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A New Dimension of the Catholic Church's Influence on the World: On the Novelty of the Social Teaching of St. John Paul II

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Abstract: When reflecting on the relationship between the Catholic Church and the modern world in the second half of the 20th century, it is impossible to overlook the radical shift brought about by John Paul II. As Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde points out, the saintly Pope opened a “new dimension of the Church’s influence on the world”. The essence of this novelty was John Paul II’s perception of the Church’s task as being defined “centrally and exclusively from the perspective of its salvation mission”. The above thesis seems proven regarding Holy See diplomacy. The most prominent example of a “new approach” was the decision taken by John Paul II to put aside Ostpolitik, dominant since the time of John XXIII. Nonetheless, the question arises regarding a change in the social teaching of the Church under St. John Paul II, for ultimately, political praxis is always rooted in some theory. In the case of the Church, the theoretical foundation of the Church’s socio-political activity and its relation to modern world is Catholic social doctrine. The presented article examines the meaning of the teaching of St. John Paul II for the nature, method, and goals of the social teaching of the Church. If Böckenförde is right when writing about the political novelty of the Polish Pope’s pontificate, also in this field, despite numerous references to his predecessors, the position of John Paul II should be associated with a significant novum. The article is devoted to discussing this thesis.

Keywords: John Paul II; Catholic Church; Catholic social teaching; politics; theology; sociology; Francis



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1. Introduction

While reflecting on the relationship between religious traditions and secularism, it is worth considering the relationship between the Catholic Church and the modern world in the second half of the 20th century. The serious internal tensions within the Catholic Church around the role of revelation and theology for answering modern social problems within Catholic social doctrine, raised in the late 1960s and especially after Vaticanum II, were clearly answered in late 1970s and then in the 1980s by John Paul II. As Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde points out, the saintly Pope opened a “new dimension of the Church’s influence on the world”. Its basis—he noted—was “an extensive vision of the attitude of the Church towards politics, which, despite frequent references to his predecessors, differs from their conceptions” (Böckenförde 1985, p. 3). The essence of this novelty, Böckenförde emphasizes, was John Paul II’s perception of the Church’s task as being defined “centrally and exclusively from the perspective of its salvation mission” (Ibid., p. 4).

For some, it may seem slightly shocking to read that the novelty in the activity of the Church during the pontificate of the Polish Pope was the defining of its task from the perspective of the Church’s salvation mission (a troublesome question arises: what, then, had defined it earlier?). Nonetheless, it reveals the depth of the tension between the secular and religious approach, which also challenges religious institutions in the “secular age”. The Church, while remaining a community of faith, has always fulfilled and fulfils many social and political functions. Occasionally, however—and there is no dearth of historical examples—these functions became autonomous to such an extent that, in practice, their

meaning obscured the essential mission of the Church, inevitably leading to a greater or lesser undermining of the Church's credibility. The problem of the domination of political logic within Church's activity had already become an important issue at the beginning of *Vaticanum II*, during which the Church—in the name of securing the favour of the Moscow Patriarchate—did not refer to the rule of communists in much of the world and the resulting persecution of the Church (Besançon 2017). It was followed afterwards by the so-called *Ostpolitik* of the Holy See, which put the relationship with post-communist countries above the good of local churches (Skibiński 2022, p. 375). In the light of Böckenförde's thesis, the novelty of John Paul II in relation to his predecessors, especially Paul VI and John XXIII, would therefore consist in restoring the secondary or derivative functions of the Church to their proper place, thanks to their unequivocal subordination to the Church's salvific mission and, therefore, to their theological and Christocentric anchoring. Consequently, it signified giving a new direction, and often impetus, to the Church's influence on the world.

The above thesis seems proven with regard to the turn of Holy See diplomacy. The most prominent example of a "new approach" was the decision taken by John Paul II to put aside *Ostpolitik*, dominant since the time of John XXIII. Ultimately, such a change proved to be of fundamental importance for the political changes in the world, and notably in Central and Eastern Europe liberated from subjugation to the Soviet Union (Weigel 2003). Nonetheless, the question arises regarding a change in the social teaching of the Church under St. John Paul II, for, ultimately, political *praxis* is always rooted in some theory. In the case of the Church, the theoretical foundation of the Church's socio-political activity and its relation to the modern world is Catholic social doctrine.

In the present article, therefore, I would like to examine the meaning of the teaching of St. John Paul II for the nature, method, and goals of the social teaching of the Church. If Böckenförde is right when writing about the political novelty of the Polish Pope's pontificate, also in this field, despite numerous references to his predecessors, the position of John Paul II should be associated with a significant *novum*, reinforcing a "religious" approach towards "secular" problems. The presented article is devoted to discussing this thesis.

In the first, introductory part, I outline the essence of the novelty of the social teaching initiated by Leo XIII as a way of influencing modern societies and elucidate specific aspects of the Church's social doctrine. In the second part, I sketch intra-Church problems with the reception of social teaching after the Second Vatican Council and some changes in its understanding within the Magisterium, following secular ideas. In the third part, the question regarding the nature and significance of John Paul II's contribution to the revival of the Church's social doctrine is analysed. In the final, fourth part, I outline the meaning of the Polish Pope's position for understanding the discussions taking place in the Church today.

