

Paul Hanly Furfey and the Catholic Intellectual Tradition

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Abstract

This essay surveys and critiques Furfey's engagement with the sources of the Catholic tradition from the Apostolic era to the social encyclicals. Furfey used these sources in a selection and idiosyncratic way in accord with his advocacy of personalist social reform. His use of the early tradition—Scripture and Patristics—ignores common exegesis, contrary textual evidence, and well-known historical fact. His reading of the social encyclicals fails to grasp their implicit sociology, or the possibility of collective agency in society altogether. Throughout, he assumes a causal relationship between personal virtue and social reform, which the early tradition never articulates and the modern encyclicals explicitly reject. Ultimately, Furfey's Catholic sociology disappoints both on sociological and Catholic grounds.

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I. Introduction

Most sociologists today would consider a religiously informed social analysis, on its face, to be inconsistent with genuine social science, which must proceed by “value-free” inquiry; others, broadmindedly, might consider a religious sociology possible but irrelevant or at least not useful to genuine sociology. To this mindset, as to late modernity generally, the claims of Paul Hanly Furfey, Catholic priest and sociologist active in the second quarter of the 20th century, cannot help but be a bit jarring; for Furfey unapologetically grounded his social theory in the dogmatic truths of the Catholic faith. While the modern rejection of such a project is not without value, it is worth noting that it never actually engages the religious views it opposes. (Modern social scientists find such a stance plausible, but modern social scientists are axiomatically secular by training and orientation. Thus their critique or dismissal of religious, and to a lesser extent any “interested”, social theory, simply begs the question of what constitutes “genuine” sociology.) For simply to assert divergent assumptions, to the extent one is not simply being intolerant, doesn’t constitute an argument. Modern sociologists have their assumptions, which are secular, and Furfey has his, which are theological or religious. Without first committing to one set of assumptions, how is one to conclude that either view is better than the other?

Indeed, Furfey’s sociology is as assertively Catholic as today’s sociology is assertively secular. Catholic sociology, he argues, is superior to secular alternatives precisely because it appropriates the truths of divine revelation. For Catholic sociology, Church tradition is axiomatic. “The Catholic sociologist,” he explains, “cannot make up his theory out of his own hand. He must draw it from the teachings of the Church.”¹ In this essay I propose, stipulating this assumption, to examine Furfey’s use of the Church’s teachings in the formation of his social

thought. Assuming (for the sake of argument, if nothing else) that a sociology informed by Catholic teaching is possible and valuable, how adequate is Furfey's theory by that measure? To the extent that Furfey's views are persuasive, this method provides a much stronger assessment of his social theory than the alternative, for it critiques his sociology, not on the basis of current conceptions of what constitutes sociology, but on the basis of his own claims.

II. Sources of Authority

Although advocating close adherence to tradition, Furfey untraditionally privileges the New Testament and the ante-Nicene Fathers as especially authoritative sources for social thought. He argues: "Among all these sources of Catholic social teaching, of course the Holy Scriptures and the early Fathers are pre-eminent. For these are the *fontes revelationis* and to them the Catholic sociologist must turn as to a fountain head. . . .to learn the true nature of Catholic social reform."² This view of the relation of early to later components of the Tradition seems not to take seriously the Catholic understanding of the development of doctrine, in which later elements build upon and elucidate earlier ones. The normal Catholic approach would be to examine the most recent teachings of the magisterium (not to ignore Scripture, but interpreting it with magisterial teaching as a guide) in order to learn the "true nature" of any doctrine.

This criticism would not be too serious, perhaps, with regard to foundational aspects of dogma or morals, which are recognized to be already thoroughly developed within Scripture or the early Fathers. But Catholic social teaching is explicitly recognized as a later, very recent development of thought within Catholic doctrine. In light of this Furfey's variance from the tradition is striking. Consider, for example, the simple statement of the Catechism on this point: "The social doctrine of the Church developed in the nineteenth century when the Gospel encountered modern industrial society. . . The development of the doctrine of the Church on

economic and social matters attests the permanent value of the Church's teaching at the same time as it attests the true meaning of her Tradition, always living and active."

Furfey does not deny that Catholic doctrines develop, but he holds that the social teachings, which "have been particularly slow to develop",³ are still incoherent. "Catholics lack a definite theory of society,"⁴ he complains, which prevents a clear and coherent agenda for social reform. Yet, as we shall see below, he holds that the New Testament presents a complete theory of society. How is it that modern Catholics lack a definite theory of society when there was a complete and well-rounded doctrine in the New Testament era? Furfey never addresses this question. However, he frequently implies that modern Catholics have lost or degraded the original fire and purity of the New Testament vision of social reform. This idea, that an original pure revelation has been degraded and is currently being rediscovered, is essentially Protestant in orientation, a point to which I will return in the conclusion of this essay.

As sources of authority, then, Furfey draws upon, in roughly descending order, the New Testament, the early Church Fathers, and the modern social encyclicals. I will examine his treatment of each of these sources in the same order.

III. Scripture

For Furfey, the New Testament presents a "complete and well-rounded"⁵ body of social doctrine. The central idea is the Mystical Body of Christ, in which "common life Christians are elevated to the supernatural order and they practice supernatural virtues of which charity is the chief."⁶ This is the fundamental social teaching of the New Testament.⁷ Motivated by charity, Christians form a new society of mutual love, dignity, and equality. The rich voluntarily renounce their riches to share with the poor; all persons are detached from seeking great wealth.

