

# The Social Mission of the Catholic Church

by Thomas Storck

Many Catholics are acquainted with the heresy known as Modernism, which Pope St. Pius X called the "synthesis of all heresies." Briefly, Modernism is the shifting of Catholic doctrine from an absolute to a relative basis, founded on alleged human needs and insights, with the result that even if all the traditional words are used, they no longer mean the same things.

It is easy to see how this is the entire overthrow of Catholicism. Unlike the other, older heresies, which attacked one or a few dogmas, Modernism attacks all of them, while piously claiming to be merely bringing the Faith up-to-date. As a result, Modernism is one of the most dangerous of intellectual movements, and its revival since the 1960s has been the cause of considerable harm to the Church.

But there exists another type of Modernism, a type that orthodox Catholics, especially perhaps in the United States, have not been equally on their guard against. This is what has been authoritatively termed "social Modernism." In his first encyclical, *Ubi Arcano* of December 1922, Pope Pius XI (1922-1939) introduced the notion of "social Modernism." The Pope spoke of those Catholics who give lip service to doctrine concerning the social order, including "Catholic teaching concerning ... the rights and duties of laborers ... in industry" but who "by their spoken and written word, and the whole tenor of their lives" disregard and belittle this teaching.<sup>1</sup> Pope Pius goes on to say, "In all this we recognize a kind of moral, judicial, and social Modernism, and We condemn it as strong-

ly as We do dogmatic Modernism."<sup>2</sup> If social modernism is as worthy of condemnation as is dogmatic modernism, then it surely is worthwhile learning what it is and seeking to avoid it. And if we are to avoid social modernism, we must give Catholic social teaching the prominent place in our thoughts and acts that it deserves.

It is not my intention in this article to restate the Church's social doctrine. Rather, I hope to show why that doctrine is important and why it is an integral part of the entire corpus of Catholic doctrine. It is not something extra, something merely added on, which may be disregarded or ignored if one is not interested in it. Still less is it something that may be altered at the desire of individual Catholics, in order to make it suit factors such as the temper of their times or the

political and economic traditions of their country. It is no more correct to do this with Catholic social teaching than it is with Catholic dogmatic teaching.

In the first place, then, we must ask, what sort of thing is the Church's social doctrine and why is it appropriate that the Church have such? The first question is easily answered. Beginning in 1891 with the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of Leo XIII, Leo and most of his successors have issued encyclicals and other documents dealing with what has sometimes been called "the social question." That is, these documents deal, *inter alia*, with the respective rights and duties of workers and owners, with the role of the government in the economy, with a right use of mate-

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rial goods and in fact with the entire economic organization of society so that all its functions and aspects give glory to God and aid man in attaining eternal life. Pope John Paul II identifies this social doctrine of the Church as part of moral theology.<sup>3</sup> And it is in that light that we should proceed.

Long before 1891, in fact throughout the history of the Church, the Magisterium, together with orthodox theologians, have had to instruct the faithful on questions of moral theology. Since one of the commandments of God is, "Thou shalt not steal," and since justice is one of the four cardinal moral virtues, questions concerning justice are obviously a major part of moral theology. In the great age of the Scholastics, theologians often treated questions of justice, examining in great detail where justice comes into human affairs, and particularly into the economic transactions of the time. A few centuries later, in 1745, Pope Benedict XIV felt compelled to address an encyclical letter, *Vix pervenit*, to the bishops of Italy, on a question of economic justice, restating the Church's teaching on the immorality of usury, a teaching that, of course, remains true today.

Now in doing all these things, the Supreme Pontiffs, and those theologians who sought faithfully to interpret Catholic doctrine, were moved by their concern for both our temporal and our eternal existence. That is, like our Lord, who healed both souls and bodies and fed the hungry, the Church has never approached questions of economic justice or injustice with the spirit of a social worker or politician or economist. The charge that Jesus gave the apostles, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20), obviously necessitates teaching the whole law of God, and this includes the right use of our earthly goods. For the manner in which we make use of these earthly goods has much to do with whether or not we will obtain our *spiritual* reward in Heaven.

So as we look at that remarkable series of encyclicals and other documents that constitute the modern corpus of Catholic social teaching, we should keep in mind their ultimately spiritual aim. Even as they necessarily address questions that are mainly temporal, they have an underlying spiritual object. For example, in the first of these documents, Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* of 1891, Pope Leo begins by saying that his purpose is "to treat the question expressly and at length, in order that there may be no mistake as to the principles which truth and justice dictate ..." <sup>4</sup> And forty years after that, Pius XI in *Quadragesimo Anno* defended the authority of the Church in "social and economic problems" with these words:

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.<sup>5</sup>

The social teaching of the Catholic Church, then, deals extensively with questions concerning "social and economic problems." For example, it upholds the right in strict justice of a worker to receive a just and living wage; it supports the natural right of the worker to unionize; it calls for more cooperation between owners and workers; it defines the role of the government in the economy, condemning both those who want a state-run economy and those who wish to eliminate any role for government in economic affairs. Catholic social teaching deals with all these questions, but it does so for spiritual ends and in a manner that is essentially spiritual.