2. The Novelty of Catholic Social Doctrine

The Church's social doctrine is believed to have had its origins in Pope Leo XIII's encyclical from 1891, titled *Rerum Novarum*. It does not mean that earlier 19th-century popes did not publish any encyclicals on social issues. It means that those documents "usually are not considered a part of Catholic social teaching" (Curran 2002, p. 6). The breakthrough nature of *Rerum Novarum* can be attributed not so much to the social and political subject, but rather to the way it was taken up. In that encyclical of Leo XIII, for the first time the Church systematically dealt with system changes occurring in society in the 19th century as a result of the political and industrial revolution, including a radical—made by communism and predatory capitalism—division of the society. Nonetheless, by aptly criticizing the "two social and economic systems: socialism and liberalism", Leo XIII differentiated the nature and scope of such criticism. Whereas the criticism of socialism was total, concerning liberalism it was conducted, so to speak, through dialogue. This differentiation revealed the new strategy of Leo XIII for "reconciliation of the traditional church and modern society" (Holland 2003, p. 115). The Pope aimed at "reforming the political-economic side

of modern liberalism”, hoping for a “modern revival in the bourgeois form of the now collapsed aristocratic Christian civilization” (Ibid., p. 116).

A novelty of Leo XIII’s strategy directed at modifications within liberalism was connected with the major novelty in the way the Magisterium approached “social teaching”, compared to the classical moral teaching of the Church. Firstly, it was a new approach to ethics. Samuel Gregg is right to claim that “the social teaching reflects the fact that the Christian life is not limited to the proper ordering of personal moral life” (Gregg 2002, Kindle Locations 78–79). Nonetheless, Catholic moral teaching was never limited to “personal moral life” of the believer. The Apostles’ calls for personal conversion and growth in virtue were inseparably connected with the issues concerning desirable patterns of social behaviour. The Church “did not differentiate between individual and social virtues, not by oversight, but as a result of a thought-out decision (. . .) not to allow morality to be divided into individual and social” (Salij 2000, pp. 40–41).

The change came with Leo XIII’s “social philosophy”, to use the name of Catholic social teaching proposed by Pius XI. Trying to initiate dialogue with the way of thinking based on secular ideology, it was impossible for the Church to refer mainly, or only, to the theological, transcendent perspective of personal life, as the Apostles could do when writing to Christians. Leo and his successors thus sought a way to justify their moral principles in a language that would be understood by all, and which could help to organize, in a fair manner, a world that was ceasing to be Christian. The social doctrine of the Church, beginning with Leo XIII, was thus constituted—even if not fully consciously—as a social ethic, and this was a novelty in the panorama of the thought of the Church. It resonated with broader transformations in human thought, including the systematic development of the social sciences during the 19th century, and of the science of values.

As a social ethic, the teaching of the Church sought, therefore, “values, goals, and moral norms on which it would be possible to build a dignified coexistence of human beings” (Possenti 2007, p. 29). This temporal purpose corresponded with the temporal language. Taking as a starting point the assumption that at least the main moral principles “are known to every normal person by nature, without being revealed by God”, the teaching referred mainly to the language of the “natural order”. This had its own significant advantages. The social doctrine of the Church as a social ethics, the norms of which have philosophical (and therefore—at least theoretically—also accessible to secularized reason) justification, obtained the mandate to indicate the right ways of action, not only to members of the Church, but also to state authorities or professional groups (entrepreneurs, workers). For, ultimately, all people are bound by the same moral order that descends from the natural law, of which—as Paul VI put it in *Humanae Vitae*—the Church is the “guardian and interpreter” (Paul VI 1968, no. 18).

Together with the benefits of referring to the natural order and philosophical justifications, there were also some risks associated with such a strategy. Namely, the more the *ordo naturalis* was understood as an independent, closed system, the more the *ordo supranaturalis* became merely a certain addition. Obviously, the social teaching of the Church was—as Aniela Dylus puts it—open to theologisation (Dylus 2003). Nonetheless, by referring to rational reasons, social philosophy, and natural law, this social ethics treated the theological argument as an *ultima ratio*. Popes constantly worked to make Catholic social teaching the teaching of both philosophy and Christian faith. However, this does not alter the fact that it ultimately gravitated towards philosophy rather than faith: if the social doctrine of the Church had an ethical profile, then the norms it provided were properly justified, from Leo XIII to Paul VI, by referring primarily to “the principles of right reason” (Pius XI 1931, no. 110), or—somewhat more precisely—to arguments of social philosophy based on natural law.

Another specific trait of the “novelty” of the Church social doctrine was its large—as for the doctrine of ethical nature—specificity and detail. This is quite understandable if we consider the fact that the context demanding its appearance was the so-called “social issue” that required an immediate answer—a phenomenon of social crisis, so common in

industrial countries at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, founded on extreme economic inequalities: the pauperization of the population and exploitation of industrial workers by the economic elites of that time, and the development of the communist ideology. In consequence, Catholic social doctrine could not limit itself only to the criticism of some socialist postulates or those of economic liberalism (for example the communist idea of joint property or the liberal idea of economic rights). It also had to postulate certain socio-economic or legal and political solutions addressed, not only to the Church congregation or its structures, but also to political institutions.

