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The Principle of Subsidiarity

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One of the key principles of Catholic social thought is known as the principle of subsidiarity. This tenet holds that nothing should be done by a larger and more complex organization which can be done as well by a smaller and simpler organization. In other words, any activity which can be performed by a more decentralized entity should be. This principle is a bulwark of limited government and personal freedom. It conflicts with the passion for centralization and bureaucracy characteristic of the Welfare State.

This is why Pope John Paul II took the “social assistance state” to task in his 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus*. The Pontiff wrote that the Welfare State was contradicting the principle of subsidiarity by intervening directly and depriving society of its responsibility. This “leads to a loss of human energies and an inordinate increase of public agencies which are dominated more by bureaucratic ways of thinking than by concern for serving their clients and which are accompanied by an enormous increase in spending.”

In spite of this clear warning, the United States Catholic Bishops remain staunch defenders of a statist approach to social problems. They have publicly criticized recent congressional efforts to reform the welfare system by decentralizing it and removing its perverse incentives. Their opposition to the Clinton Administration’s health care plan was based solely upon its inclusion of abortion funding. They had no fundamental objection to a takeover of the health care industry by the federal government.

Why the troubling contradiction between Papal teaching and the policy recommendations of the U.S. Bishops? Part of the problem may rest with the reliance the Bishops have placed upon commentators such as Monsignor George Higgins. In the spring of 1994 Monsignor Higgins gave a lengthy talk on the principle of subsidiarity to the Albert Cardinal Meyer Lecture series. Higgins stated that the “principle of subsidiarity is concerned with the relationship of the state to other societies, not with the nature of the state itself.” This view is

wrongheaded. Subsidiarity applies to all human institutions, including the state. When the federal government usurps the rights and responsibilities of state and local governments, a flagrant violation of the principle of subsidiarity has occurred. If upper echelon bureaucrats in a Cabinet department operate in a top-down manner and deny any flexibility to their subordinates, the effectiveness of this department will be diminished. Higgins's interpretation of subsidiarity exempts the internal operation of the various levels and branches of government from any critical scrutiny.

The ultimate purpose of Higgins is to defend the welfare statist philosophy which he and his allies in organized labor have advocated for decades. This leads to serious distortions in his analysis of the principle of subsidiarity, especially in his treatment of Alexis de Tocqueville. Higgins cites de Tocqueville's praise for voluntary associations as part of a larger discussion in which he endorses an enhanced role for government in fighting poverty. But Higgins ignores other aspects of Tocqueville's work which would devastate his thesis. As Russell Kirk observed, Tocqueville strongly opposed the centralizing impulse which afflicts modern democracies. In accord with subsidiarity, true democracy is a product of local institutions and self-reliance. Consolidation is the weapon of tyranny, but the friend of liberty is particularism. "Among the public men of democracies, there are hardly any but men of great disinterestedness or extreme mediocrity who seek to oppose the centralization of government; the former are scarce, the latter powerless."

Monsignor Higgins, by contrast, fails to even mention the relationship between federal, state, and local governments. Any extended discussion of the principle of subsidiarity which neglects to consider the respective roles of the state and federal governments in the American system is radically flawed. As our founding fathers made clear in *The Federalist Papers*, the U.S. Constitution was designed to leave many issues of great importance in the hands of the states. The federal government was to do only those things which the individual states could not effectively do for themselves. The subsidiarity principle was at work in the foundation of our nation. But from the New Deal era onwards, there has been a steady growth in federal power at the expense of the states. This has sparked a renewed interest in the Tenth Amendment, which reserves all powers not delegated to the federal government to the states.

But there is another area of Alexis de Tocqueville's thought which runs directly counter to Monsignor Higgins's argument. Higgins is defending the Welfare State, the prospect of which Tocqueville dreaded. Tocqueville described the system which he foresaw in terms which are chillingly similar to modern society. He predicted that modern democratic government would degenerate into a huge, paternalistic state which would guide the individual in all of his affairs and insure that all of his needs were met. "For their happiness such a government willingly labors, but it chooses to be the sole agent and the only arbiter of their necessities, facilitates their pleasures, manages their principal concerns, directs their industry, regulates the descent of property, and subdivides their inheritances; what remains, but to spare them all the care of thinking and all the trouble of living?"

Tocqueville strongly opposed this system because it kept the citizens in perpetual childhood. Pope John Paul II criticized the Welfare State in *Centesimus Annus* for the same reason. However, Monsignor Higgins does not even address the Pope's critique. He makes one passing reference to it before directing the attention of his hearers elsewhere. Higgins cites Gregory Baum's argument that the principle of subsidiarity has been complemented by the principle of socialization, first elaborated

by Pope John XXIII. Baum defines subsidiarity as “de-centralization” and socialization as “centralization”. In other words, in this view, Catholicism teaches the principle of de-centralization and the principle of centralization simultaneously!

The absurdity of this argument is clearly revealed by taking a closer look at the meaning of socialization. In reviewing John XXIII’s encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, Father Robert Sirico observes that the Pontiff’s desire was to strengthen mediating institutions in order to protect the primacy of the human person. Far from advancing any form of collectivism, Pope John wanted to “multiply social relationships” so that the individual would be free to pursue the common good. Socialization does not mean centralization. Rather, it refers to the voluntary associations which Alexis de Tocqueville praised as being a vital part of American freedom in the 1830s.

The principle of subsidiarity is both thoroughly Catholic and thoroughly American. The U.S. Catholic Bishops should be leading defenders of it. That they are not is due to intellectual currents which go beyond the partisanship of scholars such as Monsignor Higgins. The Bishops have not learned the key lessons of the 1980s: the success of free market economics and the failure of collectivism. The top-down, centralized planning of the Soviet system could not succeed because it contradicted the subsidiarity principle. When producers and consumers are not allowed to bargain freely, prices cease to reflect meaningful information and become arbitrary dictates of the bureaucracy. The Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises wrote, “Without the basis for calculation which Capitalism places at the disposal of Socialism, in the shape of market prices, socialist enterprises would never be carried on, even within single branches of production or individual countries.”

If the Bishops understood this point, they would not be advocating government price controls on goods ranging from health care to cable television. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops needs to take a closer look at the principle of subsidiarity and to apply it more consistently. In the realm of economics, this would entail respect for the mechanisms of the free market and opposition to state intervention exemplified by the failed Clinton health plan. The Bishops must understand that taking away the power of decision from producers and consumers and entrusting it to government bureaucrats violates the subsidiarity principle. Concerning political teaching, the Bishops should support efforts to restrict the Welfare State and to return to the states rights and responsibilities taken from them since the 1930s. If they do, the U.S. Bishops will find themselves more in accord with the Papal teaching of *Centesimus Annus*, the Catholic natural law tradition, and the convictions of most American Catholics.

Resources

[5 Minute Explainer: Subsidiarity](http://blog.acton.org/archives/63774-5-minute-explainer-subsidiarity.html)
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2 The Economics of Sin Taxes (/pub/religion-liberty/volume-4-
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3 How Christianity Created Capitalism (/pub/religion-liberty/volume-
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