

THE SOCIAL TEACHING OF THE CHURCH

What is Catholic Social Teaching?

This is the fourth installment in our series looking at interpretations and possible applications of the Church's social doctrine.

by Thomas Storck

Probably the main reaction that most Catholics have to the subject of Catholic social teaching is indifference or even, in some cases, hostility. Is it not, some would say, just some sort of left-wing scheme dreamed up in the aftermath of Vatican II, or maybe something manufactured out of the woolly brains of European clerics? Or if not this, then it is equated with works of charity, such as helping out at a soup kitchen or giving clothes to the homeless. But while these works of charity are important, indeed essential, they are not the main focus of Catholic social teaching. In order, then, to understand this subject we should begin with some examination of the phrase itself, for from that we can learn much about its contents.

But let us look primarily at the second word of the phrase, social. This, I think, is where most resistance to the idea resides. Many Catholics, in their laudable efforts to obey God's law and follow the teachings of the Church, concentrate primarily on those commandments, especially the sixth and the ninth, that concern personal morality. Nor do I deny the necessity of keeping these two commandments if we hope to reach Heaven. But there is more. For Catholic teaching since New Testament times has considered that the redemptive message of Jesus Christ comes not just to individuals, but to groups as such, that is, to men divided into the many kinds of social groupings which human nature tends to create, including the state or civil society. Although a Catholic can live a good Catholic life in a pagan society,

not only is it easier for him if the society around him is Catholic, but that society ought to be Catholic. It is not right that we restrict the saving work of our Lord and his Church only to individuals. That is part of the heresy of Martin Luther, who was willing to consign society and the state to the Devil and make Christianity primarily a private matter.

But the Catholic Church has never agreed to this. In his encyclical on the Kingship of Jesus Christ, *Quas Primas* (1925), Pope Pius XI stated, *Nor is there any difference in this matter [of the Kingship of Jesus Christ] between the individual and the family or the state; for all men, whether collectively or individually, are under the dominion of Christ. In Him is the salvation of the individual, in Him is the salvation of society.*¹ If this is so, then the very laws and institutions of society should not only give honor to Christ, but these laws and institutions should reflect his justice. Nor can we suppose that somehow since the Second Vatican Council the Church has abandoned this age-old Catholic teaching, for the Council itself taught that it is part of the mission of the laity "to impress the divine law on the affairs of the earthly city."²

Although Catholic social teaching extends much further than concern with economic arrangements, it is the case that these loom large in the Church's social documents, not because the Church is trying to meddle in an area where she has no competence or mission, but because economic matters are mixed with moral concerns much more than many people think. Here is how Pius

XI again put it in his 1931 encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno*.

*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.*³

All this is actually implicit in the biblical commandment, You shall not steal. For in order to understand what stealing is, we must know exactly what justice is, and it is the Church's duty to teach us this.

Therefore Pope John Paul II taught that Catholic social teaching "belongs to the field, not of ideology, but of theology and particularly of moral theology."⁴ Since so much of man's life is lived in common with others, clearly moral theology cannot be restricted to purely personal sins, for this would exempt much of human life from God's law and judgment.

The entire scope of Catholic social teaching was summarized by Pius XI in another encyclical *Ubi Arcano* (1922) as *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.*⁵

We can see from this that the economic aspect of the social doctrine is in fact subordinate to the whole, but since questions of economic justice are so important in human affairs,

many of the papal encyclicals which are commonly included in the corpus of the Church's social teaching deal in large degree with economic questions, including *Rerum Novarum* of Leo XIII, *Quadragesimo Anno* of Pius XI, *Mater et Magistra* of John XIII, *Populorum Progressio* of Paul VI, and the three social encyclicals of John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* and *Centesimus Annus*.

