

Liberatio

Journal of the World Forum on Theology and Liberation

Revista del Foro mundial de teología y liberación

Revista do Fórum mundial de teologia e libertação

Revue du Forum mondial de théologie et libération



A Just and Green Recovery: Reflections on Catholic Social Teaching in Light of the Pandemic

Gareth L. M. Rowe

Volume 1, 2024

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1115311ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1115311ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

PUM

ISSN

3078-1671 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Rowe, G. L. M. (2024). A Just and Green Recovery: Reflections on Catholic Social Teaching in Light of the Pandemic. *Liberatio*, 1, 123–128.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1115311ar>

Article abstract

The paper poses the question: What would lead to a better and greener post-Covid world in terms of livelihoods and economics? Is this consistent with Catholic social teaching (CST) or a challenge to CST? The paper provides the first external report on a project currently being undertaken by CAFOD (part of *Caritas Internationalis*) with Durham University. The project undertakes an exploration of one of CAFOD's priority themes: "a just, green global recovery." It aims to reflect theologically on the pandemic and how it disrupted economic enabling environments and exacerbated structural inequalities and to suggest some ways forward as and when we begin to emerge from the pandemic. The overall aim of the project is to contribute towards advancing the vision of progress and agenda for change in CAFOD's strategic framework: *Our Common Home (OCH)*, which was itself inspired by *Laudato Si'* and Pope Francis's insight that "We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental." Methodologically, the project aims at a multi-layered approach. A grassroots approach is central, building theology up from the voices of CAFOD's partners. Discussions are being held with partners in Africa, Asia and Latin America to find out what kind of economic enabling environment would improve their lives. This approach is being supplemented by discussions with supporter groups in the UK. The insights from partners will be reflected upon in the light of CST in its widest sense. This includes the papal magisterium, regional episcopal conferences and the insights of liberation theologians.

A Just and Green Recovery: Reflections on Catholic Social Teaching in Light of the Pandemic

GARETH L. M. ROWE

ABSTRACT: The paper poses the question: What would lead to a better and greener post-Covid world in terms of livelihoods and economics? Is this consistent with Catholic social teaching (CST) or a challenge to CST? The paper provides the first external report on a project currently being undertaken by CAFOD (part of *Caritas Internationalis*) with Durham University. The project undertakes an exploration of one of CAFOD's priority themes: "a just, green global recovery." It aims to reflect theologically on the pandemic and how it disrupted economic enabling environments and exacerbated structural inequalities and to suggest some ways forward as and when we begin to emerge from the pandemic. The overall aim of the project is to contribute towards advancing the vision of progress and agenda for change in CAFOD's strategic framework: *Our Common Home* (OCH), which was itself inspired by *Laudato Si'* and Pope Francis's insight that "We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental." Methodologically, the project aims at a multi-layered approach. A grass-roots approach is central, building theology up from the voices of CAFOD's partners. Discussions are being held with partners in Africa, Asia and Latin America to find out what kind of economic enabling environment would improve their lives. This approach is being supplemented by discussions with supporter groups in the UK. The insights from partners will be reflected upon in the light of CST in its widest sense. This includes the papal magisterium, regional episcopal conferences and the insights of liberation theologians.

KEYWORDS: CAFOD (caritas), Catholic social teaching, climate, post-Covid world, structural sin

This paper gives me the opportunity to report on some of the emerging themes of a two-year collaborative theology project between Durham University's Centre for Catholic Studies and CAFOD, the official aid agency of the Catholic Church in England and Wales and a member of *Caritas Internationalis*. In simple terms, the project asks: "what would lead to better lives and livelihoods in a post-Covid world and is this consistent with Catholic social teaching (CST) or a challenge to CST?" The project has explored three themes: lives/livelihoods, climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper presents a rough sketch of what seems to be happening in many rural communities. Secondly, it suggests that this is not wholly new, but has some parallels in the biblical period. Thirdly, it explores some insights from CST on what we should be doing.

What we see: the emerging themes

The emerging story of rural communities is only one of many points I could have picked out of the project, but it captures some of the key issues in a particularly succinct way. It is a story you could perhaps hear on the news, but in the project, we have been privileged to hear it first-hand from the authoritative voices of participants. In this story, repeated in many locations across the world, traditional subsistence agriculture has been abandoned within the last fifty years. This traditional agriculture has fed farmers and their families for generations with any surplus sold to provide additional income. These practices were communal or at least social, environmentally friendly and diversified. They created stable families and communities which persisted over time. These communities were economically marginal but sustainable. A range of factors have now intervened to make these practices unprofitable. These include technological changes, war, political instability and interference, the effects of profit seeking by local groups and international corporations as well as unequal structures of power in areas such as trade relationships.

