

THINKING WITH (OR WITHOUT) THE CHURCH

THOMAS STORCK
Saltillo, Pa.

I was first introduced to the concept of 'the world setting the agenda for the church' about ten years ago, before I was a Catholic, by a former teacher and current friend, who pointed out that when Christians accept as their current concern issues proposed and defined by unbelievers — whether ecology, peace, world hunger, etc. — however valid these issues may be in themselves, we are allowing the world to dictate what we think about and expend our energies on, and even the way in which we think and act, i.e., from essentially secular motives and with a secular analysis and secular proposals for reform. Unfortunately, one can see this sort of thing happening all the time.

Secularists have a certain number of issues with which they are concerned, frequently one issue predominating at any given time. Quite often — though decreasingly so — these issues are such as to appeal legitimately to Catholics — world hunger, poverty, discrimination against Hispanics, etc. In fact, in some cases Catholics are put to shame by the efforts of non-Christians to deal with a matter we have neglected.

So some might judge there is nothing wrong with this: we Catholics have our consciences goaded, and as a result we take action on a matter we have up to then ignored.

But nevertheless, this is not a good thing. Though some accidental good doubtless results from performing corporal and spiritual works of mercy from essentially secular motives, yet, I think, the damage done outweighs the good. What is the damage? It is an importation into the Church, and into the thinking of Catholics, of secular modes of thought, secular approaches to problems, secular analyses of situations. Ultimately it leads to a paralysis of real Catholic action, for we become ashamed or afraid to act from Catholic motives, thus depriving the world and our fellow men of the true contributions we have to make, whether in world peace, social justice, or any other area. If we simply ape our secular brethren in addressing the world's problems, then who will bring to bear the immense wealth contained in Catholic teaching and tradition?

The environmental movement of the 70s is a good example of what I am talking about. Now Catholic

tradition has always been concerned about proper treatment of created things. Fifty years ago, Christopher Dawson spoke of "the destruction of the countryside and the pollution of the earth and the air and the waters." But the actual ecology movement had no solid intellectual base, and therefore mixed a proper anxiety about pollution and destruction with alarmist talk about the alleged population explosion. Too often the movement seemed opposed to the human as such, viewing any alteration of a field or stream, in the interests of civilized life, as a crime nearly equal in perversity to a real defilement of nature. At an extreme, some of its spokesmen embraced the horrible monism that the earth and everything on it are one big organism, and therefore to kill off excess people is like clipping one's toenails or cutting out a cancer.

Catholics involved in the ecology movement either accepted it as defined by its leaders, or at most offered ad hoc criticisms of particular proposals. What was needed was neither an abandonment of Catholic identity nor mere piecemeal criticism of the ideas of others, rather a connected theory and plan, based on Catholic premises. Though one might object that had we waited for Catholics to propose remedies for the problem we would still be waiting, I suggest that had we been more aware of our own tradition we might well have taken up the matter years ago.

The Catholic Difference

Of course, Catholic tradition does not, as a rule, contain technical suggestions for dealing with contemporary problems, nor does it always explicitly deal with such problems at all. But very often a solution will be hinted at in the tradition, some ways of approaching it will be ruled out, and a definite help afforded to discovering a correct and workable answer. I should make it clear here that by Catholic tradition I do not mean just Sacred Tradition, though I certainly include that. Rather I mean all that has been written, said or done by Catholics, as Catholics, all that is in accord with Catholic truth and a Catholic way of life. It may even include non-Catholics, for example, the ancient pagans such as Aristotle or Cicero, and the moderns who write in a Catholic spirit, as G. K. Chesterton did even before his conversion.

Thus, the tradition I refer to might justly be called Western rather than Catholic. But it is also correct to call it Catholic, since everything true and noble in pagan antiquity foreshadowed the Church, and everything true and noble in subsequent Western culture is either of the Church or somehow derived for her teaching and ethos. There is a civilizational tradition, then, of which the Catholic faith is the soul and center, and which without the Faith would die. This tradition is not just a matter of books and ideas, for everywhere it is allowed to flourish unimpeded it gives rise to a genuine Catholic culture, a way of life that embodies in customs and institutions certain beliefs, about God, man, time, work, and so on.

