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The limits of ethical pluralism in Catholic social teaching

Summary

DEFINITION OF THE TERM: Ethical pluralism can be understood in two ways in Catholic social teaching (CST): first, it refers to the stance taken in CST on the plurality of ethical and worldview systems in the contemporary world (external pluralism); second, it refers to the plurality of values, norms, and ethical judgements on the same issue adopted by different subjects within the axiology of CST. Both types of pluralism are relevant for addressing social issues in the social teaching of the Church.

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE TERM: In this section, both the documents of the Magisterium of the Catholic Church and the literature dedicated to religious freedom, ethical rationality, and ethical and worldview pluralism are analysed. While the Second Vatican Council was a breakthrough in the area of external pluralism, Catholic doctrine maintained doctrinal continuity in the area of internal pluralism in the conciliar and post-conciliar periods. A multifaceted reflection on the pluralism of values declared in the context of the autonomy of secular matters is now developing within CST.

DISCUSSION OF THE TERM: This section focuses on internal pluralism and addresses the following research question: does CST expand the permissible scope of pluralism of moral judgements compared to the pluralism allowed in moral theology? In other words, does the declared autonomy of the political, economic, and cultural worlds mean that, within the CST paradigm, two people can have different ethical evaluations of the same institution in the same circumstances, and if so, what are the limits of this permissible pluralism?

SYSTEMATIC REFLECTION WITH CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: Analyses of the sources and method used in CST lead to the conclusion that it contains a broader scope of plurality of opinions and evaluations than traditional moral theology, which can be explained by the fact that it addresses social institutions and structures that are largely of a morally indifferent nature. The criterion for evaluating these institutions is prudence in the realisation of the common good. Further conclusions may result from scholarly studies dedicated to political friendship and the culture of encounter advocated by Pope Francis. The results of these studies can initiate a systematic reflection on justice in cultural dialogue in which the evaluation of a human act would be complemented with a diagnosis of the intrinsically good or intrinsically bad components of culture. Such studies require metatheoretical and metaethical reflection in accordance with the Magisterium of the Church.

Keywords: Catholic social teaching, ethical pluralism, natural law, culture of encounter, autonomy of lay matters

Definition of the term

In Catholic social teaching (CST), ethical pluralism can be understood in two ways: first, it refers to the stance taken in CST on the plurality of ethical and worldview systems in the contemporary world (external pluralism); second, it refers to the plurality of values, norms, and ethical judgements adopted by different subjects on the same issue within the axiology of CST. Both types of pluralism are relevant for addressing social issues in the Church's social teaching and for finding practical solutions to social problems. This article focuses on internal pluralism and examines the necessary and sufficient conditions for permissible pluralism in the evaluation of political, economic, and cultural issues. The terms 'Catholic social teaching' (CST), 'social teaching of the Church' and 'Catholic doctrine' are treated interchangeably here. The aim of the article is to present the position on social pluralism expressed in the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church.

While ethical principles are formulated in an abstract and universal way, a doctrine always presupposes a certain guiding idea that merges problems and relates them to concrete historical conditions. In the case of the Catholic doctrine, this guiding idea is the universal salvation of people and the mission to proclaim the Gospel in real social conditions. In this article, the term 'Catholic social teaching' refers to the theses proclaimed by the Magisterium of Church, as defined in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, published by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (Pontifical Council *Justitia et Pax*):

The Church's social doctrine is not only the thought or work of qualified persons, but is the thought of the Church, insofar as it is the work of the Magisterium, which teaches with the authority that Christ conferred on the Apostles and their successors: the Pope and the Bishops in communion with him (Compendium, 2004, 79).

Whenever the term 'Church' appears in this article, it means 'the Roman Catholic Church'.

Historical analysis of the term

External pluralism. The doctrine of the Church has undergone a notable evolution in its approach to worldview pluralism in the world. Pope Leo XIII was openly opposed to freedom of speech and religion. In the encyclical *Libertas Praestantissimum* (1888), he claimed that civil rights should be subject to “the prescriptions of the eternal law” (LP, 1888, 10) and called the separation of the Church and the state “the fatal theory” (LP, 1888, 18). His criticism of religious liberty was based on three premises: the first was that it offended God himself by the “degradation” of liberty (LP, 1888, 20); the second was that it was a logical and axiological contradiction (“it is absurd to suppose that nature has accorded indifferently to truth and falsehood, to justice and injustice” [LP, 1888, 23]); the third was that it was a demoralisation of society.