Once traditional agriculture becomes unprofitable, traditional societies become unsustainable. Cash cropping and monocropping have replaced diversified subsistence farming. These rely on inputs such as fertiliser and pesticides. Inputs like these degrade the natural environment, including the soil and rivers. They are also expensive and subject to price fluctuations, asymmetric trade deals and fraudulent middlemen. Climate change makes the situation worse by unpredictable seasons and excessive drought or rainfall. The COVID-19 pandemic has made the situation still worse by reducing the availability and increasing the price of inputs and shutting down the markets where farm outputs are sold. Smallholders are driven to sell-up and wealth is aggregated into fewer hands.

Previously self-sufficient smallholders who stay in the countryside may become day-labourers on their own land. Many choose instead to migrate to the cities or abroad. In the cities, they become “unskilled” workers without rights and vulnerable to exploitation and sudden lockdowns. Some drift into the informal or illegal economies. At best they are pedlars or street vendors. At worst they drift into crime, the drug trade or prostitution. The overall story is one in which stable communities become unstable and people are sucked out of their environment by a whirlpool of economic, social, political and criminal forces. Theologically, we could, perhaps call these dynamic forces vortices of sin. Once people are dragged down by these sinful vortices, they become increasingly vulnerable to exploitation: we see this at its most stark in international migration where sex trafficking, modern slavery or death can be the outcome for migrants. Pope Francis repeatedly talks of saying no to an economy that kills.¹ His language is not hyperbolic but merely reflects the reality of the world reported by CAFOD partners.

1. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* [Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World], November 24, 2013, 53, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_

How we judge: the Bible and economics

The picture I have drawn so far is a story, a simplified sketch of a much more complex reality — but one which nevertheless contains a large measure of truth. But is it a new situation? The answer is both yes and no. In *Biblical Economic Ethics: Sacred Scripture's Teachings on Economic Life*, Albino Barrera describes the period covered by the Old Testament from the angle of economics.² From Barrera comes the insight that maybe it was not so different in the biblical era. He sketches out several ways of reading the Old Testament period. In one of them, Israel began with egalitarian family groups of subsistence farmers living in the highlands. Land was parcelled out by family size and held jointly. Cooperation between groups made sense because if your neighbour was in need today, there was a pretty good chance you would be in need tomorrow. Crops were diversified, fields periodically left fallow and animals raised so they could be eaten in hard times.³

This stable community began to fall apart when Israel appointed a king to deal with the threat of foreign empires.⁴ Samuel was a true prophet. He warned the Israelites that a king would “take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants” (1 Sm 8:14-15). On one reading, this is exactly what happened. An expensive aristocracy and bureaucracy developed. They were paid for by taxing the farmers. Taxes made smallholding increasingly unprofitable. Perhaps, fields were no longer left fallow and cash cropping, with its promise of higher returns, replaced subsistence agriculture. If so, this made smallholders vulnerable to markets: to price fluctuations and fraudulent traders. Crop rotation and diversity would have been lost and the animals which were insurance against hard times would have been eaten or sold and not replaced. Land may have stopped being a sacred inheritance and instead become a commodity which was sold to, or grabbed by, the rich. Free smallholders might have become day labourers or debt slaves, others would have migrated to the towns and cities in the area.⁵ In the post-exilic period things may only have become worse. This era was characterised by a tributary economy where the best land was “the king’s land” and taxes creamed off any surplus to a foreign country.⁶ By the New Testament period, Israel was occupied by the Roman Empire: an enormous transnational economic concern backed up by

exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html; *Fratelli Tutti* [Encyclical], October 3, 2020, 22, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

2. Albino Barrera, *Biblical Economic Ethics: Sacred Scripture's Teachings on Economic Life* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013), esp. Chapter 1, “Old Testament.”

3. Barrera, *Biblical Economic Ethics*, 43.

4. Barrera, *Biblical Economic Ethics*, 42.

5. Barrera *Biblical Economic Ethics*, 43-48.

6. Barrera, *Biblical Economic Ethics*, 58-62.

force of arms. In the bible, it is the prophets who judge this situation, crying out against injustice and speaking up for the poor.⁷