The ethical profile of social doctrine and its ambitions, very specifically referring to forms of shaping socio-economic praxis, raised a question concerning its method. A specific lecture on the methodology of this doctrine can be found in John XXIII's *Mater et Magistra*. In point 236, he gathers the methodological experience of 70 years of its development and states: "There are three stages which should normally be followed in the reduction of social principles into practice. First, one reviews the concrete situation; secondly, one forms a judgment on it in the light of these same principles; thirdly, one decides what in the circumstances can and should be done to implement these principles. These are the three stages that are usually expressed in the three terms: look, judge, act" (John XXIII 1961, no. 236).

The methodology of the social doctrine thus combined an inductive element (examining the social reality), a deductive element (evaluation of this reality according to principles of natural law or conclusions of induction analyses) as well as a practical element (aiming at improving reality to shape it better: to fit moral principles). This is essential, as it reveals that "social teaching is practical teaching, aimed at action rather than cognition. Unlike speculative knowledge, which learns for the love of knowledge, in practical thinking . . . the main task of cognition is not cognition for the sake of knowledge, but cognition to better direct one's actions" (Possenti 2000, p. 69).

This explains numerous narrations of practically all social encyclicals, which start with the description of social and economic reality (*vide: Rerum Novarum*, whose name comes from the characteristics of those "new things", which worried Leo XIII), to evaluate them then according to objective criteria, among which natural law plays a vital role, and then—especially since John XXIII—the category of human dignity¹ and, on this basis, to develop specific solutions to disturbing problems.

At the same time, when reading encyclicals in which evaluation criteria were not always connected only with moral law, but also with a certain interpretation of reality, one could raise a question concerning the relationship between the induction and the deduction method. It seems that in the first period of social teaching development (the teaching of Leo XIII, Pius XI, Pius XII), the primacy of principles deduced from natural law was unquestionable. They formed the basis on which reality was evaluated, and action directives were proposed. Since John XXIII, as observed by Cardinal Karol Wojtyła in 1978, "the nature of documents has changed; it has become somehow less deductive, concentrated mostly on principles, and it has adopted more inductive, descriptive forms, concentrating more on facts" (Possenti 2007, p. 57).

3. The Crisis of Catholic Social Doctrine

The growing importance of inductive logic within Catholic social teaching was connected with the change in attitude towards natural law, which had developed since the 1960s. As observed by Benedict XVI during his speech in the Bundestag: "up to the time of the Enlightenment, up to the time of the Declaration on Human Rights after the Second World War and the framing of our Basic Law [1949], there has been a dramatic shift in the situation in the last half-century. The idea of natural law is today viewed as a specifically Catholic doctrine, not worth bringing into the discussion in a non-Catholic environment so that one feels almost ashamed even to mention the term" (Benedict XVI 2011). This problem was visible as early as in the 1960s, which is best evidenced by protests and rejections, inside the Church, of Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, devoted to giving life and regulating

conception, in which—which turned out to be shocking to many—he claimed that natural law was the source of his doctrine.

The reservations concerning natural law at that time were connected—in various ways—with three main accusations. Firstly, it was argued that the Pope, whose proper domain was the preaching of the Gospel, went beyond his competencies and expressed opinions on natural law. Secondly, it was indicated that the concept of natural law itself “belongs to highly controversial philosophical and theological theses, mostly due to the unspecified and ambiguous nature of this concept”. Thus, considering the fact that “the state of views presented by philosophers and theologians proves that both the existence and the content of this law are highly dubious; therefore, it constitutes a form of “poor philosophy” and that reference to this category jeopardizes the doctrinal value of social doctrine”. Thirdly, it was claimed that reliance on unclear natural law puts Church doctrine in conflict with the latest developments, proving that “it adheres to obsolete concepts which are not suitable for the contemporary living conditions” (Kraków’s [Memoriał 1969](#), pp. 13–14).

These objections were reinforced by the fact that, according to the tradition of the Church “the Pope, being authorized by God to interpret natural law, may determine and determines what he understands by this law, by his commissioned task. In this case, he is not bound by any philosophical system, not even by the philosophy of Saint Thomas.” (Ibid., p. 14). This approach, troublesome from the perspective of the methodology of social and philosophical sciences, made scientists emphasize that “the Pope’s reference to this idea shall lead the Church onto the sticky ground of philosophical controversies” (Ibid.).

In this way, quite unexpectedly, the Church’s social doctrine as social ethics, justified by arguments of natural reason, received a blow to its methodological foundation in the 1960s. Natural law, constituting the essential criterion for assessing reality, became a criterion that could not be communicated and that was suspicious, if not groundless and empty. What is more, along with the development of social science, the science claiming the right to be “social doctrine” was “indicted” for its excessively deductive and metaphysical character. The rejection of metaphysics, intellectually dominant at that time, also encouraged Catholics to abandon mediation of ontology and natural law to—in line with the inductive strategy of social doctrine—take advantage of sociological and analytical mediation.