Before the Second Vatican Council, the social teaching of the Church reflected clear double standards: in countries where Catholics were in the minority, the need for religious freedom in practice was emphasised; however, in countries where Catholics were in the majority, it was advocated that the legal order should be based on values derived from Christian revelation. The Magisterium of the Church derived the justification for this position from natural law:

From what has been said it follows that it is quite unlawful to demand, to defend, or to grant unconditional freedom of thought, of speech, or writing, or of worship, as if these were so many rights given by nature to man. For, if nature had really granted them, it would be lawful to refuse obedience to God, and there would be no restraint on human liberty (LP, 1888, 42).

A breakthrough in terms of attitudes towards other religions and worldviews came with the Second Vatican Council. In the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions – Nostra aetate*, the Council expressed respect for religious values in non-Christian traditions, seeing in them a “profound religious sense” (NAE, 1965, 2). Referring to Hinduism and Buddhism, the Council Fathers acknowledged that “the Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions” (NAE, 1965, 2). They also admitted that these traditions “reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men “ (NAE, 1965, 2). The affirmation of religious values was further emphasised in relation to

Muslim and, more especially, Judaic traditions. The Church, faithful to the belief that the fullness of God's revelation was accomplished in the Person of Jesus Christ, called for the promotion of spiritual and moral goods in other religious traditions.

In the *Declaration on Religious Freedom – Dignitatis humanae*, the Council Fathers stated that:

all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits (DH, 1965, 2).

Religious freedom derives from personal dignity and can be justified either rationally (philosophically) or religiously (theologically), and these two justifications are complementary to each other. With regard to the Eastern Churches, the Council's *Decree on Ecumenism – Unitatis red-integratio* (1964) acknowledged that "various theological expressions are to be considered often as mutually complementary rather than conflicting" (UR, 1964, 17).

This turn that took place within the framework of the Second Vatican Council is of great importance for the development of dialogue and world peace, as is best exemplified by John Paul II's historic meetings with religious leaders from around the world in Assisi in 1986 and 2002. In his proclamation of universal brotherhood, forgiveness, and reconciliation, also Pope Francis explicitly refers to diverse theologies. For example, in the Vatican in 2019 he met with Bartholomew, the Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople, and Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Mosque and University in Cairo, in order that they join together, with one voice, to speak about the equal rights and dignity of all people in the world and the need for peace: "accepting our differences and rejoicing that, as children of the one God, we are all brothers and sisters" (FT, 2020, 279).

Internal pluralism. This article focuses on the issue of the permissible limits of internal pluralism within CST, i.e., the limitations imposed in situations in which two people evaluate the same issue differently from a moral point of view and both do so in accordance with the Catholic doctrine. The Church has a long tradition of polemics with advocates of moral relativism and subjectivism, but theses in social

encyclicals regarding the autonomy of secular matters and the openness to new things (*res novae*), to the signs of the times, and to dialogue with the world, are often formulated in very general terms and require further studies and interpretations. The eminent Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, emphasised that this issue is extremely difficult, but it is also crucial for the fruitful presence of the Church in the world (Baniak, 2004, p. 11).

The fundamental premise of Catholic views is the thesis that ethical disputes are resolvable and that the ethical order is founded on God's commandments, which are immutable and universal. St. Thomas Aquinas conceptually ordered the issues that are linked to the resolution of moral conflicts and those linked to particular goods in the logic of the common good (*bonum commune*):

Now it is evident that all who are included in a community, stand in relation to that community as parts to a whole; while a part, as such, belongs to a whole, so that whatever is the good of a part can be directed to the good of the whole. It follows therefore that the good of any virtue, whether such virtue direct man in relation to himself, or in relation to certain other individual persons, is referable to the common good, to which justice directs (Thomas Aquinas, 2017, p. 1915).

In the times of St. Thomas, it was possible to practise social ethics without referring to complex social structures and institutions. Simple ancient categories, such as the household, the family, the state, a son belonging to his father, a servant to a master, etc., sufficed. Capitalist conflicts of interests and the democratic pluralism of values and opinions were non-existent. In the realities of the industrial revolution, these ancient and medieval categories were no longer sufficient to describe and evaluate vital social phenomena and processes.

Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum novarum* (1891) marks the historical beginning of SCT as a systematic study. "New things" – *res novae* – included the labour question, the industrial revolution, the emancipation of the underprivileged classes of society, the involvement of the state in social life (legal regulations of working conditions and social security, the state's interference with the right to private property). New problems created the need for "a new discernment of the situation" (Compendium, 2004, 88). The novelty of the approach presented in *Rerum novarum* consisted first and foremost in comprehensive analysis of the extensive

social problems they were facing and in identifying new elements of social analysis which defined the social question rather than formulating new criteria for moral evaluation, which remained unchanged. The Church had matured into approaching the question of trade unions and the social character of private property in a new way – shifting away from appealing to the consciences of owners to now proposing new structural solutions.

