



Faith and COVID-19: Can Catholic Social Teaching Save the World? A Lebanese Case Study

*Fé e COVID-19: pode o Ensino Social Católico salvar o mundo?
Um estudo de caso libanês*

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Abstract

From full lockdowns to school closures and essential workers out on the frontlines, COVID-19, the novel coronavirus disease, has turned people's lives upside down since December 2019. This pandemic continues to have a huge socio-economic impact on the world. However, each community has been hit differently- some more severely than others. Many articles have tackled the subject of the current global health crisis and its impact on the world, but the relationship between the application of the principles of Catholic Social Teaching (CST) and the potential halt of the spread of COVID-19 has not yet been explored. Therefore, this article seeks to discover whether or not the application of these principles can save the world during this global pandemic. More specifically, it aims to examine the relation between the CST's three main cornerstones: human dignity, solidarity, subsidiarity and helping the world reach the common good by surviving this crisis and creating a foundation for a better tomorrow.

Keywords: COVID-19. Catholic Social Teaching. Human dignity. Solidarity. Subsidiarity. Common good. Lebanon.

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Resumo

De fechamentos completos a fechamentos de escolas e trabalhadores essenciais na linha de frente, COVID-19, a nova doença coronavírus, virou a vida das pessoas de cabeça para baixo desde dezembro de 2019. Esta pandemia continua a ter um enorme impacto socioeconômico no mundo. No entanto, cada comunidade foi atingida de forma diferente - algumas mais severamente do que outras. Muitos artigos abordaram o tema da atual crise global de saúde e seu impacto no mundo, mas a relação entre a aplicação dos princípios da Doutrina Social Católica (CST) e a potencial interrupção da disseminação do COVID-19 ainda não foi explorado. Portanto, este artigo busca descobrir se a aplicação desses princípios pode ou não salvar o mundo durante esta pandemia global. Mais especificamente, visa examinar a relação entre os três pilares principais do CST: dignidade humana, solidariedade, subsidiariedade e ajudar o mundo a alcançar o bem comum, sobrevivendo a esta crise e criando uma base para um amanhã melhor.

Palavras-chave: COVID-19. Doutrina Social Católica. Dignidade humana. Solidariedade. Subsidiariedade. Bem comum. Líbano.

Introduction

“We are in this together and we will get through this, together”- this is how UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres addressed the current worldwide pandemic (UNODC, 2020). With over ten million cases and half a million deaths around the world, the novel coronavirus disease spread globally in a matter of months (WORLDMETER, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic is not only the “defining global health crisis of our time” (UNDP, 2020) but also a humanitarian crisis that could lead to “devastating social, economic and political crises” (UNDP, 2020). According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development’s forecast, if a second wave of infections hits before the end of year, the global economic growth will plunge by 7.6% (OECD, 2020). Moreover, this global health crisis is estimated to “push 71 million people into extreme poverty in 2020” (WORLD BANK GROUP, 2020). Therefore, action must be taken to help the most vulnerable societies around the world.

Catholic Social Teaching encourages people to take action and help those in need. According to Ryan, the CST “proposes a set of principles on which to form one’s conscience in order to evaluate the framework of society and as the criteria for prudential judgment in decision making” (RYAN, 2000). The CST focuses on ten main themes: human dignity, respect for human life, association, participation, preferential

protection for the poor and vulnerable, solidarity, stewardship, subsidiarity, human equality and finally the principle of the common good (BYRON, 1998). These principles “once internalized, lead to something” - that something being concrete action (BYRON, 1998). In fact, the CST could inspire people to do something in order to help and support their respective communities as its principles “provide moral direction as we face dangers, restrictions and fears” (CARR, 2020).

It is important to note that Catholic Social Teaching is characterized by its inclusiveness; it goes beyond all types of segregations. It welcomes people from all religious groups; monotheistic or not, believers or not. Therefore, everybody is concerned by these teachings and everybody could be inspired by them.