Another blow to the foundations and very sense of the existence of the social teaching of the Church came from the side of theologians. Quite a few theologians were convinced that only an “intra-world” perspective would be in line with the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. As the future cardinal, Fr. Walter Kasper, argued “the Council accepted the fundamental concept of the modern age”, that “secular matters are to be decided in a secular fashion, political matters in a political fashion, (. . .) and, further, that none of these issues are to be decided ‘magisterially theologially” ([Rowland 2003](#), p. 27).

Such an approach was associated with the increasing popularity of the thesis of a “total autonomy of the global order”. That view was promoted by “new theological trends since the 1950s”, as they gave “the right to organize earthly life according only to technical and ideological arguments”, thus developing social conviction that “social life may be directed by a well-selected set of social techniques or an ideology, not by the ethics of public life” ([Possenti 2000](#), p. 28). In the perspective of such a paradigm, the social teaching of the Church became perceived as an “ideology”, which “takes as a reference a ideal world, supposed to reflect the divine glory, sanctifying in fact a particular hierarchical structure of the social order” ([Epp 1980](#)). The most significant criticism of that kind was made by Marie Dominique Chenu OP ([Chenu 1979](#)), who “went on to endorse changes in the Catholic social teaching that moved into greater reliance upon the inductive reading of the sign of the times and the use of the social sciences” ([Himmes 2018](#), p. 4).

Even if the crisis of natural law, a kind of “complex” of some of the representatives of Catholic social doctrine towards social sciences connected with the theological critique of the very idea of Catholic social doctrine (and the accusation of not following the “spirit” of *Vaticanum II*), pushed the social doctrine of Church towards a growing appreciation of the

inductive method, typical of the social sciences, such an approach also posed a powerful challenge. On the one hand, the question arose as to whether the Church was at all capable of developing such a doctrine that would refer to the methods of social sciences. On the other hand, as Jean Guittou noted, the deductive and inductive methods provide a different turn to the teaching and work of the Church. The first method “consists in establishing, first and foremost, the tradition (which is, in fact, the history of the identity of truth) in order to possess it well and understand it well (. . .), and only then to turn to the thoughts of the world (. . . to) distinguish in them what is compatible with the spirit of tradition and what is contrary to it—praising the former which is content-filled and rejecting the latter which is spoiled. The second method is to establish, first and foremost, the current thought, to assimilate its language, to feed on its principles, to penetrate its spirit, and only then to turn to tradition—and, finally, to reject all that appears in it as contrary to the present thought, and to accept the rest” (Congar 2001, p. 340).

Adopting inductive logic brings not so much the development, but rather: transformation, “gradual transformation through contributions external to its own given: and this is quite different from development” (Ibid., p. 341). The primacy of inductionism and *praxis* would finally put the whole methodological structure of the Church’s social teaching at risk. Any judgment of social solutions would not be possible from the metaphysical perspective or “eschatological distance” and would have to be connected with the internal perspective. Consequently, inductive social doctrine would turn out to be not so much a tool for transforming the world by the Church as, rather, an instrument for the Church to be transformed through the world.

How serious that risk was one can discover by looking at the interpretation of the Church’s social magisterium of Paul VI, especially in *Populorum Progressio* (1967) and *Octogesima adveniens* (1971), clearly connected to the inductive approach by supporters of liberation theology. As, for example, Donald Dorr states: “In a very carefully phrased paragraph (. . .) [*Populorum Progressio* 31] Pope Paul succeeded in avoiding the simplistic dilemma which would demand that he either approve of violent revolution or reject it out of hand. He pointed out that a revolutionary uprising produces new injustices, imbalances, and disasters. But his rejection of revolution was not absolute. He inserted a qualifying parenthesis into the passage where he argued against a violent insurrection (. . .) [and the] parenthesis in this key paragraph is meant to suggest that in certain extreme situations, a revolution might be justified” (Dorr 2017).

It is easy to notice that such an attitude contradicts the traditional treatment of violence in the Catholic Church since the times of the Apostles (Salij 1998). That example shows that the risk of instrumental treatment, immanently inscribed in social doctrine, connected with a temptation to seek “the third way”, increased significantly along with the “inductive turn” and the popularity of the Marxist analysis and its adaptation in many local churches.

In light of all these transformations, the Church’s social doctrine, seeking moral norms on which it would be possible to build dignified coexistence of human beings, living in the law that determines what is good and what is wrong, what is just and what is unjust, seemed to be in the 1970s a position that was not serious scientifically and rather utopian. At the same time, it was perceived as a politically reactionary position, stopping—predicted by the liberation theology—radical social changes that were to make the dream of justice come true. From this perspective, the Church’s social doctrine, when it was practical, represented liberal superstitions, and when it was general, was considered useless and utopian. In any case, it did not have any scientific foundations and suddenly seemed not worth paying attention to.

4. The Novelty Proposed by John Paul II

Compared to the criticism which seemed to push the Church’s social doctrine into the corner even within the Church itself, the position of Karol Wojtyła, later Pope John Paul II, was not only fresh and different, but, above all, it showed the possibility of a new opening, which was later accomplished by John Paul II.

