty in stepping outside the ‘internal logic’ of this paradigm. This is because for those of us under the paradigm’s spell, the obvious solution to all difficulties is to concentrate knowledge and technical expertise on an issue and back them up with resources of money and power. Thus, the solution exacerbates the problem and the circle becomes more vicious.

⁵⁵Gen. 1: 27.

⁵⁶Francis, Pope, *Laudato Si*, 24 May 2015, § 67, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html> [accessed 02 April 2023].

⁵⁷The Holy Bible, *English Standard Version Catholic Edition* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2021).

⁵⁸2 Chron. 26: 10.

⁵⁹Evoked in Guardini, *Modern World*, p. 111.

⁶⁰Guardini, *Modern World*, p. 111.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁶²*Ibid.*, pp. 102–03. Pope Francis, often seen as a moderniser is here in complete agreement with Guardini. Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2018), § 160–61.

⁶³*Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁶⁴Guardini bluntly defines capitalism as ‘technics’ plus ‘uncontrolled greed’. *Modern World*, p. 94.

The classic work on the nature of technology is Martin Heidegger's 'The Question Concerning Technology'.⁶⁵ In the essay, he claims that technology is not neutral or an inert tool for human use. The essence of technology, he suggests, is not something technological: it is a making known of what was previously unknown – a revealing. He then examines what technology reveals. One of his examples is agriculture. He contrasts the peasant farmer of the past with the mechanised food industry and finds the former does not 'challenge' the land, but the latter 'sets upon nature'. There is an aggressive taking hold of nature in industrialised agriculture, and this taking hold leads also to storing up. Nature becomes a 'standing reserve' because it now stands by ready to be disposed of by us. This, says Heidegger, is the real danger: we have also become part of the standing reserve to be used in industrial processes.⁶⁶ Technology reveals an 'Enframing', concludes Heidegger: we are framed by it: caught, trapped, or imprisoned. There are some obvious similarities between Heidegger's analysis and Guardini's: what we thought we had dominated, it turns out, dominates us. It also takes one step further the fungibility of people who are now not only commodified but also available to be stored up for future use. If Heidegger tells us anything, it is that the solution to the chaos – climate and otherwise – wrought by our domination of the world by the technological paradigm is not more technology or technocratic solutions. We need to think differently.

3. Propose

CAFOD partners described a world of dynamic sinfulness in which human persons are uprooted by vortices of sin, objectified, and instrumentalised along with the other creatures of our common home.⁶⁷ Our resources of technology, money, and power have failed us, and we seem to be hemmed in, finding it easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.⁶⁸ The churches would seem to be the last places to look for a way out of our difficulties, appearing to be '[...] cast aside by the industrial/And scientific flood of our world'.⁶⁹ However, the final section of this paper proposes that in an alternative framing of Catholic social thought and teaching, we gain a vision of the role, purpose, and even the *agency* of such thought and teaching, and that by construing CST as a multi-layered phenomenon that can be grouped into three broad tiers, each with a distinctive role, we gain a clarity that empowers us in our troubled world.

This framing of CST does not start with an *a priori* view of what CST is, nor does it begin with published documents. Instead, it begins with human persons. This is important because if we began with CST, as an historical or principles-based approach largely

⁶⁵Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans by. William Lovitt (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1977), pp. 3–36.

⁶⁶If we have any doubt on this point, just think of the ugly modern term 'human resources' and combine it with zero hours contracts.

⁶⁷The phrase, from *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home* is the name chosen by CAFOD for its strategic framework, see CAFOD, 'Our Common Home', 2020, <<https://cafod.org.uk/about-us/how-we-work/our-common-home-vision>> [accessed 19 July 2023].

⁶⁸Fredrick Jameson, quoted in Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia*, third lecture, p. 92.