Fundamentally, as we saw above in *Quas Primas*, men organized into groups, including into political communities, are as much bound to obey the law of God as are individual persons. Thus a state is bound to construct its laws in such a way as to promote justice. And even a business firm or a corporation, although its primary mission is not one of promoting social justice, cannot violate justice in its operations or dealings. Since businesses are made

up of human beings, and human beings are bound to obey the law of God in all their acts, the mere fact that men have combined into groups to produce some product or service hardly exempts them from obeying his laws. With that in mind, let us look at how Catholic social teaching deals with some of the concrete points of ethics as they relate to economics.

The question of wage justice was one of the first topics taken up by the Popes with the renewal of Catholic social doctrine that began in 1891 with the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. At the time of *Rerum Novarum* it was widely held that if an employee accepted the wage offered by the employer, then that wage contract was ipso facto just, for had not a free agreement been made on both sides? Pope Leo's answer, and indeed the answer of every subsequent pope, has been no, such an agreement is not necessarily just.

And the fallacy of those who hold that agreement between employer and employee always produces justice arises from the fact that it rests upon an individualistic way of looking on man and society.

In the first place, Pope Leo points out that although from one standpoint, a worker is free to contract for any amount he pleases, even for no wage at all, from another standpoint he is not, *for without the results of labor a man cannot live; and self-conservation is a law of nature, which it is wrong to disobey... The preservation of life is the bounden duty of each and all, and to fail therein is a crime. It follows that 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.*⁶

In other words, if it is our duty to preserve our life and provide for our families, how can we do this if our wages do not provide enough to live



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on? By working two jobs? By sending one's wife out to work? I know that some readers might object that economic science contradicts what I am saying here, and I will address that later on in this article. For the time being, let us focus on developing this point.

We must begin, then, to see the economic order as neither a machine whose output is determined according to exact quasi-mechanical laws nor as a field for dog-eat-dog competition. Instead, like all human activities, economic activity leaves considerable room for alteration according to man's free will and, as we will see later, according to the laws, customs and institutions which mankind has established. If society is capable of producing enough food, shelter and other essentials so that no one need starve, then there is no reason for anyone to receive less than a living wage, provided of course that he is willing to work.

Let us look at another matter related to economics, property rights. Here the Church teaches that society acting through the state has the right to set limits and bounds to the use of property.

When civil authority adjusts ownership to meet the needs of the public good it acts not as an enemy, but as the friend of private owners; for thus it effectively prevents the possession of private property, intended by Nature's Author in His Wisdom for the sustaining of human life, from creating intolerable burdens and so rushing to its own destruction.⁷

In other words, it is the *common good*, the good of the whole of society, which must be the final rule in economic matters. Although individuals do have rights, very often these rights are not absolute, and must yield to the creation of a society which is focused more on gaining Heaven than on gaining more

earthly goods. Men should hope and work for the goods necessary for their and their families' sustenance; but beyond that a preoccupation with earthly gain is likely to come under the condemnation uttered by St. Paul when he wrote, *if we have food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all evils; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced their hearts with many pangs.⁸*

In their teaching the Popes always remember that our time on earth is short, and that if we allow the goods of the earth to predominate in our thoughts and desires, then we stand the chance of losing Heaven.

If, then, we grant what all the popes from Leo XIII through John Paul II have taught solemnly in encyclicals and others documents, we can begin to grasp the Catholic approach to social morality. Fundamentally, our economic activity is not an end in itself, but is for the sake of something greater, namely, our family life, our cultural life, our spiritual life, and in the end, our eternal life with God. There are many licit ways in which society, including its economic structures, can be arranged. But however this is done, they ought to serve and to encourage sinful humanity to look toward God, to live virtuous lives, to realize that in this world we do not have our ultimate fulfillment. Any economic arrangements that distract us from this understanding do not serve God but the Devil. The creation of piles of useless goods, the dependence of our economy on buying for the sake of buying, the frenzied pace of much of our work - none of these things will help us attain eternal salvation.

Unfortunately many people

imagine that economic activity is in a separate world. Yes, they might say, we must keep God's commandments. That is the realm of religion and morality. But the economic order is different. It has its own laws. It is more or less autonomous. Any talk of reigning in man's economic appetites smacks of socialism.

