

Catholic Social Teaching: from Pius XII Through Paul VI

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(FIFTH IN A SERIES)

The successor of Pius XI in the papacy was Pius XII, who reigned from 1939 to 1958. Although today he is often not appreciated, I think he was one of the greatest popes of the last two centuries. He issued major encyclicals on the Mystical Body of Christ, on the sacred liturgy, on biblical studies and on modern philosophical and theological errors. Most notably, in 1950 he infallibly proclaimed the dogma of the Assumption of our Lady into Heaven. He also reinstated the Easter Vigil Mass on the evening of Holy Saturday, and, in reaction to the changed conditions of modern life, drastically reduced the Eucharistic fast to three hours in order to allow more people to receive our Lord in Holy Communion.

Although Pius XII did not issue any social encyclicals, he gave a great number of addresses on social topics. And because of their importance, I will quote from a few of them in this article.

In the first place, then, on the unfortunately perennial question of the Church's involvement in social matters, no better answer could be found than this brief statement.

This task of the Church is indeed arduous, but they are simply unwitting deserters or dupes who, in deference to a misguided supernaturalism, would confine the Church to the "strictly religious" field, as they say, whereas by so doing they are but playing into the hands of their enemies.

— *Address to members of Rinascita Cristiana, January 22, 1947*

On the question of the place of competition in economic affairs, Pius XII, echoing *Quadragesimo Anno*, had this to say:

The demands of competition, which is a normal consequence of human liberty and ingenuity, cannot be the final norm for economics.

— *Address to International Foundry Congress, September 28, 1954*

Pius XII made clear that, on the subject of the occupational groups mentioned by Leo XIII and discussed in more detail by Pius XI, the teaching of the Church had not somehow changed:

The time has come to repudiate empty phrases, and to attempt to organize the forces of the peo-

ple on a new basis; to raise them above the distinction between employers and would-be workers, and to realize that higher unity which is a bond between all those who co-operate in production, formed by their solidarity in the duty of working together for the common good and filling together the needs of the community. If this solidarity is extended to all branches of production, if it becomes the foundation for a better economic system, it will lead the working classes to obtain honestly their share of responsibility in the direction of the national economy. Thus, thanks to such harmonious co-ordination and co-operation; thanks to this closer unity of labor with the other elements of economic life, the worker will receive, as a result of his activity, a secure remuneration, sufficient to meet his needs and those of his family, with spiritual satisfaction and a powerful incentive toward self-improvement.

— *Address to Italian Workers, March 11, 1945*

And lastly, on the deficiencies of the liberal state of the nineteenth century, and on the state's proper duties.

And, while the State in the nineteenth century, through excessive exaltation of liberty, considered as its exclusive scope the safe-guarding of liberty by the law, Leo XIII admonished it that it had also the duty to interest itself in social welfare, taking care of the entire people and of all its members, especially the weak and the dispossessed, through a generous social programme and the creation of a labor code.

— *Address to Italian workers on the Feast of Pentecost, June 1, 1941*

All this is no more than a taste of the many rich and varied comments which Pius XII made on social questions during his pontificate. Since the basic foundations of social doctrine were laid by Leo XIII and Pius XI, his task, and that of later popes, has been to deepen our understanding of this doctrine and apply it to changing conditions. In this Pius XII succeeded well, preparing the way for the next pope, John XXIII.

After the death of Pius XII, John XXIII was elevated to the Papacy in October of 1958. His one encyclical devoted entirely to social matters was *Mater et Magistra*, issued May 15, 1961. I will mention only the salient points of this document, which in many ways forms a bridge between the teaching of Pius XI and Pius XII, and that of Paul VI and John Paul II.

Pope John begins his encyclical by recalling that "the teaching of Christ joins, as it were, earth with heaven, in that it embraces the whole man, ...body and soul" (no. 2), and that just as our Lord "was moved to exclaim sorrowfully, 'I have compassion on the crowd,'" (no. 4) before He fed them in the wilder-

ness, similarly His Church has continued this care for both the bodies and souls of men. And the encyclical of Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, is "notable evidence" of the Church's charitable concern for mankind.

The Pontiff briefly recites the circumstances of *Rerum Novarum's* origins and effects, and then summarizes its contents, as well as those of *Quadragesimo Anno* and several social messages of Pius XII. After pointing out that circumstances have changed greatly since these earlier social documents, he writes, that:

we feel it our duty to keep alive the torch lighted by our great predecessors and to exhort all to draw from their writings light and inspiration, if they wish to resolve the social question in ways more in accord with the needs of the present time (no. 50).

