

Deep Degrowth: Contributions from Catholic Social Teaching

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Introduction

The climate crisis compels society to look at the current dominant socio-economic system and evaluate how certain characteristics (e.g., colonial dynamics and a prioritization of economic growth) contribute to different forms of injustice. Rising global temperatures and shifting weather patterns contribute to an array of issues impacting human and non-human communities. Biodiversity loss is reaching levels only comparable to past mass extinction events (Cowie et al. 2022), concerns are rising over food and water security across the globe (Mbow et al. 2019), and contemporary justice issues with historical roots have come to the fore of development discourse. Global society is looking itself in the mirror, and many advocate for a shift in values and behaviors to foster a more environmentally and socially just socio-economic system that adequately addresses this polycrisis.

Of course, with intentional self-examination comes ideas and visions of alternative pathways and destinations to pursue. Many scholars and activists among an array of disciplines attempt to diagnose the problem, suggest certain transformations, and offer a set of principles to guide us there. How do we come to better care for each other, the planet, and future generations? This is the pressing question for our time. It is a question that many have addressed in recent decades, notably with the emergence in the 1970s of two schools of thought: deep ecology, first articulated by Arne Naess, and social ecology, first articulated by Murray Bookchin. Both Naess and Bookchin sought a radical critique and transformation of the dominant socio-economic system, although Bookchin did not appreciate Naess's emphasis on the importance of ecological wisdom (ecosophy) for such critique and transformation. As Jason Wirth (2021, 14) notes, Bookchin misinterprets Naess as guilty of New Age mystification and irrationality. In reality, deep ecology's appeal to wisdom is not irrational. Indeed, it is entirely compatible with social ecology, forming a hybrid that Wirth calls deep social ecology, for which the world's wisdom traditions are allies in the work of cultivating sustainable and just communities of life on Earth. An important part of deep social ecology involves moving away from the obsession with unending economic growth, whereby "more is never enough" (Wirth 2021, 5). Wirth's deep social ecology is similar to the "deep economy" proposed by Bill McKibben (2), which seeks to draw out the economic implications of deep ecology. For McKibben, the "most

important work” of deep economy is “to crack the consensus that what we need is More” (4).

The critique of growth in deep economy and deep social ecology resonates with degrowth – a transdisciplinary school of thought comprised of scholars and activists working to critique and transform the growth-oriented global economy. Many of those working with degrowth draw primarily on social and environmental sciences, rarely paying attention to the spiritual pursuit of wisdom. Whereas the title of one article by some prominent proponents of degrowth states, “Degrowth Can Work—Here’s How Science Can Help” (Hickel et al. 2022), deep degrowth draws attention to how religion and spirituality can help. Degrowth can work, and here is how wisdom traditions can help. We call this approach deep degrowth. It is a way to bring degrowth into dialogue with the world’s wisdom traditions, so that the values of Hinduism, Buddhism, Indigenous lifeways, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and all the world’s religions can support the transition away from the endless pursuit of More. Of course, a comprehensive examination of all of those traditions is beyond the scope of a single essay. In what follows, we focus on contributions to degrowth in one specific area: Catholic Social Teaching (CST), a body of literature formed over the past 220 years, concerned with issues of environmental and social justice. Both degrowth and CST offer a framework of values and principles upon which critiques of the dominant global economic system are made, alternative futures are envisaged, and pathways are formed. Many of the values and principles promoted by these two groups overlap (Puggioni 2017), and if brought into greater conversation, potentially impactful transformations may be made that bring us closer to a more sustainable and just global socio-economic system.

Of course, CST does not stand for Catholic Spiritual Teaching, so it makes sense that some might hear more resonance with social ecology than deep ecology. However, it is important to point out that CST is in fact deeply spiritual and not merely social. This is evident in the way CST makes extensive references to scripture, roots praxis in faith, and seeks the holistic transformation of individuals and societies toward communion with God, neighbor, and creation. CST is at once a path of justice and a path to holiness. This reflects Catholic understandings of the Incarnation and the Eucharist, whereby spiritual truths are not separate from material forms, and the body and blood of Christ are substantially inseparable from sacramental bread and wine. In short, for CST, that which is deeply spiritual is not separate from that which is social. Social acts are spiritual acts of communion.

