

Catholic Social Teaching: *Centesimus Annus, II*

(LAST IN A SERIES)

by Thomas Storck, M.A.

In this article I will conclude the discussion of *Centesimus Annus* and bring the series on papal social teaching to an end.

The fourth and longest chapter of *Centesimus Annus* concerns the twin truths of the right to private property, and at the same time, of the universal destination of material goods. This is the same truth that Leo XIII stated when he said, "...the earth, though divided among private owners, ceases not thereby to minister to the needs of all" (*Rerum Novarum*, no. 7).¹ That is, the reason that God has instituted the private ownership of property among men is not to exclude anyone from his share of the earth's bounty, but rather to make possible the efficient and peaceful provision of sufficient goods for all. Thus private property is simply a *means* to an end; it is not an end in itself. Though it is surely a means consonant with human nature, and therefore it cannot be abrogated by human law, it is nevertheless subordinate to its end, and thus can be regulated so as to better attain that end. Thus the chief matter that the Holy Father takes up in this chapter is what he calls "the legitimacy of private ownership, as well as the limits which are imposed on it" (*Centesimus Annus*, no. 30).

Although "God gave the earth to the whole human race for the sustenance of all its members,...the earth does not yield its fruits without a particular human response to God's gift, that is to say, without work" (no. 31). Thus, the Pontiff points out, not only the earth, in the sense of land, but human skill and ability, including the ability to organize and direct, are

increasingly important parts of the reaping of the earth's fruits. "Indeed, besides the earth, mankind's principal resource is the *person himself*" (no. 32). This leads the Pope to state one of the first of his conclusions that have led some people to suppose that *Centesimus* somehow represents a break with all prior papal social teaching. The Pope's statement is this: "The modern business *economy* has positive aspects. Its basis is human freedom exercised in the economic field, just as it is exercised in many other fields" (*ibid.*). But in this passage, just as in the others of the same sort, there is continuity with earlier social teaching, nor do these passages represent any kind of break with his predecessors' teachings. Let us look at one of the most explicit of these statements of John Paul.

A few pages later, then, occurs this sentence: "It would appear that, on the level of individual nations and of international relations, the *free market* is the most efficient instrument for utilizing resources and effectively responding to needs" (no. 34). But then, beginning in the very next sentence, the Pontiff adds,

But this is true only for those needs which are "solvent," insofar as they are endowed with purchasing power, and for those resources which are "marketable," insofar as they are capable of obtaining a satisfactory price. But there are many human needs which find no place on the market.

It is a strict duty of justice and truth not to allow fundamental human needs to remain unsatisfied, and not to allow those burdened by such needs to perish. . . . Even prior to the logic of a fair exchange of goods and the forms of justice appropriate to it, there exists something *which is due to the person because he is a person*, by reason of his lofty dignity.

This is essentially the same as the teaching of Pius XI in *Quadragesimo Anno* (no. 88), that "Free competition, however, though justified and quite useful within certain limits, cannot be an adequate controlling principle in economic affairs." For if "there are many human needs which find no place in the market" and if it is "a strict duty of justice and truth not to allow fundamental human needs to remain unsatisfied," then the free market cannot be the controlling principle of the economy, however useful it might be for those things which are "solvent" or "marketable." Nor is it correct to say that the needs "which find no place on the market" might be things such as love or beauty or other intangible items. For the Pontiff says that it is "a strict duty of justice and truth" to meet these needs, so it is obvious he is speaking here of tangible and material things.

Immediately after that, the Pope speaks of certain Third World nations where even the prescriptions of *Rerum Novarum* have not yet been realized. And as a help in realizing the mandates of Pope Leo, John Paul instances the work of labor unions. It is thus obvious that the Holy Father does not simply appeal to the workings of the free market to correct the situations he cites. For the market has had a hundred years to bring about justice and human dignity. But as all the popes have recognized, the market cannot on its own do so, without intervention, for it is necessary "that the market be appropriately controlled by the forces of society and by the State, so as to guarantee that the basic needs of the whole of society are satisfied" (*Centesimus Annus*, no. 35).