One of the things that prompted John XXIII to issue this encyclical was the increasing complexity of social and economic life, "a daily more complex interdependence of citizens, introducing into their lives and activities many and varied forms of association" (no. 59). These in turn cause a "growing intervention of public authorities" (no. 60). But because of this increased activity, on the part of private organizations and firms and of the state,

it becomes difficult for one to make decisions independently of outside influences, to do anything on his own initiative, to carry out in a fitting way his rights and duties, and to fully develop and perfect his personality. Will men perhaps, then become automatons, and cease to be personally responsible, as these social relationships multiply more and more? It is a question which must be answered negatively (no. 62).

Pope John reminds us that this increasing social complexity does not result "from a blind drive of natural forces," but that man is free. With this he touches on a theme that has been developed much more by the present Pontiff, John Paul II, namely, the centrality of the human person in social and economic processes. In *Mater et Magistra* the Pope uses this criterion of the human person as his standard for evaluating all socio-economic arrangements and structures. For example, he writes:

Consequently, if the organization and structure of economic life be such that the human dignity of workers is compromised, or their sense of responsibility is weakened, or their freedom of action is removed, then we judge such an economic order to be unjust, even though it produces a vast amount of goods, whose distribution conforms to the norms of justice and equity (no. 83).

In accord with this teaching, and in order to preserve and create types of businesses in which the dignity of man could more easily be upheld, John XXIII several times in this encyclical recommends the fostering of small and craft enterprises, cooperatives, and family farms. He devotes much space to discussing appropriate means of aiding them in a modern economy, including professional associations and "special provision for them" by the state "in regard to instruction, taxes, credit facilities, social security and insurance" (no. 88).

Although the social encyclicals of Leo XIII and Pius XI had more than once touched on the international aspects of the social question, both of those pontiffs had largely confined their focus to national economies. But as trade between nations increased, so did other aspects of international economic relations, including foreign aid, the beginnings of international economic organizations, such as the International Labor Organization, the World Bank, and the dozens of others that exist. Because of this, the Church naturally had to turn her attention to these things, for many questions of justice and of human dignity are raised by these international contacts. In *Mater et Magistra* Pope John begins the first major papal discussion of these international questions, a discussion that will be developed by both Paul VI and John Paul II.

The Pope discusses the question of the economic relations between rich and poor countries, foreign aid, the relation of population to economic development, and the root of international distrust and conflict, namely that some, "more especially leaders of States" (no. 205), disagree about truth and right, and though they use words such as 'justice,' different people mean different things by them. But, as the Pontiff reminds us, "the guiding principles of morality and virtue can be based only on God; apart from Him, they necessarily collapse" (no. 207). This leads him into a discussion of materialism and other false philosophies. Some, for example, think that the progress of science and technology means that man can forget God, and therefore "no folly seems more characteristic of our time than the desire to establish a firm and meaningful temporal order, but without God, its necessary foundation" (no. 217). And to counter this, the social teaching of the Church is "not only to be explained but also applied" (no. 226). And he concludes his encyclical by exhorting all involved in the lay apostolate to dedicate themselves to this task.

We desire that the divine Redeemer of mankind, "who has become for us God-given wisdom, and justice, and sanctification, and redemption" may reign and triumph gloriously in all things and over all things, for centuries on end. We desire that, in a properly organized order of social affairs, all nations will at last enjoy prosperity, and happiness, and peace (no. 263).

With this John XXIII concludes *Mater et Magistra*.

John's reign was followed by that of Paul VI, whose social documents we will take up in due course.

When Paul VI (1963-1978) succeeded to the papacy it was in the midst of the most noteworthy ecclesiastical event of the 20th century, the Second Vatican Council. Vatican II was opened by John XXIII on October 11, 1962, but Pope John died after only the first session of the Council and its work was completed under Pope Paul. Vatican II did not issue a document explicitly and entirely on the subject of social doctrine, but there are sections of *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, issued on December 7, 1965, that deal with social teaching. Therefore, before discussing Pope Paul's encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*, I will briefly take a look at some of the passages in *Gaudium et Spes* dealing with the social order.

The Council proposes to "reiterate [the principles of the Church's social teaching] in accordance with the situation of the world today" and to "outline certain guidelines, particularly with reference to the requirements of economic development" (no. 63). In the first place, the Council Fathers turned their attention to man himself, for whom the economy exists. The Fathers were thus concerned with anything that misdirected economic activity away from man (no. 64). As a result, *Gaudium et Spes* warns against an economy that is dominated and managed by only a few persons and of the "immense economic inequalities which exist in the world and increase from day to day" (no. 66). The Council reaffirms the freedom and right of individuals to join into associations of various sorts to preserve and to further their economic well-being.

