

**Michel SCHOOYANS**

**Introduction to the  
Social Teaching of the Church**

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# **Introduction to the Social Teaching of the Church**

In this period of rapid upheavals when some totalitarian ideologies collapse while others arise, the Church's message on social matters assumes a burning actuality and a highly prophetic character.

Every lay person, whose vocation is to radiate Christianity in the world where he or she is sent on mission, has the duty know what the Church teaches us and why it teaches it.

This work is an excellent introduction to social doctrine. It might also serve for working in groups. It will help each baptized person to bear witness to the newness of the Gospel in its social, economic, and political implications.

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Social Teaching of the Church**

English Translation by Thom and Marcia Potempa

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## Introduction

The teaching of the Church on social concerns is anything but a cerebral and theoretical construction. This teaching is in part a reflection of the action and commitment of Christians in society. Between doctrine and action, there exists a “give-and-take” and constant enrichment. Just as action cut off from its doctrinal sources would be empirical, so a teaching disconnected from practice would be completely sterile.

In the first chapter we will show the *dogmatic foundations* of this teaching. We will do this by explaining that this teaching is based first of all upon a theology of creation, a theology of the Incarnation, and a theology of the Church.

In the second chapter, we will show the *central and recurrent themes* that are always found in the Church’s teaching on social matters.

Finally, in the third chapter, we will show how this teaching has evolved from *Rerum novarum* (1891) until *Centesimus annus* published by John Paul II on May 15, 1991, exactly one century after the publication of the first great social encyclical by Leo XIII.

# Chapter 1

## The Dogmatic Roots of the Church's Social Justice Teaching

### The Theology of Creation

First of all we must consider that the social teaching of the Church is rooted in the doctrine of creation.

#### *Man, Image of God*

Here it is extremely important to recall a theme to which the social teaching of the Church never ceases to return: *man is the image of God* (cf. Gen. 9:6; 1 Cor. 11:7, James 3:9). More precisely, man was created by God as a reasonable being and endowed with free will. This means first of all that man is capable of finding in material nature the plan of God, His project for the world. Creation is thus not the place of the irrational; it is not inhabited by magical forces. Between our intelligence and the laws that govern the world there exists, so to speak, a connaturality, a familiarity. Moreover, it is this familiarity which makes scientific knowledge possible: God does not deceive us; He does not lead us into a trap. As expressed in the book of Genesis, God offers us nature so that we may have dominion over it and manage it (cf. Gen. 1:26-30). This is why he has also given us the capacity to understand it and to intervene in it, and thus it teaches that we are in a position to inscribe projects upon it.

Here we come to a point that must be stressed, for it is the cause of frequent misunderstandings. It concerns the close connection between *freedom* and *determinism*. It is often said that there is antimony between the two. Nevertheless, if

there were no determinism in material nature, man's freedom would not have any impact, since material creation would not be "reliable." One would not be able to rely on a given situation today to foresee what would happen tomorrow. Consequently, man would not be able to draw from knowledge that he might have of a segment of nature to inscribe in it a plan of action which he would freely specify.

### *Work, cooperation in Creation*

Thus we find, as of present moment, datum of great importance. Without having used the word, we have just discovered that, even in the book of Genesis, there already existed a *theology of work*. Of course work is not everything for man: God Himself rested once His creative work was finished (cf. Gen. 2:1-3)! Thus a place is foreseen, along with work, for contemplation and "leisure."

According to the plan of God, to be the steward of nature is not simply to be its landlord or simply the witness of the work that God might have accomplished, once and for all, from the beginning of creation. To be steward of nature is to work; that is to give nature a human imprint, to place human activity in the wake of God's creative activity. Strictly speaking, God alone creates; yet when man works, he cooperates in divine creation. More precisely man is invited through his work to participate in God's *continuous* creative plan.

Thus creation is not a limited event occurring once and for all at the beginning of the world. It is a constant event. We are in a *state of permanent creation*, and man, precisely because he is reasonable and free, is associated in a strictly personal way with God's continuous creative activity.

This point is particularly noteworthy because it orders the Church's entire social doctrine concerning work. Actually, work that we carry out is not an activity that concerns us in a solely personal or individual way. All authentic human work is

*offered to others.* By transforming nature, I impress upon it something of my personality; in what I do, others can acknowledge what I have contributed; they can also benefit from it.

Reciprocally, what others do constitutes a source of joy and of enrichment for me as well, insofar as I meet others through their work.

To summarize, the teaching of the Bible concerning man as the image of God is rich in direct repercussions at the level of the conception of human work.

### *Man, reflection of the Trinitarian God*

Nevertheless, when we evoke the doctrine of creation and when we recall that man is the image of God, these same basic texts of Genesis must be reread in *light of the New Testament*.

Actually, when we say that man was created in the image and likeness of God, we must add that he was created in the image and likeness of the *Trinitarian* God; that is, of the God who is a community, who is communion (cf. Mark 1:10, Luke 10:21 ff). This idea of communion, of community, is already clearly affirmed at the beginning of the book of Genesis. When, in a famous passage, Genesis says, “*Man and woman he created them*” (cf. Gen. 1:27), this signifies that humanity itself was created as the *reflection of God-communion*, of God-community. The creation of man is neither finished nor concluded by the creation of an individual named Adam. According to God’s plan, the creation of man is only “perfect” and complete in the creation of the couple. In the couple, the sexual differentiation appears as the *prototype of alterity*; that is, the difference among human beings, and the individuality *of each of them*. This difference—and the fecundity which is its corollary—is the promise of what will later make and be the social fabric of humanity.

The Bible thus brings us, on the subject of the other, an eminently optimistic message. Already in the book of Origins, man appears as a "political animal," to use the expression that Aristotle was to use much later. It is quite remarkable that this condition of "political animal" is based, in the Bible, not upon metaphysical, psychological, or sociological considerations, but upon a theological datum.