In the unity of the Mystical Body, differences of race, sex, or social condition are seen to be superficial and unimportant, and have no place.

By the practice of charity “Christians will influence society for the better.”⁸ This “social effect of the practice of the social virtues by the individual person”⁹ is what Furfey means by personalist social action. This, and not by organized social reform, is how the early Christians changed society. Furfey is explicit about this: “Personalist social reform is the characteristic technique of the early Church. Unless we understand personalist social action we can read the New Testament and the early Fathers and miss their social thought entirely.”¹⁰

Although the Church in our day has become weak and corrupted, for the Christians of the New Testament era the doctrine of the Mystical Body “was more than a beautiful ideal; they practiced what they preached.”¹¹ That the practice of virtue in early Christianity had the intent and effect of rectifying social wrongs in early Christianity. Almsgiving, for example, constituted “the personalistic attack on the unequal distribution of wealth”, one that was “very effective.”¹² Organized social reform can also influence society, but personalist social reform is better. It is “just as effective as organized action. In fact, in many cases it is much more effective.”¹³ Personalist action can be undertaken, moreover, when organized action is not possible or is ineffective.¹⁴ Despite its outlaw status, the early Church’s practice of charity “was a leaven which was gradually leavening the whole mass” of Roman society.¹⁵

Furfey’s exposition of Scripture conveys a sense of challenge, even excitement, but it is premised upon a number of textual and factual inaccuracies. At least three of these problems are quite serious. First, New Testament accounts do not support the idea that the early Church generally operated as an ideal community such as Furfey describes. Second, his claim for the effectiveness of Apostolic era personalist reform is made problematic by the apparent persistence

of social inequalities in Roman society and especially in the Church. Finally, the notion of personalist social action is inconsistent with the early Church's expressed understandings of both virtue and society. This third problem extends into Furfey's use of the early Church Fathers as well as Scripture. I will deal with each of these issues in turn.

A. Apostolic heroism?

As noted above, Furfey maintains that personalist social action motivated by charity characterized the church of the Apostolic era. The modern Church, he urges, can learn from "our heroic ancestors in the faith" to "be unworldly, to love poverty, obscurity and austerity. . . to live in a unity of spirit. . . to forget the distinction. . . between race and race. . . [and] to help the poor by heroic almsgiving."¹⁶ However, it is not at all clear from the evidence that the early Church, beyond the twelve Apostles, actually operated in such an ideal fashion.

Furfey himself provides little evidence for this ideal view of early Christianity. In his fullest treatment of the topic he points to only two things as evidence: St. Paul's collection for the needy Christians in Judea, and Acts 4:32: "The multitude of the believers were of one heart and one soul, and not one of them said that anything he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common."¹⁷ Neither of these, however, clearly supports the claim he is making.

Many exegetes question whether Acts 4:32ff (and the parallel passage at Acts 2:44-45) is strictly literal history. The superlative references ("not one . . . all") suggest that this is an idealized account, whether by Luke himself or a redactor. Grant notes that these are summary statements that make "striking statements about Christian life at Jerusalem" in accord with favorite Lucan themes.¹⁸ While Peter's statement in Acts 3 that he has neither silver nor gold is consistent with taking these summaries at face value, the condemnation of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11) does not. Here Peter makes clear that the sin they have committed consists not in

withholding their property as their own, but in lying about the amount it brought at sale. “While it remained unsold, did it not remain yours?” he asks. (Acts 5:4) Moreover, here is a clear counterexample to the claim, made just 6 verses earlier, that all possessions were donated for the needy.

Furfey’s interpretation, furthermore, overlooks an obvious feature: the Jerusalem Christians are not reported to have shared their goods with society, or with the poor generally, but only with those who were being added to the Church. Some have argued from this that the early Christians understood the demands of Christian charity to apply only to relationships with other Christians, but not relationship with unbelievers.¹⁹

This may go too far, but it underscores the plain point that the benefits of such heroic charity as is reported in the New Testament accrued overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, to those inside the Church.

Surprisingly, for someone who was an advocate of “supernatural sociology”, Furfey also completely ignores the dramatic stories of supernatural healings, visions and miracles scattered throughout the accounts of the early Church. These are clearly integral to the life of the church and further its apostolic mission and charity. If the healing of the lame man in Acts 3 is representative, here is a direct amelioration of a social problem on a personal level that is fully in accord with any other instance of personalist action that may be found in the book. The fact that Peter offers the healing as alms, and precedes it by saying, “Silver and gold I have none”, makes the connection with voluntary renunciation of wealth explicit. On this point, it appears that Furfey’s supernatural sociology is not supernatural enough.

In any event, it is clear that such heroic renunciation and sharing of goods, if it actually occurred, did not last long in Jerusalem, and did not characterize the activity of early Christians

generally. It was only a few weeks at most before inequities in the distribution of goods due to ethnic factions—the Hebrew Christians were shortchanging the Greeks—necessitated the commissioning of deacons to oversee the distribution so that the Apostles’ ministry would not be distracted by the complaints (Acts 6:1ff). This is hardly a picture of heroic renunciation and charity. Furthermore, as Harrison notes, “apparently the regular distribution referred to in the early days of the church had to be discontinued” fairly soon because “the resources of the local church were unable to cope with the situation.”²⁰ Indeed, it was precisely for the Jerusalem Christians, by then in collective penury, that St. Paul took the collection that Furfey points to as additional evidence of heroic charity.