The Second Vatican Council teaches the *autonomy* of political, economic, and cultural issues (e.g., evaluations of political party programmes, education systems, social security systems, etc., that are independent of theology). The *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World – Gaudium et spes* refers explicitly to the pluralism of opinions in social and religious matters:

Respect and love ought to be extended also to those who think or act differently than we do in social, political and even religious matters. In fact, the more deeply we come to understand their ways of thinking through such courtesy and love, the more easily will we be able to enter into dialogue with them (GS, 1965, 28).

The same document goes even further and discusses the plurality of right opinions:

Often enough the Christian view of things will itself suggest some specific solution in certain circumstances. Yet it happens rather frequently, and legitimately so, that with equal sincerity some of the faithful will disagree with others on a given matter (GS, 1965, 43).

Civil society has been recognised as a space for the plurality of “the legitimacy of different opinions” (GS, 1965, 75). The autonomy of worldly affairs is here understood broadly: the term world encompasses the totality of relations and activities of an interpersonal nature, not directly related to religious activity, which are here defined as earthly affairs, earthly matters, worldly dimensions, everyday life, temporal duties, etc. *Gaudium et spes* speaks of the plurality of cultures in a sociological and ethnological sense. The Church is open to the achievements of many different cultures and “is not bound exclusively and indissolubly to any race or nation, any particular way of life or any customary way of life recent or ancient” (GS, 1965, 58). State-Church relations are regulated on the basis of independence and

autonomy, which means that the Church “is not identified in any way with the political community nor bound to any political system “ (GS, 1965, 76). The encyclical *Centesimus annus* specifies this as follows:

The Church respects *the legitimate autonomy of the democratic order* and is not entitled to express preferences for this or that institutional or constitutional solution (CA, 1991, 47).

This also applies to economic issues:

The Church has no models to present; models that are real and truly effective can only arise within the framework of different historical situations, through the efforts of all those who responsibly confront concrete problems in all their social, economic, political and cultural aspects, as these interact with one another (CA, 1991, 43).

Recognition of this autonomy does not mean that democracy or the free market economy are free from moral judgements. Helmut Juros speaks of the “relative but legitimate autonomy of the various domains: economy, politics, society” (Juros, 1998, p. 356). The Church “recognizes the positive value of the market and of enterprise, but which at the same time points out that these need to be oriented towards the common good” (CA, 1991, 43). The principle of the common good is also a fundamental criterion for evaluating political parties and state policies. The common good is “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment” (GS, 1965, 26). The prudent realisation of this good can be pursued in many different ways, which are ‘good’ in their own ways, and which might differ in the degree of stabilisation of society, degree of social trust, their real chances of success, and the long-term effects, etc. Catholics may differ in their evaluation of these factors as “social action can assume various concrete forms” (CCC, 1992, 2442).

The proclamation of the autonomy of secular matters initiated the treatment of Catholic social thought as a set of open-ended propositions (Juros, 1998, p. 354). The interdisciplinary character of this teaching and its openness to the achievements of the detailed sciences were emphasised. However, none of the above documents led to any ‘breakthrough’ on the question of ethical rationalisation in Catholic

doctrine. In addition, in the statements of the Magisterium of the Church at the turn of the 21st century, one can observe a revival of traditional teaching and intense opposition to the manifestations of relativism and ethical pluralism in the broadly understood Christian culture.

The 1993 encyclical *Veritatis splendor*, which recalled “the traditional doctrine regarding the natural law, and the universality and the permanent validity of its precepts” (VS, 1993, 4), was written in response to disputes, dilemmas, and doubts “within the Christian community itself” (VS, 1993, 4). Referring to the conciliar Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, it taught of the objective norms of morality, which are based on the universal and permanent natural law (VS, 1993, 52–53). In other words, moral judgements cannot depend solely on the mental states and intentions of the cognising and acting subject. Moral norms are rooted in the law that comes from God, who is the creator and giver of human nature. Consequently, it is the structures of being that influence the content of moral norms in accordance with the classical maxim: *agere sequitur esse*.

Moral perfection demands radical adherence to the person of Jesus Christ, while “the task of *authentically interpreting* the word of God” is made in collaboration with the Holy Spirit (VS, 1993, 27). Significantly, the truth discovered under the guidance of the Holy Spirit relates not only to human salvation but also to the “social order” and to the “fundamental human rights” (VS, 1993, 27).