### *Sin is alienation*

Nevertheless another element intervenes in the doctrine of creation: *sin*. Now, when we speak about sin, we are referred to what is usually called *alienation*. To alienate a good is to let it pass to another master. To alienate oneself is to become a stranger to oneself. A man who is alienated is a madman, that is to say that he is no longer in control of himself. Sin is alienation in the sense that it is, above all, the rejection of the creature's dependence upon its Creator. It is the rejection of this dependence vis-à-vis the very act of creation continued by God. Sin is a taking hold of and an appropriation by man of the gifts of God which are *reason* and *free will*. By sin, man wants to exercise his reason and free will by cutting himself from the existential root which unites him to the Divine Being.

Moreover, the *sin par excellence* for man consists in taking himself as his own measure first of all, then as the measure of others, and finally as the measure of God.

This is the sin which is evoked by different expressions in the first chapters of the book of Genesis, for example, "*You shall be as gods, knowing good and evil*" (cf. Gen. 3:5). This affirmation means that while man has received his freedom from God, he can use this gift of God against God Himself. The crisis that results from a bad use of human freedom, the crisis of sin, is that I can use my freedom for things other than those intended by God. God gave me freedom so that I could

love Him, so that I could respond to His love. Nevertheless, I can use this freedom given by God to separate myself from God, to cut myself from my reference to God.

Now sin, which is fundamentally a rupture vis-à-vis God and a break in my existential relation to my Creator, also leads to a rupture vis-à-vis other men.

### *Stranger to God and to others*

This is indeed what appears in the first chapters of Genesis. In the third chapter, we see Eve, whom Adam received from God as a gracious gift, as a *"helpmate similar to himself."* Now this *"other self"* offered by God to Adam will soon be designated as a third person: *"The woman whom you gave to me...."* Eve becomes an object to be pointed out: *"It is she who gave me the fruit..."* (cf. Gen. 3:12). The same teaching in the tenth chapter: the people of Babylon want, as stated in the text, *"to make themselves a name"*; that is, to usurp the privilege of God, for God alone can give a name. They want *"to make themselves a name,"* and for this reason they want to build a tower which reaches the sky. They end up being bewitched by their own project to the point that they no longer understand each other and a confusion of languages occurs. Strangers to God, men become and are strangers to each other.

Here we grasp the very close connection between man's relation to God and his relation to others. If the relation to God is hypothetical and deteriorates, it immediately results in negative repercussions concerning relations with others. It follows that sin always has a *twofold dimension*: it always offends God, but it also wounds men insofar as they are images of God. It wounds them personally and in their relations to others.

## *Structures of Sin*

We must add that all that said today concerning "*structures of sin*" is found, in seminal form, in what has just been said concerning sin. Structures of sin come from a will for power exercised by some men in contempt of their reference to God. Forgetting their existential reference to God, Creator of all men, some men assume the privilege to control, to manipulate their fellow men: they claim to be the measure of the Other, of all Others.

### **The Theology of the Incarnation**

The second great point to develop deals with the *Incarnation*. The central, and so to speak unique, message of the Gospel is that by His Incarnation, "*by pitching His tent among us,*" the Son of God deified the human condition. By assuming flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary, He "dignified" all humanity. This is what Saint Irenaeus summarizes in a gripping statement: "*If flesh did not have to be saved, the Word of God would not have been made flesh*" (*Against Heresies*, book V, 14, 1).

### *Called to happiness*

This central truth is illustrated by numerous Gospel stories, in particular by stories where Jesus shows His tenderness for men who suffer. Jesus cares for Samaritans, for the wounded, for the sick, for prisoners. He signifies in this way how important our human condition is for Him. Men are *called to happiness* by Jesus, not simply in the next world, but in the present. Of course, Jesus takes care of the body and forgives sins, but He also wants men to be happy to be alive. This necessarily entails direct repercussions at the level of the Church's social teaching; here we have a motivation which is

found at the source of all Christian involvement in time and in society.

### *Charity and liberation*

What is even more fundamental in this theology of the Incarnation is that the Son of God, sharing in our humanity but keeping, as Saint Paul says, “*the form of God*” (cf. Phil 2:6), made a gesture that sinful men, left to their own devices, cannot in any case hope to make. This gesture accomplished by Christ consists, as Saint Paul expresses it, in “*justifying*” us; that is, in coming near to us and saying to us, “You who are a sinner, I make you just.” It is an act of *total gratuitousness* on Jesus’ part, God sharing integrally our human condition. Jesus makes, for the benefit of each of us, a gesture of justification, of liberation, and of love, a gesture that man cannot make by the very reason of his condition as creature and sinner.

Finally, we are invited to imitate Jesus’ attitude. Whereas we were separated from others by sin, we also are invited to approach them and say to them, gratuitously—following and imitating Jesus—and strengthened by the grace given by Jesus’ Spirit, that we acknowledge their justice and their dignity as equal to our own. We want them to be free with the liberty that only Christ is able to propose to each of us.

Jesus has summarized this in the definitive phrase recorded by Saint John: “*Love one another as I have loved you*” (cf. Jn. 13:34). This commandment would make no sense if the possibility of bringing it about were not *offered* to each of us at the very moment when it was promulgated by Christ.

From this point on we begin to discern another aspect of the originality of the Church’s social doctrine, namely, that this doctrine is a *theology of charity*. The social teaching of the Church is not only this, but it is above all this. The social

teaching of the Church is thus not primarily a theological reflection about trade unions, political parties, international organizations; it is a theology which provides a theological and spiritual light concerning concrete situations. In the light of the Gospel, the Church brings a particular outlook to human society, and this particular quality of perspective obviously and essentially adheres to Revelation as such.

### *The Easter event*

A third point must be taken into consideration concerning the Incarnation. This point is actually the most important, since it concerns the *Easter event*. The Resurrection is the transcendent sign attesting that the sacrifice of Christ was accepted by His Father. This is the heart of the Christian faith (cf. 1 Cor. 15:14-17). The gesture of Christ offering Himself and immolating Himself for us cannot have been in vain, as Saint Paul explains. The work of our salvation, that Christ wrought by His Passion and His death upon the Cross, is "successful." The "proof" that this work is successful is that the Son, who was obedient unto death, and death upon the Cross, was exalted in glory by His Father (cf. Phil. 2:6-11).