The Corinthian Christians to whom Paul wrote soliciting the collection could hardly be said to be examples of heroic charity. The community was split by factions (I Corinthians 1:11-12); sexual immorality (6:12-13), including incest (5:1), was openly tolerated, even justified; lawsuits between members were a problem (6:1); and the poor were discriminated against even in the sharing of the communion meal (11:17-22). Nor does Paul make heroic charity the basis of his appeal. He nowhere advocates that they should renounce their property; on the contrary, he asks only that each contribute a small amount—“whatever he can afford” (16:2)—each week. While Furfey takes as evidence of personalistic action Paul’s catalogue of his own apostolic sacrifice—“We go hungry and thirsty, poorly clad and roughly treated” (4:11-12)—Paul’s point is to contrast his experience with that of the Corinthians: “You are already satisfied; you have already grown rich. . . .” (4:8). It is out of their surplus wealth, not voluntary poverty, that Paul appeals to them to supply the needs of the Jerusalem Christians, “not that others should have relief while you are burdened” (2 Corinthians 8:13-14). Clearly, Furfey’s description of an ideal

community of heroic renunciation and charity does not apply to the Corinthian Church or to the collection he references.

Apart from possibly the primitive Jerusalem assembly, heroic charity (as distinct from merely generous almsgiving) cannot be said to represent the apostolic church more generally. To the contrary, Harrison points out that ascetic practices, particularly celibacy, fasting and the renunciation of wealth, were not practiced in the early church as much as they were in the fourth century.²¹ The best that can be said is that, like the present day, a wide variety of church forms and philanthropies can be found throughout the apostolic era in responses to different social settings.²² Contrary to Furfey's argument, no single form of charity can be taken as exemplary for all churches either then or now.

B. Persistent problems

Not only does Furfey claim that the early church actually practiced personalist social action; he also claims that it was actually effective in bringing about social change in the church and the wider society. To support these claims, Furfey is led inexorably to defend positions that are manifestly contrary to fact.

For example, Furfey claims that "the familiar principle of the Mystical Body" resulted in a "lack of consciousness of racial differences" which solved the problem of race relations in the apostolic church.²³ Yet reported problems over racial differences abounded, even if we confine ourselves to the historical material of the New Testament. We have already noted how the Greek widows were short-changed by the Hebrew administrators of church welfare funds in Jerusalem (Acts 6:1). This discrimination only involved Jews of different racial mixtures, however. The consensus assumption among the Jerusalem Christians at that point in time was that persons not of the Jewish race ("Gentiles") were not eligible for salvation at all. Far from being an implicit

result of charity, this assumption only changed as a result of special visions (Acts 10), confrontations (Galatians 1) and the first church council (Acts 15). And the idea that non-Jews could be saved was not accepted by the early church immediately, uniformly, or in some cases ever. The transformation of Christianity from a Jewish sect to a universal religion, open to all races, is one of the major themes of the book of Acts, carried by the gradual movement of the narrative from Jerusalem to Rome.

In light of these inconvenient facts, which Furfey completely ignores, his claim that the early church was not conscious of racial differences cannot be considered credible. Likewise, Furfey's treatment of the place of wealth and the position of women in the early church also founders on the facts. But his most blatant misrepresentation of the history of social issues in early Christianity regards the institution of slavery.

Not surprisingly, Furfey asserts that "slavery. . .was inconsistent with the Christian moral ideal as implied by the doctrine of the Mystical Body."²⁴ And unlike the issues just discussed, he does recognize the problem that the persistence of slavery in the early church presents for his understanding of personalist social action. "Since slaves are proclaimed the equals of free men within the unity of the Mystical Body, we might expect that St. Paul would demand the immediate liberation of all slaves. This, however, was not the case." Furfey explains this difficulty by claiming that Paul temporized, in a two-pronged argument. Although a) the absence of slavery was part of St. Paul's social ideal, b) it was not part of his "immediate practical program" because of the social disruption that manumission would cause. "To preach the liberation of all slaves at once would have done more harm than good."²⁵ Eventually, however, Paul's teaching led to the liberation of Roman slaves.

To make this argument, however, is to undercut the whole idea of personalist social action. If the apostles refrained from enacting their social principles because it would disrupt social order, they clearly were not practicing nonparticipation. If St. Paul denied a clear implication of the Mystical Body in order to preserve pagan society or avoid a reputation for fomenting disorder, he was, according to Furfey's own theory, engaged in compromise rather than practicing heroic charity and renunciation.

