

Catholic Social Teaching: John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, I

by Thomas Storck, M.A.

(EIGHTH IN A SERIES)

In this article I will begin the discussion of *Centesimus Annus*, the latest social encyclical, written to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, and issued on May 1, 1991. In some quarters *Centesimus* was hailed as a new direction in papal social teaching, and even as a repudiation of past doctrine. However, as we will see, this was not at all the case. But because this charge has been widely made, I will devote much of this article and the next to showing the continuity of *Centesimus* with the prior social doctrine of the Church.

One of the reasons, I think, that *Centesimus* seemed to some to indicate a new direction in Catholic teaching, was that its constant counterpoint, the thing always on the Pope's mind and which underlies most of what he says, was his experience of a totalitarian communist economy in Poland. He was thus familiar with the heavy, and inefficient, hand of centralized state planning and of a lack of freedom in economic initiatives. In certain passages of the encyclical, such as chapter three or the beginning of chapter five, one can see his preoccupation with the absence of freedom that characterized such regimes. Thus his good words, even praise, for open economies. But such praise is always qualified. For John Paul is at pains to point out that freedom, even economic freedom, must be rooted in the truth, and as a result he is clear that economic activity must be circumscribed by a legal order that points it toward justice and the common good. (cf. nos. 4, 11, 15, 17, 34, 36, 42, 48 and 58.)¹ In our discussion of the encyclical we will see how often the Holy Father returns to this theme.

Centesimus Annus opens with a brief introduction followed by six chapters. In the introduction John Paul states that he is looking at *Rerum Novarum* "in order to discover anew the richness of the fundamental principles which it formulated..." (no. 3). Moreover, he states that in *Centesimus* he "seeks to show the fruitfulness of the principles enunciated by Leo XIII, which belong to

the Church's doctrinal patrimony and, as such, involve the exercise of her teaching authority" (*ibid.*). Thus far from seeking to set a new course for social doctrine, the Pontiff roots his own teaching firmly in that of Pope Leo.

Following this, he devotes the first chapter to *Rerum Novarum*. He notes the "radical changes which had taken place in the political, economic and social fields" at the time of that encyclical. As a result of these economic changes, labor had become

a commodity to be freely bought and sold on the market, its price determined by the law of supply and demand, without taking into account the bare minimum required for the support of the individual and his family. (no. 4)

John Paul describes this situation as a "grave injustice" (*ibid.*), and he summarizes some of the points Leo XIII made in response. He notes that Leo "affirmed the fundamental rights of workers" as well as the right to private property, mentioning that the earlier pontiff had been "well aware that private property is not an absolute value." Leo had also proclaimed the "necessary complementary principles, such as the *universal destination of the earth's goods*" (no. 6). Then Pope John Paul discusses *Rerum Novarum's* vindication of the right "to form private associations," such as professional associations or labor unions. And in this human right "we find the reason for the Church's defense and approval of the establishment of what are commonly called trade unions...because the right of association is a natural right of the human being" (no. 7).

Next the Holy Father mentions other rights of the worker which had been specified by Pope Leo. These include rights to reasonable working hours and periods of rest, to a safe workplace, and to a just wage. Indeed, John Paul affirms: "A workman's wages should be sufficient to enable him to support himself, his wife and

his children." And immediately he quotes Leo XIII, "If through necessity or fear of a worse evil the workman accepts harder conditions because an employer or contractor will afford no better, he is made the victim of force and injustice" (no. 8). John Paul then goes on to say,

Would that these words, written at a time when what has been called "unbridled capitalism" was pressing forward, should not have to be repeated today with the same severity. Unfortunately, even today one finds instances of contracts between employers and employees which lack reference to the most elementary justice regarding the employment of children or women, working hours, the hygienic conditions of the workplace and fair pay.... (*ibid.*)