The consequences of the Easter event for the social doctrine of the Church appear immediately. The Resurrection is the foundation of an *incredible hope* for all humanity, not only for each man taken individually, but for the entire human community. Christ offered Himself for all humanity. While man corresponds to the offer of salvation made by the Son of God to all humanity, it remains for men to *consent* to be saved, not only individually but as a community.

We must insist upon this point for, generally, when one speaks of the social teaching of the Church, one emphasizes the duty, for each Christian, to become involved in institutions, to work to improve conditions of life, and one is right to do so. All the same, the social teaching of the Church has a

dimension which goes beyond individuals and the institutional mediation that affects them. This teaching has a *community* dimension which it is proper to emphasize much more than one habitually does. The call to salvation and the proposition of the new covenant are not simply addressed to each person, but are proposed to the entire human community as such. Here is a theme for reflection which is a good disposition—if not to renew—to at least to deepen the theological reflection by which the social teaching of the Church is nourished.

### The Theology of the Church

The third great point to emphasize concerns *ecclesiology*. Something must first be recalled here: the Church is the prototype of saved humanity.

#### *Accepting differences*

This is the area in which each is accepted in his differences. It is the place where men—who are otherwise divided by cultures, languages, generations—acknowledge one another as brothers and where they are accepted in their individuality and in their personality (cf. Acts 2:6-11). From this perspective, the Church is in a certain way the *anticipation* of what humanity is called to be (cf. Rev. 3:12; 21:1-22, 5).

In effect differences are leveled in all totalitarian societies; man is made one-dimensional; persons are reduced to the same common denominator. It is exactly the opposite which occurs in the Church, even if there have been and there still are abuses, and even if at times some have considered universality in terms of uniformity. The Church, because it is "*Christ given and communicated*" (Bossuet), must accept in its midst all men by the very reason of their individuality and

their differences. Even at the level of human society, the Church can be a beacon, a type of *horizon* towards which humanity can direct itself if it is open to the grace offered by God. From this perspective the Church has a *prophetic role* to play, right now, at the level of human society. It must, in a sense, *incarnate upon the earth God's dream for humanity*.

Thus the Church is not only the place where believers meet among themselves; it is also the assembly of all those who are ready to testify to the love that God offers to all men, to all societies, to all cultures. As a result we not only have the duty of Christian witness in the personal and *individual* sphere; there also exists a duty of Christian witness as a community—that is, the witness of the ecclesial community as such confronted by human society.

There is a practical consequence from this: the social teaching of the Church tells us that it is necessary but insufficient, for the Christian, to be involved in a particular organization promoting justice and peace. In addition to this first duty, eminently personal, we must *also* emphasize the duty, for the ecclesial community, to manifest the interest that it has in temporal realities and the happiness of man even in this life (cf. Matt. 23:23).

### *The sacraments of the community*

The second remark that should be made concerning the Church concerns the *sacraments*. The social teaching of the Church in fact invites us to dust off a bit a still too widespread vision concerning the sacraments, in particular the Eucharist and Confession.

The *Eucharist*, for example, does not simply concern, if one may say, the personal life of each of us; it does not only nourish the immediate or close relations which unite us to one another; it has a signification for the entire human community.

This social dimension of the Eucharist needs to be made more manifest in the liturgy itself. The Holy Mass is actually the place *par excellence* where all men coming from very different spiritual and cultural horizons *together* respond to the same call of God.

In the Eucharist, we approach the Lord together in order to respond to His call together. It is actually He who *makes* our unity; it is He who *is* our unity. It is also He who sends us on mission, personally and as a believing community, into human society.

The same holds true for *Confession*, only one aspect of which we will emphasize here. When we prepare ourselves to receive Christ and acknowledge ourselves to be sinners, when we invoke the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and who gives us His peace (cf. Jn. 14:27), we must understand that this peace is not given to us so that we might use it—if one may say so—in a purely individual way. This pardon and this peace which are offered to us are destined for all men. It is impossible for us to correspond to the demands of the Lord if we do not envision ourselves as artisans of peace in the society of men.

### *A specific teaching*

Thus we notice that the social teaching of the Church rests *upon some pivots of a dogmatic and sacramental nature* which give this teaching its Christian specificity. Before going on to the second chapter, we can thus summarize what we have explained until now:

- a) In the theology of *Creation*, we have noticed the centrality of the theme of man, image of God. This theme must be linked with the biblical theology of sin.
- b) The theology of the *Incarnation* allows us to see how Christ's human existence was "favoring" and "valoriz-

ing” to the whole of the human community. This theology of the Incarnation enabled us to rediscover the theology of sin, but also to discover the theology of the Resurrection. The salvation wrought by the resurrected Christ is identified with “justification.”

- c) Finally, we have noted the importance of *ecclesiology*. Here the Church appears as the first-born of human society as God desires it. In order to respond to God’s desire, and in order to collaborate with His plan for humanity, we have to accept God’s gift of Himself in the Eucharist and in Confession. These are two modes of God’s active presence in the history of humanity. God does not abandon man in the construction of the Kingdom that He promised.

## Chapter II

# Central Themes in the Social Teaching of the Church

In the second part of this introduction, let us discover together all the themes which recur in the major documents of the Church on the social question.

### The Common Good

When the Church emphasizes the necessity of being vigilant about the common good, it means that society must be organized in order to enable each person to best realize his personal potentials. Man can neither seek nor realize his happiness outside of an environment itself human. We cannot dream to realize this happiness in the way of Robinson Crusoe, isolated upon his island. We bring certain things to society, and society offers us others. The personal fulfillment of each person thus depends upon the commitment of all to seek the common good.

This is why the primordial duty of all social, political, or corporate responsibility consists first of all in vigilance for the common good. To be vigilant about the common good, for example, is to do precisely the opposite of what the corrupt politicians do, who are concerned with their *particular* good. To be vigilant about the common good implies that those responsible, those who exercise power, also exercise a *justice* that takes into account the diversity of persons and of situations: a *distributive* justice. The common good requires, for example, that disabled persons benefit from legislation that takes into account their disability. Conversely, we must not be scandalized, but on the contrary rejoice, if the gifted also benefit from certain conditions which allow them to better realize

their talents: the community will be able to benefit from this. Thus the common good must take into account a very complex totality of requirements which morally qualify the totality of life in society.