Insofar as non-Catholic beliefs, either Protestant or secular, differ from those of the Church, to a similar degree Protestant and secular cultures will differ from Catholic culture, since those cultures will embody their beliefs. Fr. George Bull stated this clearly in his important article, "The Function of the Catholic Graduate School."

In recent years, Catholics have become increasingly conscious of the clash between Catholicism as a *general* culture, and the culture of the world around them. The work of men like Belloc, Maritain, Christopher Dawson and others, has shown that we differ not in religion alone, but in the whole realm of unspoken and spontaneous things, which color even our daily routine.¹

We differ about our daily routine precisely because we differ about religion, since our daily routine ought to be formed by our religious beliefs, or rather, by our recognition of the nature of God and the law of our created natures. These things as Catholics we know.

But if the Faith is what all ancient culture anticipated, and, since Pentecost, has been the soul of Western culture, then non-Catholic ideas and their embodiment in a civilization are in a sense cultural heresies, that is, expressions of erroneous beliefs in erroneous ways of living. Whether Calvinist, Marxist or liberal capitalistic, these ideologies attempt to form man in a false image, or rather, reform him after partial and poorly understood half-truths. But if we Catholics allow ourselves to be ruled by the movements and ideas of the secular world, it will profit us but little that we are the true heirs of the entire Catholic and Western culture. We must consciously seek to steep ourselves in Catholic thought in order to form our minds in a Catholic fashion. Especially is this true in the United States, where there is no public Catholic culture to aid in our formation.

Though Catholics continue to fall every day for the

secularist fashion of the moment, I think there is more awareness now than fifteen years ago that we need to be very cautious about indiscriminately endorsing every liberal crusade. The secularist support for abortion and euthanasia, both so clearly against basic teachings of the natural law, have made even lukewarm Catholics suspicious of the liberal agenda. But lately, it seems to me, some of the very Catholics who in the past protested against the Church adopting the liberals' causes, have themselves adopted a program, secular in origin and opposed to venerable Catholic tradition. But the secular group is not liberal; this time it is the New Right.

Though the Pro-Life movement is often linked with the New Right, indeed considered a part of it, I think there are fundamental differences between them. Though there are prominent New Right figures in the anti-abortion campaign, the Pro-Life movement is essentially Christian. It is based on an immediate and correct judgment on a point of the natural law, reinforced in revelation by the fifth commandment. The basic thrust of the movement is on a very simple level: it is wrong to murder. This is not a very esoteric precept of the moral law, nor does it take a learned moral theologian or philosopher to appreciate its truth. Thus the Pro-Life movement is a direct response to legalized murder, with its roots in the human and Catholic judgment that such murder is monstrous. In contrast to this simple perception of wrong, the New Right has a complicated political, social and economic program, much of which is not obviously derived from natural law or revelation. Rather, I would argue, many of its root assumptions may be found in various secular ideologies and traditions, particularly Lockean individualism. And because of this, its programs conflict with Catholic teaching and tradition in several areas. The one in particular that I want to discuss is economics.

New Right economics, as exemplified in authors such as George Gilder, Newt Gingrich and Jack Kemp, offers an economic program which is a variety of free enterprise capitalism, stressing dynamic entrepreneurial activity, which supposedly results in job creation, plentiful and inexpensive goods, and a socially healthy economy. The benefits of such an economy are not considered to be narrowly economic or materialistic, for the New Right believes that their model of a vigorous economy would reduce unemployment, allow the poor to better themselves, reduce the size of government and taxes, and, in general, promote civic betterment. They point out that a stagnant economy is likely to breed unemployment, crime, divorce and other familial tensions, induce mothers to seek jobs outside the home, in turn causing more crime, social

disintegration, etc. Now, most of this desire is laudable, and perhaps many of their specific proposals feasible and sound. But, in spite of this, the program as a whole is not Christian but secular.

