

An Introduction to the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church

FIRST IN A SERIES

by **Thomas Storck**

Within that body of truths taught by the Catholic Church, truths about what we must believe and about how we are to live, there are those truths commonly called Catholic social teaching or the Church's social doctrine. They are an important and integral part of Catholic doctrine, but not so well known or so well understood as they might be. In this series of articles I will be presenting this teaching by way of expounding the principal documents in which it has been embodied by successive popes. In this first article I will give an introduction to the teaching, including what I think are important points we should remember to prevent misunderstanding, and to perhaps lessen the disagreements which sometimes arise in this area.

What is Catholic Social Teaching?

Catholic social teaching may be described as that teaching which deals with the rights and duties of man organized into society, especially with the economic aspects of society. Why is the Church concerned at all with such matters? Is not her only business simply to help us save our souls and thus attain Heaven? Why does the Church meddle in such secu-

lar matters as economics? Is not this all simply one more sign of that worldliness which has invaded the Church in the wake of Vatican II?

These types of questions are very apt to be raised by Catholics unfamiliar with the reasons for social doctrine. And I think that they are quite reasonable questions, which deserve to be frankly faced and honestly answered. Unless we do so, the suspicions about

social doctrine that still linger in some quarters will never be dispelled.

In the first place, then, we should note that the Church's concern with social doctrine is not something new, something which arose only after the Second Vatican Council. Certainly since Vatican II there has been, on the part of many, a very unfortunate eclipse of major parts of Catholic doctrine with a corresponding emphasis on other parts. In a sense, the transcendental aspects of the Faith have been de-emphasized, and the horizontal emphasized, sometimes even overemphasized. But Catholic social teaching is definitely not a product of this. The Church's social teaching has its roots in the teachings of our Lord Himself, in the Fathers of the early Church, and in the medieval doctors, such as St. Thomas Aquinas. Its modern presentation began with the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of Pope Leo XIII, issued in 1891. And all of Pope Leo's successors down to John Paul II have contributed to the social doctrine of the Church by encyclicals or other documents. Catholic social teaching was well established long before Vatican II.

Granted that this is the case, why, nevertheless, did the Church ever embark on this path? The most basic answer to that question is that man organized in a corporate or social manner, whether it be into civil society, a business firm or a labor union, is not freed from his duties to Almighty God or to his fellow men. Just because I have combined or cooperated with my neighbor on a project does not exempt either of us from God's law. Just as human virtue and good works can be regularized or institutionalized in common endeavors, e.g., in a religious order, so when the personal sins of one man are joined with the sins of others, the result can be what John Paul II has called "structures of sin," the effect of which is that sinful behavior is institutionalized and thus sins "grow stronger, spread, and become the source of other sins, and so influence people's behavior."¹

This general truth about mankind's cooperation in each other's virtues or vices is specifically true in regard to economic activity. This is because there are many moral questions within the field of economics. A clear and direct statement of this was given by Pope Pius XI, in what is perhaps the greatest of the social encyclicals, *Quadragesimo Anno*, issued in 1931. The Pontiff wrote:

We lay down the principle long since clearly established by Leo XIII that it is Our right and Our duty to deal authoritatively with social and economic problems. It is not of course for the Church to lead men to transient and perishable happiness only, but to that which is eternal. Indeed "the Church believes that it would be wrong for her to interfere without just cause in such earthly concerns"; but she never can relin-

quish her God-given task of interposing her authority, not indeed in technical matters, for which she has neither the equipment nor the mission, but in all those that have a bearing on moral conduct. For the deposit of truth entrusted to Us by God, and Our weighty office of propagating, interpreting and urging in season and out of season the entire moral law, demand that both social and economic questions be brought within Our supreme jurisdiction, in so far as they refer to moral issues (par. 41).

For, though economic activity and moral discipline are guided each by its own principles in its own sphere, it is false that the two orders are so distinct and alien that the former in no way depends on the latter (par. 42).