While not explicitly framing his inquiry as deep degrowth, Puggioni (2017) notes the affinities of degrowth literature with more updated Catholic Social Teaching of socio-economics and the environment, namely, Pope Francis’s *Laudato Si’*, marking the start of an important dialogue. This paper will contribute to this dialogue.

To start, we explore both degrowth’s and CST’s critique of growth. Next, we discuss their

perspectives on mending colonial relations and facilitating a just distribution of resources. We then examine Catholic Social Teaching's commitment to, and understanding of, distributive justice. To conclude, we offer brief remarks about affinities between degrowth and Catholic Social Teaching as well as potential future directions for deep degrowth.

Critique of Growth

There are two interlinked dimensions of degrowth's critique of growth. Firstly, degrowth argues that economic growth as a process, currently measured by GDP, is driving a number of environmental stressors and cannot function sustainably within a finite planetary system. For example, there appears to be an inherent correlation between GDP growth and an increase in carbon emissions and material footprint (Weidmann et al. 2020). Because the economy currently relies on fossil fuels, trends show that as the economy grows so does the use of fossil fuels, which leads to greater carbon emissions and the threat of increasing global average temperatures (Florides and Christodoulides 2009). Simultaneously, there is a correlation between rising GDP and an increase in material use, as measured in material footprint (Hickel and Kallis 2020). As the economy grows, the use of material like land, water, and minerals increases as well. Scholars locate the sustainable threshold of material use at 50 billion metric tons (Hoekstra and Wiedmann 2014). According to the United Nations, in 2017 the total global material footprint was 92 billion metric tons, far surpassing the sustainable threshold. And that figure is projected to double by 2060 if we maintain our current trends of production and consumption (United Nations 2019). Therefore, economic growth makes it extremely difficult to decrease the global economy's ecological footprint due to its intrinsic tie to increasing carbon emissions and material footprint. It follows, according to degrowth scholars and activists, that we must abandon economic growth to more expeditiously transition to a sustainable economic model (Hickel and Kallis 2020).

In addition to degrowth as a critique of the process of economic growth, degrowth advocates for abandoning the belief that growth always contributes to greater well-being and progress. And while degrowth rejects economic growth and argues for "material downscaling" of the economy, Akbulut (2021) states that "it is more fundamentally a call to break with economic growth as a societal goal and to oppose the automatic association of growth with better outcomes—that is, the ideology of growth" (98). Degrowth challenges the belief that increasing GDP will generate greater well-being and spur healthy progress and calls for the use of alternative metrics that better encapsulate the plethora of factors contributing to well-being for both people and the planet – metrics that abandon the primacy of growth.

Degrowth positions are rooted in a critique of growth as an economic process and the ideology

of growth, and it is essential for our deep degrowth inquiry to identify if CST shares these critiques. Upon reviewing CST for its commentary on economic growth, we do indeed see an increasingly critical engagement with both the process of economic growth and the ideology of growth through the lenses of environmental and social justice.

The potential negative impact of economic growth as a concern was explored in CST, at least beginning with the papal works of Paul VI, if not before. In *Populorum Progressio*, Paul VI (1967) quite clearly states that economic growth is necessary for “human progress” and “development” (25). According to Paul VI, however, this growth must encompass both social and moral parameters to avoid becoming counterproductive to human flourishing. In an address to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Pope Paul VI (1970) outlines his position. He states that “The most extraordinary scientific progress, the most astounding technical feats and the most amazing economic growth, unless accompanied by authentic moral and social progress, will in the long run go against man” (4). The pope signals that economic growth will inevitably become counterproductive should it be without proper ethical guidance and an adequate consideration of the social impacts. Expounding on this point, Pope Paul VI (1971) formalizes a critique of economic growth in Catholic Social Teaching with his encyclical *Octogesima Adveniens*.