John Paul speaks of Leo XIII's discussion of two erroneous socio-political theories, socialism and liberalism. And here I must again mention that liberalism, as used in the papal social encyclicals, does not mean what we here in the United States mean by liberalism. It is the European usage of the term, which approaches what we would call Libertarianism, or the "unbridled capitalism" which supports a market free of restraints. Socialism, for the most part, is no longer a temptation to most people, but free-market liberalism is currently enjoying a resurgence. John Paul reminds his readers that "the State has the duty of watching over the common good and of ensuring that every sector of social life, not excluding the economic one, contributes to achieving that good, while respecting the rightful autonomy of each sector" (no. 11). This is in contrast to the free-market liberal or Libertarian view of the state, which sees it as merely enforcing peace and preventing fraud. Indeed, if this contrast between Catholic teaching and liberal dogma is fully grasped, it will be found to contain a profound commentary on modern society and modern economics.

I cannot leave this first chapter of *Centesimus* without noting the Holy Father's statements that "to spread her social doctrine pertains to the Church's evangelizing mission and is an essential part of the Christian message" and that the "'new evangelization' which the modern world urgently needs...must include among its essential elements a proclamation of the Church's social doctrine" (no. 5).

We can see, I think, by looking at the first chapter of John Paul's encyclical, that far from weakening the doctrine of his predecessors, the Holy Father is determined to reaffirm and apply it to today. Exactly how he does this we shall see in the remainder of our discussion.

In the second chapter of *Centesimus*, John Paul begins his analysis of the situation since *Rerum Novarum*, including the situation of today. In the first place the Pontiff speaks of socialism, which in Leo XIII's time was "still only a social philosophy, and not yet a fully structured movement," let alone in control of "a strong and

powerful State..." (no. 12). But Pope Leo divined the evils of socialism quite clearly. Moreover, as Pius XI had pointed out earlier (*Quadragesimo Anno*, nos. 117-119),² and as John Paul points out now, "the root error of socialism is anthropological in nature" (*Centesimus Annus*, no. 13). That is to say, since socialism conceives of man wrongly, it necessarily conceives of society wrongly, and in turn, conceives of the economy wrongly. And this wrong conception of man is the notion that the human person is merely "an element, a molecule within the social organism, so that the good of the individual is completely subordinated to the functioning of the socio-economic mechanism" (*ibid.*). Socialism also ignores the fact of man's power of free choice and "the unique and exclusive responsibility which he exercises in the face of good or evil" (*ibid.*). And ultimately these errors are rooted in socialism's atheism, which "deprives the person of his foundation, and consequently leads to a reorganization of the social order without reference to the person's dignity and responsibility" (*ibid.*).

If the socialist errors about God and man lead to an evil socio-economic system, "from the Christian vision of the human person there necessarily follows a correct picture of society" (*ibid.*). That is, if we correctly perceive the truth about God and man, we will correctly perceive the truth about society, including the economic system. But the Pope immediately continues by pointing out that atheism is not confined just to the socialists.

The atheism of which we are speaking is also closely connected with the rationalism of the Enlightenment, which views human and social reality in a mechanistic way. Thus there is a denial of the supreme insight concerning man's true greatness, his transcendence in respect to earthly realities...and, above all, the need for salvation.... (no. 13)

Now the "mechanistic" viewpoint which John Paul II is criticizing here is, of course, that of the founders of economic science and capitalistic doctrine, such as Adam Smith in Scotland and the Physiocrats in France. John Paul's repeated statements that the economic order requires a legal framework to point the market toward the common good, shows that he does not fully accept the tradition of economics stemming from these thinkers.

After this the Pontiff takes up this very theme, which he had earlier touched on, namely, the need for a "juridical framework within which economic affairs are to be conducted..." (no. 15). That is, although economic activity must have a "legitimate sphere of autonomy," at the same time it must respect certain necessities of the human person, and there must be some means to guarantee that this is done. For example, "society and the State must ensure wage levels adequate for the maintenance of the worker and his family" and "working hours" must be such as not to

oppress the worker (*ibid.*). Both Leo XIII and Pius XI had made the same points in their social encyclicals. Here John Paul mentions not only the State's role in achieving these goods for the worker, but the "decisive" role of unions in this as well.