And lastly, since "God destined the earth and all it contains for all men and all peoples" (no. 69), economic processes must serve and not frustrate that purpose. Thus "Investment...should be directed to providing employment and ensuring sufficient income for the people of today and of the future" (no. 70), and the "social dimension" of private property must not be forgotten. In areas with large numbers of poor in which there exist "large and sometimes very extensive rural estates which are only slightly cultivated or not cultivated at all," it can be lawful to expropriate these estates in order to provide land for the poor, with, of course, compensation for the prior owners (no. 71).

This teaching of the Second Vatican Council, joined with the earlier teaching of Leo XIII, Pius XI and Pius XII, has been passed on and developed further by the more recent pontiffs. Next let us turn to the one social encyclical of Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*.

Paul VI issued this encyclical on Easter Sunday, March 26, 1967. While John XXIII in *Mater et Magistra* had given considerable attention to the international aspects of the social question, Pope Paul devotes his entire letter to it. In the very beginning of *Populorum Progressio* the Pontiff proclaims, "Today the principal fact that we must all recognize is that the social ques-

tion has become world-wide" (no. 3). Thus justice and charity *among* nations rather than within individual nations is his subject.

All of the social encyclicals were occasioned by crises in the world. Leo XIII wrote in *Rerum Novarum*, for example, that "some remedy must be found, and quickly found, for the misery and wretchedness which press so heavily at this moment on the large majority of the very poor" (no. 2). But *Populorum Progressio*, however, perhaps more than earlier encyclicals, is a personal appeal by the Sovereign Pontiff in the face of the world's need, a real *cri du coeur*, a cry of the heart. As he says at the very end of the encyclical (no. 87), "Yes, We ask you, all of you, to heed Our cry of anguish, in the name of the Lord." The Pope notes how his own journeys to poor regions "brought Us into direct contact with the acute problems" (no. 4) of those nations.

Today no one can be ignorant any longer of the fact that in whole continents countless men and women are ravished by hunger, countless numbers of children are undernourished, so that many of them die in infancy, while the physical growth and mental development of many others are retarded and as a result whole regions are condemned to the most depressing despondency (no. 45).

And so this encyclical is devoted to the *progressio*—usually translated as "development"—of the peoples of the world. But the Pontiff means more by development than increased riches. "Development cannot be limited to mere economic growth. In order to be authentic, it must be complete: integral, that is, it has to promote the good of every man and of the whole man" (no. 14). He even goes so far as to say,

Increased possession is not the ultimate goal of nations nor of individuals. All growth is ambivalent. It is essential if man is to develop as a man, but in a way it imprisons man if he considers it the supreme good, and it restricts his vision (no. 19).

Paul is concerned, then, with man on every level, and is anxious to impart guidance and exhortation for his genuine progress. He points out, in fact, that when poorer countries receive aid from rich countries, they are apt to imitate the materialism of their benefactors and to lose their own spiritual and cultural traditions in the name of material progress. "Less well-off peoples can never be sufficiently on their guard against this temptation which comes to them from wealthy nations" (no. 41).

It is still true, however, that much needs to be done on a material level. And Pope Paul insists again on that justice and charity which Leo XIII and Pius XI had earlier demanded. Just as Leo XIII, for instance, had said that "the earth, though divided among private owners,

ceases not thereby to minister to the needs of all,"¹ similarly Paul VI teaches, "If the world is made to furnish each individual with the means of livelihood..., each man has therefore the right to find in the world what is necessary for himself" (no. 22). The world was created to sustain all of mankind, and our economic arrangements, our "rights...of property and of free commerce, are to be subordinated to this principle" (no. 22). Of course this does not mean that all goods are simply to be held in common. Rather it means that if we find that the structures we have created to carry on our economic life are actually making it more difficult for all men to gain a reasonable living for themselves and their families, then it is these structures that must be changed, for "the economy is at the service of man" (no. 26).

And just as in *Quadragesimo Anno*, Pius XI noted the social duties of private property (nos. 45-49) and wrote that "the proper ordering of economic affairs cannot be left to the free play of rugged competition" (no. 88), similarly Paul VI teaches that

it is unfortunate that . . . a system has been constructed which considers profit as the key motive for economic progress, competition as the supreme law of economics, and private ownership of the means of production as an absolute right that has no limits and carries no corresponding social obligations (no. 26).

But because of changed conditions in the world economy, Paul VI brings out what was only implicit in earlier papal teaching: namely, that the same requirements of justice that obtain between individuals and groups within a national economy also must obtain between different countries.

What was true of the just wage for the individual is also true of international contracts: an economy of exchange can no longer be based solely on the law of free competition . . . Freedom of trade is fair only if it is subject to the demands of social justice (no. 59).