⁶⁹D. Gwenallt Jones, (*Gwreiddiau*), 'The Churches', in *Sensuous Glory: The Poetic Vision of D. Gwenallt Jones*, trans by Donald Allchin, D. Densil Morgan, and Patrick Thomas (Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 2000), p. 148.

does, rather than the human person, we would be beginning with an abstraction rather than the thoughts, teaching, and actions themselves. Our being overwhelmed in the face of global issues is partly caused by our taking the descriptive abstraction as the fundamental reality, when what is fundamental is always human persons and their thoughts and actions.⁷⁰ Beginning with human persons is necessary but not sufficient for our freedom to act.⁷¹

We could say that this alternative framing of CST comes from the peripheries and is built from the bottom up because despite human persons' ontological primacy, the centres of power in our world coalesce around reifications, such as the economy, the financial system, the political system, and so on. Specifically, in this paper, the conception of this understanding of CST comes from the conversations with CAFOD partners who are enacting CST in multiple geographical and social situations.⁷² From this point of departure, we see an inversion of the technocratic pyramid. Partners focus on small local solutions to the problems identified in the first part of this paper. For example, tackling gender inequality in Malawi through 'leadership training, livestock management, seed saving, sustainable crop production and woodlot management' or improving soil fertility in Bangladesh organically.⁷³ Rethinking CST this way is important because CST cannot credibly suggest alternatives to a top-down technocratic approach if it is seen largely as a top-down papally led approach.

Pope Francis points to 'an excess of diagnosis, which at times leads us to multiply words and to revel in pessimism and negativity'.⁷⁴ With the starting point identified in this paper, the diagnosis does not precede a – largely ineffective – call to action. Instead, the diagnosis – which we could also call the teaching – emerges along with and through the action. This creative blend of praxis and pedagogy is named by Francis as the work of 'social poets'.⁷⁵ This designation is not a mere rhetorical flourish but rather a technical clarification, for just as poetry cannot be disaggregated into its component parts or paraphrased in prose without loss, neither can the action, thought, and teaching of social poets be disaggregated without loss. This loss, which is precisely the loss of the ability to act effectively, is what we see when diagnosis is separated from action.

In *Let us Dream*, Pope Francis quotes the Carmelite nun, Edith Stein, who said 'the most decisive turning points in world history are substantially co-determined by souls whom no history book ever mentions'.⁷⁶ Francis evokes a world that is an inversion of the technocratic pyramid. Rather than the powerful leveraging wealth and technology

⁷⁰This is not to ignore the importance of non-human creation but here the focus is on human agency.

⁷¹John Paul II's careful language on structural sin is pertinent here. He concedes that it is not out of place to talk of 'structures of sin' but is careful to root the idea in personal sin, giving primacy to the human person and their agency. Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, § 36, 30 December 1987, <https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html> [accessed 10 July 2023].

⁷²There is not the space here to describe what partners are actually doing, nor, due to security concerns, am I able to identify individual partners. I instead refer to the wealth of information on CAFOD's website. CAFOD, 'Where We work', <<https://cafod.org.uk/about-us/where-we-work>> [accessed 20 July 2023].

⁷³CAFOD and SCIAF, 'Enterprises with Purpose: A Guide to Supporting Resilient and Sustainable Local Economies', p. 23 and 26, <<https://cafod.org.uk/about-us/how-we-work/international-guidelines>> [accessed 28 September 2023].

⁷⁴Francis, 'Popular Movements', 2015.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream*, p. 137.

for their own ends with all the attendant hazards described in Section 2, it is a vision of a decentralised, messy, yet not altogether disorganised tapestry of dispersed grass-roots communities affecting change in multifarious ways.⁷⁷ Francis evokes this world as an alternative to the frightening 'labyrinth' of today. The way out of the labyrinth, he says, is 'the Spirit calling us out of ourselves' enabling us to 'decentre and transcend'.⁷⁸ In one sense, the world Francis asks us to dream of is an idealised future, but in another, it is a present reality glimpsed in the conversations with CAFOD partners. The obverse of the vortices of sin described in Section 1 is the actions, thought, and teaching of the people we spoke to in the project: people open to the Spirit. In summary, the first of the three levels of CST proposed in this paper is at the level of the human person. At this level, CST emerges where the actions, thought, and teaching of human persons are open to transcendence. It is catholic in the sense of being universal, and it is social teaching in that it emerges in the interplay of praxis and pedagogy.

