

# The Evolution of Catholic Social Ethics



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*From the Palaeolithic to Pope Francis*

Frank Colborn

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## THE EVOLUTION OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL ETHICS

From the Palaeolithic to Pope Francis

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For Melissa,  
Who “hungers and thirsts after justice.”



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# Contents

*Introduction* | ix

*One* The Dawn of Morality: The Mores of the Foragers | 1

*Two* Stepping Stones to Civilization: The Lives of Farmers  
in the Neolithic (New Stone) Age | 10

*Three* The Laws of the Cities | 18

*Four* Prophet and Sage in the Axial Age: The Prophets  
of Israel and their Contemporaries | 21

*Five* The Message of the Scriptures: The Hebrew Bible/  
Old Testament | 29

*Six* The New Testament | 51

*Seven* Life in the Spirit | 69

*Eight* Christians in the Empire | 77

*Nine* The Rise of Western Christian Civilization | 85

*Ten* The High Middle Ages: From Practice to Theory:  
Aquinas (and Others) | 91

*Eleven* Christendom Expanding: Imperialism and  
its Discontents | 99

*Twelve* Christendom Divided: The Protestant Reformation | 102

*Thirteen* The Transition to Modernity | 106

*Fourteen* The Early Modern World: The Seventeenth  
and Eighteenth Centuries | 108

*Fifteen* The Age of Reason and Freedom | 110

## CONTENTS

<i>Sixteen</i>	A New World: The Nineteenth Century   116
<i>Seventeen</i>	The Twentieth Century: 1900–1980 Popes, Prelates, and People Deal With Modernity   126
<i>Eighteen</i>	Toward a “Post-Modern” (?) World: 1965–2000   143
<i>Nineteen</i>	The New Millennium   153
<i>Twenty</i>	Reflections on This History   160
	Acknowledgments   163
<i>Appendix A</i>	Official Papal Documents   165
<i>Appendix B</i>	Collections and Commentaries   166
<i>Appendix C</i>	Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching   168
	<i>Bibliography</i>   169



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# Introduction

## What is Catholic Social Ethics About?

SOCIAL ETHICS WOULD SEEM to be a reflection on moral life in society. But that covers too much. After all, we live all our lives in networks of relationships with other people: our families, schools, workplaces, churches, cities, country, and the world. These are social institutions: patterns of behavior and relationships based on common worldviews and self-understanding.

Since no one can think of everything at once, it's customary to give special treatment to sexual ethics, for example, and the highly technical field of medical ethics with its life-and-death issues. Then there are professional ethics: business ethics, legal ethics, etc. That leaves a lot of territory for social ethics.

In fact, much of official Catholic social teaching has been about economics, with some attention to peace and war, and somewhat less to other issues, such as governmental systems or cultural development. Catholic social ethics, though, is broader than official teachings of the church. It includes the writings of theologians and bishops and the witness of good people who live and die by their faith. Nevertheless, economic concerns are prominent in what follows. Will that be a problem?

## Why Should We Care?

Mention sexual ethics and people get interested. Mention abortion or euthanasia and people get excited. Mention economics and people get bored.

But consider the following: economic inequality, immigration, nationalism, the opioid epidemic, racism, sexism, and war. All are connected, related

to each other. Such problems are the result of false ideas and bad decisions that create unjust institutions and contribute to further wrong ideas and actions. To correct these evils, we need correct ideas—good social ethics.

### Will it Help to Know Much about History?

It's not difficult to know *what* Catholic beliefs about social ethics are. They revolve around two poles: individual dignity and social solidarity. They can be found in short summaries,<sup>1</sup> in lengthy expositions,<sup>2</sup> in collections of official statements—see Appendix A for lists of these—and commentaries—see Appendix B. The more complex question is: *Why* do we hold these convictions?

To answer that fully requires that we pursue three different questions. How did we arrive at the convictions we hold today? What are the assumptions and commitments that underlie our present beliefs? And how do they make sense in light of other things we know? (Similarly, an explanation of why I am a Catholic could consider my upbringing and life history, my current commitments and assumptions, and how Catholic faith fits into my whole worldview.)