Next the Pontiff makes two points which should give us, especially here in the United States, pause. We are apt to contrast our social system with communism by pointing out the freedom that we have and the lack of freedom that existed and exists under Marxism. We even called ourselves the *Free World*, not the *Just World* or the *Godly World*. And John Paul describes here the root error related to freedom, namely "an understanding of human freedom which detaches it from obedience to the truth...which leads to an unbridled affirmation of self-interest and which refuses to be limited by any demand of justice" (no. 17). If we recall that the economic model which affirms the unlimited self-interest of the individual has often been championed as an alternative to communism, this passage should make us think twice about the implications of this.

Then the Pope writes of the situation after World War II, of the Marxist totalitarian states and alternatives proposed against communism. Among these was

the affluent society or the consumer society. It seeks to defeat Marxism on the level of pure materialism by showing how a free-market society can achieve a greater satisfaction of material human needs than Communism, while equally excluding spiritual values. In reality, while on the one hand it is true that this social model shows the failure of Marxism to contribute to a humane and better society, on the other hand, insofar as it denies an autonomous existence and value to morality, law, culture and religion, it agrees with Marxism, in the sense that it totally reduces man to the sphere of economics and the satisfaction of material needs. (no. 19)

Where was this "affluent society" or "consumer society" located? At times we have boasted of our affluence, but surely we must recognize that the Pontiff is speaking of *us* here! It is our society that has tried to surpass communism on a purely material level. And although we have succeeded well enough at that, surely there is more to living than possessing an abundance of things. As our Lord said, "...a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15).

In the next chapter of the encyclical, chapter three, John Paul II discusses the events of the year 1989, the year that chiefly saw the fall of communist governments throughout eastern Europe. The Pope discusses the reasons for the fall of these regimes, and he identifies three. The first is "the violation of the rights of workers." He mentions, of course, the Solidarity movement in his native Poland, and that the workers because of "a hard, lived experience of work and of oppression...recovered

and... rediscovered the content and principles of the Church's social doctrine" (no. 23). The experience of simply living and working in the "workers' paradise" of communism rightly convinced them of the injustice of their position.

Secondly, the Pontiff mentions the "inefficiency of the economic system," which is more than the inability to produce a sufficiency of goods, but involves a restriction of human freedom. And connected to this, he adds communism's practice of understanding "the human person on the basis of economics alone," a practice which is basic to Marxist philosophy. For a "human being is understood in a more complete way when situated within the sphere of culture through language, history, and the position one takes towards the fundamental events of life..." (no. 24). In other words, we are more than producing and consuming beings—even the lower animals do that. What makes us distinctly human is a complex of factors revolving around a culture.

Then thirdly the Holy Father specifies "the spiritual void brought about by atheism" as in fact the principal cause. This had "deprived the younger generations of a sense of direction," but in some cases this ultimately brought them to Christ, "as the existentially adequate response to the desire in every human heart for goodness, truth and life" (no. 24).

This fact shows the insufficiency of merely political or social systems to fulfill man's longings. In making use of merely political means to bring about justice and peace, politics can become a "secular religion" which operates under the illusion of creating paradise in this world" (no. 25). But the Kingdom of God, in but not of this world, "throws light on the order of human society" (*ibid.*). In this light we can better see what is needed for a true rebuilding of human society. Then the Holy Father touches on several topics as he closes this chapter, including the effort to reconstruct Europe after the fall of communism, and the fact that aid for this project "must not lead to a slackening of efforts to sustain and assist the countries of the Third World..." (28). And finally, the Pope, echoing Paul VI's encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, reminds us that "development must not be understood solely in economic terms, but in a way that is fully human" (no. 29). And most importantly, the "apex of development is the exercise of the right and duty to seek God, to know him and to live in accordance with that knowledge" (*ibid.*).

In the next and concluding article in this series I will discuss the final three chapters of *Centesimus*.

Thomas Storck is a writer living in Maryland.

End Notes

- 1 References are to the edition of *Centesimus Annus* published by the Daughters of St. Paul.
- 2 Section references to *Quadragesimo Anno* are from *Seven Great Encyclicals* (Paulist Press, c. 1963).