

The Principle of the Subsidiarity

The 10 second Summary:

What does the Church say about the principle of Subsidiarity?

The principle of Subsidiarity states that the individual and the family precede the state; that is, individuals do not exist for the state but rather the state exists for the well-being of individuals and families entrusted to its care. Furthermore, nothing should be done by a higher or larger organization that cannot be done by a lower or smaller one.¹

The Latin derivation of the word Subsidiarity comes from *subsidium*, which means “help.”

Two Key Understandings:

The principle of subsidiarity relies on two central understandings which provide the conditions necessary to achieve public order and promote the common good.

1. **The human person and family precede the state.** Human persons are born into families and into a fabric of relationships. The family is the foundation of the church and the basic unit of society. Institutions only exist to serve human needs and interests. Where practical, those persons or institutions closest to the situation should have the autonomy to function by exercising their proper role and initiative freely. Only when a higher authority is required for the common good should there be intervention.
2. **The state should be active but limited.** The state has a proper moral role within its sphere to secure justice, safeguard and guarantee rights, promote peace, and defend the weak. The state should not intervene unless necessary, according to its role and function.

Where does this teaching on Subsidiarity come from?

- **Biblical source:** Scripture— rooted in scripture
- **Moral source:** Tradition— the use of reason and reflection based in the Catholic tradition.
- **Ecclesial source:** Church teaching— expressed in the Pope’s Encyclical letters, (This source is often what is referred to as Catholic Social Teaching.) Apostolic letters, Apostolic exhortations, and the Bishops’ Pastoral letters, which respond to the issues of the day.

How does this teaching on Subsidiarity connect with my life?

It provides:

- Principles for reflection;
- Criteria for judgment;
- Guidelines for action;
- Tools for conscience formation.

¹ Dwyer, Judith, ed. *The New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought*, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, p. 927-929.