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to show how the CST's three main cornerstones may inspire actions that could help save the world. The CST's three main cornerstones inspire many actions that could result in the survival of these crises. In fact, the first cornerstone; the respect of human dignities, urges people to abide by physical distancing rules and to preserve the rights of workers. Solidarity- the second cornerstone- inspires actions such as praying together, stopping the spread of fake news and helping vulnerable and marginalized communities. The last cornerstone- subsidiarity- calls for the empowerment of local communities and private initiatives to support those in need. The findings will then be applied to Lebanese cases in order to show how the application of these principles could potentially help the world to survive this global pandemic.

It is essential to note that this article does not aim to establish that the application of the principles of Catholic Social Teaching is the only way to overcome this crisis; it simply seeks to show the efficiency of their application in one's everyday life to survive this tough period.

Human dignity

Catholic Social Teaching's fundamental principle is the respect of human dignities. According to Pope Benedict, each human being is “created in the image of God” and “has the dignity of a person” (Benedict XVI, 2006). Thus, God has inscribed

in each and every human being a divine dignity that no one has the right to take. In the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, the importance of the respect of this dignity is highlighted: “a just society can become a reality only when it is based on the respect of the transcendent dignity of the human person” (COMPENDIUM OF THE SOCIAL DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH, 2005, para. 132). This principle makes each human being a member of the “the human family” (BYRON, 1998) in which they belong. Therefore, the upholding of this principle is crucial for “fraternity and for the survival of humanity” (Fratelli Tutti, 2020, para. 107).

Now more than ever, this human family and people’s dignities are put at risk. Thus, it is essential to fight for the other and to protect them. In this regard, the CST inspires many actions in local and international communities. First of all, taking precautions and respecting physical distancing rules would help halt the spread of the virus and protect one’s own life and the lives of others by avoiding infection. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the virus is spread from person to person when they are in close contact for a prolonged period of time, therefore, keeping distances slows the spread of COVID-19 (CDC, 2020). However, it is important to stay socially engaged during these times in order to protect personal wellbeing. In fact, UNICEF called for the respect of physical distancing rules while staying emotionally connected to other people “in the interest of mental health and well-being” (UNICEF, 2020). For example, phone calls, video conferences and social media are useful tools that could be used to stay socially connected with family and friends (UNICEF, 2020).

Moreover, since preserving human life and dignity is one of the three pillars of CST, “every political, economic, social, scientific and cultural programme must be inspired by the awareness of the primacy of each human being over society” (COMPENDIUM OF THE SOCIAL DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH, 2005, para. 132). In addition, saving lives is the world’s main focus in this time of crisis. One of the ways of saving people’s lives is by infection prevention as aforementioned, nevertheless, it is also “imperative” to provide all people with access to health care when needed (UN, 2020, p.7). Saving the lives and dignities of infected people starts by ensuring that they have proper access to the treatment they need. The April 2020 UN report sheds light

upon the importance of equal access to medical care for all despite the deep-rooted social and economic inequalities within societies; “women and men, children, youth and older persons, refugees and migrants, the poor, people with disabilities, persons in detention, minorities, LGBTI people, among others, are all being affected differently” (UN, 2020, p. 2-3).

Furthermore, this pandemic has put essential workers out on the frontlines while others might have lost their jobs or are incapable of going to work due to certain restrictions in their countries. Therefore, it is important to preserve the dignity of these workers since “the rights of workers, like all other rights, are based on the nature of the human person and on his transcendent dignity” (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 2005, para. 301). According to America Magazine, “restoring work, rescuing livelihoods and recognizing the needs and rights of workers should also be at the center of any economic recovery plan” (CARR, 2020). Additionally, frontline workers are risking their own health to keep others safe and have the right to be protected. While they have the responsibility of respecting safety and health guidelines, “providing free life and health insurance to essential workers who must leave their homes to continue working is an honorable and affordable policy” (TOMER; KANE, 2020).

Consequently, it is essential to respect safety measures by maintaining physical distancing to stem the spread of the virus, while also providing treatment to those in need in order to preserve human life and respecting the rights of workers.