Why is this? As many know, the Catholic Church has a long history of dealing with economics and its relation with people and the common good of society. In the Middle Ages the Catholic spirit inspired the creation of the guilds, which embodied a particular attitude toward economic activity and its implications for social welfare. Medieval theologians and moralists discussed the morality of the increasingly complex commercial life of the time, seeking to apply to it essential Catholic attitudes, and to judge it by the natural and divine laws.

Papal Teaching and Its Critics

Though by no means silent on economic matters during the intervening centuries, perhaps the next great age of Catholic thought on economic matters is our own. Beginning in 1891 a series of papal encyclicals, addresses and other documents have treated extensively of economic questions. Moreover, especially during the thirties, forties and fifties of this century, many Catholics, cleric and lay, commented on, expounded, and applied the social and economic teachings of the twentieth-century popes. As one would expect, the modern papal teaching assumes the same fundamental attitudes toward economic activity as did the earlier pronouncements, but is fully updated as regards its application. This body of doctrine is no more outmoded than are the Ten Commandments, though both originated in an earlier age.

It would seem sensible for any Catholic interested in economic questions to make this age-old teaching his starting point. Instead of beginning with secular authors and then turning to Church documents to see to what extent they deviate from our favored secular theories, it would seem that the correct way is first to come to understand and adopt the papal point of view and methodology, and then turn to other economic writers to discover what helpful ideas may be found in them.

But the Catholic New Right, following in the footsteps of their liberal coreligionists of the sixties and seventies, seems first to read their Gilder and Kemp, and then turn to the popes to praise or blame. A slim volume entitled "Papal Economics"² and issued by the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, well illustrates this kind of approach. The work is a collection of essays on the encyclical *Laborem exercens*.

I will deal with only one of the contributions to the

work, that of Fr. James Schall, S.J., a well-known politically conservative Catholic. Fr. Schall is concerned that Pope John Paul has omitted "any explicit reference to the market as the immediate means by which goods produced finally reach the concrete people who need them,"³ and regrets that in *Laborem exercens*

The word "profit" is always used with the adjectives "excess" or "inordinate" in relation to a strict interpretation of classical economic theory. Just profit, as something earned by the "work" of thought or sacrifice or hard work, is not discussed.⁴

Moreover, according to Fr. Schall,

The entire discussion of "capitalism" in the encyclical studiously avoided any adequate examination of 18th and 19th century economic history. In spite of the admitted horror stories, such a study would ask why, as the last century progressed, the workers in fact grew richer.⁵

Schall also complains, "The encyclical also speaks of rights to jobs, leaving aside again, perhaps because of lack of attention to innovation and creativity in this regard, the question of how jobs are created . . ." Fr. Schall sums up his contribution by stating,

The uniqueness of this Encyclical, in my opinion, is that it betrays all the marks of a document open finally to a complete understanding in papal thought of the innovative, productive nature of an economy directed to and by human persons.⁷

Although the above quotations should not, of course, be taken as being all Fr. Schall has to say on the subject of *Laborem exercens*, let alone Catholic social teaching as a whole, I think it is evident from what I have quoted that Fr. Schall already has a coherent economic theory in his head when he sits down to read a papal social encyclical, and that to the extent the encyclical does not agree with that theory, it will, politely to be sure, be found wanting. For Fr. Schall is not taking exception to just one papal utterance. Take for example his statement about 18th and 19th century capitalism and its effect on the worker. According to Fr. Schall "the workers in fact grew richer." But what do the popes say? Leo XIII's *Rerum novarum*, written during this very period of 19th century capitalism, speaks of "the misery and wretchedness which press so heavily at this moment on the large majority of the very poor."⁸ Pope Leo also states that "a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the masses of the poor a yoke little better than slavery itself."⁹ Forty years later Pope Pius XI spoke:

Toward the close of the nineteenth century,

new economic methods and new developments of industry had in many nations led to a situation wherein the human community appeared more and more divided into two classes. The first, small in numbers, enjoyed practically all the comforts so plentifully supplied by modern invention. The second class, comprising the immense multitude of workingmen, was made up of those who, oppressed by dire poverty, struggled in vain to escape from the straits which encompassed them.¹⁰

Although Fr. Schall or his New Right allies may think that during the 18th and 19th centuries the condition of the worker improved, the papal social encyclicals assert the very opposite. It is patent that Father Schall has picked up a theory, secular in origin, and used this theory to judge the contents of the papal social documents.

Now as a Catholic, it seems to me that the right method is just the opposite. Instead of coming to the social encyclicals with our social theory already pretty much complete, and looking either for isolated passages to buttress our case, or places to criticize, we should humbly and docilely sit down to learn. If the popes stress distribution more than production in their teaching, then maybe we should too. If they neglect what we consider most important, maybe there is some reason they do this, and it is just possible we can learn why. If we find their economic teaching deficient and frustrating, perhaps our economic theory is not Catholic in spirit. If we desire our plans and programs to be based on the accumulated wisdom of the Church and of Catholic culture, then we must be willing to put aside our cherished theories and analyses if there is any conflict. And if we engage in the kind of nit-picking at papal encyclicals that New Right economic theorists do with the social encyclicals, then it should be clear that something is wrong with us.

New Right authors less forthright than Schall, such as the framers of the so-called Lay Letter on Catholic Social Teaching, are content to sprinkle their work, based squarely on a secular analysis, with quotations from and references to papal teaching, to give the impression that it accords with it. But neither straightforward disagreement nor selective quotation should be tolerable for a Catholic. Instead, let us have proposals that are Catholic in beginning and inspiration, Catholic in methodology and analysis, and Catholic in spirit and execution. Only then can we make the contribution we are capable of, and really begin once again to restore all things in Christ. □

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FRAGMENTS

Assaults On Children by Children Rising

A six-year-old girl was treated after allegedly being raped on March 20 by two Dallas boys, 8 and 9 years old. The boys were held for questioning but released under Texas law which holds that children under the age of 10 are not criminally liable for their actions. The victim's mother stated that the 8-year-old boy reportedly began abusing boys and girls in the neighborhood after he had seen some pornographic movies.

"Exposure to pornography is a passive form of abuse," commented Dallas County Rape Crisis Center Associate Director Jan Delipsey, adding that sexual assaults on children by other children are not infrequent these days. She also stated that some sexually abused children act out what's been done to them.

Delipsey states that she recently had a case of a 5-year-old-boy who sexually assaulted a 3-year-old girl.

In another case, in Hilliard, Ohio a 12-year-old boy, who had set up a hideout underneath an amphitheater stage and stocked it with porno magazines, was charged on April 8 with the rape of a 10-year-old retarded boy. In Chicago, a 13-year-old boy was charged with raping a 6-year-old girl. In New York City, a 5-year-old boy was recently molested by an older boy. And in London, a 10-year-old boy who said that he wanted to be "like the men he saw in the magazines and on TV" has been charged with the rape of a 12-year-old girl.

Sagan, pope agree

Carl Sagan, the well-known American scientist, agreed last week with Pope John Paul II that the "tragedy" of nuclear war can and must be avoided.

"The primary effects of a nuclear war would destroy our global culture," Sagan told an audience of 400 at the National Geographic Society in Washington. "The long-range effects would destroy life on this planet. Therefore I agree with the pope that nuclear weapons are intrinsically evil," Sagan said in response to a question from the audience.

He had been asked about comments the pope made earlier on Sept. 11 to a group of citizens from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, at the Vatican that the atomic bombing of both cities was a tragedy that "must not" happen again.

many of them among the poorest of the poor. In one place after another, he called on bishops and other church leaders to exercise their proper authority to correct error, and urged them not to let faith in Christ the Redeemer be "relegated to second place" in the pursuit of the principles of social justice.