In his teaching, John Paul II theologised SCT by recognising it as a branch of moral theology (SRS, 1987, 41; CA, 1991, 55) and thus indicated the theological method of practising this teaching, which is based on reason enlightened by faith. The theological character of SCT is also emphasised in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, which draws attention to the fact that the understanding of faith “includes reason, by means of which – insofar as possible – it unravels and comprehends revealed truth and integrates it with the truth of human nature, found in the divine plan expressed in creation” (Compendium, 2004, 75). According to the *Catechism*, SCT “comprises a body of doctrine, which is articulated as the Church interprets events in the course of history, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit” (CCC, 1992, 2422). In this sense, this teaching is binding on the faithful, who “have the duty of observing the constitutions and decrees conveyed by the legitimate authority of the Church” (CCC, 1992, 2037).

Pope Benedict XVI's objections to the relativisation of truth led to his recognition of love in truth (*caritas in veritate*) as a principle of the Church's social teaching (CV, 2009, 6). This principle is intended to help overcome social individualism and to act in the name of the common good. While generally continuing his predecessors' line of teaching, Pope Francis introduces new pastoral issues to it. He emphasises the need for dialogue and tolerance in a world of plurality of "legitimate convictions and concerns" and observes that "differences are creative; they create tension and in the resolution of tension lies humanity's progress" (FT, 2020, 203). Like many theologians and philosophers with a post-colonial sensibility, the author of *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli tutti* allows the voices of peripheral countries to be heard. In contrast to all other Popes, in the footnotes to his documents, he repeatedly refers to the statements of the local communities of the Church. It seems that this new perspective on the encounter of cultures and on the culture of encounter is, for Francis, the sign of the times.

Discussion of the term

The consequence of grasping social doctrine in theological terms is the adoption of a certain hierarchy of moral order: the order proposed by human society cannot overturn the order established by the Creator. In this vein, John Paul II condemns "a pluralism of opinions and of kinds of behaviour [...] being left to the judgment of the individual subjective conscience or to the diversity of social and cultural contexts" (VS, 1993, 4). The pluralism of opinions that is characteristic of democratic institutions and the world of contemporary media must not undermine the order based on revealed truth, must not obscure the "Catholic doctrine in its purity and integrity" (VS, 1993, 113). By definition, there can be no conflict between absolute and universal values, although there might be a problem with their coordination, i.e., "the limitation of their axiological ranges", e.g., in the case of aggression (Ślipko, 1984, pp. 210–214).

Among the threats to the integrity of Catholic doctrine, John Paul II mentions the absolutisation of freedom ("The individual conscience is accorded the status of a supreme tribunal of moral judgment" [VS, 1993, 32]). Extreme individualism leads to denial of the objective truth of the

existence of transcendent human nature directed towards contact with God. Another danger is “a relativistic conception of morality” (VS, 1993, 33) and distinguishing “between an ethical order, which would be human in origin and of value for this world alone, and an order of salvation, for which only certain intentions and interior attitudes regarding God and neighbour would be significant” (VS, 1993, 37). *Veritatis splendor* opposes the ethical theory called the fundamental option (VS, 1993, 65–68) and teleological theories of consequentialism and proportionalism (VS, 1993, 90). The question of the historical mutability of the moral consciousness of individual societies is not dealt with in detail in this document, which contains a brief statement stating that moral norms have been “specified and determined” throughout history (VS, 1993, 53). The encyclical also speaks in very general terms of the need to seek moral solutions through dialogue with “non-Catholics and non-believers, especially in pluralistic societies” (VS, 1993, 74).

It is significant that both *Veritatis splendor* and the *Catechism* analyse social issues in terms of traditional moral theology directed at evaluating the actions of the individual. Their reflections are placed within a doctrinal reflection on the seventh commandment (*Thou shalt not steal* – Exodus 20:15) and, in this context, the encyclical emphasises the importance of the traditional virtues of temperance, justice, and solidarity (VS, 1993, 100). As examples of behaviours and actions against the seventh commandment, it lists

theft, deliberate retention of goods lent or objects lost, business fraud, unjust wages, forcing up prices by trading on the ignorance or hardship of another (VS, 1993, 100).

In doing so, the document refers to the Old Testament *Book of Deuteronomy* and to the *Book of Amos*. The examples primarily include those that are traditionally analysed within detailed ethics (detailed moral theology), which refers to the behaviour of the individual rather than social institutions or structures (which are the main research area of the social sciences). Thus, *Veritatis splendor* does not analyse aspects of contemporary capitalism or contemporary political systems such as structural exclusion, discrimination, domination, the distribution of material, cultural, intellectual, and political goods, belonging, identity, etc. It focuses on traditional virtues – which are the most important from a moral perspective – of the

individual, who should be honest, impartial, and should not reduce other people to “use-value” (VS, 1993, 100). This encyclical places emphasis on the formation of the individual person, who should resist temptations, avoid sin, repent, and cooperate with the Holy Spirit.

