

Catholic Social Teaching: John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*

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(SEVENTH IN A SERIES)

Just a few years after *Laborem Exercens*, on December 30, 1987, John Paul II issued the second of his social encyclicals, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*. Unlike most of the social encyclicals, which were published on an anniversary of Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, was issued to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio*. In fact, John Paul II states that he desires "to pay homage to this historic document of Paul VI" (no. 3) and "to extend the impact of that message by bringing it to bear...upon the present historical moment..." (no. 4). Not surprisingly the Holy Father devotes the first part of *Sollicitudo* to a discussion of Paul VI's encyclical. He points out that *Populorum Progressio* brought out the "worldwide dimension" (no. 9) of the social question more clearly than any previous papal document. That encyclical had been devoted to the "development" or "progressio" of the peoples of the world, not merely to development conceived of as an accumulation of goods, but as promoting "the good of every man and of the whole man."¹ Now in his own document, John Paul proposes "to develop the teaching of Paul VI's Encyclical..." (no. 11).

The entire context and background of all that the Pontiff writes here consists in the fact that Paul VI's "hopes for development...today appear very far from being realized" (no. 12). In other words, the application of Catholic social teaching to the whole world and to relationships between nations, for the sake of the genuine betterment of mankind, which Paul VI called for with such urgency, for the most part did not take place. John Paul, then, devotes this encyclical to various reflections and comments on the situation twenty years after *Populorum Progressio*.

In the first place, the Holy Father notes "the persistence and often the widening of the gap between the

areas of the so-called developed North and the developing South" (no. 14). To these he adds various kinds of oppression and exploitation as characteristic of the time of his writing. John Paul naturally is concerned with these injustices and the consequent poverty which exists in much of the world. His reflections on it, however, are far from simplistic, and his prescriptions and suggestions are based on a comprehensive view of things. For example, in a passage which anticipates his next social encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul laments that "the right of economic initiative is often suppressed" (no. 15). He is clearly thinking here of the Communist countries, and speaks of the resulting "passivity, dependence and submission to the bureaucratic apparatus..." (*ibid.*). But the Pope looks beyond the economic or social surface at what must be the basis of every economic and social system, man himself. For he notes that in such a regime "the creative subjectivity of the citizen" (*ibid.*) is destroyed. Thus he links the socio-economic arrangements with man, the subject of work and of the economy, something he discussed at length in *Laborem Exercens*. In evaluating the justice of any social system, its effects on man must always be the first thing looked at.

Moreover, he is far from exempting the developing nations themselves from a share in the blame for the present state of things.

Responsibility for this deterioration [in conditions] is due to various causes. Notable among them are undoubtedly grave instances of omissions on the part of the developing nations themselves, and especially on the part of those holding economic and political power (no. 16).

We can recall instances, for example, in which the money loaned to developing countries was spent to benefit those in power, instead of being used to improve conditions for the nation as a whole. Of course,

this does not exempt from blame those in the rich countries who, by commission or omission, have contributed to the present condition of things.

Although mankind may not be developing according to the plan of God, and the prescriptions of the Church, nonetheless the interdependence of nations and peoples is a reality. But when "this interdependence is separated from its ethical requirements, it has *disastrous consequences* for the weakest" (no. 17). When two or more countries make agreements for free trade, for example, if one of the countries is economically strong and the other weak, can we simply hope that justice will arise spontaneously? To do so would be to ignore the explicit teaching of not only John Paul, but of Leo XIII and Pius XI, who both taught that justice could easily be violated in agreements in which the strong and powerful were able to dictate terms to the weak.²

In view of the many ways in which the true "*progressio*" of peoples has gone awry, the Holy Father repeats what has been the explicit judgment of the Magisterium since at least Leo XIII, that "...the Church's social doctrine adopts a critical attitude towards both liberal capitalism and Marxist collectivism" (no. 21).³ And it is further the case that both the political blocs of East and West, which are based on these two social systems, are guilty of faults which have affected the developing world.

Each of the two *blocs* harbors in its own way a tendency toward *imperialism*, as it is usually called, or toward forms of neo-colonialism: an easy temptation to which they frequently succumb, as history, including recent history, teaches (no. 22).

Because of the existence of these two politico-military blocs, "each with its own forms of propaganda and indoctrination, the *ideological opposition*" has become "a growing *military opposition*" (no. 20). And the great number of weapons introduced into these nations by these two blocs still haunts them today—as witness the strife in Afghanistan or Nicaragua—long after the collapse of the Soviet bloc. And since our country is at present the only superpower in the world, we could well take the following words of the Holy Father's to heart.

It is timely to mention—and it is no exaggeration—that a leadership role among nations can only be justified by the possibility and willingness to contribute widely and generously to the common good (no. 23).

Then the Pope includes a timely warning about "*systematic campaigns against birth*" which are often "the result of pressure and financing coming from

abroad, and in some cases they are made a condition for the granting of financial and economic aid and assistance" (no. 25).

Although the interdependence of nations and peoples is a fact, this need not result in these various types of imperialism and exploitation.

At the same time, in a world divided and beset by every type of conflict, the *conviction* is growing of a radical *interdependence* and consequently of the need for a solidarity which will take up interdependence and transfer it to the moral plane (no. 26).