On the natural level, all the members of the human race are brothers, because we have one Father who created us and we take our origin from the same first parents. This is the foundation for a corporate or social view of humanity. But for the baptized this unity is even greater, since we have all been made adopted sons of God (Galatians 3:5-6). In his first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul teaches that the Catholic Church is the Mystical Body of Christ and the members of the Church are jointly members of this Mystical Body (I Cor. 12:12-30). Thus, we are brothers, both naturally and supernaturally, but how are we to live together as brothers?

The Church holds out a vision to us, of what John Paul II calls "a civilization of love," a social order animated by justice and charity, or by what is sometimes called the virtue of solidarity.<sup>6</sup> Thus the social teachings of the Church must be thought of not as academic commentaries on economics, which somehow the various popes, almost by accident began creating, but rather a foreshadowing of "the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God" (Rev. 21:10). It is like the situation described in Psalm 133:1: "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity."

If the Church calls us to create such a civilization of love, it is necessary to view the Seventh Commandment as more than a command concerning personal morality. Of course it is that, for all morality arises from personal responsibility and all sin arises from personal sin.<sup>7</sup> But if we can grasp the notion of not merely separate individuals, but of all of society dedicated to the service and glory of God, of the economic transactions of our corporations or the trading relations of two nations subject to the same moral law as the dealings between two individuals, then we will have begun to understand what the Church proposes to us in her social teachings. For all of the social teach-

ing of the Church presupposes not merely a reformation of individuals but a reformation of society.<sup>8</sup> And this brings us to another important concept: Christ the King, not only of individuals, but of societies and entire nations, in fact, of all mankind.

Pius XI, who did so much to put modern Catholic social teaching on a sure foundation in his *Quadragesimo Anno*, wrote another encyclical which is not usually classed among the social encyclicals. This is the encyclical *Quas primas*, on the Kingship of Christ, issued on December 11, 1925. To try to understand Catholic social teaching apart from the Kingship of Jesus Christ is to have only a partial and one-sided view of the matter. For "all men, whether collectively or individually, are under the dominion of Christ." Moreover, "It would be a grave error ... to say that Christ has no authority whatever in civil affairs, since by virtue of the absolute empire over all creatures committed to Him by the Father, all things are in His power."<sup>9</sup>

If we develop these points we can see that, looked at as part of the kingdom of Jesus Christ, nothing that mankind does, either individually or corporately, can be alien to Christ's law and his kingly rule. Therefore the Church, as the mystical extension of the Incarnation, is not doing anything foreign to her mission when she provides guidance for bringing about the realization of Christ's Kingdom in the affairs of men. We are all Christ's subjects, and as such we are bound to make our institutions and our customs reflect him. Catholics should not dare to have a conception of business or economic life that is based either on practical atheism or on a deism that sees God as simply a distant Creator, who left a kind of clockwork universe that runs by itself, as in Adam Smith's "invisible hand."

Just as we would not allow the sexual appetite to rule itself, on the grounds that since it was created by God somehow it would ultimately work everything out for the good, so we cannot allow the appetite for economic gain to have free rein. As Pius XI taught, "Just as the unity of human society cannot be built upon 'class' conflict, so the proper ordering of economic affairs cannot be left to the free play of rugged competition."<sup>10</sup> To do so would be to think and act as if, whenever men gathered into societies or groups, including nations, somehow they could forget the kingly law of Jesus Christ.

If it is wrong to hurt the person living in the next house, it is likewise wrong to hurt my employee or even my competitor, for are we not brothers and are we not all subjects of our common King? And if we cannot see how it is possible not to hurt them in order for myself to survive in the business world, then we need to rethink our approach to economic life and change the demands that our economic system makes

upon each of us. For more basic and more demanding than any of its strictures are the moral law and the fundamental principles of justice and charity.

The laws of physics describe how particles of matter move and react under certain conditions. Because these particles do not have free will, they have no choice about their behavior and they cannot be blamed for what they do. The so-called laws of economics, however, are about the actions of free human persons.<sup>11</sup> Because of this freedom they can yield or refuse to yield to their various concupiscible appetites. The laws of economics are descriptions of what human beings will generally do if they yield themselves fully to their concupiscible appetite for gain. But whenever this appetite for gain runs counter to the law of Christ, it is entitled to no more respect than when the sexual appetite similarly runs out of bounds. And just as with the sexual appetite, we must curb our appetite for gain if our activity is likely to bring harm or disruption to a social order that supports a civilization of love.

But there is another thing insisted upon by the Church's Magisterium important to her social doctrine. This is nicely expressed by St. Paul in 1 Timothy 6:8, "If we have food and clothing, with these we shall be content." Just after this in verse 10 he writes, "For the love of money is the root of all evil."