Without doubt, there has been just condemnation of the limits and even the misdeeds of a merely quantitative economic growth; there is a desire to attain objectives of a qualitative order also. The quality and the truth of human relations, the degree of participation and of responsibility, are no less significant and important for the future of society than the quantity and variety of the goods produced and consumed (41).

Pope Paul VI and CST take an important position: economic activity, specifically economic growth, cannot be seen as isolated from the social and political, and “objectives of a qualitative order” must be centered. With Pope Francis, we see a deeper engagement with economic growth specifically in his encyclicals, and it is with Francis that we see CST evolve to explicitly call for a downscaling of economic activity.

While Paul VI was critical of an economic growth without proper guidance and guard rails, Pope Francis (2015) more explicitly locates economic growth as a root cause of various forms of contemporary injustice, stating that “We fail to see the deepest roots of our present failures, which have to do with the direction, goals, meaning and social implications of technological and economic growth” (109). Economic growth, according to Francis, has indeed gone rogue and confirms the fear of Paul VI, claiming that it has now “turned against man.” Therefore, Pope Francis calls for downscaling economic growth, degrowth in other words, to foster greater

environmental and social justice. In *Laudato Si'*, Francis (2015) explains this position:

We know how unsustainable is the behaviour of those who constantly consume and destroy, while others are not yet able to live in a way worthy of their human dignity. That is why the time has come to accept decreased growth in some parts of the world, in order to provide resources for other places to experience healthy growth (193).

In this statement, Francis expands on CST's criticism of growth and actually advocates for "decreased growth" of certain parts of the globe – a first for CST. Not only does this reveal CST's support of degrowth's core argument that decreased material throughput is necessary, but it actually echoes a key position held by degrowth. According to CST and degrowth, the global North is indeed more responsible for downscaling economic activity due to its disproportionate contribution to rising global temperatures and surpassing key planetary boundaries. If the global North downscaled economic activity, the global South would also have the means and space to "experience healthy growth" to ensure well-being (Hickel 2021).

On Mending Colonial Relations

Of course, it is important to note that the Roman Catholic Church has been, in many ways, an arm of colonialism throughout history. Pope John Paul II, during his papacy, asked forgiveness for the failings of the Catholic Church during the colonial era (John Paul II 1992). And more recently, Pope Francis, when on a visit to Canada shared similar remarks asking native peoples' forgiveness for abuses perpetrated by the Catholic Church through various means, including the Doctrine of Discovery, which justified colonial activities (Francis 2022). While more recent teachings do not mend historical atrocities, the modern social teaching of the Catholic Church reflects the sentiments of John Paul II and Francis, and the need to recognize past and present colonial dynamics to move forward in a more globally just manner. While apologies and teachings are important, in terms of action, much more needs to be done.

With the papacy of Pope Paul VI, important developments and shifts occurred within the social teaching of the Church and its approach to questions of international development. During his papacy, a shift occurred from a paternalistic approach that saw development as merely a matter of the "poorer" countries following the path of development taken by "richer" countries, to an approach that better recognized the complexity of international development and the political forces often perpetuating colonial relations at the global scale. According to the researcher Uzo Chokwu Njoku (2007), Paul VI's initial views of international development, reflected in his papal works *Populorum Progressio* and *Gaudium et Spes*, saw the relationship

between “richer” and “poorer” countries in paternalistic terms, and that in order for poorer countries to develop, they should receive aid and follow the path of development taken by richer countries. Importantly, however, Paul VI shies away from this perspective in later papal documents after recognizing that these dynamics perpetuated globally unjust socio-economic patterns. Drawing upon dependency theory, Paul VI in *Octogesima Adveniens* states that he has “seen in a new perspective the grave problems of our time” (Paul VI 1971) and he begins to advocate for a political analysis of global inequality and the power dynamics that perpetuate colonial relations (Njoku 2007).