Barrera's work is nuanced, but I have simplified it to bring out the parallels with the modern situation. In this sketch, what had been viable subsistence farming becomes unviable due to a range of factors including war, political instability and greed. People are increasingly vulnerable to price fluctuations, markets and fraud. Freedom is replaced by indentured labour. The poor pay for the wars, the bureaucracy and the luxuries of the rich. Wealth is aggregated into fewer hands. The difference between then and now is that the modern situation is worse. Firstly, the scale is larger: in pre-exilic Israel the economic problems described were largely restricted to the Holy Land. Post-exile the problems become regional as the Persians and later the Romans dominated Israel. Yet even at its height, the Roman Empire did not stretch very far from the Mediterranean. Conversely, today the picture is truly global. The second difference with the modern period is caused by technology and know-how. Fertilisers, pesticides, fossil fuel driven machinery, plastics and so on make the modern situation much worse as the destructive economic forces are now accompanied by destructive environmental forces. Thirdly, the global scale of the issues combined with destructive environmental impacts left people vulnerable to a global pandemic which may not be the last.

How we act: some insights from the Bible and Catholic social teaching

The main thing I think we have learned from the project so far is how dynamic the sinful and destructive factors that affect people and communities are. This is why I want to propose the image of the vortex or whirlpool which I think perhaps goes beyond the debate about individual versus structural sin. 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 and communities. 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 which suck people out of their environments and drag them down into increasingly desperate and squalid poverties: economic, mental, physical, emotional and spiritual. 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, prostitution or starvation.

There is a dynamic and complex relationship between the local — meaning people and communities — and the global — meaning the forces that come into

7. Barrera, *Biblical Economic Ethics*, 132-135.

communities and destabilise them. Because of this, the starting point for action must be in understanding this relationship between the local and the global. One way to find such a starting point, I think, is in a reading of Catholic social teaching — and specifically in an insight of Pope Francis. The Pope tells us that we should not conceive of the globe as a smooth sphere, but rather as a polyhedron.⁸ My, and I suspect the Pope's, favourite polyhedron is a soccer ball. From a distance a football is spherical like the globe, but look closer and it is a complex patchwork of hexagons and pentagons overlaid with swirls and splashes of colour. That's what our world should be like: a patchwork of local colour and shape harmoniously sewn together into a unified whole. This is globalisation from the bottom up.

If this polyhedral globalisation is the grand unifying concept provided by Catholic social teaching, how do we operationalise it? Here I can only briefly sketch a few of CST's proposals. Benedict XVI points us to the Italian civil economy tradition which shows what an economy of communion that puts people and their communities, rather than profit, at its heart looks like.⁹ Francis talks of a culture of encounter where the migrant becomes a source of cultural enrichment and not fear.¹⁰ John Paul II teaches us that capital should be at the service of labour.¹¹ But we cannot expect the Popes to provide us with all the answers. Catholic social teaching is multi-layered and it is in these layers that it is operationalised. In addition to the papal magisterium, we have the bishops' magisterium of which Medellín and Puebla remain outstanding examples, but there are now many other examples from around the world, such as the 2020 document from the bishops of Zimbabwe called *The Economy We Want*.¹² These documents increasingly point to practical local solutions which are consistent with Catholic social teaching. But I want to end by saying that we too are both creators and appliers of Catholic social teaching. In his 2020 letter to popular movements, Pope Francis calls the voices of popular movements "authoritative."¹³ In the CAFOD-Durham project, we have been privileged to hear some of these authoritative voices which are even now working against the flow of the sinful vortices that are destabilising communities and helping to create a polyhedral globe where the local is open to the global and the global respects the local.

8. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 236.

9. Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* [Encyclical Letter], June 29, 2009, 46, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html

10. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 215-217.

11. Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens* [Encyclical Letter], September 14, 1981, 23, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens.html

12. Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe, *The Economy We Want: Policy Brief on Zimbabwean Citizens' Ideas on the Economy They Want* (Harare: Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference, 2020).

13. Pope Francis, *Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Popular Movements*, April 12, 2020, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200412_lettera-movimentipopolari.html

BIOGRAPHY: Gareth L. M. Rowe is the inaugural CAFOD-Durham Research Fellow and an Honorary Fellow in the Department of Theology and Religion at Durham University, Durham, UK. His research interests include Catholic social teaching (CST), spirituality and ecclesiology. His current research is focused on “a just green, global recovery (with a focus on food systems and rethinking economic models in a post Covid world).” This is one of the priority themes of CAFOD: the official aid agency of the Catholic Church in England and Wales and a part of the global Caritas network. Gareth’s publications in 2022 include: “Ruth Burrows: A Reader of the Carmelite Tradition,” *Carmel in the World* 61, no. 1 (2022), 23-40; “Diaconates in Transition: Enriching the Roman Catholic Permanent Diaconate from the Experience of the Church of England and British Methodism — a Receptive Ecumenical Approach,” *Ecclesiology* 18, no. 1 (2022), 99-117.