A notable Lebanese case regarding the respect of human dignity and life is the case of the Syrian refugees. With over 1.5 million refugees in the country, Lebanon is facing difficulties providing them with the proper access to tools that would enable them to lead a dignified life in the country (CHEHAYEB; SEWELL, 2020). Syrian refugees more specifically are struggling with movement restrictions and growing poverty after the country’s lockdown policies to reduce the spread of the novel coronavirus and this “may be having life-threatening consequences” (Chehayeb; Sewell, 2020). A lack of access to proper medical care and preventative equipment is making it hard for these refugees to follow the World Health Organization’s guidelines on how to prevent COVID-19 infections (AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, 2020). Furthermore, Amnesty

International's latest campaign sheds light upon the case of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and their lack of access to clean water and soap, which also exacerbates their situation in these times. Joahar Assaf, a Syrian refugee living in an informal camp near Saadnayel, said "we are abandoned without food and drink, without medical care, without medicine" (CHEHAYEB; SEWELL, 2020).

Another case in Lebanon is the LGBTQ+ community one which is "silently hit by crises" (HRW, 2020). The Human Rights Watch April 2020 report affirms that "in Lebanon, criminalization, combined with gaps in data, means LGBT people's vulnerabilities are not addressed" (HRW, 2020). Moreover, structural marginalization and discrimination against the LGBT community joined with the economic crisis, inflation and lockdown are making it difficult for members of the community to have access to basic necessities such as food and medicine (HRW, 2020). In addition, the government's relief plan is "likely to prioritize family units, which can effectively exclude many LGBT people" (HRW, 2020). Therefore, it is essential to include LGBT people in Lebanon's COVID-19 response and assist Lebanese LGBT organizations in order to survive these vulnerable times.

Furthermore, since the beginning of the lockdown, domestic violence reports have significantly increased along with a spike in calls to emergency helplines of the Internal Security Forces and NGOs such as Abaad and KAFA (Al Arabiya, 2020). In reality, some women have to live in the same household with other abusive family members and their "home" becomes "one of the most dangerous places to be" (Al Arabiya English, 2020). According to Ghida Anani, director of the Abaad Resource Center for Gender Equality, women are "struggling with crises of mental health issues or expressing suicidal thoughts" (Al Arabiya English, 2020). Some are even receiving death threats when showing symptoms that are similar to coronavirus' symptoms (AL ARABIYA ENGLISH, 2020).

Consequently, protecting women from gender-based violence is a must in order to preserve their life and dignity. Moreover, the need to protect marginalized communities and minorities comes at the core of the respect of human dignities and would help them and the Lebanese society in general in the fight against COVID-19.

Solidarity

Catholic Social Teaching's second cornerstone is solidarity which "highlights in a particular way the intrinsic social nature of the human person, the equality of all in dignity and rights and the common path of individuals and peoples towards an ever more committed unity" (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 2005, para. 192). Thus, solidarity is the virtue that binds people together and represents "the fabric for all authentic relationships" (WRIGHT, 2017, p.14). In addition, Wright mentions the importance of the practice of solidarity since it "is a necessary component of our faith" (WRIGHT, 2017, p. 14). Maruggi stresses the fact that solidarity also implies taking real action as well as "the needs of the other" (MARUGGI, 2012). Thus, this pandemic is a global call to stand in solidarity and to express our faith in humanity by helping and supporting one another. Cardinal Turkson stressed the significance of solidarity in these hard times saying "the human family is required to feel and to live truly as an interconnected and interdependent family" (CARDINAL TURKSON, 2020). Furthermore, Pope Francis, in his new encyclical letter, addressed the importance of recovering the feeling of passion "to create a community of belonging worthy of our time, our energy, and our resources" in order to survive this tough time (FRATELLI TUTTI, 2020, para. 36).

First of all, Catholic Social Teaching calls for the support of those in need. In fact, "the principle of the universal destination of goods requires that the poor, the marginalized and in all cases those whose living conditions interfere with their proper growth should be the focus of particular concern" (COMPENDIUM OF THE SOCIAL DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH, 2005, para. 182). On the other hand, the COVID-19 global health crisis will put more than 70 million people worldwide under the international poverty line measured at \$1.90 per day (WORLD BANK GROUP, 2020). Therefore, one should care for the other and stand in solidarity with those who are suffering.