These verses may serve to introduce the notion of a certain necessary restraint in our possession and use of material goods. The entire aim of the Christian revelation and of the divine economy is to save mankind from eternal death. Our life here on earth is not our final fulfillment. While material things are not evil, they are, in this world, merely our temporary possessions, and, as the New Testament points out in many places, they can easily come between us and God.

As society piles up more riches every decade, and people acquire a higher standard of living as they grow older, we must stop and ask ourselves whether all this is good. Has it helped to remove the attention of our minds from the inevitable fact of our coming death and judgment? Can riches cloud our intellects and weaken our wills, so that we do not strive for heavenly things with the ardor that we ought to? Were our ancestors, poorer than we, perhaps more pious? Yet we are accustomed to justify our economic system with the argument that it produces great wealth and has made us rich in comparison with those who lived before us. Perhaps the best reply to that is the words of St. James, "Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you" (James 5:1). If we really believe the Faith, we must scrutinize all that we do and all that our society does in the light of the Gospel and of the one thing necessary, the attaining of eternal salvation.

When we look at the connection between the

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functioned as his secretary and assistant, cheerfully doing whatever was asked of him. Even when he found himself performing menial tasks which the father had left unfinished, he applied himself without grumbling. "Father drives ahead at whatever he deems most important," Brother Joseph wrote in his diary, "until something else seems more so. Then he jumps over into that, and so leaves a track of unfinished jobs ... and requests that I finish what he was doing." And Brother would do all that finishing, with a growing certainty that he had finally found his place in the world. Here, he felt, he was truly needed and ready to contribute something, anything, everything to ease his lepers' lot.

After Father Damien's death on April 15, 1889 Brother Joseph remained on Molokai, diligently carrying on the work the great priest had begun. (Following his recent beatification by Pope John Paul II in Belgium, Father Damien's remains were returned to his beloved Molokai.) Until his own death 44 years later, Brother threw himself into the work, appalling as it sometimes must have been. He once described his life on Molokai as a "beginning again." Time and again he proclaimed his sole reason for living was to do good for the lepers and his hope that his efforts would be acceptable to Almighty God. Always he prayed that he, like Father Damien, would die of leprosy!

Having always been a patriot at heart, Joseph never lost his care for America and described it to the lepers with much pride and love. Every day he made certain that the Stars and Stripes fluttered from a very tall flagpole which stood on the island's highest point. And he always took particular care that the people stood at attention, as best they could, as he raised or lowered the flag. Despite his great love for them, he spoke sharply to any of the lepers who failed to show respect on such occasions.

In 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt sent sixteen American battleships around the world and when he heard of such patriotism as Joseph's taking place on Molokai and how the lepers always hoped to catch sight of the fleet, the Commander-in-Chief cabled the ships to sail past that island in battle formation, with each dipping its colors in salute to the white-haired Brother Joseph and the island's flag flying high above his head. It was a proud nation's tribute to one of her most noble sons and the lepers under his care.

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Church's social doctrine and her teaching concerning our salvation, then perhaps we can see the social doctrine in a new light. Instead of debating whether this social doctrine is liberal or conservative, according to current secular categories and terms, we ought to see that despite whatever accidental resemblance it sometimes has with one or the other, it is in fact neither. Rather, it is for the guidance of the royal government of Jesus Christ, for the brotherhood established by God the Father at our creation, and even more for the brotherhood of the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ. It is the means by which we can live so that even in our business activities we can say, again with St. Paul:

But our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself (Philippians 3:20-21).

If the Kingship of Christ Jesus over all men and over every aspect of human affairs is a *fact*, not merely a fancy which we use to decorate our piety at appropriate times, then this fact requires our utmost attention, and all the other activities and institutions of human existence must be shaped to recognize that Kingship. Consequently, far from being something extra added onto Catholic dogma, the social teachings are integral parts of the realization of the Lordship of Jesus Christ the King. Every year we celebrate the feast of the Kingship of Christ and thus every year we have a new opportunity publicly to reaffirm these truths. But every single day we have the opportunity not just to reaffirm them, but to put them into practice. Otherwise, how can we avoid the condemnation of that Supreme Pontiff, who said of social Modernism, "We condemn it as strongly as We do dogmatic Modernism?"

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<sup>1</sup>Encyclical *Ubi Arcano*, no.55.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, no. 56.

<sup>3</sup>Encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 41.

<sup>4</sup>Encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, no. 1.

<sup>5</sup>Encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, no. 41.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, no. 10.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 36.

<sup>8</sup>To mention only a few examples, see *Rerum Novarum*, nos. 22, 25; *Quadragesimo Anno*, nos. 76-80, 88, 110, 132-133 and 136; *Centesimus Annus*, nos. 48-51.

<sup>9</sup>Encyclical *Quas Primas*, no. 8.

<sup>10</sup>Encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, no. 88.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, no. 42.