This work is concentrated on the first of those three questions: How did our social ethics originate and develop?

### Do We Really Need Another Version of Our History?

There are many excellent studies of particular periods in our history, such as ancient Israel, the New Testament, the Patristic era, and modern times. There are some efforts to bring the different eras together, as in Daniel Finn's fine and recent work, *Christian Economic Ethics*. What more could be added?

In a word, context. That means primarily a narrative context, an account that shows how one century led to the next, how one era followed another. So I have included some centuries when a kind of social morality was developing without a great deal of thinking about it.

1. U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching*. For a list of these, see Appendix C.

2. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*.

It also means a deeper context in the story of humanity, of how people dealt with each other and with life in the millennia before the Bible. The first chapters of this book go back before the rise of civilizations.

Then there's the broad context of world history: while our social ethic was developing, what was happening in other religions and civilizations? Jewish, Muslim, Chinese, and Indian authors had things to say about social ethics. In more recent times, not only other Christians, but also atheists and agnostics have proposed their own ethics. Some of them are included in what follows.

Finally, I want to say something about the ecclesial context. Popes and bishops have had lots to say. But theologians have too. And so, in their own way, have the heroic people who show us the meaning of Catholic social ethics by their lives—and their deaths. They too will be mentioned in the pages ahead.

Inevitably, any historical narrative is selective, telling of some people and events but not all. Of course the selecting is done by the author of the narrative. So it is necessary to say something about the author and his point of view.

### About the Author

I am an American Catholic priest of Irish and English descent, now semi-retired. I am well aware that old white men are not exactly the wave of the future, that the Catholic Church in the U.S. is facing serious problems (many of them created by priests and bishops), and that our country is not any longer the dominant power it once was. Nevertheless, America is still the most powerful nation in the world, Catholics still constitute the largest religious denomination in America, and American Catholics might yet make a great contribution to peace and justice in the world of the twenty-first century if they cultivate a truly Catholic view of life. And my life as a priest has given me some experience of dealing with social problems.

As a student in the seminary, my heroes were Blessed Charles de Foucauld, who loved the Eucharist and the poor; Canon Josef Cardijn, founder of the Young Christian Workers; and a future saint of the church, Dorothy Day, whom I had the privilege of meeting a couple of times in later life. I studied theology under Jesuits at the Gregorian University in Rome, among them Bernard Lonergan and Josef Fuchs. After ordination in 1963, I worked for a couple of years in parishes in the Los Angeles

## INTRODUCTION

area, and then went back to receive a Doctorate in Theology from the Gregorian University in 1969.

Returning to southern California, I taught theology at St. John's Seminary in Camarillo during the 1970s—interesting times. I joined others in objecting to U.S. military policy in Southeast Asia. I prayed and marched and picketed with Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers. A little later I helped an urban community organizing effort, Saul Alinsky-style, get started in Los Angeles.

In the 1980s I returned to parish ministry in a largely Spanish-speaking parish. After that I spent some time in an interfaith campus ministry on a secular campus, offering there a course on Catholic teaching. After the 1992 riots in Los Angeles, I moved to a mostly African-American parish as pastor there, and when my term there was up, I became pastor of a very diverse parish in Pasadena. Finally I retired from administrative responsibilities and amused myself by reading and writing—culminating in this book.

In all these venues I have taught about Catholic social ethics, addressing seminarians, college students, and adults in a variety of contexts, and writing an occasional article on the subject. I write in this book from the viewpoint of a teacher trying to make the text readable for students, noting sources of information in footnotes and introducing chapters with a few words about their importance. This should give the reader an idea of my perspective.

But enough about me. It's time to talk about our ancestors.

## The Dawn of Morality

*The Mores of the Foragers*

WAS THERE ANY KIND of social morality before the Bible? Prehistoric human beings did not, of course, have written codes of social ethics, but did they have some ideas of right and wrong, some precursors of what would become social ethics? To put the same question from another point of view: Did the biblical teaching on social ethics mark a rupture with all that had gone before, or was it part of an already-existing process of development? Can we know anything about this? And does it matter?