Advocating for people in need through volunteer work, donations, by avoiding stigmatization or even lending an ear is essential especially in these times of crisis. Showing solidarity with one another is now crucial in order to include everybody in the fight for survival since “COVID-19 does not discriminate, nor should our response” (UN DGC, 2020). Thus, nobody should be left behind.

Moreover, cultivating hope in these seemingly hopeless times is essential for one’s mental wellbeing. This could be done through the organization of online supplications, masses and interreligious prayers. Pope Francis highlighted the importance of prayer in these hard times since it “helps us understand our vulnerability” (FRANCIS, 2020). Therefore, praying in solidarity with and for one another brings a sense of comfort, unity and belonging. The Higher Committee of Human Fraternity launched a Day of Prayer on May 14, 2020 calling for all believers to come together to pray, fast and do works of charity (VATICAN NEWS, 2020). Pope Francis appealed for it saying: “may we unite as brothers and sisters in asking the Lord to save humanity from the pandemic, to enlighten scientists, and to heal the sick” (VATICAN NEWS, 2020). Many Lebanese organizations responded to this call and came up with initiatives on this day. For example, the "Islamic-Christian meeting around Mary" announced that members of the association will be gathering in Beirut in a “celebration to ask - each according to his faith - that God relieves everyone from the pandemic contagion potentially capable of threatening the lives of billions of people” (AGENZIA FIDES, 2020). This event was broadcasted on television by Noursat-Tele Lumiere and Al Iman TV and included speeches by Archbishop Joseph Spiteri, Apostolic Nuncio in Lebanon, and Shiite Sheikh Sayyed Ali Fadlallah (AGENZIA FIDES, 2020). Consequently, uniting prayers is a global act of solidarity that would help people get through this tough period of time.

Additionally, the spread of fake news during this period could be fatal to some. In fact, Imran Ahmed, the CEO of the Centre for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH), stated that “social media is currently awash with conspiracy theories, fake news, and incorrect medical advice about coronavirus and COVID-19” (We Are Restless, 2020). This wave of misinformation is creating alongside the pandemic a “disinfodemic” that claims that certain techniques or medications can kill the virus while they have not yet been proven

to be effective in the fight against COVID-19 (UN NEWS, 2020). The CCDH called for a group effort in order to stop the circulation of false information by blocking and reporting misinformation as well as promoting official scientific advice (CCDH, 2020). Finally, the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church recognizes the limitations of the use of media but states that “one fundamental moral principle always applies: the human person and the human community are the end and measure of the use of the media” (COMPENDIUM OF THE SOCIAL DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH, 2005, para. 416).

Many fake news and rumors have been circulating on social media in Lebanon in the past few months. For example, “yesterday, the drop of the coronavirus infections was accompanied by a very dangerous rumor, which is the end of the Corona pandemic in Lebanon” stated Dr. Manal Abdel Samad, minister of information (UNDP Lebanon, 2020). She highlighted the dangerous impact the spread of these rumors has on the Lebanese society since it creates “confusion and false hope” which leads to the aggravation of the situation in the country (UNDP LEBANON, 2020).

Therefore, CST inspires actions that bring people together such as helping the vulnerable, praying together and stopping the spread of fake news in order to overcome these tough times.

Many people are reaching out to others during this pandemic and more acts of solidarity are visible within the Lebanese community than before. In fact, churches are offering a safe place to stay under quarantine for those who have been infected by the virus (AGENZIA FIDES, 2020). For example, the Maronite Bishop of the diocese of Byblos in Lebanon Michel Aoun made the summer residence of the bishopric in Lehfed available to hospitalize infected people (AGENZIA FIDES, 2020). However, this project requires services such as disinfection, cleaning, catering, etc. in order to be effective. It needs people to come together and volunteer to help to make projects like these possible and safe (NOUN, 2020).