Leo XIII had taught that insofar as a man's labor is necessary to provide for himself and his family, "each one has a right to procure what is required in order to live; and the poor can procure it in no other way than by work and wages,"² and thus a wage agreement that does not provide what the workman and his family needs is unjust even if it has been freely agreed upon. In a similar way, Pope Paul points out that international trade cannot be permitted to impoverish poor countries, who often rely on the export of raw materials that are "subject to wide and sudden fluctuations in price" (no. 57). "As a result, nations whose industrialisation is limited are faced with serious difficulties when they have to rely on their exports to balance their economy

and to carry out their plans for development" (*ibid.*). If the prices for industrial goods remain stable or increase, but the prices of raw materials decrease, a situation arises in which "poor nations remain ever poor while the rich ones become still richer" (*ibid.*). In a passage still relevant today, he discusses international debt, remarking that loans must be "conditioned by the real needs of the receiving countries" and that if done properly and justly, poor countries

will . . . no longer risk being overwhelmed by debts whose repayment swallows up the greater part of their gains. Rates of interest and time for repayment of the loan could be so arranged as not to be too great a burden on either party, taking into account free gifts, interest-free or low-interest loans, and the time needed for liquidating the debts (no. 54).

In the face of all these needs, Pope Paul calls on the world to develop the charity and solidarity which are needed as a remedy.

The world is sick. Its illness consists less in the unproductive monopolisation of resources by a small number of men than in the lack of brotherhood among individuals and peoples (no. 66).

Even the peace of the world is threatened by the disparity between the rich and the poor nations. "Excessive economic, social and cultural inequalities among peoples arouse tensions and conflicts, and are a danger to peace" (no. 76). But in the unity of the human race we are all brothers, called to contribute to the needs and advancement of all.

We ask Our Catholic sons who belong to the more favored nations, to bring their talents and give their active participation to organisations . . . which are working to overcome the difficulties of the developing nations. (no. 81) .

All of you who have heard the appeal of suffering peoples, all of you who are working to answer their cries, you are the apostles of a development which is good and genuine, which is not wealth that is self-centered and sought for its own sake, but rather an economy which is put at the service of man, the bread which is daily distributed to all, as a source of brotherhood and a sign of Providence (no. 86).

On this note the Pope proceeds to his conclusion. Just as Leo XIII pleaded for justice and charity for the workingman, so Paul VI pleads for justice and charity for the poor of this earth, our brothers. If Catholics of "the favored nations" do not love those whom Christ loves, how worthy are we even to bear the name of Christian?

Although Paul VI did not issue any more social

encyclicls, there is one more social document of his reign which I will briefly discuss, the apostolic letter, *Octogesima Adveniens*, of May 14, 1971, written in commemoration of the eightieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*.

In this letter Pope Paul touches on a great number of questions, "questions which because of their urgency, extent and complexity must in the years to come take first place among the preoccupations of Christians..." (no. 7). Thus in this letter the Pope takes note of problems which in 1971 were current or just emerging as major issues. These include the beginning of hugh mega-cities in Third World countries, the youth revolt of the 1960s, changes in the role of women, and the rise of concern for the environment. After this survey, the Pontiff speaks of the various ideologies, such as socialism, communism and the "renewal of the liberal ideology."³

In the face of this, the Pope calls on Catholics to draw upon the Church's social teachings and to avoid the various errors that are present in these ideologies. And he addresses "a fresh and insistent call" to "all Christians." Quoting his own encyclical *Populorum Progressio* he states, "Laymen should take up as their own proper task the renewal of the temporal order" (no. 48). This is necessary if the love of God is to become known by all men.

Today more than ever the Word of God will be unable to be proclaimed and heard unless it is accompanied by the witness of the power of the Holy Spirit, working within the action of Christians in the service of their brothers . . . (no. 51).

In the next article in this series I will take up the social thought of John Paul II in his first social encyclical *Laborem Exercens*. After that I will consider John Paul's second social encyclical, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, and I will conclude this series with an article discussing *Centesimus Annus*, the encyclical issued on the hundredth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*.

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End Notes

- 1 *Rerum Novarum*, no. 7
- 2 *Rerum Novarum*, no. 34.
- 3 It is vital to recognize that the term *liberal* as used in papal writings is used in the European sense and has a different meaning from its American usage. Liberalism in this sense "exalts individual freedom by withdrawing it from every limitation, by stimulating it through exclusive seeking of interest and power, and by considering social solidarities as more or less automatic consequences of individual initiatives, not as an aim and a major criterion of the value of the social organization" (no. 26). It is more or less equivalent to the Manchester school of economics denounced by Leo XIII or the "rigid capitalism" denounced by John Paul II. Liberalism in this sense champions freedom, particularly in economic affairs.