In addition to this serious problem, both prongs of Furfey's argument regarding slavery require factual assertions that are highly problematic. Regarding the first prong (a), there is simply no evidence that St. Paul ever envisioned the general liberation of slaves. His counsel to slaves was to find contentment with their place in society. "Were you a slave when you were called? Do not be concerned but, even if you can gain your freedom, make the most of it." (1Cor 7:20-21 NAB) Furfey claims that "the whole Epistle to Philemon is indeed a beautiful and tactful plea for the liberation of the latter's slave,"²⁶ but this exaggerates from a single oblique hint—"I know you will do even more than I say" (Philemon 21)—and ignores the fact that the occasion of the letter is that Paul is returning Onesimus to his master. Brown is representative of the more balanced scholarly consensus on this point: "[D]espite his implicit encouragement to release Onesimus, Paul does not tell Philemon explicitly that keeping another human being as a slave factually denies that Christ has changed values."²⁷ Moreover, Philemon was never understood by the Church to even hint against slavery before the 19th century, so that ". . . through the centuries Paul's failure to condemn slavery was used. . . as proof that the institution was not evil in itself."²⁸

For the second prong (b), Furfey makes the striking claim that the teaching of Christianity did eventually lead to the actual liberation of all Roman slaves. ". . . as soon as the

doctrine [of the Mystical Body] was widely accepted, slavery disappeared automatically in the Roman Empire.”²⁹ Furfey provides no basis for this claim, nor could he have, for there is none. The assertion is contrary to all historical evidence, including the unanimous witness of the Christian apologists. Far from disappearing, Cowell estimates that the number of slaves increased throughout the duration of the Roman Empire.³⁰ The Roman practice of enslaving the Goths and Huns was a primary motivation of the Germanic rebellion and invasion of Rome. Slavery did not cease even with the fall of the empire, but persisted in a mitigated but real form in the medieval institution of serfdom. That Furfey was unaware of such historical knowledge may be hard to believe. Lest we may think he misspoke, however, he adds, “Here is an example of personalist social action at its best.”³¹ Elsewhere he insists again that the Roman Empire was concretely converted by Christian love.³²

We have seen that in the face of persistent social problems that contradict his claims for the effectiveness of personalist social action, Furfey either ignores the contrary evidence, as with race relations, wealth or women, or is led to make clearly counterfactual claims, as with slavery. For all these issues, Furfey tends, regardless of contrary evidence, to read 20th-century social ideals back into the apostolic church—a point I will expand in the conclusion. Despite the inspirational tenor of his ideas, we must conclude that his strategies to address these problems are not very successful, nor are his arguments convincing regarding the effectiveness of early Christian personalist social action.

IV. Scripture and Patristics: Virtue and Social Reform

Besides errors of fact, however, Furfey’s views are confronted by a more fundamental problem in the New Testament, extending into his use of the early Patristic sources. Not only is Furfey in factual error in claiming that personalist social action actually produced social change

in the apostolic era, there is not a shred of evidence that any early Christian writer ever thought that they would.

Furfey consistently interprets the abundant exhortations to virtue in the early Christian literature as a plan of social action, undertaken on the conviction that “personal reform will gradually lead to social reform.”³³ Indeed, for this reason Furfey sees the Holy Scriptures and early Fathers as the pre-eminent sources of Catholic social theory.³⁴ However, while personal reform is dealt with at great length in these sources, not once in all of this literature is the idea of social reform ever discussed.

The idea of social reform is foreign to the thinking of the New Testament. As Harrison points out, in the New Testament Christians are aliens and exiles in the world (I Pet. 2:11), whose citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20), and who have no lasting abode here but seek one to come (Heb. 13:14).³⁵ While to separate completely from society is impractical, personal holiness calls for as much detachment from the corrupt world order as possible, and there is certainly no sense of a positive obligation toward society. Brown, voicing the consensus view of modern exegesis, attributes this to the early Church’s apocalyptic expectations: “[B]elief in the imminent return of Christ allowed toleration of unjust social conditions for the expected short while.”³⁶

Even Brown’s view overstates the case for social concern in the early Church, however. There is little doubt that the expectation of an immediate Parousia strongly conditioned the thinking of the early Church, but if it served to suppress the development of an incipient apostolic social theory, one would expect such a theory to develop soon after the Church began to adjust to the possibility that Christ’s coming was delayed indefinitely, that is, by the mid-second century. Furfey shares with Brown the perception that the development of the Church’s impulse for social reform, implicit in the apostolic era, was suppressed by social conditions,

although he points to different conditions and a different timeline: “The Church had to wait for the Peace of Constantine [314 a.d.] before it could come out in the open and sponsor social reform.”³⁷

Both Furfey’s and Brown’s views founder, however, on the fact that it was not until at least a thousand years after Constantine that anything like the idea of social reform began to emerge. This is a point upon which there is virtually no historical disagreement. Gordon writes that, but for a couple possible exceptions, “[T]here would seem to be general scholarly agreement with the judgment of Gerhart Ladner that, “. . . since the Christianization of the Roman Empire not one of the Fathers. . . expect a universal change of economic and social conditions to result from the preaching of Christian morality.”³⁸ “The Fathers”, Ladner continues at the same place, “did not expect a general disappearance of social injustice on earth.”³⁹

Although the Fathers advocated works of charity that may have had some social benefit, they in no way conceived of this as oriented toward social reform, personalist or otherwise. Gordon notes that “in urging almsgiving. . . the Fathers’ chief emphasis is on the spiritual benefits accruing to the individual who undertakes such action. . . Social reform. . . appears to be either outside their scope of vision or deemed no part of Christ-inspired social action.”⁴⁰