### **The Principle of Subsidiarity**

In the word subsidiarity we recognize the word subsidy: in Latin *subsidium* means help. According to the principle of subsidiarity, it is the duty of the public powers to *help* individuals and intermediary bodies to take initiatives that they are perfectly capable of taking on their own. Thus it is not a question, for the same public powers, of inappropriately substituting themselves for individuals or groups. The temptation of all constituted authorities is always to want to exercise power in a more-or-less paternalistic way, or even to fall into *abuses* of power. Everything then unfolds as if the authorities were saying to individuals, intermediary groups, or to families: "You are not capable of solving such a problem yourselves. Let us solve it suitably in your place"!

The Church has always insisted, correctly, and insists more than ever upon this principle of subsidiarity, of which the field of application is constantly growing. The Church says that it is necessary to enable all men to fulfill themselves in action, and that the public powers must help them in this fulfillment. We must not want the good of men despite themselves; we must not want to impose upon them from above a certain conception of the good which does not necessarily correspond to the effective good of persons or of groups.

The *foundation of this principle* of subsidiarity must be painstakingly brought to light. It is based upon the fact that men are different; they are persons. Each man has an irreplaceable richness; each man is the source of originality and has something to contribute to other men as well as to the human community. Far from suffocating this capacity for orig-

inal contribution, it is the duty of authorities to stimulate it, to invite men to offer to society the unique contribution that society has the right to expect from each of them.

This principle of subsidiarity is so important that one can consider it as *the central nervous system of all Church teaching on democracy*. The Church's entire teaching on this theme only *explains* this principle. When one speaks, for example, of *participation* in economic life or political life, one puts this fundamental principle in action: man not only has something to contribute to others, but he also has the right to receive from others something of their wealth. We are not isolated points; each must be able to be truly himself, as much as for the greatest benefit to each person as for the greatest benefit to the human community.

John Paul II makes frequent reference to this principle of subsidiarity when he speaks of *development*. It is necessary, he says, to enable the countries of the Third World to extract *themselves* from the situation in which they find themselves; it is necessary to help them solve their own problems themselves without imposing on them solutions that come from the outside, and especially from rich countries. Thus it is necessary for the rich countries to put the poor in a condition to escape from this situation and not substitute themselves for the poor in a task in which they cannot be removed.

### **The Universal Destination of Goods**

Roman Law regulated property rights, but it had a disposition which was literally a sort of "anti-Christianity" (before the term); it actually recognized "*jus uti et abutendi*," the right to use and abuse property. The owner of a good could not only use it, but even abuse it if he pleased. Nothing could be more anti-Christian than this type of saying. Actually, in Christian social teaching, what is first is the universal destination of goods. We already know this: the Creator placed

the whole of the world's goods at the disposal of all humanity, and we are simply the *stewards or managers of Creation*. The right of private property itself is only justified in the end in a social perspective. While I have the right to own a car, a house, a television, etc., it is nevertheless true the use that I make of these goods that I own must be ordered to the whole of the human community. Thus I must make a *social* usage of the goods which I own privately. These goods are, as it were, the instruments which enable me to manifest the love I have for another. Egotistical and avaricious appropriation of goods is thus in total opposition to the doctrine of the Church concerning the universal destination of goods.

This doctrine has often been explained, from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, by political philosophers of Christian inspiration; it has sometimes even been manipulated in the context of rather particular colonialization operations. Thus the theme of universal destination of goods has been sometimes wrongly invoked in order to "justify" the despoilment of the Indians. The argument that was made was summarized like this: *"The Indians are not using all the resources of their land; thus let us go develop them in their place."*

This principle is thus very modern and it is necessary to correctly interpret it, for it emphasizes that the doctrine of the Church on the question of private property is perfectly foreign to the idea of regarding such property as sacred: the goods possessed privately are always ordered to the totality of the human community.

This principle is constantly invoked, as are others, in the texts of John Paul II. The Pope has particularly relies on it in the teaching he develops on the specific problem of the environment. All the arguments that the Holy Father develops concerning respect for nature revolve around the theme of universal destination of goods: we cannot administer the world in which we live without taking into account future generations; in this world we are simply the landlords, the stew-

ards, and we will have to render an account to future generations. Just as parents cannot manage their affairs in view of their own interests alone, we likewise must manage nature today by taking into account responsibilities that we have not only with respect to our contemporaries, but also with respect to future generations.

### Work

The idea that is developed here is that man intervenes in a "constituent" way in nature, in history, and in society. Men are not simply passive beings who would only be able to limit themselves to noticing a particular state of nature or of society. With respect to this nature we have *a possibility of intervention*; we can *humanize* it: man is "a working being." We are capable of negating it, of refusing it in its current state, of undertaking projects, of improving it, of transforming it, of going beyond it.

What appears here with the idea of work is the idea of *finality*. Man's action is directed and oriented towards a certain end. If, for example, we want a more just society to take shape, we know well that today we must take certain measures in the educational, fiscal, and political order. If measures of this kind are not taken, the end that we want to reach, that is, a more just society, cannot be reached. We know that things are not born spontaneously and that history is not determined.

On this topic, it must be remembered that the Christian dreads the future far less than those who adhere to certain ideologies. For Christians, the future must be *invented*, invented with a view certain values of charity, of justice, of peace. The social action of the Christian is thus animated by the care to institute more justice, more charity in the society of men. The fundamental object of work is thus *not simply to manage creation*; its also to *engender more charity* in human

society. It is a question of rendering *both* the surrounding world, *and* especially human society, more worthy of the salvation offered in Jesus Christ.

Like other themes, that of work—which we have already evoked concerning creation—is particularly rich in all its possible applications.

### **The Centrality of the Human Person**

This theme is present in Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical *Rerum novarum*, but it is particularly emphasized by John Paul II in his social teaching. This is not surprising, for already before his accession to the See of Saint Peter, Karol Wojtyla had set about to develop a very structured anthropology. The different aspects of this anthropology are explained in the various sectors of the pontifical catechesis, in particular the social catechesis of the Pope. It is in the name of this anthropology that the Pope judges concrete situations, whether they be social, political, economic, etc.