There was almost no stone he left unturned. Clearly, here was a pope who loved the people, and they were ready to return the favor in kind.

Those who have criticized John Paul for being too political will undoubtedly find cause to continue doing so. His message was surely "political" in the sense that he called on all sectors of Latin society to work together peaceably for social progress and change, matters which inevitably involve the government as well as the church.

But leftist ideologues — those who have been sniping at the pope as an "ultraconservative" who doesn't understand Third World imperatives — were bound to be disappointed. In places marked by wide disparities between rich and poor, John Paul made a forceful appeal to the wealthy and powerful to help improve living conditions for the poor, thus touching down on one of the focal points of liberation theology's strongest proponents, such as Gustavo Gutierrez of Peru and Leonardo Boff in Brazil.

Yet the tough-minded, athletic leader from Communist Poland did not duck the sensitive issue continually glossed over by so many liberation theologians as if it didn't exist: the twin problems of class warfare and armed revolution stirred up by Marxist forces in areas they seek to dominate. John Paul, in fact, reserved some of his boldest language for one of the most explosive spots in the region, Ayacucho, Peru, a hornet's nest of guerrilla activity high in the Andes Mountains. During an airport stop there, the pontiff pointedly urged members of the *Sendero Luminoso* — an extreme Maoist group known as the Shining Path in English — to end their terrorism and violence. The man who had been victimized in a previous Marxist plot by a would-be assassin's bullet himself was bluntly urging the Maoists "in the name of God" to lay down their arms.

"The cruel logic of violence leads nowhere," he told a wildly cheering throng of residents, who had grown weary from living with a reign of terror that has led to the killing of 4,000 people in the last four years. It was the sort of confrontation that could make the blood of a lesser man run cold.

What was the Shining Path's response? As the pope's plane touched down the very next evening in Lima, the

Maoists dynamited several electrical towers outside the city, plunging the area into complete darkness. A series of lanterns, luridly arranged in the shape of a giant hammer and sickle, suddenly appeared on San Cristobal Hill overlooking the city.

A symbolic message was clearly being sent back to the spokesman for justice and peace from Rome. The Marxists wanted neither peace for their country nor justice for the Peruvian masses. They wanted power for themselves.

In a country still struggling to build on a youthful democracy, John Paul had once again proved himself both savvy and far more courageous than his critics in distant ivory towers in North America and Europe. He knew better than they how to deal with the fragility of peaceable change in a Third World country: Genuine reform would come to Peru if the rich were ready for a change of heart in their attitudes to the poor, he seemed to be saying, but only if the whole country was ready to turn its back on the totalitarian horrors of Marxism in any form. □

references

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¹*Thought* 13 (Sept. 1938) 364.

²Washington: Heritage Foundation, no date given. See also the review of this work by Dr. Dupert Ederer in *Fidelity* 3 (Nov. 1984) 29-30.

³*ibid.*, p. 23.

⁴*ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

⁵*ibid.*, p. 24.

⁶*ibid.*, p. 26.

⁷*ibid.*, p. 28.

⁸Encyclical *Rerum novarum*, no. 2, in *Seven Great Encyclicals*. New York: Paulist Press, 1963, p. 2.

⁹*ibid.*

¹⁰Encyclical *Quadragesimo anno*, no. 3, in *Seven Great Encyclicals*, p. 126.

National Catholic Education Association Conference

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¹P. P. Flannery, Gen. Ed., *Vatican Council II. the Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*. St. Paul Editions, 1980, p. 997.

²*Ibid.*

³Charlotte Thomson Iserbyt, *Back to Basics Reform or Skinnerian International Curriculum?* 1985, p. 11.

⁴Onalee McGraw, Ed., *Education Update*. The Heritage Foundation, "Saving Society Through Social Studies" by LITE, Vol. 3, No. 1, January 1979, p. 5.