The two possible exceptions involve principles in Augustine’s *City of God* and Chrysostom’s call for Christians to free their slaves. Furfey claims that Augustine teaches an unadulterated theory of personalist social action.⁴¹ Others have found in him the seeds of a more traditional doctrine of social reform.⁴² However, while Augustine’s two-kingdom view of the relations of the spiritual and material realms was philosophically important for the later development of the Church’s social theory, as Ladner notes, “St. Augustine did not envisage a

reform of the socioeconomic order as such.”⁴³ Frend concludes his review of the later Fathers, principally Augustine, with the observation, “Reform of society, even as a sign of preparation for the Coming, proved to be beyond the imagination of the time. . . .to think that the Lord had shown that the Kingdom would be established by destroying many of the moulds accepted by society would have seemed altogether fanciful.”⁴⁴ Similarly, although Chrysostom did advocate freeing slaves (of which Furfey seems unaware), for him “the freeing of a slave is not an issue of social justice. Rather, it is an act of piety or charity.” His concern is to urge wealthy Christians to a less cluttered life, and he is not averse to them retaining one or two slaves.⁴⁵

Beyond the few oblique references already noted, Furfey did not deal much with the later Patristic tradition. This is consistent with his view that the most powerful advocacy of personalist social action was to be found in the most primitive sources. It remains to examine Furfey’s treatment of the modern Catholic social tradition that was emerging in his own day.

V. The Social Encyclicals

In contrast to his use of the Fathers and Scripture, Furfey’s treatment of the social encyclicals is neither cursory nor uninformed. Although he pointedly eschews extended exposition of them,⁴⁶ it is fair to say, as Curran does, that he “constantly appealed to the papal teachings in the encyclicals.”⁴⁷ However, he uses the encyclical material selectively, reinterpreting it in accord with his theory of personalist social action, largely ignoring the emphasis on social justice and change that form the focus of the encyclicals themselves.

Furfey sees himself as correcting an imbalance in the interpretive discourse on the social encyclicals. He repeatedly quotes *Quadragesimo Anno*’s (hereafter QA) prescription for the social problem: “Two things are most necessary, the reform of institutions and the correction of morals.”⁴⁸ In fact, he points out,⁴⁹ QA says that “the first and most necessary remedy is a reform

of morals”.⁵⁰ “Unfortunately”, Furfey argues, “commentators on the encyclicals have given moral reform far less attention than it deserves. . . .writers have confined themselves to the discussion of organized action in interpreting the *Rerum Novarum* and the *Quadragesimo Anno*. Thus they have told only half the truth.” His purpose, he explains, “is to attempt to restore the balance by calling attention to the great emphasis which these encyclicals place on “the correction of morals”.⁵¹

To Furfey it is apparent that this correction of morals is nothing other than personalist social action. “Moral reform. . .is a true technique of social action. . .it has been well called “personalist social action”.⁵² This is functionally the same personalist social action that he finds characterizing the New Testament: “the social effect of the individual life lived in accordance with Christian social virtues”.⁵³ Thus, he concludes, QA advocates that personalist social action is “the first and most necessary remedy” to the social problem.⁵⁴

Furfey’s understanding of moral reform, however, is quite different from that of the encyclicals. This difference is not merely adventitious or one of emphasis, but is based on a fundamentally different understanding of the nature of human action in society. This difference is apparent on three levels of interpretation in the encyclicals, from the surface sense of their explicit teaching, to the level of the meaning and interpretation of words, and finally to the level of the theoretical context or assumptions by which the teachings are to be understood.

At the surface level, it is apparent that personalist social action is not emphasized in the social encyclicals to the extent that Furfey suggests they are or should be. Furfey, no doubt, would argue that greater magisterial teaching in this regard would be possible, and would be a benefit to the Church. Yet the deficit is so striking as hardly to need elaboration. The term “personalist social action” or even “personalism” never occurs in the social encyclicals. As is

well known, they focus on the rights and duties of social justice, such as private property and defining a just wage, issues seldom if ever addressed by Furfey. To solve the social problem *Rerum Novarum* (hereafter RN) appeals not to superhuman charity but to minimal duties, the failure of which is a crime.⁵⁵ Not only do they lack Furfey's call for renunciation and voluntary poverty, the encyclicals defend the aspirations of workers to acquire wealth, and advocate that the wealthy need only give alms out of the surplus, after providing for themselves.⁵⁶

Furfey interprets the encouragement of Eucharistic participation in the encyclicals as an argument for the effectiveness of personalist action. But the documents call not only for persons to fervently desire the Eucharist, but also for the State to make possible sufficient respite from labor to be able to celebrate it.⁵⁷ And they nowhere suggest that the former will automatically bring about the latter. There is, in sum, simply no strong advocacy of personalism in the social encyclicals. As far as their explicit teachings are concerned, we must agree with criticisms such as Cronin's: "In all candor, it must be stated that the heavy emphasis upon personalism and nonparticipation, in [Furfey's writing], does not accord with the apportionment of subjects in the social encyclicals. . . ."⁵⁸

Probing to the level of denotation, it is clear, furthermore, that the "correction of morals" envisioned by the encyclicals is not what Furfey takes it to mean. This term does not refer to the individual reform of moral behavior, as Furfey assumes, but rather the collective reform of moral influences and restraints, what we today might call the reform of public morals. Granted that original sin has inclined both employers and workers to avarice, the moral problem addressed by the papal teachings is not the increased veniality of individuals so much as "social conditions which, whether one wills it or not, make difficult or practically impossible a Christian life."⁵⁹