Within CST, there is a call not just to analyze global inequality and unbalanced power dynamics, but to actively address the root causes. This spirit is rooted in the principle of *solidarity*. Solidarity is multidimensional and holds all human communities as interconnected and interdependent, and thus encourages all to work towards collective well-being. Christie et al. (2019) offer a helpful description of solidarity, stating that:

[solidarity] concerns the inherent sociality of human beings and their need, as flawed and dependent creatures, to live in relations of mutual care and responsibility. Each person has a unique dignity and worth, but each is also constituted as a relational being, dependent on and capable of giving to others for the achievement of mutual flourishing (1348).

Solidarity is not simply the ability to sympathize with others around the globe and show outward signs of connection. It is, more importantly, a responsibility to dedicate oneself to the good of humanity as a whole (Kammer 1991). In fact, the *Catechism* emphasizes the international dimension of solidarity stating that: “International solidarity is a requirement of the moral order; world peace depends in part upon this (Catholic Church 2000, para. 1941).

Francis (2020) speaks to the implications of an international solidarity that interrogates the causes of injustice, which can thus inform efforts to mend colonial relations:

Solidarity means much more than engaging in sporadic acts of generosity. It means thinking and acting in terms of community. It means that the lives of all are prior to the appropriation of goods by a few. It also means combatting the structural causes of poverty, inequality, the lack of work, land and housing, the denial of social and labour rights (116).

What is relevant here is the call to combat “structural causes.” Global solidarity, as Francis emphasizes, centers actions that address the source of what ails society. As we saw, Francis identifies disproportionate and excessive global consumption as a structural cause, and later, we will explore his centering of distributive justice in an analysis of unbalanced and unhealthy

relations between countries and how to mend them.

Degrowth engages in questions of colonialism and neo-colonialism, perhaps recognizing and more pointedly calling out those driving it. Hickel (2021) states that “Degrowth scholars and activists explicitly recognize the reality of ecological debt and call for an end to the colonial patterns of appropriation that underpin Northern growth, in order to release the South from the grip of extractivism and a future of catastrophic climate breakdown” (1). What underpins Northern growth, according to scholars from the degrowth school, are unjust relations that essentially funnel wealth and resources disproportionately to the global North. Ecological debt centers not only the historical and present injustices that manifested from these relations, but also the need to mend injustice between the global North and South via reparations (Demaria et al. 2013). From the degrowth perspective, an important measure to mend relations between the North and South is a matter of debt forgiveness and the redistribution of resources.

Just Distribution of Resources in Degrowth

A key tenet of any economic system equipped to facilitate downscaling material throughput in a just manner, according to degrowth scholars and activists, is the equitable distribution of resources, wealth, and income (D’Alisa et al. 2014; Hickel 2019). It is argued among advocates that this is essential to both living within planetary boundaries and promoting healthier social relationships (Hickel 2020a). Demaria and Latouche (2019) affirm this, stating that “the degrowth project challenges the hegemony of economic growth and calls for a democratically led redistributive downscaling of production and consumption in industrialized countries as a means to achieve environmental sustainability, social justice, and well-being” (148). Through democratic processes, according to Demaria and Latouche (2019) “redistributive downscaling” of economic activity is essential when considering the manner in which degrowth transformations take place.

In a transition away from a growth-centric economy, the just distribution of resources is a means to ensure environmental thresholds are respected while sufficiently meeting social indicators of justice and well-being. According to Hickel (2019), “The literature on degrowth argues that it is possible to reduce aggregate economic activity in high-income nations while at the same time maintaining and even improving indicators of human development and well-being” (57). Reducing material throughput does not necessitate a reduction in quality of life or forcing people into poverty. Through social and political mechanisms, a more equitable and just distribution of plentiful resources can ensure the well-being of both people and the planet while deprioritizing economic growth.

While concrete policy suggestions are not the focus of this paper, there are various mechanisms degrowth scholars and activists argue can facilitate more just distributions of resources, wealth, and income. One such mechanism is to cap resource use and the accumulation of wealth and income to both prevent surpassing environmental limits and facilitate greater social well-being (Kallis 2018). While “capping and sharing” is admittedly vague, Buch-Hansen and Koch (2019) offer more concrete policy approaches that degrowth transitions might employ to achieve environmental and social well-being. A shortened work week is another approach often found in degrowth literature that can help reduce ecological footprint, distribute resources more equitably, and enhance well-being in degrowth scenarios (Schor 2014). Elaborating on this point, Parrique (2019) states that “shorter working hours could liberate time for leisure, education, care activities, and political involvement, thus improving health, well-being, justice, and democracy” (572).