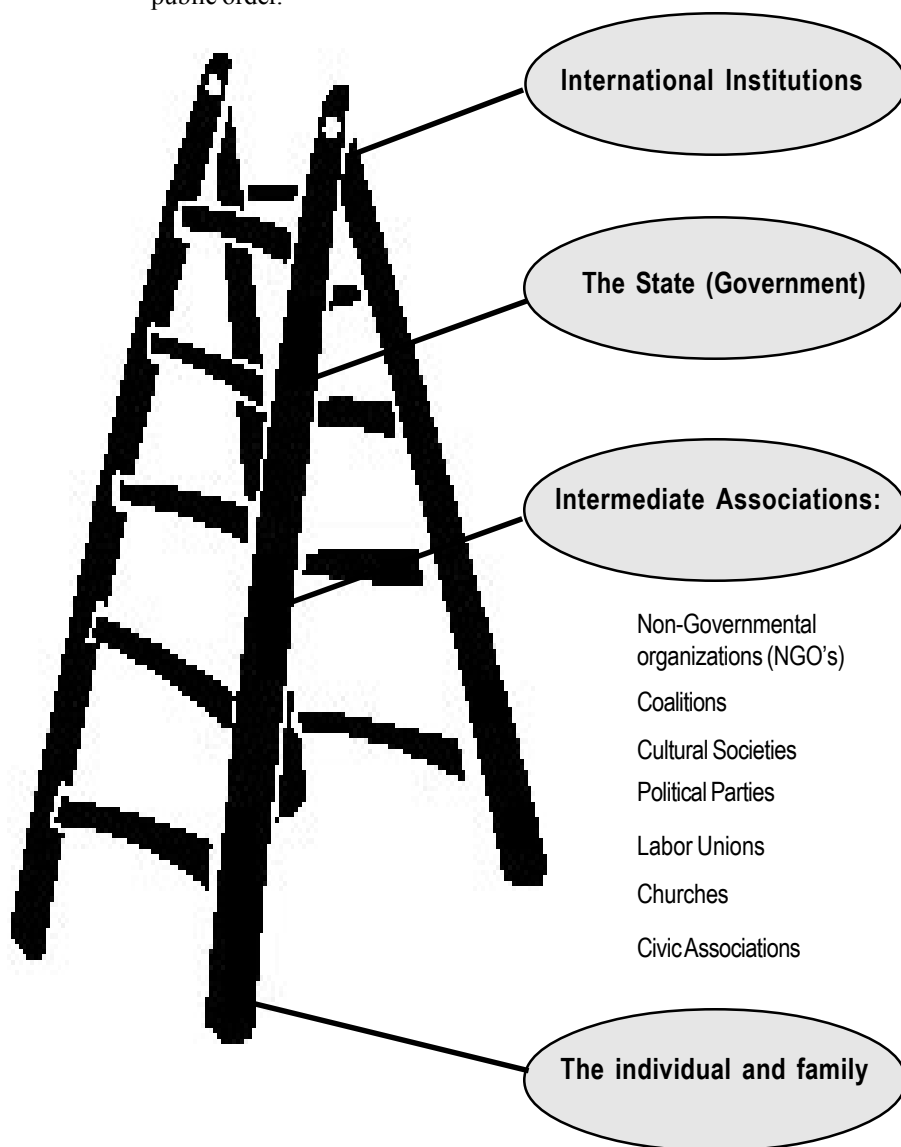
Subsidiarity in clear terms

Subsidiarity is essentially a principle about the vision of how society should be ordered and should function. It recognizes that there must be an autonomous sphere of civil freedom in which individuals and groups can function.

One helpful way to think about the ordering of society according to the principle of subsidiarity is to think of the way in which you use a ladder. Ordinarily, things that can be obtained within one's reach are simply grasped with your own initiative. But when something is on a higher shelf, just out of reach, you need to get a ladder to reach the item. The same is true with the principle of subsidiarity. The next higher level of involvement is sought only when it is clear that the lower level is insufficient to meet the ends desired.

Three Essential Elements of Subsidiarity

1. The human person is social by nature and born into a fabric of relationships
2. Individuals and intermediate groups have an appropriate sphere of activity which should respect human initiative and voluntary associations and should not be hindered by the state.
3. The sphere of the state is active but limited and is responsible for safeguarding the common good and maintaining public order.



Only when needed should a higher level be appealed to. This movement best respects freedom and initiative at lower levels.

The state should be active but limited.

Intermediate associations or organizations have a legitimate and necessary role to play in a society

Decisions should be made at the lowest level possible in order to respect freedom, initiative and appropriate roles.

The family is the basic unit of society

Encyclicals and Subsidiarity

What are some of the historical developments that caused the church to take notice and respond to the call for subsidiarity?³

Signs of the Times	Document & Year	What was presented?
1890's The rise of the industrial revolution created great social upheaval. The previous protections of the working guilds were gone, leaving an open door for worker exploitation and greater social and financial instability.	The Condition of Labor (<i>Rerum Novarum</i>) Pope Leo XIII 1891	Subsidiarity is not treated explicitly in this document, however Leo XIII recognizes there is an appropriate role for the authority of the state which must be balanced with the rights of workers.
1930's The Great Depression was a reality both in the U.S. and abroad. Wealth was becoming more and more concentrated into the hands of a few. This translated into increased political power concentrated into the same hands.	The Reconstruction of the Social Order (<i>Quadragesimo Anno</i>) Pope Pius XI 1931	Pius XI explicitly makes the principle of subsidiarity the guiding norm upon which the social order is to be restored.
1960's The world had been experiencing rapid change. It was the age of the atom, space exploration and the heavy threat of nuclear war. The advances in technical and scientific arenas along with increased efficiency were creating a multiplication of social relationships calling for new forms of cooperation.	Christianity and Social Progress (<i>Mater et Magistra</i>) Pope John XXIII 1961	The individual is the foundation, cause, and end of all social functions. Men and women should first take responsibility for their own initiative and labor, and the state should only intervene to promote justice and prevent harm. The state should intervene to redress economic imbalances or political tensions when necessary.
1960's The Cold War was underway and the Cuban missile crisis was looming. The fragile and costly nature of peace was a central concern. The role of authority was examined as authoritarian dictatorships and totalitarian regimes posed real threats by their disregard for human rights.	Peace on Earth (<i>Pacem in Terris</i>) Pope John XXIII 1963	The principle of subsidiarity is applied to the international situation and appeals for the establishment of an international public authority to address the urgent economic, social, and political problems of the day. A higher authority is needed to protect and promote the universal common good.
Development becomes a key focus in wrestling with the unremitting reality of poverty. Authentic human development is required, not simply economic gain.	The Development of Peoples (<i>Populorum Progressio</i>) Pope Paul VI 1967	Paul VI affirms the need for international authority to coordinate the establishment of just political and economic spheres and draws on the principle of subsidiarity.