It matters. Consider some different stories of the development of human society and how these narratives affect people's thinking. And then let us see what contemporary scientists have to say about the issues.

Some Protestant theologians, inspired by Martin Luther, have told the story as follows. Human nature, they say, has been totally corrupted by sin. From the time of our first ancestors, human minds have been so darkened that we are unable to know God's will, much less do it, without special supernatural revelation. Of course God has given us that revelation through the Bible, but even now we cannot expect much from secular, even nominally Christian, society. The state can at best repress evildoers and maintain some kind of order, but it is unrealistic to expect justice and righteousness from the world. Such a view does not impel one to fight for justice.

On the other hand, some, following John Calvin, say true Christians—but only they—may hope to create a righteous society here on earth. The early New England Puritans thought this as well, and their spiritual heirs are still with us.

Thomas Hobbes proposed a secular kind of pessimistic narrative, as follows. "Man in the state of nature" was an isolated individual, at odds with

his fellow men. (Presumably women were the same.) People had to band together and give over their individual freedom to a higher authority for the sake of security, for self-defense, mostly against other human beings. It is still the function of the state to protect us from threats, both foreign and domestic, and that is all the state is good for.

An optimistic secular narrative is associated with Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He too believed that the natural state of human beings was solitary, but that this was a happy and free existence in which people associated with each other only when they chose to do so. With the rise of organized society, people lost that freedom. Yet we might still be free and happy if Church and State would leave us alone. (There is more to Rousseau than that, and it would be unfair to put all the blame on him for the naïve optimism of today.)

A Catholic account of the development of society would differ from all of the above. We believe that human beings have been affected by the sins of our ancestors, going back far beyond recorded history, but that we are still capable of reasoning and so of knowing something about right and wrong. Though fuller revelation has come to us through the Word of God, we can discuss human rights and justice on a rational basis with people who do not accept the Bible as revelation. We hope to work toward a more just society with all people of good will. We should be hopeful. We should not be extremely optimistic nor extremely pessimistic. It will be seen that this Catholic story is more compatible than the others mentioned with the ideas of contemporary anthropologists and other scientists.

One might think that little could be known about the ethics and religion of prehistoric peoples. They were, after all, illiterate, and left neither written records nor grand monuments. Yet a good deal has been written lately about the origins of morality in the Late Stone Age.<sup>1</sup> Archaeology,<sup>2</sup> evolutionary biology,<sup>3</sup> paleoanthropology, genetics,<sup>4</sup> ethology (the study of animal behavior), and even game theory give us some clues about our early ancestors. We can at least be sure that our ancestors lived for many

1. Pinker, *How the Mind Works*. Pinker is notoriously opinionated and controversial, but still interesting.

2. Wade, *Before the Dawn*.

3. *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 7 (2000) 1–352. Boniolo and de Anna, *Evolutionary Ethics and Contemporary Biology*.

4. Washington, D.C., National Geographic, 2007. Alan R. Templeton interprets the evidence from genetic analysis somewhat differently in “Out of Africa Again and Again,” 45–51.

millennia as wandering bands of a few families, surviving by hunting and gathering their food.

But what can we know of the mores and piety of our ancestors of the Late Stone Age? Were they ethical monotheists? Were they superstitious primitives? Were they noble savages who needed neither religion nor ethics? All of the above have occurred to people, but there is little hard evidence for any of them. Of what, then, do we have evidence?

