

SUBSIDIARITY *balances other* SOCIAL JUSTICE PRINCIPLES

NEIL DARRAGH explains subsidiarity as a principle of social justice and describes how it works together with other principles in making a just society.

The principle of subsidiarity advocates devolving decision-making in society to the lowest practical level. This creates a presumption for the value of lower-level decision-making on public issues but allows for higher-level intervention if there is a good reason.

More proactively, the principle of subsidiarity calls on larger governing bodies such as the state to support smaller, less powerful social organisations in making their own decisions about their own and public well-being.

The general aim of the principle of subsidiarity is to ensure some degree of independence of a lower authority in society from a higher authority such as central government. It rules out intervention from the higher authority if an issue can be dealt with effectively by a lower body. Subsidiarity is concerned fundamentally with participation and democracy in society.

The opposite of subsidiarity is a condition of overriding state control where a central government regulates almost all aspects of life, leaving little room for freedom or spontaneous organisation. Historically, subsidiarity became an important principle in Catholic social thought from the late 19th century onwards, as part of an effort to counter the rise of both extreme inequalities in society and of state socialism.

At the centre of the principle of subsidiarity is the idea that trust and compassion in society is necessary for both the common good and the upholding of the dignity of individual persons. The belief here is that trust and compassion at all levels of society are the source of social integration and this, rather than coercive regulation, is more likely to result in social and economic organisation that meets genuine human requirements.

Subsidiarity in Public Debate

Subsidiarity is an important principle in Catholic social thought but it does not belong just to the Catholic Church. It plays an important role in international law especially in confederations such as the European Union where it serves to restrain the power of centralised regulation and protect the sovereignty of the member states.

In New Zealand it serves to support public decision-making at the local level, but allows intervention by central government when necessary. It operates, for example,



in such debates as where the responsibility should lie for the management of resources or actively preventing fresh water pollution. The principle of subsidiarity does not solve such disputes but it gives support to local civic responsibility and requires justification for central government intervention. And in 2009, when New Zealand introduced an “anti-smacking” law, subsidiarity featured in debate around where to draw the line between the rights of the family and the need for government legislation to prevent violence towards children.

Grounded in Social Justice

In Catholic social thought, the principle of subsidiarity is normally grounded in social justice. In the wider political debate, other grounds for it have also been put forward: that it protects individual liberty, it promotes economic or bureaucratic efficiency, it is a basic principle of democracy and self-determination, it promotes political

accountability downwards, and it promotes respect for social and cultural diversity.

Builds Civil Society

The crucial thrust of the principle of subsidiarity is that it calls for decision-making to be located towards the grass-roots level of the people who are most affected by those decisions. It is concerned with the building up of civil society, made up of the social, economic, cultural, sporting, recreational, professional, business and political associations that are expressions of

the relationships among people. Its political orientation is to oppose collectivism or centralised power whether in the form of dictatorship, state socialism, non-constitutional monarchy, or military rule. In a more general way, it resists the top-down exercise of power such as that in line-management and hierarchical systems of organisation where decisions are made from the top.

At a lower level even than the organisations that make up civil society, this principle supports decision-making, where possible, at the level of the individual person. In healthcare, for example, it is concerned not just with the dignity of the individual person but also with personal “agency”. That is, it is concerned that even the very vulnerable or dependent person retains as much decision-making power as possible; that they have a voice in their own care and do not become simply passive recipients of other people’s decisions.

A Matrix of Social Justice Principles

Because of its emphasis on grassroots decision-making and restraints on the power of centralised government, the principle of subsidiarity is the social justice principle most favoured by the “neo-liberal” end of the political spectrum. There, priority is given to the individual as a self-governing entity endowed with inalienable rights to life, liberty and property. But this priority isolates the notion of subsidiarity. Like all the principles of social justice, subsidiary cannot operate on its own. It sits within a matrix of social justice principles where one principle balances another.

The principles of Catholic social thought are principles extracted from a number of official Catholic documents,

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mainly papal encyclicals, and can be listed in somewhat different ways. Caritas New Zealand lists these principles as: Human dignity (made in God’s image), Subsidiarity (empowering communities), Solidarity (walking together), Preferential option for the poor and vulnerable (protecting those in need), Working for the common good (the good of each and all), Participation (everyone with a part to play), and Stewardship (care for the Earth as our common home). So far this year, issues of *Tui Motu* magazine have been focused on solidarity, respecting the dignity of the human person, the common good, stewardship (care for our common home), participation and an option for the poor.

Interrelationship of Principles

These principles are all interrelated (and sometimes overlapping). Subsidiarity and solidarity, in particular, are linked and mutually reinforcing. An interdependence of both of these is necessary for bringing about the common good on the one hand and the dignity of all human beings on the other.

If left isolated without the related principles of solidarity and the common good, subsidiarity could be taken to support the kind of individualism where a person is supposed to be self-sufficient and self-promoting, seeking their own “excellence” and serially inventing and reinventing their own personal identities. Together, subsidiarity and solidarity advocate the idea that we are all gifted persons willing to serve the common good at whatever level and in whatever way we can and that we do this in solidarity with others, especially those most in need.

Subsidiarity in the Church

The very odd thing about the principle of solidarity is that the Catholic Church officially advocates it for the wider society, but not for itself. Except for a brief period following the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) when it was promoted in the form of “participation”, and in spite of its implementation in a variety of forms in other churches, the principle of subsidiarity has not been applied to the Catholic Church’s own internal organisation. ■

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