Firstly, cardinal Wojtyła just before his election, in the interview for Possenti from 1978 (Possenti 2007), emphasized that his own experience confirmed the sense and deep significance of the Church's social doctrine. He pointed out that its significance reveals more, as social reality moves away from the truth of the Gospel. Based on his own experience, which confirmed the adequacy of social doctrine and the truth about man, which he discovered in his soul, he predicted that the significance of the Church's social doctrine would grow. "Along with the appearance of socio-political situations caused by anti-Christianity ideologies (of both leftist and rightist origin)—he claimed in 1978—common awareness of these truths, principles, values, and attitudes which follow the Church social teaching would grow. Even (most frequently) without formal knowledge of its content, this doctrine will be recognized by people" (Possenti 2007, pp. 93–94). Even though it is hard to consider such predictions to be optimistic, it revealed a deep conviction—expressed, let us repeat, at the moment of a serious crisis of Catholic social doctrine—that the Church's social doctrine prime time is yet to come. Being aware that he would not convince a large group of critics, he did not exclude the possibility that "these doubting . . . Christians must face what constituted negation and the effects of negation—their faith and morality, to allow them or to force them to believe again in the historical mission of the contemporary Church towards the culture and civilization of the future." (Ibid., pp. 103–4). He added: "sometimes we need a powerful contrast to see the rightness and the truth which we have not perceived before" (Ibid., p. 36).

"The criticism of the criticism" conducted by Cardinal Wojtyła was not limited to an apology of Catholic social doctrine and disavowing objections of secondary importance. It also faced fundamental methodological and theoretical charges. Cardinal Wojtyła took up theoretical polemics with sociological (and often soaked in the Marxist theory), induction cognitive strategy and action directive. The future Pope argued that an inductive social doctrine that gives priority to *praxis* over principles, "carries the risk of utilitarianism of some sort (individualistic or collectivist)".

Starting from the Gospel (which revealed a new methodological approach later developed by the Pope—see below), Cardinal Wojtyła corrected the understanding of the meaning of *praxis* in his polemics. The archbishop of Kraków emphasized that the "priority given by Christ to human *praxis*, deeds and "fruits" is different [than the *praxis* of Marxism or social science—MG]. We must differentiate between *praxis* as a "test" and *praxis* as a "means". Christ's words: "By their fruits, you shall know them" clearly indicate the former type of *praxis* priority . . . *Praxis* as a test point at "theory", the truth about reality from which it stems, which it expresses, and which it serves. This priority of *praxis* contains merit priority of *theory* and is based on it. It is quite a different story when some (economic or political) *praxis* "creates" its theory and subordinates it." (Ibid., p. 49).

The above-outlined "criticism of the criticism" of social doctrine led Cardinal Karol Wojtyła to defend a broadly understood methodological position of this doctrine. He emphasized that "contrary to what is commonly believed by Marxist authors, Christianity is not a philosophical kind of idealism. It is realistic. Moreover, the *theory–praxis* relationship in it is realistic. This also refers to social doctrine. For our social *praxis* to be correct—that is, "just" and not only effective—it must reflect the whole truth about reality. Proper cognition is at the foundation of just actions. This system of *theory–praxis* relations protects actions, and social programs of action, against utilitarianist bias. One, therefore, needs to ask who a man is, what is the relationship between a person and society, and what is the internal truth of different societies and communities, such as a family or a nation—we need to ask what is a common good and what are the principles of its proper interpretation. All these questions must be asked first; we must have a theoretically true picture of the entire reality within which our action is shaped, to act justly—that is we must have internal testimony of the truth of our cognition, also in our action, and also in the whole social *praxis*" (Ibid., pp. 48–49).

Thus, in 1978, Cardinal Karol Wojtyła defended the foundations of the classical methodology of social doctrine, in which the central place was occupied by the evaluation of social

phenomena in the light of objective principles, the truth about man and society. It is worth emphasizing, by touching the heart of the social issue, that is, the area of social doctrine competencies, Saint John Paul II, already as the cardinal, clearly favours the deductive method. The method starts from moral truth and revealed truth, not—as in the case of the induction method, typical for social sciences—“from reflection on reality” (Palladino 2018). The starting point is of fundamental importance for the ending point. The induction method, typical for social sciences, constitutes a temptation for the Church “to adjust theology to the needs of sociology” (Mazurkiewicz 2017, p. 18).

Defending the primacy of deduction, the Pope John Paul II, therefore, created a barrier to various forms of ideological abuse that we have already analysed. In their essence, they stem (which is best seen in Marxism and various forms of political ideologies) from the primacy of *praxis* over sound anthropological and socio-political theory, whose element is also aware of human imperfection and the imperfection of human deeds. This choice should be emphasized. The position adopted by John Paul II not only defended the research paradigm typical of Catholic social doctrine, but also allowed him to write in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, with full conviction and based on his way of practicing social doctrine and its carefully thought-out philosophy that “the Church’s social doctrine is not a ‘third way’ between liberal capitalism and Marxist collectivism, nor even a possible alternative to other solutions less radically opposed to one another: rather, it constitutes a category of its own” (John Paul II 1987, no. 41). This independence results from its specific, methodological character, accounting for the fact that “nor is it an ideology, but rather the accurate formulation of the results of a careful reflection on the complex realities of human existence, in society and the international order, in the light of faith and of the Church’s tradition” (Ibid.).