“...it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of the right order to assign to a greater or higher association what a lesser and subordinate organizations can do.”

-Quadragesimo Anno, #79

³ For a complete analysis of these documents see, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching*, by Kenneth Himes, ed. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2005.



What Does the Catechism Say About Subsidiarity?⁴

Paragraph

1881

Each community is defined by its purpose and consequently obeys specific rules; but “the *human person* . . . is and ought to be the principle, the subject and the end of all social institutions.”⁴

1882

Certain societies, such as the family and the state, correspond more directly to the nature of man; they are necessary to him. To promote the participation of the greatest number in the life of a society, the creation of voluntary associations and institutions must be encouraged “on both national and international levels, which relate to economic and social goals, to cultural and recreational activities, to sport, to various professions, and to political affairs.”⁵ This “*socialization*” also expresses the natural tendency for human beings to associate with one another for the sake of attaining objectives that exceed individual capacities. It develops the qualities of the person, especially the sense of initiative and responsibility, and helps guarantee his rights.⁶

1883

Socialization also presents dangers. Excessive intervention by the state can threaten personal freedom and initiative. The teaching of the Church has elaborated the principle of *subsidiarity*, according to which “a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to coordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good.”

⁴ Source: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. New York: Doubleday, 1994.

How has this teaching developed?

- A vision of the “good life” has been shaped through Western Classical Greek moral philosophy – Aristotle and Plato, Cicero and Socrates, etc. The idea of the “polis” or the Greek city-state was the place where citizens made decisions about self-governance and their life in common for the sake of noble actions, not just companionship. The polis or political society was not necessarily a geographic location, but an association of citizens where the exercise of the public virtue of citizenship was achieved. The common good was understood as seeking the “general welfare” of the polis.
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- Augustine built on the Greek understanding of polis but insisted that the full and complete common good of the polis exists only partially here in the earthy realm, and only completely with and in God in the eternal realm. The common good takes on a divine understanding in addition to a political one.
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- Aquinas further clarified that the ultimate good that is sought is not anything to be achieved on earth but is only achieved in the fullness of life in God. Concern for the common good therefore is not merely a political aim, but has a divine aim and therefore transcends the limits of human political rulers.
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- With the dawn of the Enlightenment in the 18th century a new emphasis was placed on human reason and scientific investigation. Philosophers and thinkers of this era brought ideas of freedom, liberty, equality, and individual rights to the center (among others). These ideas and their influence gradually shaped the social teaching on common good.
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- An understanding of the linkage between the common good and human rights came largely through the work of Jacques Maritan in the 1940’s recognizing that the person in society needed secure protection to exist and thrive in society.
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- Modern global realities and contemporary thinking have further expanded the teaching to look at the international scope necessary to achieve a global common good as well as an awareness of new threats that endanger or thwart the common good. Pluralism, war, technological advances, ecological awareness and globalization all create new challenges in seeking the common good of all.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. In your own words how would you summarize the principle of the Common Good?
2. Can you describe a time when you made a decision that was for the good of others and not just yourself? What impact did it have on others? On you? What did you learn?
3. What challenges and threats to the common good would you identify as the most significant at this point in time?
4. How are human dignity and human rights related to the common good?
5. Which elements of American culture do you think provide the biggest obstacle to people working together cooperatively to seek and promote the common good?
6. How can technology be used to promote the common good? What kinds of technology can actually work to prevent the work of the common good?



Selected Quotes from Catholic Social Teaching on Subsidiarity

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

Quadragesimo Anno, #79

Just freedom of action must, of course, be left both to individual citizens and to families, yet only on condition that the common good be preserved and wrong to any individual be abolished.