In other words, the physical fact of interdependence demands a corresponding moral fact of human solidarity. Just as our Lord commands us to love our neighbors, nations must behave toward their neighbors with that same charity. Just because men are combined with others to form political communities does not relieve them of the necessity of obeying God's commandments.

The false idea of development, the notion that it consists in "the *mere accumulation* of goods and services" (no. 28), leads not only to injustices among nations but to evils within even the rich nations.

This is the so-called civilization of "consumption" or "consumerism," which involves so much "throwing-away" and "waste." An object already owned but now superseded by something better is discarded, with no thought of its possible lasting value in itself, nor of some other human being who is poorer (no. 28).

And John Paul goes on to say,

To "have" objects and goods does not in itself perfect the human subject, unless it contributes to the maturing and enrichment of that subject's "being," that is to say unless it contributes to the realization of the human vocation as such. (*ibid.*)

And he sums up this Christian conception of development with a phrase that he has used on many other occasions, the "civilization of love."

In other words, true development must be based on the love of God and neighbor, and must help to promote the relationships between individuals and society. This is the "civilization of love" of which Paul VI often spoke (no. 33).

The desire to have more and more goods cannot be justified by an appeal to the commandment of God to "subdue the earth."

The dominion granted to man by the Creator is not an absolute power, nor can one speak of a freedom to "use and misuse," or to dispose of things as one pleases. The limitation imposed from the beginning by the Creator himself and expressed symbolically by the pro-

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hibition not to "eat of the fruit of the tree" shows clearly enough that, when it comes to the natural world, we are subject not only to biological laws but also to moral ones, which cannot be violated with impunity (no. 34).

In the fifth chapter of the encyclical, John Paul II considers from a moral point of view, why "there has been no development—or very little, irregular, or even contradictory development..." (no. 35). And in this connection must be mentioned the two political blocs spoken of earlier, each with its false approach, the one having an "all-consuming desire for profit," the other, "the thirst for power, with the intention of imposing one's will upon others." And in each of these cases, the Pope continues, "one can add the expression: 'at any price'" (no. 37).

The Church is able to discern the obstacles to the creation of a civilization of justice and charity, but, as Pius XI also had insisted,⁴ "does not have *technical solutions* to offer for the problem of underdevelopment as such..." (no. 41). Social doctrine "belongs to the field, not of *ideology*, but of *theology* and particularly of moral theology. The teaching and spreading of her social doctrine are part of the Church's evangelizing mission" (*ibid.*).

Lest it be thought that the Pope's concept of development is simply a worldwide reproduction of all the bad features which are attributed to domestic welfare programs, he makes it clear that each nation is ultimately the producer of its own development.

Development demands above all a spirit of initiative on the part of the countries which need it. Each of them must act in accordance with its own responsibilities, *not expecting everything* from the more favored countries, and acting in collaboration with others in the same situation. Each must discover and use to the best advantage its *own area of freedom*. Each must make itself capable of initiatives responding to its own needs as a society (no. 44).

Although the "Church well knows that *no temporal achievement* is to be identified with the Kingdom of God..." (no. 48), the corporal works of mercy are rooted in the New Testament,⁵ and are part of the duty of Christians. It is for this reason that Paul VI and John Paul II speak of development, a means of succoring our brethren throughout the world.

At the conclusion of this encyclical, the Holy Father presents the social situation of the world to

the safeguard of the Blessed Virgin Mary (no. 49). He reminds us that the first miracle worked by Jesus Christ, that of providing wine to the wedding feast at Cana, was done at her request and intercession. "Her maternal concern extends to the *personal and social* aspects of people's life on earth" (*ibid.*). With this, he entrusts everything in his encyclical to our Lady, in the presence of the Blessed Trinity. He thus concludes by implicitly recalling the great truth expressed by St. Paul, that God will restore all things in Christ, "things in heaven and things on earth."⁶ Thus when we take part in the work of true development, we are aiding in that restoration, and making the world a more worthy offering to the Sacred Heart of our Redeemer.

In the next article in this series I will discuss the latest of the social encyclicals, John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus*, and conclude the series with some general discussion of the Church's social doctrine.

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End Notes

1. *Populorum Progressio*, no. 14.
2. See *Rerum Novarum*, no. 34; *Quadragesimo Anno*, nos. 105-108, 132-33.
3. Pius XI, for example, spoke of "those tottering tenets of liberalism which had long hampered effective intervention by the government" (*Quadragesimo Anno*, no. 27). And in May 1949, during the reign of Pius XII, the Vatican's newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, carried an editorial in which it stated that "communism...as an economic system, does not run counter to the nature of Christian doctrine as strongly as capitalism." The article said that capitalism "is atheistic in its structure; gold is its God." The editorial was written by the paper's editor-in-chief, Count Giuseppe Dalla Torre. For an account of this article, see *The New York Times*, Sunday May 8, 1949, p. 8.
4. *Quadragesimo Anno*, nos. 41-42.
5. See, for example, Matthew 25:31-46; Luke 1:53; Romans 15:26-27; I Corinthians 16:1-3; James 2:14-17.
6. Ephesians 1:10.