If the first level of CST is characterised by openness, in the second, we begin to see a growing intentionality. The labyrinth described by Francis is not new. In *Biblical Economic Ethics: Sacred Scripture's Teachings on Economic Life*, Albino Barrera OP describes the period covered by the Old Testament from the angle of economics.⁷⁹ We see a world, a little like that described in the first section of this paper, where ordinary people were vulnerable to price fluctuations, markets, and fraud. Debt forced smallholders into indentured labour.⁸⁰ Wealth was aggregated into fewer hands. The difference between then and now is that the modern situation is worse. First, the scale is larger: global not just Mediterranean. Second, the destructive economic forces are now accompanied by destructive environmental forces.

One response to the 'domination system'⁸¹ in ancient Israel was the 'company of prophets' we see in *2 Kings*. This group lived prophetically, being activist and self-supporting in the face of threats like debt slavery and famine.⁸² We have largely reduced our understanding of prophesy to a speech act, but prophesy in the bible was always performative and social.⁸³ The 'social poets' Francis talks of who 'organise and carry out creative alternatives' are the heirs of this spirit of prophesy.⁸⁴ These companies of prophets exist today in many parts of the world, supporting one another, denouncing injustices, and organising to provide land, labour, and lodging to those on the peripheries.⁸⁵

At this second level, CST emerges where human persons open to transcendence reflect upon their experience of collaborating to live prophetically in society. Over time, these reflections begin to form a common of pedagogic and practical resources.

⁷⁷See Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator, 'Laudato Si': A Prophetic Message', *Journal of Catholic Education*, 24 (2021), 300–05. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.2401192021>>.

⁷⁸Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream*, p. 136.

⁷⁹Albino Barrera, *Biblical Economic Ethics: Sacred Scripture's Teachings on Economic Life* (Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2013), Ebook, pp. 35–125.

⁸⁰Cf. *2 Kings* 4: 1.

⁸¹Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week* (London: SPCK, 2008), pp. 7–8.

⁸²*2 Kgs.* 4: 8–36, *2 Kgs.* 2: 19–21, *2 Kgs.* 4:1–7, *2 Kgs.* 6: 1–6, *2 Kgs.* 4: 38–44.

⁸³*Jer.* 13: 1–11, *Ezek.* 4: 1–16, *Hos.* 1: 1–10.

⁸⁴Francis, 'Popular Movements', 2015. Contemplating further the link between prophecy and poetry could provide some inspiration for transcending our 'enframed' milieu. See D. H. Lawrence, *Selected Literary Criticism*, ed. by Anthony Beal (New York: Viking, 1966), pp. 90–91.

⁸⁵Francis, 'Popular Movements', 2015.

These enable the creators of CST to communicate and strengthen one another across time and geographical space. These resources are likely to emerge from the common experience of people and societies, even if their subsequent articulation is by individuals. Prominent examples of this sort of reflection on prophetic living can be seen in the theologies of liberation and theologies of the people that have emerged from the experience of Latin American peoples in the latter half of the twentieth century and in the civil economy tradition that emerged through the experience of the peoples of the Apennine Peninsular in the early modern period.⁸⁶ In the work of someone like Amartya Sen, we see a more autoured response to the challenges of living prophetically but one which comes out of the collective experience of events of a people such as the Bengal famine of 1943.⁸⁷

At this median level of CST, the actions, thought, and teaching of human persons open to transcendence and attempting to live prophetically can take on greater intentionality through reflection, but they can also be strengthened through groupings and networks. Until now, the third section of this paper has been careful to use ‘catholic’ as a common noun as the CST so far described is common property, but in both the median and third level of CST, there is also a sense in which social teaching becomes Catholic.

At their best, bishops’ conferences are able to creatively shape and focus CST to respond to particular circumstances. A review of bishops’ conference documents shows a movement from the abstract and wide-ranging teaching documents that proliferated in the 1970s and 1980s to much more issue-focussed calls to action, which have prevailed since the 2000s. *The Economy We Want* by the bishops of Zimbabwe is an interesting example. It used a qualitative methodology canvassing the views of many hundreds of citizens and synthesised these into specific proposals on employment, education, health, labour rights, persons with disabilities, infrastructure, and housing. Specific proposals are included under each heading. For example, under Food and Water, there are six recommendations including: ‘[...] price control regulations to avoid private retailers who charge in foreign currency but pay tax in local currency’.⁸⁸

