

## **Summary of “Social Justice and Sustainable Development”** (online public lecture)

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Speaker: Professor Philip Chmielewski, S.J.

Respondent: Professor Kaming Wu

Moderator: Dr. Cynthia Pon

The term “social justice” can mean different things to different people. “Sustainability” and “development” have been traditionally identified with profit and GDP in corporate, economic spheres. As professor of Engineering Ethics and a Catholic, Professor Philip Chmielewski presents what social justice means in the Catholic tradition. He also charts a proper understanding for sustainability and development in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, if we are to survive, thrive and mitigate systemic risks.

A close observer of Hong Kong, Professor Chmielewski considers some ways principles of social justice could be applied to Hong Kong, and in turn how Hong Kong could respond to the global imperative of sustainable development.

### **Two key dimensions of social justice**

In 1931 Pope Pius XI issued the encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (On Social Reconstruction). Its chief author, Oswald von Nell-Breuning, SJ, was a prolific scholar, an advisor to successive German chancellors, as well as a proponent of workers’ rights. The encyclical laid out *solidarity* and *subsidiarity* as two key principles upon which a social order facing existential threats can be rebuilt.

A recent article in *The Wall Street Journal* (February 5, 2021) pointed out both concepts “have been influential beyond Catholic circles, including in European Union law which considers them key principles.”

**Solidarity** gave its name to the famed Polish workers’ movement. Pope John Paul II was himself Polish. Yet in his 1987 encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (On Social Concern), he noted: “Solidarity is most important on the international level. International interdependence must be transformed into the virtue of solidarity by recognizing that the goods of creation exists to serve the needs of all.”

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in *Laudato Si’* (On Care for Our Common Home), Pope Francis extends the principle further and speaks of the “intra- and intergenerational common good as a result of solidarity with the earth.” Solidarity is not just a commitment to others around the world,

but also to future generations.

### **What is subsidiarity?**

Professor Chmielewski quotes again from *Quadragesimo Anno*, #79: “Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do. For every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the body social, and never destroy and absorb them.”

In other words, *what individuals can accomplish by their own initiative and efforts should not be taken from them by a higher authority*. The principle applies to material goods as much as to the immaterial: ideas, values, hopes, the ability to participate, self-determine and organize. Catholic social teaching teaches respect for individuals, and the groups that they form to improve their lives so they can live fully.

The State, as Pope John Paul II says at Riga in 1993, is “conceived...as a service of synthesis, of protection, of orientation for civil society, with respect for it, its initiatives and values.” *Laudato Si'* also explains how subsidiarity “grants freedom to develop the capabilities present at every level of society.” (#196) Subsidiarity thus favors decentralizing, making use of talents and initiatives at each level.

Besides Church documents, Professor Chmielewski cites secular scholars. In *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, Bruno Latour writes: “In the end, what counts is not knowing whether you are for or against globalization, for or against the local; all that counts is understanding whether you are managing to register, to maintain, to cherish a maximum number of alternative ways of belonging to the world.” How do we see ourselves, how do other members see themselves, as belonging to the world? These are questions that the Church prompts us to ask. The individual, Professor Chmielewski reminds us, is at once a member of the family, the local group, civil society, the governing body, and international nexus. Rather than being prescribed one way of belonging, or one dimension of existing, we have multiple ways of engaging with the world.

Subsidiarity is practical. The theologian, Maria Catherine Cahill, draws out five political purposes from the social teaching of the Catholic Church: increased participation (to share); more proximate decision-making (by the users themselves), better outcomes (it’s what the people need), more efficient decision-making (rather than remote bureaucratic management); and alleviating the state’s administrative burden.

Professor Chmielewski quotes Nell-Breuning (*Sacramentum Mundi*): “From the ontological principle of common involvement, there follows the deontological principle of common responsibility; every individual as member of the community must ‘respond,’ i.e., stand responsible for the welfare of each and every member.” When we do things together, we evolve a common responsibility to one another. [Is it any surprise that where decisions are made for the people who lack therefore agency, subjectivity and dignity, that society soon loses a sense of common responsibility?] Common involvement and common responsibility extend to the global community. Solidarity and subsidiarity teach us to work together for the common good.

Citing Christine Hinze and Robert M. Kennedy, Professor Chmielewski describes social justice as a functional structure, a necessary set of conditions (made up of laws and customs, policies and practices of the community) wherein each member can flourish, and engage with one another to achieve, and enjoy the common good. Social justice promotes the common good, “never the private good of individuals at the expense of the community.”

In “Capitalism After the Pandemic: Getting Recovery Right,” the economist Mariana Mazzucato posits the changes that need to be made: “This economy would be more inclusive and sustainable. It would emit less carbon, generate less inequality, build modern public transport, provide digital access for all, and offer universal health care.” The economy should be driven by *value*—what we do for one another—not just by profit. She adds: “The road to a more symbiotic partnership between public and private institutions begins with the recognition that VALUE is *created collectively*.”