It is also crucial to mention that, given the complexity of international economic dynamics both historically and in the modern era, degrowth goes beyond calling for redistribution “in industrialized countries.” It even calls for the global community to consider mechanisms that facilitate the just distribution of resource use among nations (Demaria et al. 2013). As we explored earlier, degrowth recognizes that the global North retains an “ecological debt” accrued through past and present colonial patterns that disproportionately contribute to environmental breakdown and effectively shift wealth and resources away from the global South (Demaria et al. 2013). For example, the global North is responsible for nearly 90% of emissions in excess of safe planetary boundaries (Hickel 2020b), while at the same time, the “majority of the global South is extremely vulnerable” to climate change (Sen Roy 2018). Considering the just distribution of resources in a degrowth scenario at the international level may better ensure that relations between nations break from past and present exploitative colonial patterns, encouraging, instead, relationships grounded in reciprocity and mutual care for our common home and the common good.

What is clear from the degrowth literature is that the just distribution of resources is a central tenet of degrowth. While policy proposals to facilitate this may be lacking, vague, or broad, just resource distribution is an important pillar of degrowth scenarios that strive to meet environmental and social indicators of well-being.

Just Distribution of Resources in Catholic Social Teaching

Catholic Social Teaching has engaged with distributive justice, as a category of justice, in their reflections and teachings on socio-economics. According to a statement issued by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Catholic social teaching, like much philosophical

reflection, distinguishes three dimensions of basic justice: commutative justice, *distributive justice*, and social justice” (United States Catholic Bishops 1986) (italics our own). Pope Benedict Emeritus (2009) states in *Caritas in Veritate* that “the social doctrine of the Church has unceasingly highlighted the importance of distributive justice” and its relation to the economy. Bucciarelli et al. (2011) affirm that modern CST centers distributive justice in its understanding of healthy development, and that it is clearly derived from the writings of early Church leaders.

While this is certainly true, distributive justice, as it is understood in Catholic Social Teaching, has pre-Church roots. It is well documented in Hebrew Scripture that the excessive accumulation of wealth can deteriorate the social milieu. In fact, certain customs required land owners and creditors to redistribute resources to prevent societal degradation and reestablish economic balance. During what was called a “Jubilee year,” for example, agrarian debts were forgiven and land rights forfeited under distress were to be returned to the initial owner (Annett 2022). This long-standing theme of promoting economic justice is not to be mistaken as a kind of superficial charity. Indeed, it was a means to maintain justice and social cohesion (Goodhart and Hudson 2018). This notion of distributive justice is reflected from the beginning of Jesus’s ministry and activism, as he centered the economic plight of the marginalized often due to systemic indebtedness (Annett 2022).

A common thread throughout CST, particularly with the writings of early Church leaders up to Aquinas, is the constant declaration that the accumulation of wealth should not be an end in and of itself. Take for example Clement of Alexandria, who states quite pointedly that “If you use [an instrument] skillfully, it is skillful; if you are deficient in skill, it is affected by your want of skill, being itself destitute of blame. Such an instrument is wealth. Are you able to make right use of it? It is subservient to righteousness. Does one make wrong use of it? It is, on the other hand, a minister of wrong” (Roberts and Donaldson 1885). Clement of Alexandria articulates quite clearly that wealth, though not inherently destructive, can become counterproductive or destructive, should it be used without proper intention and parameters.

While wealth was the primary concern of Clement of Alexandria’s reflection, it is worth considering the *universal destination of goods* – a principle centered in CST that pertains to private property and the just distribution of resources more broadly. This principle emphasizes that the earth and its resources are to be respected and utilized in a manner that ensures the well-being of all, “without excluding or favouring anyone” (Pontifical Council 2005, para. 171). The universal destination of goods is a manifestation of the Christian belief that the earth is “God’s first gift” to humanity (Ibid., para. 171).

