



Catholic Social Thought and Empowerment

Catholic thought has evolved from just helping people who are poor and marginalized to promoting their empowerment as “artisans of their own destiny”¹—both individually, as workers and citizens, and as poor nations. The phrase first appears in the 1967 encyclical *Populorum Progressio* by Pope Paul VI in addressing the realities of emerging nations. It echoed in the writings of Pope Benedict XVI on the authentic development of peoples and nations.²

Pope Francis has made the term his own in multiple addresses. Among these is his 2015 address in Bolivia where he expounded on its meaning in these words:

The world’s peoples want to be artisans of their own destiny. They want to advance peacefully towards justice. They do not want forms of tutelage or interference by which those with greater power subordinate those with less. They want their culture, their language, their social processes, and their religious traditions to be respected. No actual or established power has the right to deprive peoples of the full exercise of their sovereignty. Whenever they do so, we see the rise of new forms of colonialism which seriously prejudice the possibility of peace and justice.³

This emphasis on empowerment is reflected in the development of *comunidades eclesiales de base* (basic ecclesial communities) in Latin America and in the participation of many congregations in the United States in community-organizing networks focused on social and economic change. Empowerment approaches can be found in neighborhood social assessments which focus, not just on community needs, but on community assets. Empowerment is also reflected in individual “client” assessments in social work and counseling which look to build upon personal strengths and capacities as well as to respond to challenges and weaknesses.

Two decades ago, a task force of Catholic Charities USA developed the following definition of empowerment: “Empowerment is a process of engagement that increases the ability of individuals, families, organizations, and

communities to build mutually respectful relationships and bring about fundamental, positive change in the conditions affecting their daily lives.”⁴ The task force based this understanding on three principles: (1) People are the primary agents of change; (2) empowering changes happen through participative relationships; and (3) the human person is both social and spiritual—what affects one aspect of the person, affects the other.⁵

This focus on empowerment has been part of Catholic social justice *praxis* over the last century or more in the emphasis on economic development, worker cooperatives, promotion of labor unions, worker ownership, and micro-enterprise

loans used to develop the economic skills and assets of low-income individuals and families. As recently as May 2019, the Caritas Internationalis General Assembly reiterated this in these words:

We continue in our commitment of working together in partnership and fraternal cooperation so that we can become agents of transformation, helping people to be artisans of their own destiny, defying the structures that make it difficult or impossible for people to prosper, and ensuring that our common home is sustained and respected for future generations.⁶

This commitment continues to be critically important in so many Catholic charity and justice ministries.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Pope Paul VI. (1967). *Populorum Progressio: On the Progress of Peoples*, 65.
- 2 Pope Benedict XVI. (2009). *Caritas in Veritate: Charity in Truth*, 43.
- 3 Pope Francis. (2015, July 9). *Address to the Second World Meeting of Popular Movements*, Santa Cruz de la Sierra (Bolivia), Section 3.2., at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/july/documents/papa-francesco_20150709_bolivia-movimenti-popolari.html
- 4 Catholic Charities USA. (1998). *A Catholic Charities Framework for Empowerment*.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Caritas Internationalis. (2019, May 28). *General Assembly Final Message* at: <https://www.caritas.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/FinalMessageGA2019.pdf>