



Catholic Social Thought and Corruption

Corruption takes many forms: outright bribes to law enforcement officers, kickbacks from successful contractors to public officials awarding contracts, theft of public or private funds by insiders, and campaign contributions specifically targeted to produce selective legislative or administrative decision-making. No matter what the form, corruption is a serious evil in Catholic theology. It is theft, a form of injustice, a violation of the duty to the common good, and a breach of the duty of solidarity which contributes powerfully to inequality at the international level.¹

When political corruption takes place within democratic systems, it is a “deformity”² which compromises the proper functioning of the state, causes a growing distrust of public institutions, creates disaffection from politics among citizens, distorts the role of representative institutions, and favors the interests of a well-heeled few over the wellbeing of the many.³ This kind of corruption can include efforts to undercut the voting power of individuals or groups, to sway opinions by use of perverse and false messaging, or to actually undermine vote calculations.⁴

Corruption at the international level and in developing countries greatly contributes to underdevelopment and poverty, while undermining the rule of law and the emergence of systems of public accountability and responsible government.⁵ When exercised in racially, ethnically, or economically polarized societies, corruption often exacerbates societal divisions and intergroup violence. Corruption of development aid and assistance, whether by persons located in the donor or recipient institutions or countries, is an egregious form of theft because it often denies the basic necessities of life to people with significant needs.

When the bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean gathered in 2007 at their conference in Aparecida, Brazil, they decried the influence of corruption, but also its connection to drug trafficking and profits:

Likewise alarming is the level of corruption in economies, involving the public and private sector alike, compounded by a notable lack of transparency and accountability to the citizenry. Corruption is often connected to the scourge of drug trafficking or drug financed businesses which is indeed destroying the social and economic fabric in entire regions.⁶

The drug trade and the corruption it has generated also are responsible for significant violence as groups battle one another to gain or protect the profits of drugs and/or corruption.

The bishops went on to note the importance of moral integrity for those in public office in a context where many people worldwide live in poverty because of corruption.

How much discipline of moral integrity we need, understood in the Christian sense as self-control for doing good, for being a servant of truth and of doing our work without letting ourselves be corrupted by favors, interests, or advantages. A great deal of strength and perseverance is needed to preserve the honesty that ought to emerge from a new education to break the vicious cycle of the prevailing corruption.⁷

To eradicate corruption, vigorous enforcement of anti-corruption laws must be combined with moral integrity of those in positions susceptible to corruption and a strong public rejection of corruption by money, technology, social media, or bias.

We should note, as the Vatican did last year, that “offshore” fiscal havens “on more occasions, have become usual places of recycling dirty money, which is the fruit of illicit income (thefts, frauds, *corruption*, criminal associations, mafia, war booties, etc.)” This means that the control of corruption must extend beyond national boundaries and citizenry and require effective multi-national and international interventions.⁸

ENDNOTES

¹ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. (2005). *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 192.

² *Ibid.*, 411.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ See John Paul II. (1998, December 8). *Respect for Human Rights: The Secret of True Peace*.

Even elections can be manipulated in order to ensure the victory of certain parties or persons. This is an affront to democracy and has serious consequences, because citizens have not only the right but also the responsibility to participate...

World Day of Peace Message, 6.

⁵ *Compendium*, 447.

⁶ Fifth General Conference of the Catholic Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean. (2007). *Concluding Document*. Aparecida, Brazil, 70.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 507.

⁸ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. (2018, January 6). *Oeconomicae et pecuniariae quaestiones. Considerations for an ethical discernment regarding some aspects of the present economic-financial system*, 30 (emphasis added).