The principle of subsidiarity is one of the four permanent principles of the Church’s social doctrine. Together with the principles of human dignity, pursuit of the common good, and solidarity, subsidiarity addresses the reality of man’s life in society with other individuals, groups of individuals and the state. The objective of the principle of subsidiarity is to ensure that every person has a right to sit at the table of life where our basic needs are met.\(^1\) In pursuit of that objective, the concept of subsidiarity means to rely as much as possible on those solutions that are closest to the people affected and to employ the smallest and most effective groupings and mechanisms to supply the need. By application of that definition, a benefit is realized by the person or family whose needs are met as well as by those who provide the goods or services. The benefit to both groups diminishes when the principle of subsidiarity is violated.

In this paper, I will examine the principle of subsidiarity and analyze its origins in Scripture and Church Tradition. I will also examine how the application of subsidiarity affects the four societal groups who must administer it – families and individuals; community and religious institutions; the private sector (business and manufacturing); and the government.\(^2\) Through that examination, I will demonstrate how the delicate equilibrium surrounding the principle of subsidiarity radiates through every other principle of Catholic social teaching, and illuminates the

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2 Ibid.
interdependence of all of those principles. Finally, I will propose a definitive role and responsibility that the Church has in carrying out the principle of subsidiarity – *ad intra* and *ad extra*.

The word “subsidiarity” derives from the Latin, *subsidium*, which means assistance or backup.³ In application, it places larger institutions and the state in the role of assistance, or backup, to intervene only when smaller groups cannot most effectively supply the need. By employing the smallest group to supply the societal need, the human dimension is fully developed for the servant as well as those served, manifesting the moral virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and perseverance while continuously forming the conscience.⁴ “… (T)he researches of social science, metaphysics, and theology demonstrate that man is a spiritual being whose personal identity grows in relation to service to others and to God.”⁵

Before the principle of “subsidiarity” was incorporated into Catholic social teaching, the term was coined by the nineteenth-century Italian Jesuit Luigi Taparelli (1793-1862). For him, and for Catholic social doctrine, subsidiarity was not a “free standing” concept but, instead a description of how a society of persons and groups stand in relation to one another and to the state.⁶ By the nineteenth century, the Church in Europe had not only lost its political privilege, but had also been stripped of its juridic personality. The “modern state’s” unprecedented assertion of power over persons and groups (including monks and monasteries) collided with the Gospel and ignited the need to defend the institutions of the Church.⁷

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³ Ibid., 163.
⁴ RN 24; CCC 1805, 1783.
⁷ Ibid., 821-822.
The concept of subsidiarity (but not the word itself) was adopted in 1891 by Pope Leo XIII in the first Encyclical on social doctrine, *Rerum Novarum*, where he addressed the injustices widely rendered upon the worker as a consequence of the industrial revolution. Seeing the formation of associations among workers as a means of restoring the balance between capitalists and workers, Pope Leo XIII compared the mission of such associations to that of the order of deacons instituted by the Apostles: “They were employed in feeding the needy, in burying them, in support of youths and maidens destitute of means and deprived of their parents, in the care of the aged, and the relief of the shipwrecked.”

Pope Leo XIII entreated the Christian worker to strike out in service to one another against undeserved, miserable and wretched working conditions. Not only did he suggest that, by associations they could restore balance between the worker and capitalists, but he stressed that such associations would avoid the proposed remedies of Liberalism and Socialism which carried evils far worse than the problems workers were already enduring. In his Encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno*, Pope Pius XI taught that the principle of subsidiarity has applications throughout society and not only to the needs of workers. Indeed, he found the concept necessary in every setting where spiritual development and economic benefit combine.

The broader application of subsidiarity is testament to the fact that it is not only the ideal of man, but also the idea of God. Throughout Scripture, God has showered His kenotic love on mankind - by pouring out His divinity at the creation of man and woman; by the inspired word of the prophets; and through the gift of our Redeemer. In *Acts of the Apostles*, Luke writes of...