The core of this anthropology is of course man who, as an image of the Trinitarian God, is called to salvation. Man is called to a *new covenant* with God, even in the present. Man cannot live this covenant alone; he is called to live it in community. Here appears once again the reference to the Church: it is in the Church that the covenant between God and humanity is realized in a "prototypical" way.

What is confirmed here is that the person is never fulfilled alone, but always needs others. A person needs a community in order to be himself. This is true not only in the *natural* order, but also in the *supernatural* order.

### **The Preferential Option for the Poor**

Need we be reminded that this theme finds its first illustration in the attitude of Christ as it is reported to us in the

Gospels? Now this theme has been explicitly welcomed by John Paul II into the social teaching of the Church. It is not a matter of a *discriminatory* but *preferential* option: in view of the demands of distributive justice, the poor have a right to special attention.

This theme reveals its entire extension in the teaching of the Church about *development*. The preferential option for the poor consists in awakening in them the call to take full awareness of their human dignity, access to the possibility of work, just participation in the material and non-material goods of the earth, the possibility of personally contributing to the common good.

### **Solidarity**

This theme was extensively developed in the encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, published by John Paul II in 1987. In a sense, this theme *summarizes* all the others.

According to the plan of God, human society consists of one large family. We cannot be happy—in all truth—if Asians, Latin Americans, and Africans are unhappy. We must feel that we are *responsible* for others, take care of them. It will definitely be impossible to resolve the North-South problems if all men do not take care of one another, whatever the particular communities to which they belong.

By developing this theme of solidarity, John Paul in fact exercises a very “lay” theme. In a sense, one can say that the social teaching of John Paul II is a *theology of solidarity*, but this theology of solidarity is in fact a reprise, in a social perspective, of a theology of charity.

## Chapter III

# The Great Historical Steps in the Social Teaching of the Church

In this part we will very simply mention the principal documents of the Church on social matters.

### A Preliminary Question

Before starting this outline, however, we must ask ourselves about a preliminary problem: *Why did the Church wait until 1891* before publishing the first social encyclical?

This question is obviously somewhat “perfidious” since, for us, the first document on social matters is above all the Gospel and it is also the whole constituted by the life and the teaching of the Church Herself. The latter has never ceased, in the course of Her history, showing her concern for the poorest, the sick, the marginal, the ignorant, etc. Nevertheless, in the context of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we must acknowledge that Christians generally did not show much clairvoyance in social matters. Even the encyclical *Rerum novarum* contains accents which are surprising today.

Having said this, several remarks are worth noting. The first is that the encyclical *Rerum novarum* was largely the fruit of the *action* of Christians engaged in the social problems of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Among the sources of this Christian “manifesto” are found the innumerable experiences or realizations which took place in Germany, Switzerland, France (particularly in the region of Reims), Belgium (particularly in the region of Liège), Great Britain. Believers were engaged in social, political, and economic affairs before a Christian social doctrine was systematized. One cannot forget this without committing a grave injustice and, besides, a great

historical error.

A second thing that one tends to underestimate is that the movements of explicitly Marxist inspiration had only begun to organize and assume importance at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Marx's *Communist Manifesto* obviously dates from 1848, but the political movements and widespread trade unions of Marxist inspiration were not really organized until thirty years afterwards. To say that the *Manifesto* was published in 1848 and that *Rerum novarum* was in 1891 is formally correct chronologically speaking. Nevertheless we must not conclude that during this period the socialists and the Marxists did wonderful things in political or trade union matters, nor claim that during this same period the Christians did nothing. The socialist movements especially began to flourish starting in 1880-1885 and among the most influential socialist movements of this period were the non-Marxist socialist movements. Thus it is fitting to be attentive to the historical setting in the appreciation of the intervention of the Church.

A third preliminary observation must be added, and this is the most important. We must remember that the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* of 1789 was made in an anticlerical and anti-Christian climate. This *Declaration*, moreover, essentially concerns the rights of the *bourgeois*, and not the rights of all men without distinction. Historians have sufficiently explained this: the French revolution was a bourgeois revolution to such point that from it arose the very principle of suffrage based upon property qualifications and the suppression of guilds.

The preceding remarks do not explain everything and cannot justify certain silences, indeed some complicity. Nevertheless, one can at least take into account certain mitigating circumstances.

## From Leo XIII to Benedict XV

### *Rerum novarum*

We come to the first document. As previously mentioned, it is *Rerum novarum*, which is dated 1891. One often forgets that this encyclical is only one of several documents published by Leo XIII about political and economic questions. Actually, before *Rerum novarum*, the Pope published some five important encyclicals on political, social, and economic problems, including that of slavery. After 1891, the Pope would again return to other similar problems, insisting constantly upon the moralization of public life.

The rigorous condemnation of socialism in *Rerum novarum* can give the impression of being unilateral. One might expect that, parallel to the above condemnation, an energetic warning vis-à-vis liberalism might be developed. Now in this encyclical liberalism is certainly examined, but compared to socialism liberalism gives the impression of being strangely treated. The explanation for this apparent imbalance is nevertheless easy to find: liberalism had been the object of repeated and severe moral judgments in earlier pontifical documents.

Taking this clarification into account, the teaching of Leo XIII on social matters is surprisingly balanced. What is remarkable is that nothing would seem to predispose this Pope, born of Italian nobility, to be sensitive to social questions and more precisely to the "unmerited destitution" of workers. Humanly speaking, Leo XIII scarcely had reason to be particularly curious about the working world. The new interest for social questions, which the Pope showed during his entire pontificate, thus signals an unprecedented turning-point in the history of the papacy. This is what is meant when one affirms that *Rerum novarum* always deserves to be considered as a beacon.

The pontificate of Pius X lasted from 1903 to 1914. Saint Pius X tackled social problems on the occasion of various events which marked his pontificate. Notably preoccupied by the modernist crisis, he did not publish a great social encyclical. Despite this, it is wrong that his teaching in this domain is generally considered to be of only minor interest. The social thought of Pius X certainly deserves to be closely studied, and this study doubtless holds some nice surprises concerning, for example, trade union involvement.