Moreover, many solidary acts took place in the holy month of Ramadan in order to provide families with the basic necessities they need at home. For example, Mrs. Lina Kanaan and her friends decided to supply families with ready-to-cook iftar meals and created the concept of “Iftar in a box” (AN-NAHAR, 2020). Volunteers joined them in order to collect donations and make sure the boxes are sanitized and safely delivered

to the people (AN-NAHAR, 2020). In addition, LOYAC Lebanon, a non-profit organization created in order to empower the youth, started the Ramadan Aid Donation Campaign, an initiative aimed at collecting donations to help families in need all over Lebanon (AN-NAHAR, 2020). This campaign provided over 130 Lebanese, Palestinian and Syrian families in Lebanon with food packages (AN-NAHAR, 2020).

On another note, the Lebanese diaspora came up with the idea of “Minteshreen” – which means “spread all over”- and it is a platform on which Lebanese people from all around the globe are called to donate in order to provide for people in need who are living in Lebanon. After only a month of the launch of this project, Minteshreen have collected enough donations to distribute more than 2200 food rations to families all over Lebanon while taking all sanitary precautions (Minteshreen’s official Instagram account, accessed on August 3, 2020).

Finally, all of these acts of solidarity reflect the sense of unity in the Lebanese community and have a huge impact on helping one another survive this pandemic. And as Pope Francis stated: “no one is saved alone; we can only be saved together” since we are all in the “same boat” (Fratelli Tutti, 2020, para. 32).

Subsidiarity

“If solidarity is essential in responding to this crisis, subsidiarity is necessary to help structure the response and divide up the work” (CARR, 2020). Subsidiarity, the third cornerstone of Catholic Social Teaching, is defined as “economic, institutional or juridical assistance offered to lesser social entities” (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 2005, para. 186). It promotes the human dignity of each individual while working with societal groups. Each community is then based on a “network of relationships” between these individuals and groups which constitute the civil society (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 2005, para. 185). Empowering local communities benefits both the state and the individuals since it “protects people from abuses by higher-level social authority and calls on these same authorities to help individuals and intermediate groups to fulfil their duties” (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 2005, para. 187). Moreover, Wright

highlights the fact that this principle creates a balance between individual and societal interests since it “lies at the heart of a stable social order by fostering the personal responsibility that naturally accompanies individual liberty” (WRIGHT, 2017, p. 15).

“Horizontal subsidiarity implies that society [...] places itself at the service of the individual human being” (MALTONI, 2002). Therefore, this principle’s aim is to support each and every person, and this support is much needed during this global pandemic. According to professor Jim McManus, the director of Public Health for Hertfordshire, horizontal subsidiarity “is derived, theologically, from a duty we owe one another in justice – as fellow creatures – and we should follow that” (CBCEW, 2020). In fact, these local private initiatives and organizations have been put on the “forefront of COVID-19 efforts” (OCHA, 2020) and are working with the people for the people in order to stop the spread of the virus and support the most vulnerable. Nongovernmental organizations are helping people in need by supplying them with money, food, medicine, hygiene kits, transport, etc. and by spreading awareness and providing reliable information regarding COVID-19 (BOND, 2020).

Moreover, this interaction between the state and private initiatives could ensure “that both individuals and society as a whole have what they need in order for both to experience fulfillment” which leads to the promotion of the common good (VENZOR, 2020). Giving power and responsibility to the smaller societal entities would assist the government in taking care of the people in need while establishing a division of power between the different levels of authorities in the country. Finally, the principle of subsidiarity brings “individual desires and the demands of the common good into fruitful harmony” (WRIGHT, 2017, p.15) which is much needed nowadays in the world’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The lockdown in Lebanon has been put in place to slow down the spread of the virus, however, it has worsened the already “devastating” economic situation in the country (HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, 2020). Lena Simet, a senior researcher on poverty and inequality at Human Rights Watch, stated that “if the government does not step in, more than half the population may not be able to afford food and basic necessities” (HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, 2020). With a growing pressure on the government, local initiatives have stepped in to assist people in need. One of these initiatives is the

Lebanese Food Bank which collects donations and packs food boxes and hygiene kits that can last four people for a month. These boxes are then distributed by 85 NGOs around the country to families in need (HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, 2020).