In its analyses of the seventh commandment, the *Catechism* focuses primarily on the virtues of the individual and is very cautious about institutions and structures. It states that, in economic matters, the Church rejects both centrally governed systems and those systems that promote the domination of the economy over the good of the human person. Thus, it recommends “reasonable regulation of the marketplace and economic initiatives, in keeping with a just hierarchy of values and a view to the common good” (CCC, 1992, 2425). Undoubtedly, the methodology of moral theology has had a crucial impact on the final shape of these two documents, in which a sin is always the sin of the individual, and social sin can only be understood analogously to it:

The real responsibility, then, lies with individuals. A situation – or likewise an institution, a structure, society itself – is not in itself the subject of moral acts. Hence a situation cannot in itself be good or bad (RP, 1984, 16).

Autonomy or pluralism? The reticence in formulating the criteria for evaluating social institutions and structures may suggest that their moral value should depend solely on their consistency with fundamental Christian values; in particular, moral norms expressed negatively (do not kill, do not steal, do not violate human dignity) should be upheld and, within this consistency, individuals should act prudently. Such a conclusion, however, distorts the message of CST, especially in the age of globalisation, when many areas of social life remain outside any legal regulation. In addition, today the world is experiencing cultural pluralism on an unprecedented scale, which means that the problems of external and internal pluralism intersect and give rise to new questions related to social justice. The autonomy of secular matters is not an absolute autonomy. As shown above, prudent solutions to social problems should always be directed towards the realisation of the common good. Furthermore, CST formulates norms that are more specific. *The Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life* issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2002 reminds us that

no Catholic can appeal to the principle of pluralism or to the autonomy of lay involvement in political life to support policies affecting the common good which compromise or undermine fundamental ethical requirements (Note, 2002, 5).

The document formulates specific principles that regulate the obligations of Catholics engaged in politics, including the obligation to oppose any law that attacks human life (abortion, euthanasia), seeking to protect the environment, raising awareness of the value of the family (based on marriage understood monogamously as the union of a man and a woman), social protection of minors, promotion of the right to religious freedom, concern for economic development, and concern for peace (Note, 2002, 4).

Another document issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation – Libertatis conscientia* lists certain manifestations of evil in social life and condemns “violence exercised by the powerful against the poor, arbitrary action by the police, and any form of violence established as a system of government” (LC, 1986, 76). It gives torture, violence, terrorism, and hate-based campaigns as examples of unacceptable methods of bringing about social change. Ethical action requires taking into account all the principles of CST in a complementary way and not treating its teaching selectively:

The Christian faith is an integral unity, and thus it is incoherent to isolate some particular element to the detriment of the whole of Catholic doctrine. A political commitment to a single isolated aspect of the Church’s social doctrine does not exhaust one’s responsibility towards the common good (Note, 2002, 4).

The above directive is vital in the practical application of the principles of SCT since religious values and symbols are often manipulated to achieve ad hoc political goals in the social reality. However, the realisation of the social teaching of the Church requires not only impartiality in political or ideological matters but also honest consideration of goods and values and the search for a just measure in the realisation of competing claims. While there is no specific matrix for such consideration, the Church’s documents emphasise the personalistic aspect in the evaluation of social structures. Democratic practices are subject to moral evaluation in terms of respecting the subjectivity of society as a whole (not only Catholics) and developing the co-participation and co-responsibility of all members of the community (CA, 1991, 46).

At the same time, not all violations of CST theses are sins since it also includes contingent elements, and some of its theses require “the doctrinal weight of the different teachings” (Compendium, 2004, 80). As *Libertatis conscientia* clarifies, CST contains both universal and contextual theses:

Being essentially orientated toward action, this teaching develops in accordance with the changing circumstances of history. This is why, together with principles that are always valid, it also involves contingent judgments. Far from constituting a closed system, it remains constantly open to the new questions which continually arise; it requires the contribution of all charisma, experiences and skills (LC, 1986, 72).

Systematic reflection with conclusions and recommendations

Two complementary theses – on universal moral norms and on the autonomy of secular matters – require clarifying. According to Czesław Strzeszewski, there are two characteristic features of CST: immutability and developmentality. These derive from two types of ethical norms, general and specific: “[g]eneral norms are immutable and eternal, while specific norms are a synthesis of general norms and the life conditions and transformations of social and economic relations throughout history, and as such are changeable” (Strzeszewski, 1994, p. 169). The above thesis touches on a topic that is controversial and hotly debated in the academic world, in public life, and in Catholic activist circles. In the 20th century, the dynamic nature of morality and the norms of natural law was a hotly debated topic in which the term “natural law with variable content” was coined (Rudolf Stammler) and the publications of some Catholic writers were not always in line with the teaching of the Magisterium of the Church. According to the *Catechism*, the natural law is universal, immutable and permanent, although its application should be adapted to historical conditions “according to places, times, and circumstances” (CCC, 1992, 1954–1960).