Some think we can get clues from the study of other animals. Most vocal, perhaps, is Frans de Waal, a primatologist who has devoted years to observing chimpanzees. De Waal writes to refute what he calls veneer theory—the idea that our morality is a thin veneer covering up a fundamentally anti-social animal nature. In *Primates and Philosophers*,<sup>5</sup> he has insisted that these animals are not all beastly and brutish. True, they can be aggressive towards each other, they live in male-dominated, hierarchical groups, and their intragroup politics can be violent, as can their conflicts with outsiders, but they can also demonstrate empathy, compassion, cooperation, sharing, and the ability to mediate disputes and to reconcile disputes. Besides chimpanzees, we are related to bonobos, a species much like chimpanzees but smaller and rather different in behavior, perhaps because their native habitat is an easier environment to live in. Their groups are much more egalitarian, or matrifocal, with the eldest females automatically in charge of distributing extra food. They are sexually active to a remarkable extent. With neither food nor sex to fight over, the males are less aggressive than their chimpanzee cousins; they make love rather than war. Our nearest animal relatives have the natural capacities or tendencies which in humans are what de Waal calls the building blocks of morality.

But are we more like chimpanzees or like bonobos? De Waal has said we have some of both in us; we have male bonding (like chimpanzees), and female bonding (like bonobos), and sometimes polygamy (like both), yet the nuclear family—the most common arrangement among humans—is our own; we are inclined to make both love and war; we can be “both more systematically brutal than chimpanzees, and more empathic than bonobos”; a human being is, in short, “one of the most internally conflicted animals ever to walk the earth.”<sup>6</sup>

Must we leave it at that? Our earliest ancestors inherited conflicting instincts and tendencies from the beginning? Evolutionary biologists

5. de Waal, et al., *Primates and Philosophers*. Also de Waal, *Age of Empathy*.

6. de Waal, *Our Inner Ape*, 221, 237.

argue that we can be more definite about some of those innate inclinations.<sup>7</sup> Families that care for their children so that some survive may hope to have grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Behavior that increases the fitness of another's DNA at some cost to one's own is called altruism. In this context, altruism refers to behavior, rather than mental or emotional states, and it need not be terribly costly—it could mean simply sharing food when resources are scarce. In technical language, a genetic mutation that inclined people so as to care for their offspring would be adaptive, that is, it would enhance the fitness (probability of replication in future generations) of the gene line of its bearers. It would be likely to be selected by nature for survival. So we may conclude that kin-selected altruism, or simply kin altruism, was part of the normal equipment of even our remotest ancestors.

Furthermore, people share copies of their genes not only with their children but also with their siblings, and, to a lesser extent, with their cousins. Natural selection would lead to the proliferation of genes that promoted caring for the extended family, too. "Inclusive fitness"<sup>8</sup> is the term suggested by William Hamilton to describe the potential for survival of a gene line when all copies, in all relatives, are taken into account. The saying, "Me against my brother; my brother and I against our cousins; all of us cousins against the world," is not just a product of culture, but an expression of an innate tendency in human nature. So feeling for extended family would have been common among our earliest ancestors too.

Some other behaviors that extend to unrelated people have been and should be called pro-social rather than altruistic since they involve no long-term sacrifice. One is mutual cooperation, for example in hunting large animals or fending off predators, which is for the immediate benefit of all concerned. An innate inclination to cooperate would have been adaptive in many circumstances and so also, presumably, common in the Old Stone Age.

Another pro-social behavior is reciprocal altruism, or more properly reciprocity, as expressed in the oft-cited saying, "If you scratch my back I'll scratch yours." More important than back-scratching is food-sharing. The successful hunter may share food with his unlucky neighbor, knowing that in the future their fortunes may be reversed and his family will need his neighbor's help. Even if the neighbor is unable to reciprocate, other neighbors may by common agreement share food with those who have

7. Gintis et al., "Explaining Altruistic Behavior in Humans," 153–72.

8. Hamilton, "Genetical Evolution of Human Behaviour," 1.



shared in the past: this is indirect reciprocity. And to enforce that common agreement, the social group may also have to agree to punish, perhaps even ostracize, noncooperators.

Some want to argue that real altruism toward nonkinfolk could have evolved through a natural process of group selection: a group whose members cared for each other would outcompete and eventually replace groups whose members did not cooperate.<sup>9</sup> This claim is highly controversial. It remains plausible, at least, that our distant ancestors enjoyed some natural tendencies toward real altruism beyond their family circles.