As QA explains: “Strict and watchful moral restraint enforced vigorously by governmental authority could have banished these enormous evils and even forestalled them; this restraint, however, has too often been sadly lacking. . . . [For] there quickly developed a body of economic teaching far removed from the true moral law, and, as a result, completely free rein was given to human passions.”⁶⁰ The consequence of this is that workers are exposed to greater moral hazard: “With the rulers of economic life abandoning the right road, it was easy for the rank and file of workers everywhere to rush headlong also into the same chasm; . . . Truly the mind shudders at the thought of the grave dangers to which the morals of workers (particularly younger workers) and the modesty of girls and women are exposed in modern factories; when we recall how often the present economic scheme, and particularly the shameful housing conditions, create obstacles to the family bond and normal family life; when we remember how many obstacles are put in the way of the proper observance of Sundays and Holy Days; . . .for dead matter comes forth from the factory ennobled, while men there are corrupted and degraded.”⁶¹

At one point in his writings Furfey does seem to recognize the nature of this problem. He quotes QA: “It may be said with all truth that nowadays the conditions of social and economic life are such that vast multitudes of men can only with great difficulty pay attention to that one thing necessary, namely their eternal salvation.”⁶² However, for these conditions to be corrected, he argues, “the State must yield to the Church” in an ecclesiastical supremacy that exceeds that of the Middle Ages.⁶³ Such a triumphalist vision, needless to say, exceeds anything found in the social encyclicals, and was definitively repudiated by the Second Vatican Council.

By contrast the encyclicals promote strong public authority in line with social virtue for the correction of morals. The restoration of society will come about, not through personal virtue,

but by being governed by the principles of “social justice and social charity”, which are properties of the social order, not individual persons.⁶⁴ While individuals, families and subordinate associations have their part to play, only the state can govern all the parts of society to ensure the common good.⁶⁵ This is clearly a collective and cultural, not individual, concept of moral reform. While encouraging all to greater virtue, it is specifically the correction of these corrupting conditions to which QA is addressed, and to which it refers when it calls for the “reform of morals”.

Beneath these differences in the meaning, finally, are evident fundamentally different assumptions about the relation of the individual to society. To be sure, the papal teachings argue that social good must be founded on virtue,⁶⁶ but this does not mean that it is nothing more than an effect of virtue. The concern of the encyclicals, in fact, is in the opposite direction: not with the effects of charity on society but with the social conditions that make charity possible and encourage it. Actions by the state and public authority in support of the right ordering of social life, particularly economic life, form essential conditions for virtue, just as virtue forms the necessary motive for such actions.⁶⁷ RN points out that even the heroic charity of wealthy Catholic individuals who share in the lot of the poor is “very easily destroyed by intrusion from without.”⁶⁸ Socialism is criticized not only because of its inherent injustice but also because it would promote “mutual envy, detraction and dissension.”⁶⁹ Thus, although the encyclicals frequently advocate personal charity, it is, as in Scripture, never conceived as an effective remedy for social ills. QA is explicit on this point: “no vicarious charity can substitute for justice which is due as an obligation and is wrongfully denied.”⁷⁰ Far from charity reforming the moral order, the idea here is that the moral order is a precondition for the effective practice of charity.

The fundamental difference, then, between Furfey and the papal teachings is not theological, but sociological. While the encyclicals envision a dynamic mutual interaction of collective structures with individuals, Furfey adopts the view that social change operates in only one direction, i.e., from the individual to the collective. He argues “institutions are the product of men. If individuals are immoral, their institutions will be immoral also. Good men are the basis of good institutions.” It is for this reason that “it is vain to hope for the reform of the social order unless ‘the correction of morals’ precedes.”⁷¹ Furfey never seems to grasp that social structures can also constrain and shape personal choices in ways that are culpable, that “good institutions” are also in part the basis of “good men”. In rejecting the possibility of social forces that act on individuals, Furfey steps outside, not only of the Catholic tradition, but of the sociological tradition for understanding human society as well.

In sum, Furfey’s disagreement with the papal teachings regarding moral reform is not minor or accidental. The divergence of views does not skim the surface, but “goes all the way down” through deeper levels of meaning in the encyclicals, deriving at root from different sociological conceptions of persons in society.

VI. Conclusion

This review has found that Furfey, while appealing for support to the Catholic intellectual tradition, is fundamentally at variance with that tradition in significant ways. Although he prided himself on his faithfulness to Catholic teaching, in practice he engaged in what McCarragher describes as a “selective appropriation of liberal Protestant intellectual culture.”⁷² Most importantly, Furfey’s assumption regarding the social effect of the practice of virtue is entirely absent from the ancient tradition and is contradicted by the modern social encyclicals.

This disagreement is consequential, for if personalist action is not actually effective in producing social reform, the whole idea of personalist social reform confronts serious fallacies. If virtue and moral order are not necessarily connected, as the encyclicals imply, then just as it is possible for a corrupt man to live in a good society, it is clearly possible for an individual to reap the undue benefits of an unjust economic system and at the same time engage in heroic almsgiving. Suppose an employer, out of ignorance or due to universal custom, pays his employees too little, as judged by the injunctions of social encyclicals. Suppose further that the same employer then practices heroic renunciation of his wealth in almsgiving. Does the almsgiving ameliorate the injustice of the insufficient wages? As we have seen, QA would answer, no.⁷³ The two are not connected. No matter that the alms of the employer may help others, or even the same workers, the dignity of the workers not receiving a just wage is denied no less. Thus personalist action, unmatched by a just social order, does not necessarily correct the injustice of even the little part of society under the control of the employer.