Benedict XV reigned from 1914 to 1922. He intervened numerous times during the 1914-1918 war to beseech the belligerents to stop the hostilities. In the opinion of many specialists, Benedict XV now emerges as one of the great Popes of the 20'th century. In the very midst of the hostilities, he gave evidence of an extraordinarily broad outlook which made him one of the founders of the new international moral law. In 1920, he published the encyclical *Pacem Dei munus*, which means: peace is a gift from God. In it Benedict XV emphasized the necessity for human society to organize itself so as to avoid and prevent wars such as the one that had just ended.

### **Pius XI and Pius XII**

Pius XI came upon the scene in 1922. His pontificate is punctuated by many documents which attest to his concern for the great problems of his era.

#### *New challenges*

In 1931, forty years after *Rerum novarum*, Pius XI published his encyclical *Quadragesimo anno*. The moral reflection in this letter takes into account the transformation of business which occurred since the end of the 19'th century. The businesses that Leo XIII envisioned were still relatively small;

they corresponded to what we would call today “mom-and-pop businesses.” In the 30’s, these businesses not only became larger but especially more complex. This evolution called for new developments in the area of social morality. This is why Pius XI recommends in *Quadragesimo anno* the organization of more efficient worker associations, concretely this means labor unions. He also encourages Christians *to enter into politics* for, as he explains, there is no way to resolve social problems solely by means of associative action at the level of businesses.

The fame of Pius XI, however, is linked as well to the fact that he stimulated the rise of Catholic Action. Pius XI gave decisive momentum to a great diversity of movements. These movements would become a breeding ground for laity engaged in the most diverse sectors of social action.

Attentive to the political problems of his time, Pius XI also acquired a specialized teaching, so to speak, about three great chapters of the era which were also challenges: *Facism, Nazism, and Communism*. Three encyclicals came from this:

The first is called *Non abbiamo bisogno* (1931). It is written in Italian since it is addressed to the Italians; it deals with Facism. The second, *Mit brennender Sorge*, is written in German because it is addressed to the Germans; it treats Nazism. The third document, *Divini redemptoris*, is concerned with atheistic Communism. These last two documents date from 1937 and were published within eight days of one another. At a time when many Christians did not yet have a clear vision, the Pope denounced the perils concealed by these different regimes and the ideologies which inspire them. We must remember, however, that the condemnation of Marxist socialism had already been undertaken in *Rerum novarum*.

### *Three radio messages*

Pius XII became Pope in 1939. His teaching is extremely rich in very diverse realms. In social matters, we must note the Christmas radio message of 1941 which concerns the reconstruction of international society after the war. This document notably questions the working conditions in this society and examines the means of averting cataclysms like the ones that was occurring during this era. A new stone is brought for the reconstruction of national society, this time in the radio message of 1942, which contains a veritable declaration of the rights of man. The third document which we cite is the Christmas radio message of 1944, which concerns democracy. Here also it a question of preparing for the post-war period.

The literary form of the radio message can be surprising today. Nevertheless, one must realize that during the war it was practically impossible to circulate encyclicals because of postal difficulties and censorship. Without having the scope of encyclicals, these radio messages of Pius XII are doctrinal documents that still carry great authority.

### **The Era of the Second Vatican Council**

In 1958 the pontificate of John XXIII began. He published two famous encyclicals.

#### *Justice and Peace*

The first, *Mater et Magistra* (1961), explains to us that the Church has a role to play as Mother and Teacher in the process of the construction of human society: the Church does not usurp the prerogatives of the civil power when she is interested in the well-being of men.

The following encyclical is entitled *Pacem in terris*. It

dates from 1963 and its object is peace on earth. It is the first time that a pontifical document is exclusively consecrated to this theme. Peace is threatened, the Pope explains, because of the intolerable contrast between the poverty of Third World populations and the sometimes arrogant wealth of the rich nations. If we want human society to be built in a climate of peace, more justice must reign among men.

### *Gaudium et spes*

Before evoking the teaching of Paul VI, it is fitting to cite the most famous and one of the most important documents of the Second Vatican Council. It concerns the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* (1965). This constitution is famous for various reasons. It is particularly so because of paragraph 36, which concerns the autonomy of earthly affairs:

If by the autonomy of earthly affairs is meant the gradual discovery, exploitation, and ordering of the laws and values of human society, then the demand for autonomy is perfectly in order: it is at once the claim of modern man and the desire of the Creator.

Thus there exists a just autonomy of earthly affairs. This autonomy must be respected.

### *Gaudium et spes* adds:

However, if by the term “the autonomy of earthly affairs” is meant that material being does not depend upon God and that man can use it as if it had no relation to its Creator, then the falsity of such claim will be obvious to anyone who believes in God. Without a Creator the creature disappears. In any case, believers, no matter what their religion, have always recognized the voice and the revelation of God in the language of creatures. Besides, once God is forgotten, the creature is lost sight of as well.

This document had a rather particular destiny because it hardly insists at all upon the importance of the social teach-

ing of the Church. Moreover and in general, Vatican II surprised many observers because of the relative discretion with which it treated the social doctrine of the Church. Having said this, *Gaudium et spes* has not ceased to reveal its fruitfulness since 1965. All the great documents of the Church published since then are inspired by it and refer to it.

## Paul VI

We come to Paul VI. One of the first important documents of the pontificate of Paul VI was the encyclical *Populorum progressio*, which dates from 1967. This document, devoted to the development of the peoples, benefited not only from a very solid contribution from the human sciences, but equally from the contribution of the council. The encyclical tackles the problem of development, not so much from the point of view of the developed nations, but rather from the point of view of the countries of the Third World. For Paul VI "*development is the new name for peace.*" Paul VI here takes up again the problem of the relation between justice and peace: peace is not possible without justice.