This problem was analysed in the neo-Thomist tradition by the American scholar and Jesuit, John Courtney Murray, who argues that human nature consists of two levels. At the first level, the most basic principles of natural law are cognitively accessible to all people, e.g., the

commandments of the Decalogue and the most basic concepts, such as 'parent' or 'disrespect' (Murray, 1988, p. 110). Natural law is easily cognisable because it is universal and common to all people and is based on universal and immutable values. However, human nature also contains a second level that is changeable and historically determined because man's growth and self-improvement is dependent on the conditions in which he functions.

Murray repeats after Aquinas that the nature of man is susceptible of change (Murray, 1988, p. 113). The formal aspect of this nature remains unchanged, while its material aspect changes. In this sense, the same things are not always good and just, and they must be specified by law (Murray, 1988, p. 114). Commenting on Murray's views, Robert Cuervo gives an example of the relationship between shareholders and the board of directors of a corporation as a historically formed principle that functions as a discovered and particularised moral law (Cuervo, 1992, p. 86).

Tadeusz Ślipko, a Polish Jesuit ethicist, speaks of the 'evolution' of natural law. In his opinion, the norms of this law are universal and immutable and define intrinsically good and intrinsically evil acts. He also presents several arguments for a quasi-evolution in the moral space. Starting from the assumption that the norms of immutable natural law do not constitute the whole of morality, he points out that

the foundation built by these norms and under its normative influence – norms that are changeable and relativised to the determinants of place, time, and persons – are formulated within morally indeterminate activity (Ślipko, 1984, p. 262).

Morally indifferent acts are indeterminate in their moral content and are thus neither prescribed nor forbidden by the norms of natural law; as such, they are subject to changeable norms binding in the community. Moreover, the norms of natural law were neither discovered nor applied all at once because the conditions were not always conducive. With the development of civilisation and morality, mankind learned to discover the precepts of natural law and to make them more detailed; for example, the development of the idea of the right to private property was, at one point of civilizational development, extended to cover intellectual property rights. Another variable is "the moral consciousness of mankind" (Ślipko, 1984, p. 263). In his philosophical analysis, Ślipko states:

Mankind learns natural moral law through the cognitive faculties of individuals who, however, always live within specific conditions of social life. On this path, a system of moral judgements, norms, and patterns is developed, which is part of a particular social group's spiritual culture, according to which the moral consciousness of individual human persons is formed (Ślipko, 1984, p. 263).

Moral law does not change, but the concepts and moral consciousness of both social groups and individuals are subject to change. Assuming that people differ in their cognitive capacities and in their ideals of moral conduct, they may also differ in their perception of the aforementioned quasi-evolution and enter into various disputes over it. The evaluation of structures and institutions in which behaviours that are deemed morally indifferent lead to morally relevant effects needs to be elaborated on.

Social moral theology. In light of the above considerations, it can be assumed that the pluralism of ethical evaluations in the Church's social teaching is permissible, albeit to a limited extent. The limitations of permissible pluralism of moral values formulated within CST include boundary conditions, i.e., negatively formulated moral norms. However, the totality of social life, including both morally indifferent actions and actions that belong to universal moral norms, must at least be compatible with the basic principles of CST (the common good, solidarity, subsidiarity, personal dignity). In addition, the social teaching of the Church formulates specific principles (e.g., pro-ecologicality, pro-family, preferential option for the poor, including the above-mentioned specific principles listed in the documents of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith). The aforementioned principles must be applied integrally, and none of them can act as a 'fetish' of social policy. This integrity calls for a holistic approach and for always considering a broader context for evaluating concrete structures and institutions. Even morally indifferent acts can indirectly promote or hinder the realisation of values based on natural law.

In summary, it is possible to identify two types of constraints on pluralism within the axiology of the CST: the first is a **hard constraint**, which applies to unambiguously unethical (sinful) behaviours such as racist practices or acts of genocide; the second is a **soft constraint**, which applies to morally indifferent behaviour of different levels of prudence. An example of such prudential disputes could be the debate among economists about different paths that lead to the economic development of a country. They agree that comprehensive, long-term

economic development is a common good, but they may differ radically in their choice of means leading to this goal. They may also sometimes define the components of this economic prosperity differently, placing emphasis on different aspects. For some, good social development implies radical equality in access to a broad package of economic, cultural, and political goods. For others, good social development excludes radical egalitarianism because they believe that the extensive services and social benefits offered by the state to ensure this egalitarianism hinder this development. In addition, among those who share the guiding criterion of radical equality, disputes may arise as to what kind of equality is at stake in any particular case.