Next Professor Chmielewski introduces the work of Elinor Ostrom, the first woman to win the Nobel prize in economics, and who pioneered designs for governing the commons. She gave examples of Common Pool Resources (such as fish stock, timber, coal) that are non-excludable, but rivalrous (i.e., subject to depletion), and other public goods (e.g., broadcast, air, herd immunity) that are non-excludable and non-rivalrous.

In *Governing the Commons in China*, Yan Zhang studied the upper Mekong. She said: “The concept of commons refers to anything held in common, from tangible resources (such as water and biodiversity) to intangible (such as ethnic cultures), and it involves both intergenerational sustainability and intragenerational equity.” Tensions run high these days as rivers run through neighboring districts and states that compete for water and energy. To resolve conflicts and so people can live, there is a need to organize the commons, from local management of waste to global management of planetary resources. Professor Chmielewski

highlights three of Ostrom’s guidelines: inclusive decision-making process; recognized rights to organize, and “nested enterprises.”

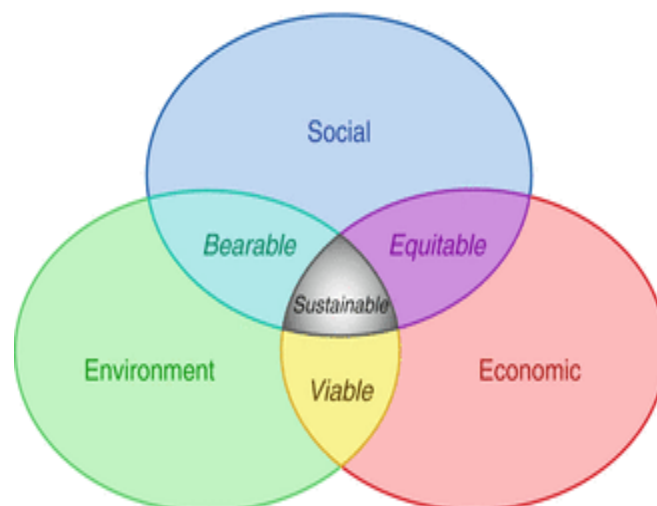
The design calls for multiple layers for appropriation/provision (people have to agree on what is being shared and how); monitoring/enforcement (develop a system, carried out by community members, for monitoring members’ behavior); conflict resolution; and governing (use graduated sanctions for rule violators; provide accessible, low-cost means for dispute resolution).

Ostrom wrote in *Understanding Institutional Diversity*: “Since most ecological systems are nested from very small local ecologies to those of global proportions, following this principle requires a substantial investment in governance systems at multiple levels—each with some autonomy, but each exposed to information, sanctioning and actions from below and above.”

This system of governance—based on subsidiarity, transparency and conflict resolution—builds responsibility for governing the common resource in nested tiers from the lowest level up to the entire interconnected system. It is one of the most important lessons and investments.

### **Sustainability = “Triple Bottom Line”?**

Professor Chmielewski introduces Gro Harlem Brundtland, a medical doctor and former Prime Minister of Norway. She chaired the UN Commission that produced *Our Common Future* (known as the Brundtland Report) published in 1987. The Brundtland Report introduced a new model of interconnecting social, environmental and economic well-being. Sustainability lies at the very core. Profit-driven economic development increases social inequality and devastates the earth. To survive and thrive, there needs to be a new triple bottom line: environment, work, and voice.



Professor Chmielewski characterizes the social as “voice”—what people say about their world can be said, will be listened to, and given response to. People matter more than profits. “Public” changes meaning too, in that other life and non-forms count in their participation in public goods; for instance, plastic gets dumped in seas where water breaks it up; it is then eaten by fish which enters our body as food. If we learn how critical interconnection and sustainability are, we can change.

### **Development is not GDP**

17 Sustainable Development Goals were adopted by all UN member states in 2015, including China.



Brundtland lists six key “entry points” where collaborative action can accelerate progress towards the Goals:

1. Strengthening human well-being and capabilities;
2. Shifting towards sustainable and just economies;
3. Building sustainable food systems and healthy nutrition patterns;
4. Achieving energy decarbonization and universal access to energy;
5. Promoting sustainable urban and peri-urban development;
6. Securing the global environmental commons.

Professor Chmielewski quotes extensively from the 2019 *Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR)*. Chief among the recommendations: actions must be taken to eliminate deprivations, and build resilience, especially through targeted interventions where

poverty and vulnerability are concentrated. The old view of GDP growth will not address the multidimensional nature of poverty (evidenced by the lack of education, safety, water, food security, clean and reliable energy, health care, etc.) Nor will it halt the serious threat to the global environmental commons. The GSDR sounded the alarm: “The stock of natural capital provided by global environmental commons is currently deteriorating beyond its rate of renewal and lacks proper valuation from markets and public policies.... There is an urgent need to manage how natural resources are extracted from global commons and how the resulting waste is managed.... Creating structural shifts in consumption behaviours through both economic and regulatory incentives and cultural transformations of norms and practices can also contribute to the protection of global commons.”

The GSDR recognizes that “people are the greatest asset in the fight for sustainability.”

“Furthering human well-being and protecting the earth’s resources require expanding human capabilities ..., so that people are empowered and equipped to bring about change.”