There is a dark side to all of the above. Care for family, for kin, for neighbors, even for a larger community, leads toward indifference or even hostility to those who are not of our group. Some have called this tendency groupishness. Group selection, if it is real, simply reinforces the distinction between in-group and out-group. Again, we meet the probability of conflicting tendencies. Groups of hunters and gatherers might have found it advantageous to trade with and intermarry with other clans. At the same time they might have found lots of reasons to fight with each other. We'll return to this in looking at contemporary ethnography.

About another possible aspect of morality in ancient times there is more disagreement. Some hold that hunter-gathering clans have a respect for their environment greater than that of agricultural or industrial civilizations. Yet prehistoric peoples are suspected—though the evidence is not conclusive—of having killed off several species of large animals as they moved into Australia and the Americas. Still, hunters and gatherers who did not work out some sustainable relationship with their food supply would not last long. We come again to a probable conclusion: most Old Stone Age groups would have been careful not to abuse their environment.

Meanwhile, game theorists have something to say. Game theory purports to show by mathematical reasoning how a rational (self-interested) person will respond in situations of conflict and/or cooperation. Ken Binmore is one game theorist who has discussed the origins of morality at length.<sup>10</sup> Binmore argues that reciprocity is what makes the world go round. Speculating about the origins of morality, he suggests that it began with food-sharing in family circles, was extended, somewhat randomly, to include nonkin, and

9. Sober and Wilson, *Unto Others*.

10. Binmore, *Game Theory and the Social Contract*. For Binmore, a social contract is a "social consensus" about "presently accepted rules . . . common understandings that have evolved to coordinate the behavior of those acting in their own enlightened self interest . . . broadly conceived" (Binmore, *Game Theory and the Social Contract*, 1:17).

expanded to more general reciprocity by a natural process. Those inclined to practice reciprocity easily and naturally would have a natural advantage over those who held back. To facilitate the business of sharing without endless quibbling, a natural sense of rough fairness would have emerged early on, along with a capacity for outrage at unfairness and envy of those unfairly privileged. (So it is among young children today, who cry, "It isn't fair," long before they can work things out mathematically.) Precisely what fairness would consist of would be a matter of social convention. Children would learn by watching their elders how things should be shared with men, with women, with children, and with nonrelatives.

To enable human beings to live together in fairly large groups, without bosses to tell them how to share their resources, people would need not only a sense of what's fair for themselves, but the ability to put themselves in the place of another, to guess what arrangement another might find acceptable and what offer she might refuse as insulting.<sup>11</sup> Since hunter-gathering clans live without bosses in many parts of the world today, it seems likely that the ability to do so evolved quickly when all human beings lived in such clans.

At this point a thoughtful observer asks, "Are we talking about morality yet?" So far it's all been about capacities, tendencies, dispositions, impulses, feelings, or conformity to social customs. Human morality, one respondent to de Waal says, means moral "autonomy," that is, "the capacity for normative self-government."<sup>12</sup> Another insists that while "veneer theory" may be wrong, so is the idea that all our morality is genetically based; some is based on reason.<sup>13</sup> Christian Smith, a sociologist of religion, insists that no amount of talk about kin altruism, reciprocity, or self-interest can account for human morality, which is a matter of conscious transcendence of mere self-interest. We are, he insists, self-conscious and reflective animals, able to reflect on our desires and seek the truth about what is good and bad, apart from our own desires.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps something can be learned from the study of contemporary hunter-gathering people. If certain kinds of behavior are found among all such groups today, it's reasonable to infer that those behaviors may have been common to hunter-gatherers through the millennia. It turns out, from the studies of anthropologists, that some things are practically

11. Binmore, *Natural Justice*, 134–36.

12. Korsgaard, "Morality and the Distinctiveness of Human Action," 112.

13. Kitcher, "Ethics and Evolution," 150.

14. Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals*.

universal. Food-sharing, whether openhearted or grudging, is one. (Binmore cites many examples from the ethnographic literature.<sup>15</sup>) The survival advantage is obvious.