But neither Sacred Scripture nor the Catholic Church views the matter in such a fashion. Socialism was an attempt to control economic activity for what were basically materialist goals, more production, which would supposedly bring about a better life for all. Socialism failed on many levels. But from the fact that socialism was and is wrong, it does not follow that the only practical alternative is a market economy that is devoid of ethical concerns, in which the economic motive is allowed nearly unlimited freedom.

In my experience, one of the factors that inclines some people to belittle Catholic social teaching is that they think the science of economics teaches conclusions that are at variance with the teaching of the Church. Many who have some formal or informal knowledge of economics make the claim that since economic science gives us a picture of how an economy works, in which there is hardly any room for moral norms, that the popes were well-meaning but misguided, and either exceeded their authority or at least did not teach with anything approaching infallibility.

But the answer to that is twofold. On the one hand, the Church has been teaching about morality in relation to economics since the time of our Lord, and certainly the Popes felt no hesitation about making pronouncements in this area which they surely regarded as authoritative. Therefore a Catholic should sense that when a secular science makes claims at variance with the teaching

of Christ's true Church, there should be no doubt as to where the truth must lie. If, for example, a sociologist or psychologist should protest that the Church's teaching on marriage or family life was contrary to the findings of his science, no sincere Catholic would have any difficulty in knowing how to resolve this supposed conflict. The same thing is true for economics. Even if an individual Catholic is unable in his own mind to resolve a conflict between the Church's magisterial teaching and the apparent assertions of any science, he should know that he must simply put his trust in the teaching of the Church and continue to study the question in the hope of understanding why the Church must be right after all.

But fortunately our hope for understanding how the Church's social thought may be reconciled with economics is not very difficult.

For the position of those economists who erect a conflict here is like that of some philosophers who claim that their subject renders impossible the Church's dogma that the existence of God can be demonstrated by reason or that human beings possess a purely spiritual soul which survives death. For although a Kantian or a logical positivist philosopher might say this, we know that there are many schools of philosophy and that a Thomist, whose claim to be a philosopher is as good as any others, would be able to show by reason that the upholders of these other schools are simply wrong. Thus the Church's doctrines do not contradict philosophy, but only certain schools of philosophy. So with economics. There is no one single teaching of economics. There are many schools of economists, and it is a mistake to identify the teachings or conclusions of just one or two economic schools with any certain conclusions of a science. Both the dominant neoclassical or "orthodox" school and the Austrian school, whose practitioners often regard ideas such as the just wage as merely an effort by do-gooders to impose their notions on an impersonal economic system, are simply in the position of the Kantian or logical positivist philosopher as regards Catholic teaching. They may regard Catholic doctrine as disproven by their studies, but we know that they cannot claim to be the only voice of philosophy. So with economists.

Although the Church will never explicitly identify one school of economic science as the only true one, such groups of economists as the American Institutional school or the German Historical school left ample room in their understanding of how an economy works for the ethical concerns of Catholic social teaching. The Institutionalists, for example, argued that neither the "orthodox" neoclassicals nor the Austrians really understand how an economy in the real world functions.

Neoclassical economists, for example, are too wedded to their graphs and equations, and do not understand that in addition to market forces there are other factors which influence economic arrangements and relations. These include institutions, including the legal system, custom, and simply raw power. When a company, for example, intimidates its employees to prevent them from organizing a union, this is nothing except the more powerful working upon the less powerful. And similarly, if a government agency or some other entity intervenes in such a case to curb the power of management, this again is an example of another power being exercised to allow justice to operate. Or when corporate CEOs appoint friends and colleagues to their boards, knowing that they will in turn approve inordinate salaries and benefits for these CEOs, this is hardly an example of market forces in action, but simply of power, power often working behind the scenes. The outcome in all these cases might be economic in the sense that it is concerned with money or other economic goods, but it is not the forces of supply and demand that are at work, but the power of management or of unions or government. Or when limited liability laws protect corporate stockholders from any adverse effects of their corporation's conduct, does not such a law influence how a corporation will act? If the stockholders were liable to

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