

Catholic Social Teaching: Homage to Christ the King

by Thomas Storck

Pope Pius XI, who reigned from 1922 to 1939, and who did much to develop the social thought of his predecessor, Pope Leo XIII, at the very beginning of his papacy in his first encyclical, *Ubi Arcano*, made an interesting statement which might set us thinking a little bit differently about Catholic social teaching. Too often the Church's social doctrine is dissected and criticized by various pundits and columnists as if it were merely some kind of political commentary. Even worse are those Catholics who think that they can persuade the reigning pope to embrace their special brand of economic thinking or at least convince the rest of us that that has occurred. But Pope Pius, author of the extremely hard-hitting encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), which bitterly criticized free-market economics and its excesses, did not see the Church's social teaching as an exercise in political punditry. Rather, he saw her social teaching as ultimately a part of the homage due to Jesus Christ, King of both men and nations. In that first encyclical, Pius, wrote the following:

"Great, without question, is the number of those who profess Catholic teaching concerning social authority and the due regard for it, concerning the rights and duties of laborers on land or in industry, the relation between the ecclesiastical and the civil power, the rights of the Holy See

and the Roman Pontiff, the prerogatives of bishops, and finally the rights of the Creator, Redeemer, and Lord, Christ Himself, over men and nations—and yet by their spoken and written word, and the whole tenor of their lives, act as if the teaching and oft-repeated precepts of the Sovereign Pontiffs, Leo XIII, Pius X, and Benedict XV, had lost their efficacy or were completely out of date.

In all this we recognize a kind of moral, judicial, and social Modernism, and We condemn it as strongly as We do dogmatic Modernism." (*Ubi Arcano*, 55-56)

Even if we are well disposed toward Catholic social teaching we are not likely to link "Catholic teaching...concerning the rights and duties of laborers on land or in industry" with "the rights of the Creator, Redeemer, and Lord, Christ Himself, over men and

nations." And why is that? I think it's because we have lost the habit, and often even the concept, of a hierarchical way of thinking. After all, economics and theology are taught in different academic departments, neither businessmen nor economists take many of their cues from religion, and it's pretty rare to hear any mention in a homily of the Church's authoritative teaching on "the rights and duties of laborers on land or in industry." So they seem like two different things, at best as two pretty much unrelated parts of Church teaching.

No faithful Catholic would deny that Jesus Christ should be king over each person's heart, in fact, over every member of the human race. But men are not just individual creatures. We form families, villages, nations, as well as many other bodies including corporations, cooperatives, societies, clubs and the like. Should Jesus

Christ be ruler over all these too? Should their fundamental laws, their constitutions or articles of agreement reflect in some way the kingship of Christ? And if it is wrong for an individual to do something, is it likewise wrong for an institution to do the same thing, even if that institution is a corporation or a government?

A few years after his first encyclical, Pope Pius answered questions such as these in an encyclical, *Quas Primas* (1925), that deals explicitly with the Kingship of Jesus Christ. His statement of the extent of Christ's rule is striking. "Nor is there any difference in this matter

between the individual and the family or the state; for all men, whether collectively or individually, are under the dominion of Christ." The entire encyclical is devoted to explaining the meaning of the "dominion of Christ," and Pope Pius took advantage of this occasion to institute the Feast of Christ the King in the liturgy for the first time.

So what does this far-reaching Kingship of Christ mean? What in particular does it mean for Catholic social teaching? If all men are subject to Jesus Christ, both as individuals and in all their social and political associations, then those social and political associations are bound by the law of Christ equally with individuals. Obviously that precludes governments from approving such abominations as abortion or same-sex unions. But it goes much further than that. If I as an individual am not permitted to mislead

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or cajole my neighbor into buying something from me by taking advantage of his weakness, need or stupidity, then neither are corporations or other business firms permitted to do so. But is not much advertising simply an appeal to the weakest parts of human nature in the attempt to persuade us to buy things we most likely do not need? If I as an individual am not permitted to callously make use of my neighbors for years and then turn my back on them with contempt, then neither are corporations permitted to do so. But most corporations will make use of the governmental, communal and social infrastructure, both material and non-material, and then blithely pull up stakes and head for some place where they can make a greater profit, perhaps leaving behind a town which has now lost its main source of jobs and income. Of course I do not deny the necessity for a firm to make a profit, in the sense of taking in enough to cover all expenses, including just payments to shareholders. But as Pope Benedict recently reminded us in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, "business management cannot concern itself only with the interests of the proprietors, but must also assume responsibility for all the other stakeholders who contribute to the life of the business: the workers, the clients, the suppliers of various elements of production, the community of reference." (40) If a company has prospered in part because of faithful and

hardworking employees, loyal local customers or suppliers, a benevolent attitude on the part of the municipal and state authorities, then it is not asking too much for their interests to be taken into account in business decisions. This is part of what I called the hierarchical relationship between economic activity and the rest of human life. Economic activity is for the sake of fulfilling human needs and supporting human life. It is not an end in itself. Profit is not an end in itself, but is useful only if it is a sign that the firm is supplying some human need and playing its part in the great hierarchy of human actions that reaches from our lowest activities up to Jesus Christ, King of creation. Pope Pius XI himself expressed it as follows:

"For it is the moral law alone which commands us to seek in all our conduct our supreme and final end, and to strive directly in our specific actions for those ends which nature, or rather the Author of nature, has established for them, duly subordinating the particular to the general. If this law be faithfully obeyed, the result will be that particular economic aims, whether of society as a body or of individuals, will be intimately linked with the universal teleological order, and as a consequence we shall be led by progressive stages to the final end of all, God Himself, our highest and lasting good." (*Quadragesimo*

Anno, 43)

Every type of human association has its own peculiar purpose, whether that be the state, a religious order or a sports club. Obviously the constitution and rules of a religious order and a sports club will be very different. One will attempt to serve God and further the cause of the Church directly, the other will attempt to promote some sporting activity directly. But just because the latter does not *directly* aim at the glory of God the way a religious community does, that does not mean that it is not part of the hierarchy of human activity, that "universal teleological order," which leads up to God. If a team schedules its games or practices so that its members have no time for Sunday Mass, then it has clearly placed itself in opposition to God and his laws. If it adopts the policy of having cheerleaders who are an occasion of sin because of their scanty clothing, here also it offends against the law of God.

Or even if a team demands so much that its members have insufficient time for family life, then that team is demanding more than it has a right to. The point is that while a sports team rightly intends to promote sport as its primary mission, it must recognize that there are higher aims than sport. And if another team practices every Sunday morning and thereby wins more games,

that team has attempted to elevate sports and winning as independent goals totally divorced from God, no longer a part of the hierarchy of creation offering homage to Christ the King. But our team, of course, has no right to increase its practices at the expense of our religious duties or our family life just because its rivals have done so—even if we know we won't ever win the championship!

Everything, every activity, in its own way must give praise to God and at the same time help human beings to attain Heaven. Sports can do this when they provide necessary and healthy recreation. But the minute sports begins to see itself as an end in itself, it is no longer part of the great hierarchy of human acts and actions which nourishes us and helps us along toward eternal life. Similarly, when economic activity provides the external goods and services mankind needs to live, at the same time providing a decent living for all involved in the productive process, then economic activity is part of that hierarchy of means and ends leading up to God, part of the homage to Christ the King which mankind is bound to offer. But as soon as businesses see profit, or even production, as ends in themselves, divorced from the larger human picture, then they are no longer contributing toward the ultimate end of human life but are actually leading us away from God. For as the Second Vatican Council taught, Catholics



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must "labor vigorously so that men may become capable of constructing the temporal order rightly and directing it to God through Christ." (Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, no. 7)

There is nothing wrong with enjoying the many activities which God provides for us in this life. Indeed, Sacred Scripture contains celebrations of many ordinary human acts, including sexual love and drinking wine. But as soon as these or any other human activity begin to lead us away from our attainment of eternal life, then they become a sin, and no longer fit into the grand symphony of man's acts and activities which can glorify God, each thing, large or small, in its own way.

If we go on a family vacation to the beach, there is nothing wrong in enjoying our stops along the way, either our stops for food or our stays in motels. It's perfectly all right to enjoy our time in the motel swimming pool. But suppose that we enjoy a certain motel so much that we forget all about that beach and never get there at all. That would be to allow something which is supposed to contribute toward our final goal to become the final goal itself. Of course, there's nothing wrong about changing our vacation plans as we go along. But we don't have that same freedom about our human destiny. Like it or not, we're headed toward that final meeting with Jesus Christ. As the Epistle to the Hebrews in the New Testament puts it so clearly, "It is appointed unto man once to die, and after that the judgment" (9:27). So while we must engage in many different activities in this world, and many of them we can enjoy, we cannot let any of them rob us of what is our final goal, eternal life with Jesus Christ.

Now if all this is true, then it applies to men whether as individuals or as groups. It is true that human beings are saved or damned as individuals. But as I pointed out above, we can't ignore God's law just because we're acting as part

of a group. Pope Pius XI noted that our economic actions, "whether of society as a body or of individuals," must be linked up in that hierarchy which has God as its apex. Catholics especially should try to make sure that the very structures of our communal and corporate organizations, from the state to the family and everything in between, will not hinder, and if possible will even promote, the glory of God and the salvation of mankind. The larger and more complex an organization is, the more necessary is it to take care that it does not begin to act as if it exists for itself alone and is not subject to the rule of Jesus Christ. Many of the social encyclicals of the popes since Leo XIII devote much space to topics such as relations between employers and employees, between one industry and another, between international trading partners, because the supreme pontiffs have always known that it is very easy for sin to enter into human affairs. Particularly in the modern world it is not just simple human sin any more, but what John Paul II called "structures of sin," institutions and established patterns of behavior which embody, promote and continue sin. As much as possible we should try to set up "structures of virtue" instead. Only in that way will the Kingship which Jesus Christ holds over the human race be actually manifested in our conduct and in the conduct of nations and of all the institutions and associations which we use and enjoy in our pilgrimage to our true and eternal Fatherland.

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