Another characteristic of contemporary hunter-gatherers is egalitarianism. Unlike chimpanzees, humans in hunter-gatherer groups don't have male-dominated, nor for that matter female-dominated, hierarchies. They don't like high-handed bosses. They don't cheerfully tolerate one person or family having too much more than another. One is not supposed to get ahead of oneself, and anyone who tries to lord it over others is put back in place by the resistance of the rest of the group. People who don't like their group or its leadership can join some other group.<sup>16</sup>

There are other "human universals" too.<sup>17</sup> All peoples have something like marriage, some kind of sexual ethics, and some rules of modesty, however different from our own. Some aspects of sexual morality are almost universal or de facto common without being universally obligatory. Incest, for example, is generally abhorred—but not universally, and even where abhorred, not always socially punished.<sup>18</sup> And while various societies permit quite various kinds of relationships, the great majority of human families are centered on a man and a woman.<sup>19</sup> And as evolutionary biology suggests, kin are found to be more likely than nonkin to share with family members, and to care for those family members who are weak; while friendships outside of the family are likely to be reciprocal, not one-sided.

To survey all the ethnographic evidence would be an enormous task. Fortunately it's already been done. According to Robert Edgerton, in *The Balance of Human Kindness and Cruelty*,<sup>20</sup> the most diverse kinds of societies have developed in different parts of the world. Some are violent, with many killings reported among the members. Others are pacifistic, even to the point of repressing expressions of anger. Some go to war against neighboring clans, while some avoid fighting. Some are kind to pets, others are cruel. Most encourage sharing of food, but, according to Edgerton, there are

15. Binmore, *Game Theory and the Social Contract*, 2:212.

16. Levy-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*. His account disparages the anarchy of hunter-gatherers, while more recent writers seem to view it more positively.

17. Brown, in his book *Human Universals*, lists numerous traits he says are found in practically all societies; not all are biologically based, and many—the use of tools, shelter, and the like—are not relevant to morality or religion, but some are.

18. Brown, *Human Universals*, 118–21.

19. Brown, *Human Universals*, 136.

20. Edgerton, *Balance of Human Kindness and Cruelty*.

counterexamples. It seems that human beings are tremendously flexible and can settle into very different kinds of customs. Yet parents everywhere try to teach their children to behave properly, to share with others, to get along with their family members, and to resist desires to be selfish or mean.<sup>21</sup> We have returned to the theme of conflicting tendencies inherited by humans from the beginning. Edgerton concludes that “human nature” includes both positive and negative impulses, which cultures seek to channel.<sup>22</sup>

What does this imply for our early ancestors? They might have created quite different arrangements in different groups, even when they numbered only a few thousand people in a few score bands. While all would have been egalitarian and communitarian in the senses spoken of above, their sexual customs could have differed somewhat, and the atmosphere of kindness or harshness could have differed a lot from one group to another.

It will be worthwhile to reflect in more general terms how social institutions begin and develop.<sup>23</sup> They come, of course, from human minds, as people try to survive in a sometimes-difficult world along with other people. When they are successful, they pass on to their descendants what they have learned about themselves and life in the world, and so customs become part of a community’s inheritance and may rightly be called institutions. Of course humans are fallible and make mistakes, and so human institutions can be based on misunderstandings and sometimes need to be corrected. But since human beings can be selfish, if some people benefit from a custom or institution that disadvantages others, and if those who benefit are powerful enough, they may refuse to make corrections. So what Bernard Lonergan called the “social surd”<sup>24</sup> grows: an irrational institution based on a refusal to act on correct understanding of reality—in contemporary theological language, a sinful social structure.

So children growing up in one group might have experienced a warm family environment, but in another, a much less pleasant way of life might have existed. In every case they would have learned, more by watching than by listening, what kind of behavior their elders expected of them. Growing older, they would have learned the more general rules covering all members of the group their family belonged to—again, perhaps, more by observation

21. Edgerton, *Balance of Human Kindness and Cruelty*, 24–31.

22. Edgerton, *Balance of Human Kindness and Cruelty*, 201–7.

23. For a lengthy and technical account of this process, see Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction of Reality*.

24. Lonergan, *Insight*, 229.