This confluence of the prophetic and hierarchical brings us to the third and final level of CST: the ‘subsidiary’. It is to help, support, promote, and develop.⁸⁹ The example of the Zimbabwean bishops shows this. The bishops’ approach was successful largely because it was built upon the peripheries. The reach of the Catholic Church in that country, and the familiarity of the bishops with the social encyclicals, meant that they were able to galvanise and articulate a response to the economic situation

⁸⁶Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 29 June 2009, <https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html> [accessed 2 August 2023]. Luigino Bruni and Stefano Zamagni, *Civil Economy: Another Idea of the Market* (Agenda Publishing, 2016). JSTOR, <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv5cg8w2>> [accessed 2 August 2023].

⁸⁷Augusto Zampini Davies, ‘Amartya Sen’s Capability Approach and Catholic Social Teaching in Dialogue: An Alliance for Freedom and Justice?’ (PhD thesis), <<https://ethos.bl.uk/Home.do?sessionId=670A8761E0199AF4CCEB8AB8C7590344>> [accessed 2 August 2023].

⁸⁸Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops’ Conference, Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe, *The Economy We Want* (Harare: CCJPZ, 2020), § 4.1.2 and § 4.6.2, <<http://www.zcbc.co.zw/zcbc-publications.html>> [accessed 19 July 2023].

⁸⁹*Compendium*, § 186.

that smaller and more dispersed groups were unable to manage. This is also the function of the social encyclicals, the papal social teaching: it is to help, support, promote, and develop the ability of human persons to be open to transcendence and to live prophetically.⁹⁰

There are two temptations that eviscerate CST at this level. The first is juridical, to legislate, command – to be the sole interpreter of reality: Pope Francis articulates this danger:

So don't expect a recipe from this Pope. Neither the Pope nor the Church have a monopoly on the interpretation of social reality or the proposal of solutions to contemporary issues. I dare say that no recipe exists.⁹¹

It is not the job of the Pope or the Roman Curia to either singlehandedly create CST or say what falls within CST.⁹² To do so would only serve to chain-up the Spirit.⁹³ Francis has begun to make the papal magisterium more cognisant of the lower levels of CST by regularly quoting bishops' conferences from around the world in his documents. What Francis's magisterium demonstrates well is the opposite to juridicism: the ability to inspire and empower and by doing so to help, support, promote, and develop: all the things suggested by the idea of subsidiarity. The third level of CST should open out, not close down: the summit as well as the source of CST is transcendence.

The second temptation is to disaggregate the actions, thought, and teaching that are inextricably entwined in the first level. It would be to mistake a segregation of duties between a hierarchy that diagnoses and a laity that acts. An historical or principles-based approach to CST can succumb to this temptation. Francis has largely avoided this temptation. His prophetic actions like the Lampedusa visit and embrace of Vinicio Riva are consistent with his teaching in encyclicals like *Fratelli Tutti*.

In summary, construing CST as a multi-layered phenomenon that can be grouped into three broad tiers provides a clarity that empowers us in our troubled world in two ways. First, it clarifies the distinctive role of CST at each level: the first is a fecund emergence of action, thought, and teaching; the second is a reflective intentionality; and the third is inspiration and empowerment. Second, it makes clear that CST is a work of the Spirit rather than a human phenomenon. When not eviscerated by juridicism or a disaggregation of diagnosis and action, this Spirit exerts a force strong enough to begin to counteract the vortices of sin in today's world. It is capable of increasing our agency and empowering us to live prophetically in our present circumstances whilst simultaneously holding out the promise of a way to transcend the labyrinth in which we find ourselves.

⁹⁰Subsidiarity can also be seen as defining CAFOD's role: helping rather than supplanting local actors.

⁹¹Francis, 'Popular Movements', 2015.

⁹²Although it is legitimate to create a synthesis like the *Compendium* conceived as a tentative milestone rather than an end.

⁹³C.G. Jung, 'Letter to Père Lachat', in *The Christian Archetype: A Jungian Commentary on the Life of Christ*, ed. by Edward F. Edinger (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1987), p. 129.