The famous encyclical *Humanae vitae* (1968) only interests us here concerning a precise point. It acknowledges the right of public authorities in the realm of the birthrate. Nevertheless, this action of the public authorities must be undertaken with respect for persons and couples: the principle of subsidiarity applies. The State can dictate neither consciences nor behavior in this area. Thus *Humanae vitae* contains a social aspect: the Church made pronouncements regarding questions of political demography.

*Humanae vitae* provoked reactions that are known, and this will be the last encyclical of Paul VI. Nevertheless, this Pope still published many apostolic exhortations.

We will cite two of them. The first is called *Octogesima adveniens* (1971) and was published on the occasion of the

80'th anniversary of *Rerum novarum*. The strong point of this text resides in the Pope's insistence on *the primacy of politics*. The temporal involvement of the Christian is not to be limited to social or economic spheres. What is brought to light in this exhortation is the morality of the political decision and the moral dimension of actions taken in society by politicians. The second exhortation is dated 1975 and is called *Evangelii nuntiandi*. It concerns the relations between *evangelization and development* and again takes up the recurrent theme in the theological reflection since the 16'th century, namely the relation between grace and nature, transcendence and immanence.

## John Paul II

Although we lack distance, it is John Paul II who, of all the Popes of this century, has most developed the social teaching of the Church. We will limit ourselves to considering three of his texts explicitly devoted to the social teaching of the Church.

### *The Worker and the Employer*

The first is called *Laborum exercens* and dates from 1981. This encyclical concerns the *worker*, and is not, as several standard French and English editions have put it, about human work. It concerns man at work: man is at the center of everything.

In this text a distinction appeared which immediately became famous: that between the *indirect* employer and the *direct* employer. What does this distinction mean? When a job applicant signs a contract for work with an owner (the direct employer), neither the person who takes the job nor the owner can on their own stipulate any of the conditions of the work contract. The contracting parties must respect a certain

number of rules which, concretely, are laid out in social legislation in the larger sense. These rules are defined by the public authorities. It is at this level that the state intervenes as *indirect* employer to define the conditions under which a work contract can be signed with a direct employer, that is to say between an owner and an employee.

Nevertheless, the Pope does not limit himself to envisioning the application of this distinction only to relations between the owner and the employee. He applies it as well to the relations between international organizations and particular States. By this John Paul II valorizes the existence of international organizations which intervene to elicit to certain conventions between States. International organizations can intervene as indirect employers, for example in the case of respect for the rights of the child, in the case of migration, of the right to work, of the rights of man in general, etc.

### *Two regimes to correct*

The second social encyclical of John Paul II, dating from 1987, is entitled *Sollicitudo rei socialis*. It created a “scandal,” as it were, at the time of its publication, because the Pope dared to affirm that one of the fundamental causes of world’s misfortunes in this era was the existence of two regimes, one in the East and one in the West, both of which needed a profound transformation. These *two* antagonistic regimes must be fundamentally *corrected*. Thus it is no longer a question of considering that western regimes in the liberal tradition are fundamentally good, even if they must be constantly retouched. The Pope from the East does not hesitate to say that even the regimes which predominate in “developed” western society must be profoundly corrected in the name of the demands of social morality.

## *Religious liberty*

It would be easy to show how most of the documents published by John Paul II contain various first-class contributions in the development of the Church's social teaching. Nevertheless, the social teaching of John Paul II in social matters is dominated by a specific theme, which is explained in part by the Pope's cultural roots. Analysis of this key point confirms and illustrates what was already said above concerning the centrality of the person in the social teaching of the Church. What is this key theme? It is *religious liberty*.

There are numerous interpretations concerning the place of religious liberty in the catechesis of John Paul II. Some think that the pope wants to restore Christendom: maybe he even dreams of seeing Catholicism become the State religion! In any case, all sorts of intentions of this type are attributed to him. Some have even said that since he is Polish he cannot understand the problems of western secularized society! As though he has no direct experience of what a secularized society is.... Sometimes the problem of religious liberty is reduced to freedom of worship: the Pope claims for Catholics the right to publicly express their faith. Now freedom of worship is only one aspect derived from religious liberty; the former is only a consequence of the latter.

Actually, when the Pope insists upon religious liberty to the point of making it the heart of his teaching in social matters, he does this for a *specific* and very profound reason. What is this reason? It is that, in the act of faith, the human person blossoms due to the fact that the most intimate interpersonal relationship that we can establish is that which unites us to God, to our Creator and Savior. It is this central point of our faith which is at the heart of the social teaching of John Paul II.

The Pope knows very well that if religious liberty is bullied, if it is not acknowledged, if it is suffocated by totalitarian

regimes, man will remain degenerate in his own humanity, and it will be the same in human society. John Paul II also knows very well that the essential goal of every totalitarian regime is the destruction of what makes each person's personality. Conversely, the Pope knows very well that the relationship of faith is the most personalizing relationship that a man can live. These are the reasons for which he does not cease to speak of religious liberty.

To understand the good basis of this insistence of the Pope, it is sufficient to refer to the testimonies of prisoners who have been deprived of contact with other persons, who have been hidden without the possibility of dialogue with anyone. According to the testimony of more than one, what saved many prisoners is precisely prayer; in prayer, they were acknowledged by Someone and they acknowledge Someone. We could on this point refer to the testimony of prisoners like Georges Vallis or Jean-Paul Kaufman.

The Pope emphasizes that when religious liberty is protected and even promoted, man and his dignity benefit from an impregnable fortress. On the other hand, when man is bullied in his faith, he simply risks being *alienated* to the benefit of all types of totalitarian ideologies. The Pope thus maintains that religious life is finally the best *antidote* against all form of totalitarianism. Authentic religious life is the best leaven for social and political *liberation*.

This theme of religious liberty is one of the keys which enable one to understand a series of events which are occurring at present, and it is also what also explains why the Pope is disruptive. When he puts this theme into action, John Paul II is disruptive because religious liberty touches the very essence of man. Thanks to his reason and his free will, man, in an act of faith, freely acknowledges a God who is Himself personal and who acknowledges him in turn. The authentic act of faith frees man from all essential alienation, and this is why the believing Christian makes all the idols of secular

society tremble. At the point when a conscious, free, and reasonable relationship of faith is established between man and God, man becomes potentially dangerous to all totalitarian regimes and to all regimes of oppression.