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9 Pius XI, Encyclical Letter, *Quadragesimo Anno (QA)*. (May 15, 1931) 10, 44.  
10 QA, 37.  
11 Gen 1:27; 2:18  
12 Jer 7:5-7; Micah 6:6-8  
13 John 15:12-17
the communal life of the early Christians who could not expect provisions from the higher order of society: “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one’s needs.” As a result of their faithful devotion to one another’s needs, “… every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” (Acts 2: 44-47) Not only did the early Christians experience the blessings of subsidiarity in action, but they were also reminded of their duty to one another and the consequences of neglecting that duty: “If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, ‘Go, in peace, keep warm, and eat well,’ but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? So, also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” (James 2:15-17)

The principle of subsidiarity involves four (types of) societal groups: families and individuals; community and religious institutions; the private (business and manufacturing) sector; and the government. Each group has a different responsibility for providing for those who lack the basic needs for life. Higher-level social authority should not supply economic, institutional or juridical assistance to lesser social entities which assistance can be more effectively delivered by the smaller cells of society. Participation by the smaller cells in providing that assistance allows the family and intermediate groups to prosper socially and enjoy greater freedom and initiative.14 When the larger cell usurps the role of the smaller cell, the smaller group is denied its opportunity to exercise the moral virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and perseverance while continuously forming the conscience.15 On the other hand, where the state can stimulate greater equality and equal justice by broader applications, subsidiarity demands that the larger societal unit should

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15 CCC 1805, 1783.
provide the goods or services. The test for involvement by each of the four groups, therefore, is whether the group can most effectively supply the need, considering the temporal and spiritual benefit to the servant and the served.

Distinguishing, by examples, the nature of activities most effectively performed by the respective groups can provide better insight into the respect that each should demand of the others. The Church’s superior competence to monitor social systems for concordance with the unchangeable law of God cannot be questioned. The proper direction and distribution of raw materials to their most effective fabrication is reserved to the private sector. The welfare of family life and the teaching of morals and values to our young is clearly a function performed most effectively in the family. Providing loving care to the sick and disabled, and preparing children to participate in the larger cells of society, are tasks that should be performed by the joint efforts of family and volunteer organization. Providing for the safety of the world in a nuclear age, protecting the earth’s environment and ensuring fair and equitable distribution of the world’s vital and scarce resources lends itself to the international state.

When there is equilibrium among the responsibilities and activities of the four groups, the principle of subsidiarity reveals the interrelationships and the interdependence of the remaining principles of Catholic Social Teaching. Pope Benedict XVI illustrated this truth in Caritas in Veritate (2009): “The principle of subsidiarity must remain closely linked to the principle of solidarity and vice versa, since the former without the latter gives way to social privatism, while the latter without the former gives way to paternalist social assistance that is demeaning to those

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16 CSD, 188.
18 MM, 42-49.
in need." Methodically, Pope Benedict XVI correlated the principle of subsidiarity with the seven themes of Catholic Social Teaching adopted by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1995. Because subsidiarity recognizes in every person the ability to give something to others, it honors the principle of human dignity. And while the principle of subsidiarity is particularly well-suited to guide and manage globalization toward authentic human development, its downthrust refuses excessive socialization by emphasizing the call to family, community and participation.

When the equilibrium among the four societal groups is unbalanced, all individuals and groups are gravely effected by the resulting, bitter political, social, and economic hostility, and racial and ideological antagonism. When each of the four groups do not share co-responsibility, collegiality, freedom, and interdependence, the specter of domestic and international war and of societal decadence and destruction is pervasive. In his Encyclical Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, John Paul II attributed the imbalance among the four societal groups to the “structures of sin.” Rejecting the terms “mistaken political calculations” and “imprudent economic decisions” as trivializing, John Paul II professed that a more profound analysis of individuals’ actions and omissions cannot be achieved without judgments or references of an ethical and moral nature.