Quadragesimo Anno, #25

The supreme authority of the State ought, therefore, to let subordinate groups handle matters and concerns of lesser importance, which would otherwise dissipate its efforts greatly. Thereby the State will more freely, powerfully, and effectively do all those things that belong to it alone because it alone can do them: directing, watching, urging, restraining, as occasion requires and necessity demands. Therefore, those in power should be sure that the more perfectly a graduated order is kept among the various associations, in observance of the principle of “subsidiary function,” the stronger social authority and effectiveness will be the happier and more prosperous the condition of the State.

Quadragesimo Anno, #80

The primary norm for determining the scope and limits of governmental intervention is the “principle of subsidiarity” cited above. This principle states that, in order to protect basic justice, government should undertake only those initiatives which exceed the capacities of individuals or private groups acting independently. Government should not replace or destroy smaller communities and individual initiative. Rather it should help them contribute more effectively to social well-being and supplement their activity when the demands of justice exceed their capacities. These does not mean, however, that the government that governs least, governs best. Rather it defines good government intervention as that which truly “helps” other social groups contribute to the common good by directing, urging, restraining, and regulating economic activity as “the occasion requires and necessity demands”.

Economic Justice for All, #124

Scripture Passages for Prayer and Reflection

Mark 6:30-56

The apostles gathered together with Jesus and reported all they had done and taught.

He said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while.” People were coming and going in great numbers, and they had no opportunity even to eat. So they went off in the boat by themselves to a deserted place. People saw them leaving and many came to know about it. They hastened there on foot from all the towns and arrived at the place before them. When he disembarked and saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

By now it was already late and his disciples approached him and said, “This is a deserted place and it is already very late. Dismiss them so that they can go to the surrounding farms and villages and buy themselves something to eat.” He said to them in reply, “Give them some food yourselves.” But they said to him, “Are we to buy two hundred days’ wages worth of food and give it to them to eat?” He asked them, “How many loaves do you have? Go and see.” And when they had found out they said, “Five loaves and two fish.” So he gave orders to have them sit down in groups on the green grass.

The people took their places in rows by hundreds and by fifties. Then, taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he said the blessing, broke the loaves, and gave them to (his) disciples to set before the people; he also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied. And they picked up twelve wicker baskets full of fragments and what was left of the fish. Those who ate (of the loaves) were five thousand men.

Luke 20: 20-26

They watched him closely and sent agents pretending to be righteous who were to trap him in speech, in order to hand him over to the authority and power of the governor. They posed this question to him, “Teacher, we know that what you say and teach is correct, and you show no partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it lawful for us to pay tribute to Caesar or not?” Recognizing their craftiness he said to them, “Show me a denarius; whose image and name does it bear?” They replied, “Caesar’s.” So he said to them, “Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” They were unable to trap him by something he might say before the people, and so amazed were they at his reply that they fell silent.

Luke 20: 1-19

One day as he was teaching the people in the temple area and proclaiming the good news, the chief priests and scribes, together with the elders, approached him and said to him, “Tell us, by what authority are you doing these things? Or who is the one who gave you this authority?” He said to them in reply, “I shall ask you a question. Tell me, was John’s baptism of heavenly or of human origin?” They discussed this among themselves, and said, “If we say, ‘Of heavenly origin,’ he will say, ‘Why did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ then all the people will stone us, for they are convinced that John was a prophet.” So they answered that they did not know from where it came. Then Jesus said to them, “Neither shall I tell you by what authority I do these things.”

Then he proceeded to tell the people this parable. “(A) man planted a vineyard, leased it to tenant farmers, and then went on a journey for a long time. At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenant farmers to receive some of the produce of the vineyard. But they beat the servant and sent him away empty-handed. So he proceeded to send another servant, but him also they beat and insulted and sent away empty-handed. Then he proceeded to send a third, but this one too they wounded and threw out. The owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I shall send my beloved son; maybe they will respect him.’ But when the tenant farmers saw him they said to one another, ‘This is the heir. Let us kill him that the inheritance may become ours.’ So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and put those tenant farmers to death and turn over the vineyard to others.” When the people heard this, they exclaimed, “Let it not be so!”

But he looked at them and asked, “What then does this scripture passage mean: ‘The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone’? Everyone who falls on that stone will be dashed to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” The scribes and chief priests sought to lay their hands on him at that very hour, but they feared the people, for they knew that he had addressed this parable to them.