Furthermore, since virtue and social justice are not essentially connected, it is conceivable that an unjustly ordered society can promote more personal virtue or that personalist action can further an unjust social order. In the hypothetical scenario above, since the net surplus wealth is greater if it accrues to the employer (assuming his personal overhead is less than that of the workers combined) than if the workers were paid fairly, the total wealth and possible good of the society may even be greater when the workers are oppressed. It has often been argued, moreover, that times of social trauma or oppression stimulate the practice of heroic virtues, renunciation, sacrifice and martyrdom. (Even in terms of the employer's personal redemption, it is a theological error to think of good and evil as commensurable. The good of his personalist action does not "make up" for the injustice to the worker, even if he were culpable for it.)

Charitable almsgiving, in turn, can lessen the collective misery of persons in an unjust order to the extent that movements for collective reform are impeded. This idea is not far-fetched: the perception that the charity of the Church could be interpreted as conferring legitimacy on an unjust social order was one of the presumptions that the 20th-century social encyclicals were written to correct. In the absence of social justice, specifically the fair distribution of wealth, charitable almsgiving can have the opposite effect from conferring human dignity. As an Anglican cleric, fully in accord with the thinking of the social encyclicals, eloquently expresses: “The charge against our social system is one of injustice. The banner so familiar in earlier unemployed or socialist processions—‘Damn your charity; we want justice’—vividly exposes the situation as it was seen by its critics. If the present order is taken for granted or assumed to be sacrosanct, charity from the more or less fortunate would seem virtuous and commendable; to those for whom the order itself is suspect or worse, such charity is blood-money. Why should some be in the position to dispense and others to need that kind of charity?”⁷⁴

Furfey’s sociological disagreement with the Catholic tradition has implications that reverberate throughout his thinking. Since infused personal virtue is his preferred, if not only, source of social improvement, the individual is exhorted toward ideal purity while collective reform is seldom in view. Society tends to be regarded as wholly corrupt and the Church as wholly incorruptible. Although he was probably unaware of this,⁷⁵ this view is more representative of Protestant, particularly Anabaptist, thinking than it is of Catholic theology. In many ways Furfey is like the radical Protestants. His literal application of Scriptural precepts, read as simple Biblicism, is reminiscent of the Anabaptists. The impulse to withdraw from society, to be pure in a natural sense, uncorrupted by culture, so as to “live above” the world, is

precisely the impulse of Protestant sectarianism. The personalist actions Furfey espouses—renunciation, non-participation and bearing witness—find their most consistent and characteristic expression among Mennonites and Amish groups. In H. Richard Niebuhr’s well-known typology of the Christian views of the relation of Christ and culture, Furfey’s position falls clearly in the category of “Christ against culture”, which “affirms the sole loyalty of Christ over the Christian and absolutely rejects culture’s claims to loyalty.”⁷⁶ This radical stance is characteristic, according to Niebuhr, of Protestant sectarianism “in its narrow, sociological meaning,”⁷⁷ and its purest exemplars are the Anabaptists. Niebuhr critiques this position as inadequate because radical Christians “cannot separate themselves completely from the world of culture around them.”⁷⁸ Thus, they tend to confine the ethical demands of the Gospel to the fellowship of Christians,⁷⁹ and have never been effective in reforming society.⁸⁰ Furfey, as we have seen, is susceptible to all of these criticisms. His ecclesiology, in short, is functionally that of radical Protestantism rather than the Catholic tradition.

In large measure Furfey’s variance from the Catholic tradition undercuts the claims he made, later in life, for metasociology and Catholic sociology. Claiming theological status for his views, Furfey argues that his Catholic sociology, deduced from revealed truth, is superior to secular alternatives based on ordinary empirical knowledge. However, if his assumptions are at variance with the revealed truth of the tradition, his “Catholic sociology” is of no higher authority than secular sociologies. There is about all this a general confusion in Furfey’s thinking, asserting for theology a normative role in social theory and for sociology a grounding in theology that neither Catholic theology nor Catholic sociology claim for themselves. The result is that, in attempting to establish theology as a metasociology, Furfey only succeeds in establishing sociology as a kind of ur-theology. He produces no viable theory of social action

beyond personal morality, albeit an heroic morality, and no program for society beyond privileging the Church.

The idealistic project of Paul Hanly Furfey, to produce a distinctly Catholic sociology, ultimately resulted in disappointment. Whether or not any Catholic sociology must disappoint by virtue of falling short of normative sociology, Furfey's Catholic sociology disappoints by virtue of falling short of normative Catholic thought. As McCarraher concludes, he "missed an American opportunity for a definitively Catholic. . .form of social thought and cultural politics."⁸¹ Furfey himself, later in life, abandoned his ideal in favor of co-operating with social democracy. It is not clear to what extent the inconsistencies in his thought may have led to this disappointment, but, as we have seen, such inconsistencies are present and are not trivial. His selective and idiosyncratic use of the Catholic tradition, scrupulous on matters of normative dogma, ultimately amounts to a rejection of the salient features of that tradition regarding the nature of social justice. Most pertinently, his assumptions regarding the place of persons in society, consciously identified as sociological, ultimately deny altogether the autonomy of social reality over against the individual, which the tradition affirms. In the final analysis, although he aspired to advance Catholic sociology, Furfey espoused a view that was neither sociological nor Catholic.