One significant example of the consequences of an imbalance among the groups caused by a violation of the principle of subsidiarity is public education in America.

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22 CV 53, 57.
The Church’s one major encyclical on education declared that children are not creatures of the State and it is the duty of the family, not the State, to ensure their educational development.\textsuperscript{25}

“There should be a well-ordered harmony between Church and State for it is spiritually nourished believers who supply the State with its necessary soldiers, taxpayers, judges, husbands, and wives.”\textsuperscript{26} The vast majority of parents in urban America have largely abdicated their responsibility for the education of their children, leaving their formation to the national bureaucracy that is entirely opposed to all principles of social teaching and the dignity of the human person. The result is alarming failure in the form of drop-outs, gangs and violence within the school institution, and the incompetence of the “nation-school” to provide an education that ensures the child an opportunity to meaningfully participate in work, community and the economy – violations of every one of the seven themes of Catholic social teaching.\textsuperscript{27} From this one example, I turn to the broader responsibilities of the Body of Christ in its endeavor to restore the equilibrium that displaces sinful consequences.

Conversely, where corporate capital cannot be assembled and regulated to provide those needs beyond the reach of the small cells of society, there are grave consequences – short term and long term. Electrical power and water is not distributed, or unevenly distributed and modern farming and lack of modern medical care lead immediately to preventable starvation and disease. Long term the desperation of the society extends even to the higher levels so that, even when other entities attempt to infuse capital, it is diverted to corrupt leaders who reject its use for the common good. The social teachings of the Church since \textit{Rerum Novarum} have provided it uniquely with

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} Pius XI, \textit{Divini Illius Magistri} (DIM), (December 31, 1929), 35.
\item \textsuperscript{26} \textit{Ibid.}, 53.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Although space limits of this paper do not allow analysis of America’s health care network, the United States is presently experiencing an effort by its leadership to find the equilibrium among the four societal groups in supplying the most effective, incentivized healthcare to its citizens. Indeed it is a living laboratory for the student of social justice.
\end{itemize}
the knowledge which, together with the virtue of charity, can lead such societies away from sin and into the “communion in charity.””

When examining the role of the Church in relation to the principle of subsidiarity, we should re-visit the very origin of the concept – the ideas of “assistance” or “backup.” These concepts are not theories, nor do they describe status. They describe actions by human beings in service to others. “Through the power of the Gospel, down the centuries monks tilled the land, men and women Religious founded hospitals and shelters for the poor, Confraternities as well as individual men and women of all states of life devoted themselves to the needy and to those on the margins of society, convinced as they were that Christ's words "as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40) were not intended to remain a pious wish, but were meant to become a concrete life commitment.”

The Church’s social doctrine must be the basis for formation of the lay faithful in preparation for service in various sectors of social life – family, culture, work, economics, and politics. To accomplish that mission, the principles of social teaching must be incorporated into every facet of the Church society – its faith formation instruction, its daily homilies, and its own associations. Unless the interdependent principles of social justice are understood by the Church community ad intra, it is not reasonable to expect the Church to bear witness to those principles, ad extra - in the larger communities and states where we are called not only to live, but to be the Gospel message in pursuit of the common good.

Conclusion

The principle of subsidiarity epitomizes the divine plan and purpose of the creation. Reflecting the eternal love of God, who shared His divinity with men and women, subsidiarity is

28 CCC 953.
29 John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, Centesimus Annus (CA), (May 1, 1991), 57.
30 CSD 528, 551.
the network through which they extend that kenosis, emptying themselves in service to others in mutual love. Joining with others in associations to most effectively serve the common good, we reflect the first “association” of supreme beings through whom we come to know and love our creator. Living the reciprocal principles of subsidiarity and solidarity, we are nourished by grace in unity as members of the Body of Christ. And strengthened by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, we have the knowledge and discernment to find the equilibrium among societal groups, which equilibrium delivers us from sin and temptation.
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