What can be learned from this teaching of Pius XI? In the first place, it is rather obvious that those who teach that economics is a self-contained discipline, in no way subject to ethics or moral theology, are simply wrong. We will see in our discussion of the roughly hundred years of modern social teaching, exactly what the Church has taught and why she has taught it. But at the outset we should remember that the Church and the moral order undoubtedly have a very important function in economic affairs. Moreover, it is for the Church, not for the economics profession, to pronounce what is the role and limit of ethics and theology in economics.

Secondly, we can see that, as Pope John Paul II put it, the Church's social teaching "belongs to the field...of *theology* and particularly of moral theology."² In other words, the Church is interested in social and economic matters only in so far as they are really moral issues. The Church would not, for example, propose the best way of dealing with inflation nor teach us exactly what rate of taxation would raise the most revenue. But where the economy touches on moral questions, that is another matter. And since the economy encompasses concerns about property, contracts, wages, work, and many other of the multifarious dealings of man with man, obviously it does include very many moral questions, questions which must be brought under the great twin virtues of justice and charity. Thus the popes have looked at social matters neither as economists nor as politicians, but with both the moral and the physical, and indeed, the eternal welfare of mankind at heart.

Rights and the Nature of Man

No part of Catholic theology can really be separated from the rest, and, of course, this holds true of social doctrine as well. In the secular political and social discourse that takes place in our society, people make many statements about rights and duties, but for the most part these statements are grounded in



Somme le roi. French, 2nd half of 13th century. FOTO MARBURG/ART RESOURCE, NY.

nothing. That is, almost no one seems to think that it is necessary to show how his political and social opinions can be derived from the nature of man or the nature of society. Yet how can we talk about man's rights and duties unless we first know exactly what man is? Is he simply a complex machine, or perhaps a complicated animal, but not different in kind from the brute beasts? Very many people today assume one or the other of these views, yet at the same time they illogically posit all sorts of rights and duties for men. But it is hard to see how machines could have rights or monkeys duties.

But the Church is different. She elaborates a view of man based on both Holy Scripture and reason, and from this view she draws the necessary corollaries about man's life in society. Thus, as John XXIII explained in *Mater et Magistra*, "the social teaching proclaimed by the Catholic Church cannot be separated from her traditional teaching regarding man's life" (no. 222). And because the Church can never fail to preach the whole truth about man, in season and out of season, therefore the "teaching and spreading of her social doctrine are part of the Church's evangelizing mission."³

This is simply another way of saying that Catholicism is not an individualistic religion. In the first let-

ter to the Corinthians, chapter 12, St. Paul describes the Church as the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ. He speaks of the various functions or apostolates in the Church, each of which is given "for the common good." He compares the Church to a human body, each part of which has need of the other. And he sums up his teaching by saying, "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together." This doctrine is the foundation for much that we take for granted in our Catholic life; for example, the intercession of the saints for us, or *our* intercession and gaining of indulgences for those in Purgatory. As Catholics we are linked in innumerable ways, both in and beyond time, with our brethren. But as Holy Scripture makes clear in many places, we are brothers not just to fellow Catholics, but to all people. "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Galatians 6:10). Catholic social teaching, then, is founded on both the natural and supernatural bonds that unite the whole human race. It is connected to some of the most central truths of the Faith and is an integral part of the Gospel.

Debate about Catholic Social Teaching

I would have to be a hermit without contact with the rest of the world, however, not to realize that very often interpretation of Catholic social teaching is a controversial matter. Of course it is legitimate to discuss precisely what is meant by this or that element of a papal statement or how exactly we may implement something. But debates on the Church's social doctrine often go far beyond this. They often assume aspects of the partisan conflict that occurs in the secular world over economic and social policy. Sometimes it seems as if more people are trying to use papal teaching to support positions they already hold than are willing to sit down and learn, with a docile heart, what God's Church is proposing for our belief and conduct.

The chief reason for this, I think, is that most people come to the Church's teaching with previously formed and strongly held opinions on socio-economic matters. Most of us are raised and formed in a milieu in which we receive either what we call liberal or conservative ideas. It is almost as in the line from Gilbert and Sullivan's *Iolanthe*,

I often think it's comical
How nature always does contrive
That every boy and every gal,
That's born into the world alive,
Is either a little Liberal,
Or else a little Conservative!