Another Lebanese initiative is the DAFA -which means “warmth”- campaign. Founded 6 years ago, this campaign aims at collecting aid and in-kind donations, not financial ones, for the poorest families in Lebanon. With the help of volunteers, DAFA collects and sorts donations in Martyr’s Square in Beirut then sends them to the people in need. Despite the lockdown measures imposed by the government in order to halt the spread of COVID-19, the DAFA campaign managed to distribute more than 200 bags of donations to families in need (DAFA Campaign official Facebook account, accessed on August 3, 2020).

Furthermore, the Lebanese Red Cross is on the frontline of the coronavirus response in the country. Every day, volunteers in this humanitarian organization are transporting suspected COVID-19 cases from different regions across Lebanon while raising awareness about the health crisis and the ways to prevent infection. It is then crucial to support them during these critical times. The LRC launched on the 8th of May 2020 its annual fundraising campaign under the slogan “Your Support Reverts to You” (LEBANESE RED CROSS, 2020). Consequently, supporting NGOs such as the Lebanese Food Bank, DAFA and the Lebanese Red Cross comes at the core of the application of the third cornerstone of Catholic Social Teaching.

Finally, Venzor highlighted the importance of the application of the three main principles of Catholic Social Teaching in the fight against COVID-19 while also reporting their violation; “as the spread of coronavirus continues, pay particular attention to how these principles of Catholic social teaching take place. See how they are fulfilled and be vigilant and call out their violations” (VENZOR, 2020). In fact, in their April 2020 report, CIVICUS underlined the importance of reporting these human rights infringements stating “we are particularly concerned by states that are abusing emergency powers to place restrictions on fundamental rights including freedom of expression and the right to access information” (CIVICUS, 2020).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the application of the principles of Catholic Social Teaching can help the world survive this crisis. As shown in this paper, the CST's three main cornerstones urge each human being to respect human lives and dignities, to work in solidarity and to support local initiatives, all of which are crucial factors in surviving this global pandemic. The first cornerstone encourages people to abide by lockdown and physical distancing rules and to preserve the rights of workers. The second cornerstone incites people to come together to pray, to stop the spread of fake news and to help the most vulnerable survive this crisis. The third and last cornerstone calls for the empowerment of local and international private initiatives which help states assist people in need. Multiple cases in Lebanon have shown that the application of these principles can help the world survive this global pandemic.

Moreover, CST is an ideal framework to connect and to focus on commonalities among the believers from different religious backgrounds. Knowing that Lebanon is a mosaic of religions and millennial interreligious coexistence, the CST is an ideal platform and a real bridge builder among believers so they can join their forces to save the world in this unprecedented pandemic. Leonard Swidler argues that the dialogue of the hands in which "we join together with others to work to make the world a better place" is in fact a solid opportunity to spread interreligious dialogue and to heal the wounds of society (SWIDLER, 2014, p.10).

Furthermore, the three main principles of Catholic Social Teaching can also be found in the basic beliefs of other monotheistic religions and they "point to our duty to pursue the common good in the midst of so much sickness and loss" (CARR, 2020). Thus, the promotion of the common good constitutes the result of the application of the three main pillars of Catholic Social Teaching. The common good is defined as "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily" (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 2005, para. 164). Therefore, working towards the common good should be the world's priority right now in order to save ourselves and others. Kelly Johnson notes that "my body, my own health, is in fact dependent on many other bodies and

their health, their participation not only in an economy but in human society” (JOHNSON, 2020).

Finally, Catholic Social Teaching does not only set the basis for the survival of this crisis but is also a foundation for a better tomorrow and for a life after COVID-19. As Pope Francis said “let us respond to the pandemic of the virus with the universality of prayer, of compassion, of tenderness. Let’s remain united” (CARR, 2020).

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