Disputes of this kind are inherent in the functioning of free and democratic societies. However, it is not experts who formulate the guiding ideas of the Catholic doctrine, although they can contribute to sharpening its basic concepts. It is the task of philosophy to provide insightful and adequate clarification of such basic concepts of this doctrine as “the person, society, freedom, conscience, ethics, law, justice, the common good, solidarity, subsidiarity, the State” (Compendium, 2004, 77). The detailed sciences provide tools for adequately describing complex social problems, but the fundamental questions and the ultimate evaluation of human choices belong to the area of reflection on human nature that is corrupted by sin and on man’s vocation of moral perfection. In the Christian tradition, this area belongs to moral theology. Reflections undertaken within CST are at risk of blurring the relationship between the theological method and the method used in the detailed sciences invited into the debate. In this context, Tadeusz Źeleźnik takes the following position:

Interdisciplinarity does not blur the very theological-ethical or theological-moral core of this science [CST – translator’s note] and does not make it a synthesis of these different sciences. It entitles one neither to abandon theology, nor to some “theological” practicing of, e.g., economics, nor to reproducing non-theological content in theological language (Źeleźnik, 2004, p. 102).

With reference to interdisciplinarity, John Paul II stressed that moral theology should not only be closely related to dogmatic theology but also be in its own way independent of the detailed humanities and natural sciences: it should “not rely on the results of formal empirical observation or phenomenological understanding alone” (VS, 1993, 111).

It is up to moral theology to decide definitively what is good and how one should act: “What is good or evil? What must be done to have eternal life?” (VS, 1993, 111).

Thus, it must be assumed that the ultimate answer to the question of the limits of pluralism in the changing world within CST must be sought within social moral theology and under the inspiration of the Gospel (Compendium, 2004, 86). The concept of justice is among the most important theological and moral concepts that refer to the behaviour of both individuals and social groups. The principles of justice, and its division into commutative justice, legal justice, distributive justice, and social justice (the last relates to the common good and respect for human dignity), are the foundation of the moral evaluation of the social order, while human rights form the basis of the Catholic concept of social justice (RH, 1979, 17). The *Catechism* clarifies that only “commutative justice obliges strictly” (CCC, 1992, 2411). Legal and distributive justice, which largely refer to (morally indifferent) structures and institutions, can never be fully realised and, by their very nature, presuppose a certain gradation in the realisation of the ideal of social order and a just balance of claims. The search for a just measure should be made with reference to the norms of natural law as well as to local practices and local discourses, including legal standards, in systems in which the law-making authorities have moral legitimacy.

The concept of social justice developed within the CST paradigm should not be limited to sketching out morally perfect institutions and principles. The realisation of justice is a process of continuous discernment and the search for a just measure – both at the level of abstract principles and at the level of subjects’ various entitlements and evaluations of specific behaviours (Dańkowski, 2020, pp. 113–144). The document issued by the International Theological Commission appointed by the Holy See *In search of a Universal Ethics: A New Look at the Natural Law* (2009) distinguishes between natural law and natural entitlement. The former contains universal and immutable norms, while the latter contains norms that are a synthesis of natural law and changing historical circumstances. Thus, ultimately:

Natural entitlement, the legal expression of natural law in the political order, appears as a measure of just relations between members of a community (ITC, 2009, 90).

Natural entitlement is the result of the judgement of practical reason in changing historical circumstances.

The ancient virtue of *epieikeia* prescribes man to rise above the letter of the law and to choose what is right from the perspective of the spirit of justice. This approach resonates in the social encyclicals quoted in this article. In the search for good solutions, it is important to “sit down and listen to others” (FT, 2020, 48), which corresponds with the teaching of John Paul II, who proclaimed that

As far as the Church is concerned, the social message of the Gospel must not be considered a theory, but above all else a basis and a motivation for action (CA, 1991, 57).

The witness of actions is more powerful than the “internal logic and consistency” of this social message (CA, 1991, 57). The totality of the message of the Catholic doctrine eludes scholarly-academic divisions and categories, especially since it is ultimately always about the concrete, not the abstract, person.