Whereas, until now, we have discovered Saint John Paul II’s argumentation defending the classical methodological paradigm of the Church’s social doctrine, the last of the quoted sentences reveals a significant change he made in its perception. It should be noted that *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* does not claim that Church social science is “the accurate formulation of the results of a careful reflection on the complex realities of human existence, in society and the international order, in the light of natural law”. Instead, he says: “in the light of faith and of the Church’s tradition”. To avoid any potential understatements, John Paul II adds that: “Its main aim is to interpret these realities, determining their conformity with or divergence from the lines of the Gospel teaching on man and his vocation, a vocation which is at once earthly and transcendent; its aim is thus to guide Christian behaviour” (Ibid.).

In the above-quoted fragment of the *SRS*, one discerns, firstly, consistent with the theological tradition and the above-formulated conclusions—the primacy of deduction over induction, which does not contradict but facilitates practical, not the ideological value of social doctrine. As a result, one perceives, secondly, confirmation of the three-element methodological scheme developed by John XIII: “see, evaluate, act”, whose middle component (“evaluate”) is central, guaranteeing a specific sense and character of the Church’s social doctrine. Thirdly, however, one might observe a visible shift in what is to be a reference point for judging the matters of this world. As was indicated earlier, the Church’s social doctrine was established at the beginning of the 19th century as social ethics, which seeks justification for its statements firstly in social philosophy, clearly placing at the front the natural-legal component. Somehow, in the “background” it placed Revelation. John Paul II reverses this system. He puts the Gospel first, seeks theological justifications and puts philosophical issues, including natural law, into the background (Curran 2005, p. 21).

This should be strongly emphasized. Defending the methodological structure of the Church’s social doctrine, John Paul II refrains from rooting the ethical analysis in social philosophy (and, of course, all the more, in the inductive social sciences), as his predecessors did². The above-indicated ways of criticizing the social doctrine of the Church—even if exaggerated in many aspects—revealed that a philosophical approach would inevitably

entail intricacies characteristic of every philosophical investigation. Especially in a world which had started to doubt reason, one that perceives the truth as a threat to freedom, and which lost the obviousness of the moral dimension of existence (and thus the awareness of the moral dimension of human nature), in such a world, all preliminary assumptions, even epistemic ones, become de facto axiomatic ones. It is no coincidence that in the period of late modernity, each philosophical theory can be opposed by another theory and—since the starting assumptions are different—it is impossible to judge them. Reference to social philosophy, and Marxism considered itself to be such, ultimately could be insufficient, and it could hinder the revelation of the so-called “Christian genius”: this specifically Christian contribution to social thinking, which did not change the discoveries of humanity, makes them more perfect, and reveals their true sense.

In the interview with Possenti in 1978, Cardinal Karol Wojtyła observed that the perception of Catholic social doctrine as social philosophy “is not fully accurate and adequate because the Church social doctrine as an expression of the Gospel must be theology in its roots . . . If we talk about “philosophy”, it is only in the meaning and scope in which theology—to allow people to understand and express the revealed content, God’s Word—used and is still using philosophy. This is a well-tried element of the theological method. This, however, does not make “theology” philosophy.” (Possenti 2007, pp. 78–79).

From this perspective, and this is the perspective of faith, identifying Church social doctrine with philosophy would only mean reductionism. As observed by Alain Besançon: “From the point of view of the Catholic faith, it is obvious that from natural religion to Catholic faith the perception of reality has a form of various layers . . . Natural religion opens our eyes to nature, the Bible revelation teaches us about God—almighty creator, allied with his chosen people. Moses causes that God Himself begins to live among people. This triad creates three orders, analogical to Pascal orders in this sense that the superior order contains two other orders, but the lower order does not contain one that is above it.” (Besançon 2017, p. 66). “Theological ethics—as emphasized in this spirit by bishop Karol Wojtyła—seeks these justifications not only in the light of human reason but also in the light of the Revelation, that is indirectly in God’s mind. It is those justifications that provide us with full ethical knowledge. Without those justifications, we know what moral law, be it natural or revealed, tells us to do, but we do not fully understand why we have to do it.” (Wojtyła 1959, p. 100).

John Paul II decided to use his method and start from the broadest and deepest perspective: to base the analysis of social matters on the foundation of the Revelation, the message of the Old and the New Testament, in the light of the latter, he interpreted the former. This was a major novelty in the ecclesial analysis of social phenomena, accounting for the fact that the Holy Pope found a different place for the Church’s social reflections in the structure of doctrine. If in *Sollicitudo rei socialis* he claims that the Church social doctrine “belongs to the field, not of ideology, but theology and particularly of moral theology” (John Paul II 1987, no. 41)³ and belongs to the evangelizing mission of the Church (Ibid.). Such positioning of this doctrine causes that it is not, and it cannot be connected with any “visible socio-political system identifying itself as ‘Christian’” (Possenti 2007, p. 25), and simultaneously in each such system it plays a critical and transformative role, directed at—reflecting eternal human vocation—the common good. Consequently, theological anchoring of Catholic social doctrine makes all accusations of ideologization, so sound during Paul VI pontificate, groundless. As John Paul II rightly points out in *Centesimus annus*, Christian faith can not be treated as ideology, while it “does not presume to imprison changing sociopolitical realities in a rigid schema, and it recognizes that human life is realized in history in conditions that are diverse and imperfect. Furthermore, in constantly reaffirming the transcendent dignity of the person, the Church’s method is always that of respect for freedom” (John Paul II 1991, no. 46).