As we are seeing, John Paul II does have praise, within limits, for the "modern business economy." But lest it be thought that the Church has unequivocally embraced capitalism, the Pope goes out of his way to say that "it is unacceptable to say that the defeat of so-called 'Real Socialism' leaves capitalism as the only model of economic organization" (no. 35). By "Real Socialism" he means here, of course, Marxist socialism or communism. But in the long run it is less important what *label* we give to an economic system, than whether it fulfills the many obligations which John Paul II and his predecessors have spoken of. For whether one wishes to call oneself a capitalist or not, nevertheless the duties of justice and charity cataloged here and in the other encyclicals still must be carried out in any economic system that can be

acceptable to a Catholic.

After this the Supreme Pontiff turns his attention to the "specific problems and threats emerging within the more advanced economies..." (no. 36). And first he speaks of the increasing quantity of goods and the desire "for an existence which is qualitatively more satisfying..." (*ibid.*). In itself this is not wrong, he states, but there are dangers connected with it. John Paul points out that the "manner in which new needs arise and are defined is always marked by a more or less appropriate concept of the human person and of the person's true good" (*ibid.*). If our culture creates a "need" to have a new car, new clothes, new appliances, every year, it is actually proposing a concept of man and of what is good for man. It is defining us by our possessions. "A given culture reveals its overall understanding of life through the choices it makes in production and consumption" (*ibid.*). Thus "a great deal of educational and cultural work is urgently needed" in order to form people to make responsible choices. The Pope notes here the duty of the media in "the formation of a strong sense of responsibility" among people, and, significantly, "the necessary intervention by public authorities" (*ibid.*).

The concept of man that defines him primarily as a consumer and that assumes he needs more and more goods to make him happy presupposes "a style of life which is presumed to be better when it is directed toward 'having' rather than 'being,' and which wants to have more, not in order to be more but in order to spend life in enjoyment as a end in itself" (*ibid.*). But this is wrong.

It is therefore necessary to create lifestyles in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of common growth are the factors which determine consumer choices, savings and investments. (*ibid.*)

Another of the "problems and threats emerging within the more advanced economies" is that of destruction of the physical environment. John Paul devotes the next section to this point. He sums it up succinctly in this way: "In their desire to have and to enjoy rather than to be and to grow, people consume the resources of the earth and their own lives in an excessive and disordered way." And because this frenzied consumerism is rooted in a false notion of man, as we saw above, "the senseless destruction of the natural environment" is rooted in "an anthropological error, which unfortunately is widespread in our day...In all this, one notes first the poverty or narrowness of the human outlook, motivated as people are by a desire to possess things rather than to relate to the truth..." (no. 37).

But it is not only "the irrational destruction of the natural environment" that concerns the Pontiff, but

"the more serious destruction of the human *environment...*" (no. 38), that is, "the *moral conditions for an authentic 'human ecology'*" (*ibid.*). John Paul mentions under this head "the social structure in which one lives...the education one has received," the problem of urbanization, but most especially, the family.

The family is the first and fundamental structure for 'human ecology' ...in which [one] receives his first formative ideas about truth and goodness, and learns what it means to love and to be loved, and thus what it actually means to be a person. (no. 39)

In this connection the Holy Father specifies that he is speaking of a family "*founded on marriage*" and criticizes tendencies which discourage people from committing themselves to a stable marriage and from having children. He mentions even more extreme attacks on life, such as abortion and "systematic anti-childbearing campaigns."