We thus see that by virtue of the close connection between truth and freedom there is still a promising future for mission. We can understand as well the connection that John Paul II establishes between the social doctrine of the Church and the New Evangelization.

### *The good destined for all*

The third text is the encyclical *Centesimus annus*, issued on the centennial of the encyclical *Rerum novarum*. In this letter, John Paul II draws lessons from the events taking place in the East, that is to say the collapse of the communist system.

At the heart of this encyclical is a particularly important doctrinal chapter. This chapter is entitled *Private property and the universal destination of goods*. We know that, according to the classic teaching of the Church, all the world's goods have been placed by the Creator at the disposition of the whole of humanity. Private property is certainly licit and necessary, but it must be moderated by taking into account, in view of the common good, the universal destination of goods. In the discussion about this question, which orders among others the Church's position concerning development, it is fitting to pay special attention to paragraphs 31-39 of this encyclical.

In these paragraphs, the Pope's argumentation is particularly tight and rigorous, and it is easy to follow its flow. While "*this earth... is God's first gift,*" this same earth "*does not yield its fruits without a particular response to God's gift, that is to say, without work*" (31b). Now "*at one time the natural fruitfulness of the earth appeared to be... the primary factor of*

*wealth... in our time, the role of human work is becoming increasingly important as the productive factor of both non-material and material wealth.*" Here we note the order of enumeration. Nonmaterial wealth is mentioned first, and it is explained a little later: this concerns "*know-how, technology, and skill.*" The Pope further adds that "*more than ever, work is with others and work is for others.*" Hence it follows that "*work becomes ever more productive to the extent that people become more... profoundly cognizant of the needs of those for whom their work is done*" (31c). In fact, "*besides the earth, humankind's principal resource is the person himself*" (32c, 38a).

Thus, according to the Holy Father, the good *par excellence* which is destined for all, that is to say called to give birth to the community in solidarity, is man himself: "*whereas at one time the decisive factor of production was the land, and later capital... today the decisive factor is increasingly the person, that is, one's knowledge, especially one's scientific knowledge, one's capacity for interrelated and compact organization, as well as one's ability to perceive the needs of others and to satisfy them*" (32d).

Two practical consequences follow from this:

The first is that the primordial task which orders all human development consists in awakening man to himself through *education* so that he can make responsible use of his freedom. Hence the Pope's insistence upon sharing knowledge and information, as well as the connection between freedom and truth.

The second is that the preeminent gift of God to man is *Jesus*, who took flesh from the Virgin Mary and became man. This is the specificity of our social message. Hence the Pope's insistence upon the experience of the Christians in the East and Poland in particular. If the Pope places religious liberty at the center of his social teaching, it is because the act of faith in Jesus Christ frees man from falsehood and the

*greatest alienation* which is ignorance and lack of knowledge of Jesus Christ. Faith unites the human person to the tri-personal God and establishes man in his truth.

In the West as in the East, what sets men upright is not the Marxist-Leninist ideology or the materialist ideology which underlies a certain liberal capitalism, it is faith which liberates from the falsehood and the violence that the latter claims to legitimize.

By combining the social teaching of the Church and the New Evangelization, the Pope seems to indicate that the effects that faith produced in the East can be produced *throughout* the world. The efficacy of faith must engender solidarity and lead to a "civilization of love" (cf. Ga. 5:6).

Hence a capital dogmatic and pastoral consequence: ultimately, *the good par excellence who is destined for all is the person of Jesus Christ*, whom the Christian must bring to the world, of whom he must be the epiphany.

This is the key of the profoundly original message of *Centesimus annus* concerning the universal destination of goods. It enables the Pope to summarize the twofold commandment of love in a single formula that is particularly dense and worthy of Saint Irenaeus: "*Man is given by God to himself.*" A formula in which the Christocentric anthropology of John Paul II definitely clears his account not only with respect to Marxist collectivism but also with respect to liberal naturalism. At the dawn of the 21'st century, *Centesimus annus* thus appears as a Christian "manifesto" for a new world order.

## Conclusion

Horowitz, the famous pianist, one day made a remark that a musical score is a skeleton to which only the interpreter can give life. The same goes for the social teaching of the Church. This teaching only comes to life through and in the involvement of Christians. In the preceding pages we have proposed an introduction to this teaching. But actually this teaching is rooted in the Christian experience as it has been lived since the beginning, and it is expressed in the actions of Christians in society.

Actually, nearly all Christians *practice* the social teaching of the Church before even realizing that it constitutes a coherent whole that can be systematized. We make up the social teaching of the Church as Monsieur Jourdain makes up prose. Thus the teaching owes a great deal to action. Cardinal Etchegaray, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, often repeats that it is by their action that Christians prepare the next social encyclical.

Nevertheless, the Church would not honor its mission of evangelization by abandoning the social action of Christians to the hazards of empiricism and improvisation. This is the reason for which, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, She started to systematize Her teaching. The latter developed, and continues developing, because it is nourished by the unceasing give-and-take between concrete situations and the evangelical criteria which enable one to judge them. The fundamental principles of this teaching must sustain the *attention* of believers facing the signs of the times. They must help Christians to *anticipate* the emergence of new challenges. In this sense, the social teaching of the Church could not be reduced to an ethics enabling one to judge current or past social situations. It is this, but it is also and especially an ethics of the responsibility concerning future generations; it is *a moral of giving birth to the future*. This teaching wants to liberate the historic

creativity of the Christian; it is not an ethics of *reaction* in the face of what is, but an ethics exalting the *initiative* of the Christian in time and space.

This is why the social teaching of the Church does not hesitate to put the present into question in the name of a future of greater love that the Christian can only construct with God's grace.

The Church does not have a "third way" to propose but, the treasures of graces of which She is guardian in the sacraments and in this time of the new evangelization as in the time of the first proclamation, offers to all men of good will the efficacious Word which She keeps. Like Saint Peter, She proclaims the Good News, "*I have no silver and gold, but I give you what I have; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk*" (Acts 3:6).