Therefore, when we come upon statements from the Church's Magisterium dealing with economic ques-

tions, there is a very human tendency to look for those statements which tend to support what we already believe and to overlook or explain away those that do not. And perhaps most importantly, there is a tendency to *interpret* these statements in the context of one or another secular political philosophy. That is, instead of seeing all of Catholic social teaching as a consistent whole, from which we are to learn, many will take those statements which have a superficial similarity to either liberal or conservative principles, and interpret them as part of one or other of those secular ideologies. This is not the right way to proceed. Catholic social doctrine is neither liberal nor conservative. Nor is it correct to say that it is partly liberal and partly conservative. It has a logic of its own which, when we grasp it, allows us to see not only that both liberalism and conservatism have but partial truths and partial solutions, but that the basic approach of both of them is erroneous. If we hope to form our intellects according to the mind of the Church on socio-economic questions, then we must discard both conservative and liberal perspectives in order to learn how to think with the Church.

Granted that it is difficult to give up or modify our views on social and economic questions because of Church doctrine. But the mark of an orthodox Catholic must be a ready submission to the Magisterium's authentic teaching. Catholics must be as prepared to yield to the judgment of the Church in social matters as they are in other matters. And the mere fact that others, people whom we regard as our enemies, are misusing Catholic social teaching, does not give *us* the right to do the same. Today there seems to be an unwillingness ever to concede that one's ideological or philosophical enemies ever have a good point or that our side —whatever it may be — ever did anything wrong. But if we approach Catholic doctrine in this manner we will get nowhere. As far as possible, as we study social doctrine, we must try to forget the bitter controversies raging in the secular political world. For we are studying *theology*, not economics or politics. This is not to say, of course, that social doctrine has no application in the real world. It certainly does. But we must still approach it in the spirit of children of the Gospel and the Church, not as if we were debaters preparing our briefs.

Some Catholics have raised objections to the pastorals of bishops and bishops' conferences concerned with social doctrine. I will not be dealing with them in these articles at all, but only with *papal* teaching. To the extent that the bishops' teaching repeats papal teaching, it is already contained in the latter. To the extent that it does not, it can be an attempt to apply papal teaching to the specific conditions of one nation, which is a necessary task, but not one that I will be looking at, for such teaching does not enjoy the same divine protection and guidance as does that of the popes.

One persistent criticism of Catholic social teaching is that, however well-intentioned it might be, it is impractical and could never be put into effect. The best reply to that criticism is to look closely at this teaching and see exactly what it calls for, and whether and how it could be applied in this world. This we will be doing, in part, in the subsequent articles in this series. But still we can make some general observations about this now. First of all, we should ask ourselves the question: Can the Ten Commandments be implemented in the real world? Are they practical teachings for today? Any true Catholic knows that they are, but at the same time he realizes that, unfortunately, they are not being put into effect among most of the human race. They *could be*, but they are not. That is to say, with the help of God, each one of us could live, albeit imperfectly, all of God's commandments. The same can be said of Catholic social teaching. With the help of God and under the guidance of the Church, mankind could indeed live, again imperfectly, in a way pleasing to God. The injustices that the popes have spoken against could largely be eliminated. Social charity could be the cement that holds society together. But, like the Ten Commandments, this requires first that we turn to God and truly seek His assistance. If we do this, then Catholic social teaching would not be beyond the reach of human beings.

If we keep these reflections in mind in our study of social doctrine, we can avoid the trap which those have fallen into who see in the Church's teaching only reinforcements of their own ideologies. As I said above, this is a fundamental distortion of social doctrine. In the next article in this series, I will be dealing with the teaching of Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903), especially with his great encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* of 1891. In this letter we can see both a summation of all that the Church taught on the social question since the time of our Lord, as well as a foundation for all that has followed, up through John Paul II. As we begin our study, then, with Holy Mary's help, we can put aside whatever preconceived ideas we might have, whether of the Left or the Right, and drink deeply from the clear well of pure Catholic doctrine.

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End Notes

1. Encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 36. The concept of "structures of sin" is taken here from the Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (December 2, 1984).
2. Encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, sec. 41.
3. Encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 41.