Responsible social moral theology has the tools to evaluate even complex social institutions and structures and to correctly distinguish between the universal norms of natural law and the autonomy of secular matters. The globalised world, however, gives rise to new problems, exemplified by culture wars, worldview tensions, and questions of the recognition, identity and cultural rights of different social groups, to name but a few. The evaluation of pluralism in these areas requires further studies and reflections, which Pope Francis encourages in his calls for universal fraternity and social friendship and calls to transcend borders and to abandon their “false universalism” (FT, 2020, 99). In the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, he recognises the seriousness of structural problems and the culture wars of the modern world. Abstract universalism can lead to an artificial or false peace: “Genuine social encounter calls for a dialogue that engages the culture shared by the majority of the population” (FT, 2020, 219). The same document reads:

A realistic and inclusive social covenant must also be a “cultural covenant”, one that respects and acknowledges the different worldviews, cultures and lifestyles that coexist in society (FT, 2020, 219).

The plurality of cultures is more than plurality in the sociological or ethnographic sense, since in Francis's writings the term 'culture' takes on a specific meaning:

The word "culture" points to something deeply embedded within a people, its most cherished convictions and its way of life. A people's "culture" is more than an abstract idea. It has to do with their desires, their interests and ultimately the way they live their lives. To speak of a "culture of encounter" means that we, as a people, should be passionate about meeting others, seeking points of contact, building bridges, planning a project that includes everyone. This becomes an aspiration and a style of life. The subject of this culture is the people, not simply one part of society that would pacify the rest with the help of professional and media resources (FT, 2020, 216).

A culture that excludes some people or groups from participation in social life contains intrinsically evil elements. The common good cannot be realised without participation:

The social nature of human beings is not uniform but is expressed in many different ways. In fact, the common good depends on a healthy social pluralism (Compendium, 2004, 151).

Nor can there be a common good without peace – both external and internal:

The path to peace does not mean making society blandly uniform, but getting people to work together, side-by-side, (FT, 2020, 228).

Francis' statements may inspire further reflections on the limits of pluralism within CST. The writings of the American theologian and Jesuit, David Hollenbach, are an example of a search for new and creative reflections by Catholic scholars. He has coined the term 'intellectual solidarity', which he defines as the "common pursuit of a shared vision of the good life" (Hollenbach, 2003, p. 137). The very fact that people of different cultures and worldviews have a positive experience of living together, have knowledge of each other's beliefs, and are capable of philosophical analyses of the common good offers hope that even in a divided society the common good can be recognised and realised. In Hollenbach's opinion, this requires a continuous process of learning from

one another, which he justifies in two ways: theologically, by elaborating on the thought of St. Augustine and St. Thomas; and philosophically, by analysing contemporary classics of deliberative democracy.

Defining and detailing the relationship between the immutable and the changeable and diverse in our moral experience is a task that never ends. This task implies the need to develop social moral theology. The methodology and the interdisciplinary nature of CST also require further scientific analyses. This reflection will perform “a theoretical and critical function but will not replace its practicing” (Juros, 1998, p. 371). Ultimately, the development of Catholic social teaching must be done by a joint effort of the Magisterium of the Church and those who develop social thought in unity with the Church. Combining old things and new things requires openness to the challenges of our times and drawing on the entire tradition of the Church.

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The documents of the Church and their abbreviations (all quotations from the above documents are given with reference to the paragraphs in those documents):

LP – Encyclical *Libertas praestantissimus* (Leon, XIII, 20 June 1888).

MM – Encyclical *Mater et magistra* (John XXIII, 15 May 1961).

UR – Decree on ecumenism *Unitatis redintegratio* (Second Vatican Council, 21 November 1964).

NAE – Declaration on the relation to the Church to non-Christian religions *Nostra aetate* (Second Vatican Council, 28 October 1965).

DH – Declaration on religious freedom *Dignitatis humanae* (Second Vatican Council, 7 December 1965).

GS – Pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world *Gaudium et spes* (Second Vatican Council, 7 December 1965).

RH – Encyclical *Redemptor hominis* (John Paul II, 4 March 1979)

RP – Apostolic exhortation *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* (John Paul II, 2 December 1984)

LC – Instruction on Christian freedom and liberation *Libertatis conscientia* (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 22 March 1986).

SRS – Encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (John Paul II, 30 December 1987).

CA – Encyclical *Centesimus annus* (John Paul II, 1 May 1991).

- CCC – *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (John Paul II, 11 October 1992).
- VS – Encyclical *Veritatis splendor* (John Paul II, 6 August 1993)
- Note – Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 24 November, 2002)
- Compendium – *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 29 June 2004).
- CV – Encyclical *Caritas in veritate* (Benedict XVI, 29 June 2009).
- ITC – The document issued by the International Theological Commission appointed by the Holy See *In search of a Universal Ethics: A New Look at the Natural Law* (2009)
- FT – Encyclical *Fratelli tutti* (Francis, 3 October 2020).

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