

Centesimus Annus: Challenge to Social Action

by Thomas J. Marti, M.M.

Pope John Paul II's recent encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, well might prove in the judgment of history to be his most significant. Written to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, it firmly established the pursuit of peace and justice as integral to Christian faith and Church practise. While reaffirming the social principles laid down by Leo XIII and his succes-



sors, *Centesimus Annus* calls for new ways of applying them in the present as we move towards the future. Pope John Paul proposes a re-reading of *Rerum Novarum* as an invitation for us to "look back" at the rich store of fundamental social principles, but also as an invitation to "look around" at the "new things" (*rerum novarum*) of our present historical moment; and finally, as an invitation to "look into the future", whose uncertainties and promises can reawaken a new commitment to fulfill our responsibility as disciples of "the one teacher" (Mt 23:8) Jesus Christ.

Pope John Paul credits Leo XIII with giving the Church a lasting paradigm in his delineation of the conditions for achieving justice in the social and economic situation of his time, especially in his insistence on social justice as the *sine qua non* for lasting world peace. He recapitulates those principles which go to make up a corpus of social teaching whereby the Church is thus enabled to analyze the world's social order. He then summarizes the major themes and concerns of his immediate predecessors, and those to be found in greater detail in his own earlier encyclicals, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* and *Laborem Exercens*. He covers a wide range of issues: the natural right to private property; the right to freedom of conscience, which

includes religious freedom; the rights of workers, in particular their right to association; the preferential option for the poor; militarism, capitalism and socialism. While offering his own analysis of the current world situation, and what challenges this presents to the Church and to all Christians, he is careful to point out that such an "analysis is not meant to pass definitive judgments since this does not fall *per se* within the Magisterium's specific domain."

While noting the demise of what has come to be known as "Real Socialism", the recent dramatic reversals in Russia and Eastern Europe, the Pope warns emphatically against seeing in this a sign that all is well with the capitalistic system. The present crisis in Marxist ideology does not mean that the world has rid itself of the causes of injustice on which it has fed for so long.

In his critique of capitalism, the Pope carefully distinguishes between an acceptable form of the system and the kind of capitalism that is not compatible with furthering human dignity and defending social justice. He sees a danger in the possible spread of what he calls "radical capitalistic ideology" which considers the only solution to the grave social and economic problems afflicting the world today to be "the free development of market forces".

He assures those who struggle against marginalization and those who suffer in their rightful pursuit of "a new and authentic theory and praxis of liberation" of the Church's firm commitment to their cause and the pledge of material assistance in achieving their goals.

In his encyclical, the Pope repeats this previous call for the creation of new, and the consolidation of old, international structures to address those problems which transcend the capability of individual nation-states to resolve. He espouses intervention and arbitration in cases of conflict. He acknowledges the fact of the "globalization of the economy", which has the power to create opportunities for the greater prosperity of all, but he also states the need for effective international agencies to oversee and direct the global economy to insure that it serves the common good.

Reflecting on the new challenges facing the countries of Eastern Europe in reconstructing their institutions and the difficulties this will entail, the Pope stresses the real need they have

for outside assistance. At the same time, he sees the citizens of these countries as the primary agents of their own renewal. In calling for aid from the other nations of Europe, he speaks of this responsibility as a "debt in justice".

The urgent needs of Eastern Europe must not result in a slackening of efforts to assist countries of the Third World. The Pope contends that their situations of poverty are often more severe and he calls for the mobilization of resources...which are not lacking...in order to promote their economic and social development. A major source of revenue, he points out, should come from disarmament, not only in the richer nations but in those of the Third World as well.

There are two particular points of papal teaching in the encyclical which I would like to highlight in this brief review. Both, I feel, will have considerable impact on the life of the Church as we move into the future and shed light on how we are to understand our mission to the world. The first is the Pope's specific endorsement of peaceful means for bringing about social transformation. Citing its recent uses in toppling repressive regimes in Eastern Europe, he praised such efforts which "insisted on trying every avenue of negotiation, dialogue, and witnessing to the truth, appealing to the conscience of the adversary and seeking to awaken in him a sense of shared human dignity". He attributes their success to the commitment of the people to non-violence, who chose to use only the weapons of truth and justice to oppose oppression and force. The Pope's words should give much support to those increasing numbers of people who are seeking alternatives to violence in working to transform present societies into societies founded on justice where peace will prevail.

The second point of particular significance in the encyclical is the papal emphasis on the place the Church's social teachings should have in evangelization. To my mind, his unequivocal acknowledgment of the Church's social teaching, which is also referred to as "social doctrine" and "social magisterium", as an essential dimension of Christian faith will have profound effects on the Church's future. He states that "to teach and to spread her social doctrine pertains to the Church's evangelizing mission and is an essential part of the Christian message, since this doctrine points out the direct consequences of that message in the life of society and situates daily work and struggles for jus-

tice in the context of bearing witness to Christ the Saviour".

Again, he states that the "new evangelization" which is so urgently needed in the world today "must include among its essential elements *proclamation of the Church's social doctrine.*" The Pope, in claiming that one's true identity is revealed to oneself only through faith, affirms that the social teaching of the Church arises precisely from that same faith. He says that the Church's social teaching is a valid instrument of evangelization as it "proclaims God and his mystery of salvation to every human being". He quotes from *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* to reiterate his view that the social doctrine of the Church "belongs to the field...of theology and, in particular, of moral theology". This teaching will have particular relevance for schools of theology, as well as for institutes of religious and pastoral formation.

It is important to note the papal insistence that the social doctrine of the Church be "above all a basis and a motivation for action and not be relegated to the realm of theoretical speculation. In fact, he states that the "fruitful activity of the millions" inspired by the social teaching of the Church's Magisterium to work for justice and peace have contributed directly to the Church's Sacred Tradition and its life of faith.

We can conclude from all of this, then, that not only the teaching and preaching of the social message of the Church, but also the actual living out in authentic witness to the truth of this doctrine, is an essential ingredient in Christian evangelization. Pope John Paul II has clarified, what might have still seemed unclear to some, the statement of the 1971 Synod of Bishops regarding "Justice in the World": "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or in other words, the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation."

Pope John Paul sees the celebration of the 100th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum* as "a source of fresh enthusiasm for studying, spreading and applying the social teaching of the Church." His encyclical is, indeed, a mandate for action.