### **Possibilities for Hong Kong**

It may come as a surprise that Hong Kong, despite her many current trials, has something to teach about sustainable development because of the city’s “naturbanity” and significant biodiversity. Professor Chmielewski also names various local NGOs that promote sustainable development, such as Designing Hong Kong, UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (Hong Kong chapter), Civic Exchange. Hong Kong seems to fall behind in the Carbon Neutrality Pledge of comparable-sized populations. The SAR government promised a carbon neutrality strategy by mid-2021. But what kind of measurable activities will we see?

The GSDR urged: “Stakeholders must work with the academic community in all disciplines to mobilize, harness and disseminate existing knowledge.” Hong Kong does not lack civic proposals and even government researches, but as Professor Wu Ka-ming noted: people have expressed; scholars have consulted; think tanks have produced policy recommendations, but the government does not listen, and there is no result.

### **Response by Professor Wu Ka-ming**

As a social anthropologist, Professor Wu asks how Catholic Social Teaching can help us think through the “land developers’ hegemony” in Hong Kong. Professor Wu gives examples of stark social inequality: sub-human living quarters where poor people are prone to disease and infection. She appreciates Professor Chmielewski’s talk on subsidiarity across disciplines; and she cites contemporary anthropological research on waste, air pollution, and movements that advance social equality, etc. But the Church’s advocacy of participation, personal regard, social

justice, and the common good also feels surreal in Hong Kong. A case in point: the Lantau Tomorrow Vision touted as building a sustainable future for Hong Kong will in fact destroy ecology; it will dump sand to build a floating island which will be submerged by sea-level rise and severe weather crises according to scientists' projections.

Professor Wu refers to her recent article, "Infrastructure and its discontent: Structures of feeling in the age of Hong Kong-China dis/connection," in which she observed the changing social sentiments of Hong Kong's young people. As the SAR government invests heavily in infrastructure projects to better connect with the mainland, and encourages young people to move to the Greater Bay Area, young people feel angry and hopeless about a system that enriches only a very small minority. Some expressed their anger by destroying the city's finest infrastructures.

How do engineers and land developers position themselves? How do they view the changing sentiment of young people? Hong Kong cannot wait, as Professor Wu expresses disappointment over, for example, the sudden scrapping of a waste levy that has been in deliberation for 20 years [so much for waste management and modifying consumption behavior]. How can sustainable engineering bring about equality, and benefit the disadvantaged now?

Professor Chmielewski distinguishes engineers from land developers. Engineers assess risks. They are bound by code of conduct in different fields to disclose risks, and to work with other stakeholders to reduce risks. Developers are keen on making profit, but they have not been attentive to new economic developments. Professor Chmielewski refers to influential economists at the world's leading business schools and institutions like the IMF, who have come to the conclusion that governments and markets are not sufficient. Civil society needs to take part (Raghuram Rajan, *The Third Pillar*). Corporations must look not only at profit-margins and stockholders, but also those affected by their decisions (Colin Mayer). Even if those with more power ignore history and economics, they face the same threats of disease, climate change, food security, mass migration ....

Professor Chmielewski draws inspiration from a sign at a Chicago bookstore long associated with social causes: *Books matter, people care, change is possible*. Discourse matters. Acts of solidarity and kindness influence others. Change is possible. Conversely, when (young) people see that promises/texts are not kept, and care is absent, they do not give it; if they do not see change as possible, they may break things. Professor Wu also invokes the new "doughnut economic model," a development model that respects human wellbeing and ecological ceiling.

Dr. Cynthia Pon, the moderator, gives the example of the World Day of the Poor, instituted by Pope Francis in 2016. Every year the Church brings together the marginalized (e.g., landless

farmers, waste collectors, migrant laborers), provides a forum, empowering them, trusting in their capacity to organize and work for the common good.

In the struggle between old and new economic paradigms (one top-down, monologic; the other participatory, discursive and pluralistic), it seems Hong Kong is moving toward a regressive model. Two things, however, give hope: 1) young people and civil society are studying seriously, not just within academia; 2) Professor Chmielewski presents “forgiveness” as part of discursive engagement (Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*). She affirmed forgiveness as a widely regarded value that members of a society can learn to create together.

Dr. Anselm Lam, Director of the Centre for Catholic Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, shares Professor Wu’s “impatience” with incremental changes, and the demand for structural change. He asks what we can do to spread Catholic Social Teaching within civil society to bring about conversion, social justice.

Professor Chmielewski refers to *Wall Street Journal*’s Friday front page story about the developments in Hong Kong (26 February, 2021). One advantage Hong Kong has is that the world is watching and cares about what is happening to the people in Hong Kong. Professor Chmielewski also gives the example of Black history. Black people were invisible; but they are moving toward respect and equality. *Books matter, people care, change is possible*. Across the United States, there are changes taking place—for example, in every department at Loyola Marymount University—toward greater diversity, equity, and inclusion. In Hong Kong, what are students, young people reading and studying? Are they doing so in a way that effects change, across boundaries, unto future generations? He also sees potential changes led by women in many fields, who act not just for themselves.

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