Popes have continually stressed that the universal destination of goods is “primordial” and precedes the right to private property (John Paul II 1987; Catholic Church 2000; Pontifical

Council 2005; Francis 2020). In other words, the teaching and belief that the fruits of the earth are to be utilized by all for the benefit of all is to be prioritized over the right to private property. Francis (2020) puts it this way: “The right to private property is always accompanied by the primary and prior principle of the subordination of all private property to the universal destination of the earth’s goods, and thus the right of all to their use” (123). Private property, according to CST, must be oriented to facilitate holistic human development – what John Paul II (1987) identifies as the “social mortgage” of private property. Thus, it is the perspective of the Catholic Church that if the degree of privatization of the earth’s goods is actively working against the well-being of individuals and the wider human community, then governments have “the right and duty” to regulate privatization (Catholic Church 2000).

Catholic Social Teaching clearly holds that wealth and private property, when used properly, can advance an holistic development of individual persons and of society (Clark 2014). However, according to CST, true development is not solely a matter of continually expanding wealth and what one owns privately. It is an holistic perspective and emphasizes the economic, social, and spiritual dimensions of the human experience (Cornish 2009). Thus, according to CST, the just distribution of both wealth and resources is essential to further a truly sustainable and healthy development of individuals and society.

Purpose of Distributive Justice in CST

To expound on this, it is helpful to look at specific aims of distributive justice. Catholic Social Teaching holds that distributive justice is a key measure of the “economic well-being of a country” (Pontifical Council 2005), promoting human dignity and social justice more broadly. Additionally, distributive justice, if truly pursued, can further international solidarity and cooperation for global flourishing (Catholic Church 2020).

According to CST, there are essential avenues to achieve distributive justice and further the well-being of a country’s economy and society in the modern era, including ensuring access to essential goods and services for individual flourishing. According to the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*:

The economic well-being of a country is not measured exclusively by the quantity of goods it produces but also by taking into account the manner in which they are produced and the level of equity in the distribution of income, which should allow everyone access to what is necessary for their personal development and perfection. An equitable distribution of income is to be sought on the basis of criteria not merely of commutative justice but also of social

justice that is, considering, beyond the objective value of the work rendered, the human dignity of the subjects who perform it. Authentic economic well-being is pursued also by means of suitable social policies for the redistribution of income which, taking general conditions into account, look at merit as well as at the need of each citizen (Pontifical Council 2005, section 303).

Here we see quite clearly in the *Compendium* that proper distributive justice policy should act as a means to ensure that a country's citizens are able to access the goods and services needed for individual well-being. To achieve this, the *Compendium* states, the distribution of income needs to be pursued by "social policies" and informed by a broader understanding of income under a framework of social justice. Fred Kammer (n.d.) outlines some potential policies as being "progressive taxation, financial assistance to families and the poor and vulnerable, minimum wage legislation... and other measures designed to reduce inequality in income or wealth."

While CST is certainly concerned about the distribution of wealth and income inside countries, the evolution of CST has seen a gradual and important increase in concern about the relationship between countries as economies became enmeshed via a globalized system. Regarding issues of economic development specifically, Pope John XXIII's papacy marked a shift due to the incorporation of international dynamics of development in CST's lens of analysis (Buccierelli et al. 2011). He called for international economic collaboration grounded in "human dignity" that respects individual state agency in political and economic matters (John XXIII 1963, 121-125). International consideration for socio-economic issues became a pressing theme in future papal encyclicals, and, as we shall see, prompted a key shift in the understanding of the distribution of wealth and income as a means to attain justice.

The Synod of Bishops' *Justitia in mundo*, written under the papacy of Paul VI, clearly emphasizes that, to "further justice in the world," it is necessary to mend global patterns of unequal distribution resulting from "international systems of domination." What has been unequally distributed, according to the Synod, are wealth and income, and also the decision-making power to influence the global economic system (Synod of Bishops 1971, section 1,12). Furthermore, in this same document, the authors express a "vain hope" in economic growth to reduce global poverty (Synod of Bishops 1971, 10), a position that was previously supported (see Paul VI 1970).

