

Restoring the Local

At present, the stated vision of Intellectual Takeout is the following: “A cultural renaissance in America based on the ideals of freedom, justice, and subsidiarity.”

We get a lot of questions about that last word, “subsidiarity”. So, what is it?

In short, subsidiarity is an organizing principle which holds that decisions and responsibilities should be handled as much as possible by the smallest units of society. For Americans, this principle would mean that individuals provide for themselves, families raise children, and the federal government defends the country. As for what happens in between, there is a lot of grey.

Academics argue that the roots of the term “subsidiarity” go back to two Catholic encyclicals, [*Rerum Novarum*](#) published by Pope Leo XIII in 1891, and its follow-up, [*Quadragesimo Anno*](#), published by Pope Pius XI in 1931. (For those unfamiliar with the term “encyclical”, it is a kind of teaching document on doctrine.) The strongest and clearest description of the principle of subsidiarity as it relates to civil and political life is found in *Quadragesimo Anno*. There, Pius XI writes:

“The supreme authority of the State ought, therefore, to let subordinate groups handle matters and concerns of lesser importance...”

Both Leo XIII and Pius XI were addressing the challenges of modernity and industrialism in the world, particularly the false dichotomy between capitalism and socialism. It was their goal to establish principles for a new social order rooted in justice that recognized private property and the realities of modern business, defended the family, and promoted freedom and justice, while also addressing the plight of workers, the problems of modern society and the challenges of capitalism,

as well as what they believed to be the destructive nature of socialism.

In *Rerum Novarum*, Leo XIII makes his position clear:

“In any case we clearly see, and on this there is general agreement, that some opportune remedy must be found quickly for the misery and wretchedness pressing so unjustly on the majority of the working class: for the ancient workingmen’s guilds were abolished in the last century, and no other protective organization took their place. Public institutions and the laws set aside the ancient religion. Hence, by degrees it has come to pass that working men have been surrendered, isolated and helpless, to the hardheartedness of employers and the greed of unchecked competition. The mischief has been increased by rapacious usury, which, although more than once condemned by the Church, is nevertheless, under a different guise, but with like injustice, still practiced by covetous and grasping men. To this must be added that the hiring of labor and the conduct of trade are concentrated in the hands of comparatively few; so that a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of the laboring poor a yoke little better than that of slavery itself.

To remedy these wrongs the socialists, working on the poor man’s envy of the rich, are striving to do away with private property, and contend that individual possessions should become the common property of all, to be administered by the State or by municipal bodies. They hold that by thus transferring property from private individuals to the community, the present mischievous state of things will be set to rights, inasmuch as each citizen will then get his fair share of whatever there is to enjoy. But their contentions are so clearly powerless to end the controversy that were they carried into effect the working man himself would be among the first to

suffer. They are, moreover, emphatically unjust, for they would rob the lawful possessor, distort the functions of the State, and create utter confusion in the community.”

For Leo XIII and Pius XI, the solution wasn't in increasing or abolishing government, or in redistribution, but rather rethinking the state and society based on the natural order. The starting point in that process was the idea of subsidiarity as an ordering principle. We see it fleshed out in greater detail in Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno*:

“When we speak of the reform of institutions, the State comes chiefly to mind, not as if universal well-being were to be expected from its activity, but because things have come to such a pass through the evil of what we have termed ‘individualism’ that, following upon the overthrow and near extinction of that rich social life which was once highly developed through associations of various kinds, there remain virtually only individuals and the State. This is to the great harm of the State itself; for, with a structure of social governance lost, and with the taking over of all the burdens which the wrecked associations once bore. The State has been overwhelmed and crushed by almost infinite tasks and duties.

As history abundantly proves, it is true that on account of changed conditions many things which were done by small associations in former times cannot be done now save by large associations. Still, that most weighty principle, which cannot be set aside or changed, remains fixed and unshaken in social philosophy: 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.

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."

As we reflect upon the modern world, the words of Pius XI ring even more true. Now more than ever society is atomized. Often, the individual's strongest, most direct relationship is with either government or employer. The bonds of civil society have largely disintegrated.

As a guiding principle, subsidiarity seems to best align with human dignity, the restoration of the local, the rebuilding of civil society, and justice. Rather than simply saying this is the law or this is how things must be, it asks whether or not the smallest unit of society can handle the task before it and if that task aligns with its natural tendencies.

For example, most individuals will be able to provide for themselves and therefore should. But others cannot due to illness or defects of birth. As that is the case, some individuals need help. But should it be the duty of the federal government, the state, the county, the city, the neighborhood, or the family to address the needs of those individuals in need? Which entity is best able to not only address the material needs of the person, but also the spiritual or emotional needs? Those are questions of justice

and prudence, of considering each case individually.

Civility and our sense of community may be restored if rather than arguing about whether or not some individuals need help and if government should provide it, we instead acknowledge that many things in life need addressing and then discuss who has responsibility for them and how those needs can best be addressed.

It is for those reasons, and others not elaborated upon, that subsidiarity is to us an appealing principle.