In the next section the Pope again discusses the state's tasks with regard to the

preservation of common goods such as the natural and human environments, which cannot be safeguarded simply by market forces. Just as in the time of primitive capitalism the State had the duty of defending the basic rights of workers, so now, with the new capitalism, the State and all of society have the duty of defending *those collective goods* which, among others, constitute the essential framework for the legitimate pursuit of personal goals on the part of each individual. (no. 40)

And in the very next paragraph he begins: "Here we find a new limit on the market: there are collective and qualitative needs which cannot be satisfied by market mechanisms. There are important human needs which escape its logic." It should be clear from these, as well as other passages which I have quoted from *Centesimus Annus*, that far from endorsing free market capitalism, the Holy Father devotes much space to reiterating Catholic teaching, which has always deemed the market as a less than trustworthy arbiter of a social order. Every social encyclical, as well as many addresses of Pope Pius XII, has made it clear that Catholic moral teaching simply cannot accept the market according to its own logic, that is, according to a logic which sees the market and market solutions as able to take care of all or most human and social difficulties and needs. Any Catholic who wishes to remain orthodox must come to terms with this repeated teaching of the papal magisterium.

In the next section John Paul II begins a consideration of the concept of alienation, a concept derived from Karl Marx. In *The German Ideology* Marx and

Engels characterize alienation as when "man's own deed becomes an alien power opposed to him, which enslaves him instead of being controlled by him," because the social system forces a certain social and economic role upon him "from which he cannot escape."² John Paul, however, rightly calls this concept of alienation "mistaken and inadequate" (no. 41). Moreover, history has proven that the Marxist cure for alienation, the establishment of a communist society, itself "rather increases it, adding to it a lack of basic necessities and economic inefficiency" (*ibid.*).

But nevertheless, alienation does exist in the capitalistic West, particularly

in consumerism, when people are ensnared in a web of false and superficial gratifications rather than being helped to experience their personhood in an authentic and concrete way. Alienation is found also in work, when it is organized so as to ensure maximum returns and profits with no concern whether the worker, through his own labor, grows or diminishes as a person.... (*ibid.*)

Ultimately alienation is overcome only by the giving of oneself to the person of Jesus Christ. And a *society* can be alienated if it makes it harder for one to make this gift of self to both God and other human persons.

After this, the Supreme Pontiff returns to the question of the meaning and value of capitalism. He asks, "can it perhaps be said that, after the failure of Communism, capitalism is the victorious social system, and that capitalism should be the goal of the countries now making efforts to rebuild their economy and society?" (no. 42). John Paul's answer to his question is interesting and indicates how it is *things* not *names* which should be the object of our desires. For he states that it basically depends on what one means by the word *capitalism*.

If by "capitalism" is meant an economic system which recognizes the fundamental and positive role of business, the market, private property and the resulting responsibility for the means of production, as well as free human creativity in the economic sector, then the answer is certainly in the affirmative, even though it would perhaps be more appropriate to speak of a "business economy," "market economy" or simply "free economy." But if by "capitalism" is meant a system in which freedom in the economic sector is not circumscribed within a strong juridical framework which places it at the service of human freedom in its totality and sees it as a particular aspect of that freedom, the core of which is ethical and religious, then the reply is certainly negative. (no. 42)

This is similar to Pius XI's statement that,

It is therefore very necessary that economic affairs be once more subjected to and governed by a true and effective guiding principle. . . . To that end all the institutions of public and social life must be imbued with the spirit of justice, and this justice must above all be truly operative. It must build up a juridical and social order able to pervade all economic activity (*Quadragesimo Anno*, no. 88).

In other words, although economic activity must not be shackled as it was in communist countries, it must serve the common good, and there must be laws, that is, "a strong juridical framework," to see that this does indeed happen. Taken in context with the other statements in this encyclical, as well as the prior but still valid teachings of previous pontiffs, I think that one can well raise the question whether the economy of our country would pass the test that the Holy Father is presenting here.