VII. References

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VIII. Notes

¹ Furfey, “Christian Social Thought in the First and Second Centuries” (American Catholic Sociological Review 1940), p. 13. Citations of Furfey’s works after the first one will be identified only by year and page number.

² 1940, p. 13. In Fire on the Earth, pp. 8-9 and 105-107 he also advocates hagiography as another source of social doctrine.

³ Fire on the earth, 1936, p. 103.

⁴ 1936, p. 2.

⁵ A history of social thought, 1949, p. 156.

⁶ 1949, p. 155.

⁷ 1949, p. 140.

⁸ 1949, p. 155.

⁹ 1940, p. 14.

¹⁰ 1940, p. 15.

¹¹ 1949, p. 150.

¹² 1940, p. 19.

¹³ 1940, p. 15.

¹⁴ 1936, pp. 94-97.

¹⁵ 1940, p.20.

¹⁶ 1940, p.20.

¹⁷ 1949, p. 150.

¹⁸ Robert Grant, Early Christianity and society, p. 98.

¹⁹ Cadoux, The early church and the world, p. 90.

²⁰ Harrison, The apostolic church, p. 181.

²¹ Harrison, The apostolic church, p. 98.

²² Raymond Brown, The churches the apostles left behind.

²³ 1949, p. 19.

²⁴ 1949, p. 150.

²⁵ 1949, p. 152.

²⁶ 1949, p. 151.

²⁷ Brown, Introduction to the New Testament, p. 507.

²⁸ Brown, Introduction, p. 507.

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- ²⁹ 1940, p. 18.
- ³⁰ F. R. Cowell, Everyday life in ancient Rome.
- ³¹ 1942, p. 18.
- ³² 1937, p. 227.
- ³³ 1940, p. 20.
- ³⁴ 1942, p. 13; 1936, p. 8.
- ³⁵ The apostolic church, p. 92.
- ³⁶ Introduction, pp. 509-510.
- ³⁷ 1940, p. 20.
- ³⁸ Barry Gordon, "Rich, poor and slave in the socioeconomic thought of the later Fathers", p. 32. He quotes Gerhart Ladner, The idea of reform, p. 463.
- ³⁹ Ladner, The idea of reform, p. 463.
- ⁴⁰ Gordon, Rich, poor and slave, p. 32.
- ⁴¹ 1936, p. 10.
- ⁴² Henry Chadwick, "Providence and the problem of evil in Augustine".
- ⁴³ Ladner, The idea of reform, p. 463.
- ⁴⁴ W.H. Frend, "Early Christianity and society", p. 71; quoted by Gordon, note 28, p. 36.
- ⁴⁵ Gordon, Rich, poor and slave, pp. 31-32.
- ⁴⁶ Furfey's 468-page A history of social thought, intended to be a comprehensive survey of social thought "from the Catholic viewpoint" (p. v.), treats the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in one page. *Quadragesimo Anno* is dismissed in one paragraph, because "it covers a broad field, too broad to be summarized here" (pp. 401-02).
- ⁴⁷ Charles Curran, "Paul Hanly Furfey: Theorist of American Catholic Radicalism", p. 674.
- ⁴⁸ *Quadragesimo Anno* 77. Quoted in "Personalist action in the *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno*", 1941, p. 204; and 1949, p. 400.
- ⁴⁹ 1941, p. 205.
- ⁵⁰ *Quadragesimo Anno* 98.
- ⁵¹ 1941, p. 205.
- ⁵² 1941, p. 205.
- ⁵³ 1941, p. 205.
- ⁵⁴ 1941, p. 205.
- ⁵⁵ *Rerum Novarum* 31, 32.
- ⁵⁶ *Rerum Novarum* 9, 65; . *Quadragesimo Anno* 74.
- ⁵⁷ *Rerum Novarum* 55.
- ⁵⁸ John Cronin, Catholic Social Principles, 1950, p. 689.

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- ⁵⁹ Pius XII, *Solenita della Pentecost*, 1676.
- ⁶⁰ *Quadragesimo Anno* 133.
- ⁶¹ *Quadragesimo Anno* 135.
- ⁶² *Quadragesimo Anno* 11, quoted in Furfey, 1937, p. 210.
- ⁶³ 1937, p. 213.
- ⁶⁴ *Quadragesimo Anno* 88.
- ⁶⁵ *Quadragesimo Anno* 80.
- ⁶⁶ *Rerum Novarum* 50.
- ⁶⁷ *Rerum Novarum* 53.
- ⁶⁸ *Rerum Novarum* 75.
- ⁶⁹ *Rerum Novarum* 22.
- ⁷⁰ *Quadragesimo Anno* 137.
- ⁷¹ 1941, p. 204.
- ⁷² Eugene McCarragher, “The church irrelevant: Paul Hanly Furfey and the fortunes of American Catholic radicalism”, 1997, p. 165.
- ⁷³ *Quadragesimo Anno* 137.
- ⁷⁴ William Temple, Christianity and the social order, pp. 22-23.
- ⁷⁵ Curran, p. 674.
- ⁷⁶ H. Richard Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, p. 45.
- ⁷⁷ Niebuhr, p. 56.
- ⁷⁸ Niebuhr, p. 73.
- ⁷⁹ Niebuhr, p. 71.
- ⁸⁰ Niebuhr, p. 67.
- ⁸¹ McCarragher, p. 165.