Pope Francis in more recent years continues this thread of criticism, critiquing the failings of international systems and economic growth to ensure the equitable distribution of resources. Francis (2015) draws our attention to international power dynamics favoring "some parts of the world" and their unsustainable patterns of consumption, which effectively siphon resources

away from other parts of the world. Francis, therefore, calls for “decreased growth” as a potential avenue to mend destructive dynamics and facilitate the redistribution of global resources (193). Francis (2015) states that a reason to promote decreased growth among particular nations is to “provide resources for other places to experience healthy growth” (193). This just distribution of resources, for Francis, is concomitant with the proportion of responsibility to downscale economic growth. The high consuming nations that disproportionately drive unsustainable activity are far more responsible for mending destructive production and consumption patterns, while the low consuming nations still have a right to “experience healthy growth” if desired and in a manner that is appropriate for their context.

In the early days of Leo XIV’s papacy, who was elected during the writing of this article, a clear message has been sent to the world that he will continue, as did his predecessor Francis, to advocate for and center distributive justice in his teachings. In Leo XIV’s address to the College of Cardinals following his selection as the new pope, he explains why he chose the name Leo, stating that it is “mainly because Pope Leo XIII in his historic Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* addressed the social question in the context of the first great industrial revolution” (Leo XIV 2025a). The social question in the encyclical being the “social situation of the workers” and ameliorating work conditions (Backhaus et al. 2017). Shortly after meeting with the Cardinals, Leo XIV met with delegates from sixty-eight different countries on the Jubilee of Governments, emphasizing their responsibility in politics “to promote and protect... the good of the community, the common good, particularly by defending the vulnerable and the marginalized” (Leo XIV 2025b). Leo XIV reiterates the pursuit of distributive justice as inseparable from pursuing the common good of humanity, explicitly locating exorbitant wealth disparity as a driver of injustice and violence. In response, according to Leo XIV, politics “by promoting the equitable distribution of resources, can offer an effective service to harmony and peace both domestically and internationally” (Ibid).

While less than two months into Leo XIV’s papacy at the writing of this article, it is clear that his papacy will at the very least continue to center distributive justice in an analysis of the many issues facing the global community. Furthermore, as the first North American pope, who has spent much of his ministerial life in South America, it is not unreasonable to expect social commentary that reflects that of his predecessor, namely unjust power and economic dynamics between the global North and global South. His contributions to CST may provide more grounds for continued dialogue between degrowth and the social teaching of the Church.

Conclusion

Degrowth and Catholic Social Teaching share similar perspectives on the socio-economic drivers of environmental degradation and the ways in which transitions to a more sustainable system can occur at local, national, and international scales. The affinities reveal important pathways that may guide successful degrowth socio-economic transformations that prioritize not perpetual value extraction and consumption but the health of all human and non-human life and systems. From both degrowth and CST perspectives, economic growth must be abandoned as a main priority to adequately address environmental degradation. Furthermore, economic growth must be abandoned as a priority in certain areas of the globe to address exploitative social relations that intersect with environmental concerns prevalent in international economic dynamics. Both degrowth scholarship and the social teaching of the Catholic Church locate the just distribution of resources as necessary to facilitate economic transformations that center well-being.

The shared perspectives of degrowth and Catholic Social Teaching also highlight an opportunity for future deep degrowth inquiry: an intentional engagement of degrowth with the socio-economic teaching of the world's wisdom traditions. Through further dialogue in and between wisdom traditions, degrowth positions and efforts will find more allies and may be more successful. There are already many examples of work in deep degrowth across traditions, including Christianity (Hall 2017; Bernico 2022), Islam (Williams 2024), Buddhism (Bandarage 2018; Masaki 2022), and Indigenous traditions (Alexander 2023; Della 2018; Frost 2019), to list but a small sample of what is quickly becoming a very large field of research and a compelling moral force for socio-economic transformation.

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