The next section, which begins with the statement, "The Church has no models to present," has led some to suppose that the Church has abandoned any hope of presenting an alternative system to socialism and capitalism. But the rest of the sentence explains the meaning,

models that are real and truly effective can only arise within the framework of different historical situations, through the efforts of all those who responsibly confront concrete problems in all their . . . aspects . . . For such a task the Church offers her social teaching as an indispensable *and ideal orientation*, a teaching which . . . recognizes the positive value of the market and of enterprise, but which . . . points out that these need to be oriented toward the common good. (no. 43)

John Paul has made it clear that the Church's acceptance of a market economy depends on whether that economy truly serves the common good, nor can such service of the common good be left to chance or to the supposed automatic laws of the market, Adam Smith's "invisible hand." The state must be prepared to play its part in making such service of man's true

welfare a reality. *Centesimus* simply updates and applies Catholic social teaching to our times, and contrasts it with the communist economies that had lately fallen throughout eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. This encyclical does develop the teaching of previous popes, but not in the sense of abandoning anything they taught, which is of course an impossibility. The Pope approaches the regnant capitalism of our day in a friendly manner and points out its flaws and where it needs to improve, much as Pius XI approached the economy of Fascist Italy in a friendly manner and pointed out its flaws and where it needed to improve (see *Quadragesimo Anno*, nos. 91-95).

The next chapter of *Centesimus* deals with the theme of state and culture. John Paul opens it by an extended discussion of totalitarianism, pointing out its denial of truth and of the dignity of the human person.

After discussing the flaws of communist and other dictatorial states, the Pope next turns his attention to democratic regimes. He first discusses the fact of abortion, which surely is as great an attack on the human person as was perpetrated by non-democratic governments. But he also speaks of "a crisis within democracies themselves, which seem at times to have lost the ability to make decisions aimed at the common good" (no. 47). He is referring to the tendency of democratic governments to be captives to special interest groups and of democratic politicians to support policies only to help them get reelected. "With time, such distortions of political conduct create distrust and apathy, with a subsequent decline in the political participation and civic spirit of the general population, which feels abused and disillusioned" (*ibid.*).

One phenomenon that has characterized many democratic states is the so-called Welfare State, or as the Holy Father also calls it, the Social Assistance State. He is critical of its "excesses and abuses," for example,

a loss of human energies and an inordinate increase of public agencies, which are dominated more by bureaucratic ways of thinking than by concern for serving their clients, and which are accompanied by an enormous increase in spending. (no. 48)

THAT IS, THE REASON THAT GOD HAS INSTITUTED THE PRIVATE OWNERSHIP OF PROPERTY AMONG MEN IS NOT TO EXCLUDE ANYONE FROM HIS SHARE OF THE EARTH'S BOUNTY, BUT RATHER TO MAKE POSSIBLE THE EFFICIENT AND PEACEFUL PROVISION OF SUFFICIENT GOODS FOR ALL.

And he goes on to say that "it would appear that needs are best understood and satisfied by people who are closest to them and who act as neighbors to those in need" (*ibid.*).

This sounds as if the Pontiff were advocating doing away entirely with state assistance to the poor and needy. But apparently this is not so. In the next section he writes:

It can happen, however, that when a family does decide to live up fully to its vocation, it finds itself without the necessary support from the State and without sufficient resources. It is urgent therefore to promote not only family policies, but also those social policies which have the family as their principal object, policies which assist the family by providing adequate resources and efficient means of support.... (no. 49)

The Pope ends this chapter by reminding his readers that the Church supports the "adequate formation of a culture" since "the first and most important task is accomplished within the heart....The Church promotes those aspects of human behavior which favor a true culture of peace..." (no. 51). And he recalls the many times he and his predecessors have called for peace, and for the true development of nations, the lack of which can be a barrier to peace. Moreover, the promotion of such development

may mean making important changes in established lifestyles, in order to limit the waste of environmental and human resources, thus enabling every individual and all the peoples of the earth to have a sufficient share of those resources. (no. 52)

These words should be matter for examination of conscience for us as individuals, as well as societies and nations.

The last chapter of *Centesimus* is called "The Person is the Way of the Church," and John Paul begins by saying that in her social teaching the Church's "care and responsibility" has been "for the human person" (no. 53), the concrete individual person. But since "a person's true identity is only fully revealed to him through faith," the Church's social doctrine is likewise rooted in the Gospel and "is aimed at helping everyone on the path of salvation" (no. 54).