Though the Magisterium formulation of the theological paradigm of the Church social doctrine took place in *SRS*, that is, in 1987, this perception of social doctrine—as I indicated—characterized Cardinal Karol Wojtyła before he became Pope. It should come as no surprise,

then, that he was implementing this paradigm of the Church's social doctrine from the very beginning of his social teaching. As early as *Laborem Exercens*, the theological perspective arranged the way of using results of specific research. As he emphasized, though this encyclical reflects "the whole heritage of the many doctrines devoted to man: anthropology, palaeontology, history, sociology, psychology and so on" (John Paul II 1981, no. 4), it also assumes that the problem of human labour "can also be explained only by taking into account the full context of the contemporary situation" (Ibid., no. 11), the starting point and the prism of his whole analysis is the Revelation. It is in It, and in particular in the Book of Genesis, that the Church, according to the Holy Pope, finds that "work is a fundamental dimension of man's existence on earth" (Ibid., no. 4). With his characteristic sense of humor, he stated in the introduction to the encyclical: "While people sometimes speak of periods of "acceleration" in the economic life and civilization of humanity or individual nations, linking these periods to the progress of doctrine and technology and especially to discoveries which are decisive for social and economic life, at the same time it can be said that none of these phenomena of "acceleration" exceeds the essential content of what was said in that most ancient of biblical texts [the Book of Genesis]." (Ibid.).

This light remark reveals the Pope's deep conviction that if—as he explained to Possenti in 1978—social doctrine and social teaching in "their central core must always be very topical, or even more: predicting, (. . .) clear and brave", this is only possible thanks to their close connection with Revelation. He emphasized that social doctrine "has its internal dynamics, stemming from the power and, so to say, fertility of the first, source layer, which ought to be sought in the Gospel itself. This value is somehow "independent" from various changing historical contexts (which does not mean that it is "a-historical"), but since these contexts appear, it reveals the new face of the truth and the rightness, the one that the context demands." (Possenti 2007, p. 58). The truth of the Gospel, therefore, is not a "burden" to social reflection (as Marxists, as well as supporters of "total autonomy of the global order" claimed) or an "addition" (as to some extent the connection with the Gospel was perceived in the logic of the Church's social doctrine as "social philosophy"), but a foundation, a real starting point and, in a sense, a destination point, allowing for the prophetic character of the Church life, consisting not only in "preaching great values and fundamental truths of the social order", but also "the testimony of life, behaviour, involvement, responsibility" (Ibid., p. 93).

5. The Position of John Paul II in the Perspective of Contemporary Dilemmas of the Church

During the development of the "secular age", John Paul II clearly reinforced religious perspective in treating social issues, developing theological nature and defending the deductive method of the social doctrine of the Church. Looking from a broader perspective, it is worth adding that the choice made by John Paul II with regard to the sources, methods, and goal of the Church's social doctrine also expressed his understanding of the meaning of the Second Vatican Council and, more generally, the role of the Church in ever more secularized societies. His approach was consistent with the Vaticanum II interpretations, which will later be called by Benedict XVI the "hermeneutic of continuity".

Contrary to the aforementioned position of Cardinal Walter Kasper, who interpreted the Second Vatican Council as a breakthrough, in the sense of a new beginning or a paradigmatic change in the approach towards the world, to be expressed in looking at its affairs from a secular perspective, and thus ultimately excluding the importance of God for social or political matters, John Paul II shared the position expressed, inter alia, by Fr. Romano Guardini. As the latter declared, all his work was determined by the belief that "what can convince modern people is not a historical or psychological or a continually ever modernising Christianity but only the unrestricted and uninterrupted message of Revelation" (Guardini 1965).

It is no coincidence that, when John Paul II spoke of the debt to the Council, he spoke of the feeling of debt that flowed "from faith, from the Gospel, which allows us to express the

Word of God in the human language of our time, linking with it the authority of the highest Magisterium in the Church" (Wojtyła 2003, p. 6). Thus, he saw the purpose and meaning of Vatican II as "enrichment of faith" and, therefore, as "an ever fuller participation in God's truth" (Ibid., p. 9). Hence, he understood the Council not as a source of change, but as a deepening of our understanding of God's truth (objective dimension) and of Christian life (existential dimension), e.g., in reference to the relationship of the Church and the world.

The difference in the positions of Kasper and Wojtyła that ultimately reflected the essence of the dispute over the meaning of the Council, which has continued to this day, can also be expressed by referring to the term of the revolution. The later Cardinal Kasper proposed a revolution, in the sense given to this term since the Enlightenment, and thus a radical change leading to a situation unprecedented in the past. In this case, it would mean adopting a secularized approach by the Church towards secular matters, and therefore a "cleansing" of its view of theological "accretions" in this area. Adopting such a position would lead to a further autonomization of individual activities of the Church, carried out according to secular rules, and thus, for example, would justify a policy, theologically adopted by Cardinal Casaroli—and from the perspective of modern political science, initiated by Machiavelli, a very rational one—of *Ostpolitik*, even if it would sometimes involve some form of betrayal of local churches. The fact that this is not a merely theoretical issue is proven by the case of Cardinal József Mindszenty.

