Is Health Care a Human Right: Article 3
by Father Mike Seavey

Last week’s article utilized Gospel accounts of Jesus’ miraculous healings. In this article, religious language will be deliberately avoided when possible. Using common secular language enables us to engage in discussions within a pluralistic society where all do not share the same religious views and many shun any religious views at all.

Unless otherwise indicated, all citations and paragraph numbers refer to the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, issued by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004. This is the official catechism for The Catholic Church’s teachings on social justice, the only section of Catholic moral theology to have its own catechism. Anyone interested in reading these paragraphs can use the website: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html. I would also be happy to provide the actual paragraphs either by email or postal mail.

“Individual” or “Person”?

Roman Catholicism shares the libertarian understanding that human rights precede government and therefore are inalienable. Government must respect and protect these rights and cannot remove them. While libertarianism speaks of “the individual” as bearer of inalienable rights, The Catholic Church speaks of “the person” in similar categories.

The difference between “individual” and “person” is more than semantics. The difference represents completely different understandings of humanity and human rights. Unlike libertarianism, Catholicism insists people are also born with inherent obligations to other people and to all creation. In fact, in community and relationships, where people share mutual rights and mutual obligations to one another, people discover their true self and the meaning and purpose for their life. This truth is for all people, not just Catholics.

The libertarian “individual” stands alone and expresses “freedom” by either choosing to relate and engage others, or by choosing not to relate and engage others. Catholicism’s “person”, being relational, experiences “freedom” only when in community, living out inherent rights complemented by inherent obligations or responsibilities. (#156) (Pope Benedict XVI, Caritas in Veritate, #43, #53)

What is an example of a “human right” accompanied by an “inherent responsibility”?

People have the right to express their opinions and give voice to their preferences in the social and political world. Freedom of communication enables people to form friendships and form a family; and to participate in the shaping of government, political priorities, and social and public commitments.

But people must exercise that right responsibly. Utilizing the right of free expression is accompanied by the obligation to use one’s voice to discern the truth, be a respectful listener of other points of view, not participate in gossip or slander and to refrain from violent or abusive language. Speech must ultimately be a tool calling the community to the service of truth on the foundations of justice and love. In a free society, the government does not decide who is speaking responsibly or irresponsibly. But we will all stand accountable before God on Judgment Day for all use of speech and communication!

The Totalitarian Viewpoint of Human Rights: From the totalitarian point of view, rights and responsibilities are assigned by the state, and therefore can be abridged, removed, or enhanced as the state decides. Roman Catholicism rejects both libertarian and totalitarian understandings of humanity. (#125)
The Common Good and Universal Destination of Goods: Rights and Responsibilities

The Common Good (164-167) See also Catechism of the Catholic Church paragraphs 1905-1912

Human rights and responsibilities are intricately connected to the justice principles of “the common good” and the “universal destination of goods”. The common good refers to the material and spiritual resources necessary for the human person to flourish; to reach the full potential of her/his personhood.

Among the material resources include: food, shelter, clothing, education, health care, transportation. The spiritual and other non-material resources include: family, friendship, right to religious freedom, right to participation in political, social and economic life of the community. These resources include free and just social conditions. (166) (emphasis added)

All these resources are considered “common” and all people have a right to draw from the common good what is necessary for their development, and all people have a responsibility to contribute to the common good for everyone’s benefit. This is a moral responsibility: “Just as the moral actions of an individual are accomplished in doing what is good...The common good, in fact, can be understood as the social and community dimension of the moral good.” (#164)

The Universal Destination of Goods (171-184)

The Universal Destination of Goods refers to creation as the first action of moral good flowing from the gratuitous generosity of God. God’s creation is intended to serve the needs of all humanity “without excluding or favouring anyone.” (#171) Pope St. John Paul II referred to the common access to creation as “the first principle of the whole ethical and social order.” (#172)

Catholicism views this right of access to the world’s goods as a natural right, inherent in the person. All other rights such as property rights, free trade, and other policies are subordinated to this primary right of access. (#172) The Church, far from being opposed to wealth, is convinced that an economic vision founded on these moral principles can generate wealth in ways that expand prosperity for all people. (#174)

The Catholic Church insists that “preferential option for the poor” must be a priority in any such economic vision and implementation. “Today, furthermore, given the worldwide dimension which the social question has assumed, this love of preference for the poor, and the decisions which it inspires in us, cannot but embrace the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without health care and, above all, those without hope of a better future.” (#182) (emphasis added)

For those who wonder if Catholicism’s social justice might be something new since The Second Vatican Council, “The teaching of Pope Pius XI is still relevant: ‘the distribution of created goods, which, as every discerning person knows, is labouring today under the gravest evils due to the huge disparity between the few exceedingly rich and the unnumbered propertyless, must be effectively called back to and brought into conformity with the norms of the common good, that is, social justice.’” (#167) Pope Pius XI served during the Great Depression to almost the beginning of World War II (1922-1939)