Thus the Church is naturally anxious to make widely known this doctrine, which is part of "an evangelization which promotes the whole human being" (no. 55). But in addition there are two particular reasons that the Holy Fathers cites. The first is because the former communist countries "are experiencing a serious lack of direction in the work of rebuilding." And the second is this: "The Western countries, in turn, run the risk of seeing [the collapse of communism] as a one-sided victory of their own economic system, and thereby failing to make necessary corrections in that system" (no. 56). This sentence by itself ought to be enough to convince us that we misunderstand John Paul II if we think that he has endorsed our own economic system.

After that the Pope speaks of the necessity of Christians living out social doctrine. "Today more than ever, the Church is aware that her social message will gain credibility more immediately from the witness of *actions* than as a result of its internal logic and consistency" (no. 57). In connection with this he repeats a point he made earlier (in both no. 36 and no. 52), that "above all a change of lifestyles, of models of production and consumption, and of the established structures of power" (no. 58) is required. For example, with the increasing globalization of the economy, unless "this increasing internationalization of the economy [is] accompanied by effective international agencies which will oversee and direct the economy to the common good," something which is beyond the power of any single nation, "even if it were the most powerful on earth..." (*ibid.*), this global economy cannot

otherwise be directed toward the common good of mankind.

Then, after a very brief survey of the Church's constant concern with the human person in her social teaching, John Paul II concludes *Centesimus*, invoking Almighty God and the Blessed Virgin, who

constantly remained beside Christ in his journey towards the human family and in its midst, and [who] goes before the Church on the pilgrimage of faith. May her maternal intercession accompany humanity towards the next millennium, in fidelity to Him who "is the same yesterday and today and for ever," Jesus Christ our Lord (no. 62).

I can think of no better way to end this article and the entire series than by quoting some words of Pius XII, in an address given on Pentecost Sunday, June 1,

IN OTHER WORDS, ALTHOUGH
ECONOMIC ACTIVITY MUST
NOT BE SHACKLED AS IT WAS IN
COMMUNIST COUNTRIES, IT MUST
SERVE THE COMMON GOOD, AND
THERE MUST BE LAWS, THAT IS,
"A STRONG JURIDICAL
FRAMEWORK," TO SEE THAT THIS
DOES INDEED HAPPEN.

1941, in which he commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, and which in a way sum up the entire corpus of the Church's social concern from Leo XIII to John Paul II.

Keep burning the noble flame of a brotherly social spirit which fifty years ago was rekindled in the hearts of your fathers by the luminous and illuminating torch of the words of Leo XIII; do not allow or permit it to lack for nourishing; let it flare up through your homage; and not die, quenched by an unworthy, timid, cautious inaction in the fact of the needs of the poor among our brethren, or overcome by the dust and dirt carried by the whirlwind of the anti-Christian or non-Christian spirit. Nourish it, keep it alive, increase it; make this flame burn more brightly, carry it wherever a groan of suffering, a lament of misery, a cry of pain reaches you; feed it with the heat of a love drawn from the Heart of your Redeemer, to which the month that now begins is consecrated. Go to that divine Heart meet and humble, refuge of all comfort in the fatigue and responsibility of the active life; it is the Heart of Him who to every act genuine and pure done in His name and in His spirit, in favor of the suffering, the hard-pressed, of those abandoned by the world, or those deprived of all goods and fortune, has promised the eternal reward of the blessed: You blessed by My Father! What you have done to the least of my Brethren, you have done to me!³

Thomas Storck is a writer living in Maryland.

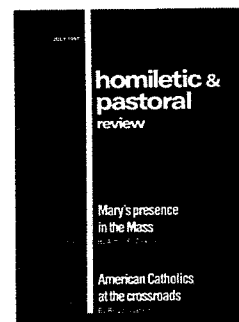
End Notes

- 1 Citations to *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno* are from *Seven Great Encyclicals* (Paulist Press), and to *Centesimus Annus* from the *Daughters of St. Paul* edition. Emphasis is always in original.
- 2 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers, c. 1970) p. 53.
- 3 *The Major Addresses of Pope Pius XII*, volume I (St. Paul: North Central Publishing, 1961) p. 36.

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