If Cardinal Wojtyła, the later Pope John Paul II, also proposed a revolution, it was only in the pre-Enlightenment sense of the word (used, for example, in the times of the Glorious Revolution in England), and thus saw it as an action aimed at returning to the original calling of the Church. This is how he understood the meaning of the Council when he wrote about "enriching of the faith". In this view, the prospect of salvation, and therefore a properly theological perspective, is not simply one of the perspectives, just as proclaiming Christ is not simply one of the tasks of the Church (apart from, for example, the fight for decarbonization). Its primacy, and therefore the primacy of God, led in exactly the opposite direction to that suggested by the "hermeneutic of rupture". It did not allow for autonomization, in the sense of the subordinating to the secular—and therefore at least *de facto* agnostic—logic, of socio-political activity of the Church. Instead, he recognized that while there existed secular actions in the sense of not coming under the jurisdiction of the Church, there were no wholly secular realms in terms of independence or autonomy from theological presuppositions (Rowland 2003, p. 29). Consequently, instead of striving for recognition of the autonomy of secularism, John Paul II aimed to open it to Christ. This task was to be served by the renewed social doctrine of the Church, not accidentally considered to be an evangelization activity. In the context of the Church itself, obedience to this doctrine meant restoring the proper direction and character to the Church's partially secularized and autonomized functions (e.g., the Holy See policy). The reading of the Church's task in the field of politics, as Böckenförde aptly noted, "centrally and exclusively from the perspective of her saving mission", was and had to be, therefore, inextricably linked with—as I hope this sketch managed to demonstrate—a *novum* in the field of the Church's social teaching, whose "new philosophy" was theologically grounded by John Paul II.

It is worth adding that the above remarks may also be relevant for understanding the current tensions in the Church. There is no doubt that, with the pontificate of Francis, the question of the meaning and proper significance of the Second Vatican Council returned with new force. In parallel, political issues took on a special significance in the activities of the Holy See. On the one hand, one can see the Holy Father's much stronger involvement in political issues than any of the post-Conciliar Popes. Suffice it to mention the papal speeches on the inadmissibility of the application of death penalty, but also life imprisonment (Francis 2014), supporting concrete solutions in the fight against climate change, detailed guidelines for migration policy (Migrants & Refugees Section of Integral Human Development Dicastery 2019), the expectation of adopting the *ius soli* principle as the foundation of citizenship policy (Francis 2018a), and the introduction of universal

basic wages (Francis 2020). On the other hand, the approach of the Holy See vis-à-vis the Church in China evokes in many (including Cardinal Zen, a retired bishop of Hong Kong) associations with post-Conciliar *Ostpolitik*, which was only rejected by John Paul II. The secret agreement concluded with the Chinese government in 2018 did not end the persecution of the Church in the Middle Kingdom (USCIRF 2020) but brought almost the entire Church in China under the control of the Communist Party. It is not surprising that—as Pope Francis himself notes—this policy “prompted different reactions in the hearts of many”, especially the faithful of the so-called underground church, persecuted until today for faithfulness to the Pope and the Church, including feelings of doubt and being “somehow abandoned by the Holy See” (Francis 2018b). Similar reactions were caused by the highly diplomatic stance of the Pope and the Holy See vis-à-vis Russia’s attack on Ukraine (Szostkiewicz 2022).

It appears that the perception of clear domination, in the political activity of the Secretariat of the State and the Holy See, of logic, which is difficult to read “centrally and exclusively” from the perspective of the Church’s salvific mission, should lead to a serious theoretical reflection on the so-called “new paradigm of Catholicism”. According to Cardinal Pietro Parolin or Cardinal Blase Cupich (Cupich 2018), it is currently being implemented by Pope Francis in his teaching (Gierycz 2019). Therefore, it would constitute the theoretical basis for the political activity of the Holy See. Taking, among others, into account that the main theological promoter of this paradigm is Cardinal Walter Kasper,⁴ the question arises as to whether we are dealing with anything new here. For it cannot be ruled out that the so-called “new paradigm” is merely a new name for the way of understanding the mission of the Church in the modern world that has been known for a long time and consciously rejected by St. John Paul II. This issue seems worthwhile to be a subject of in-depth research.

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¹ As John XXIII stressed in *Mater et Magistra*—“This teaching rests on one basic principle: individual human beings are the foundation, the cause, and the end of every social institution. That is necessarily so, for men are by nature social beings. This fact must be recognized, as also the fact that they are raised in the plan of Providence to an order of reality which is above nature” (John XXIII 1961, no. 219).

² See, e.g., the famous phrase of Pius XI from the *Quadragesimo Anno* about the principle of subsidiarity as “the first law of social philosophy”.

³ It is worth noting in passing that after his election to the See of Peter, John Paul II abandoned the use of the term “social theology” he had previously employed.

⁴ He introduced this term into the ecclesiastical debate during a speech at the consistory of the Extraordinary Synod on the Family, delivered at the invitation of Pope Francis. For more, see: Kupczak (2018).

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