

**Saturday Morning  
Keynote Address**

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## From Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* to John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus*

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Comparing the social encyclicals by popes in the first century after the publication of *Rerum Novarum*, one can notice an evolution not only in their attitude toward the real political-economic situation but also in their postulated social solutions. It seems that an analysis of the contents of the encyclicals gives one the right to propose the statement that the general view of political-economic life is rather similar and quite comparable to the model of democratic capitalism in the first encyclicals. However, the later period witnessed gradual but consistent change of this stance. At first, the encyclicals published in this period barely perceptibly remove themselves from, and then act with obvious distance toward the social solutions of democratic capitalism. This tendency is brought to a halt and partly turned around in the first two social encyclicals of John Paul II.

Looking through particular encyclicals at the role that the State should play in social life, one can perceive crucial shifts in accents. As might be expected, all the popes have shared an opposition to more extreme liberal concepts of the nation and recognition of its key role in social life. However, the very manner, as well as the scope of acting foreseen for the State, differ according to various encyclicals in a crucial way. In the beginning, there was a Scholastic vision of the State as the *societas perfecta* responsible for the realization of the common good of all its citizens. In this vision—shared by both Leo XIII and Pius XI—the State should not only react in cases of trespass upon that good but should also actively support its construction by focusing particular

attention on the poorest social classes (the accent is less on direct aid and more on creating conditions for a better future).

The holism of such an approach, which, in practice could be transformed into statism, leads, however, to a strongly balanced emphasis on the servile role of the State as well as its decentralization based upon the principle of assistance. In this vision, the primacy of the human person in relation to the State is stressed, along with the primacy of the family and any indirect associations that should be supported by the State, since the creation of a thick network of grassroots social ties is one of the sources of its strength. In time the underlining of this social differentiation, as well as its subjectivity in regard to the State, gradually weaken while the task of the State becomes, mainly, the assurance of an increasingly larger package of laws understood as rights for the individual. The connections of these rights with responsibilities, still clearly seen in John XXIII, become nearly absent in the teachings of Paul VI but return with John Paul II.

Together with progressive globalization, successive encyclicals consistently strengthen, too, the role of the State in the international dimension; not only does the State's responsibility rise for maintaining peace in the global dimension but also for international production and economic exchanges, as well as aid to weaker nations. The conviction that interested countries are, above all, responsible for good use of the aid received and also for their own development is emphasized in John XXIII but weakens with Paul VI, then again returns in the teachings of John Paul II. This is the opposite with the problem of planning social development, which, according to all the encyclicals—is the prerogative of the State. Still, in *Populorum Progressio*, the planning and coordinating role of the State (present in prior encyclicals) shifts in the direction of centrally planning social life while the areas of State intervention are clearly expanded. The meaning of this role for the State and the view of central planning are again clearly halted in John Paul II.

Deliberations on specific political systems, and especially about democracy, are almost nonexistent in the encyclicals, though Leo XIII allowed for a multiplicity of political forms—which was a novelty in those days—and removed from it the odium that it had borne since the French Revolution. An essential change, though not encompassed by these reflections, took place during World War II when the experience of two totalitarian regimes pushed Pius XII to react positively to democracy. John XXIII took up the thinking of his predecessor, and the Second Vatican Council would expand it even further. However, this stream of thought will be virtually absent in the encyclicals of

Paul VI but return—bolstered by an anti-totalitarian message—in John Paul II.

It is also interesting to compare the attitude of the popes to capitalism (and liberalism) versus socialism (and communism). The strong difference between the approving, albeit critical, stance of Leo XIII and Pius XI toward capitalism and the unilaterally negative stance of both popes toward socialism clearly narrows in John XXIII. In the texts of Paul VI, criticism of socialism seems even more moderate than his critical viewpoint on capitalism. This situation changes again in John Paul II's encyclicals showing that the practice of real socialism and Marxism goes much less with the Church's social doctrine than with capitalism.

Intricately connected with this development was the postulate of a Third Way (though it might be impossible to enact at the moment), a Christian model of social life vying with both capitalism and socialism. If, for Leo XIII and Pius XI, this way is to be patterned after the brotherhood system of the Middle Ages, then in John XXIII one cannot find either models based on the past or on future projects (excluding the general idea of a world order). In fact, Paul VI did not construct any theoretical models. Nevertheless, though obviously not associating himself with socialism (looking, however, rather approvingly at its institutions), he strongly criticized capitalism—as much on the level of practice as on theory. Such a criticism meant that thinking about a Third Way was inevitable. John Paul II returned to the position of John XXIII and, what is key here (as was mentioned earlier), rejects the construction of a Third Way as a task facing Catholic social education.

Analyzing views on economic life—private and public property, free competition and central planning, fiscalism, accents on production and distribution—it is easy to note (particularly if we add the teachings of Pius XII and *Gaudium et Spes* and *Octogesima Adveniens* to our analysis) a shift away from recognizing the solutions and institutions traditionally connected with a capitalist economy, toward solutions connected with socialism.

In the key matter of private ownership, the pontificate of John XXIII is a turning point. Up until then, popes (1) devoted much time to this issue, and (2) referred positively to the institution of private property. John XXIII acted similarly in *Mater et Magistra*, one of whose subheadings is even titled, "Confirmation of the Right of Ownership." In *Pacem in Terris* there are already significantly fewer mentions of property, though the pope stresses that the right to ownership springs from human nature (see *Pacem in Terris*, n. 21). This is also the case with *Gaudium et Spes* (n. 71). Nonetheless, in *Populorum Progressio* private property is already described rather negatively. At the same

time, the popes begin to consistently, increasingly, and more strongly emphasize the social dimension of ownership, arising out of the universal destination of created goods.

The abbreviated survey of the positions taken by the predecessors of Pope John Paul II demonstrate that an essential evolution took place at that moment in the social teachings of the Church regarding depiction of economic and political systems. It should, however, be noted at the outset that such a statement refers to a lesser degree to the whole of this development, since the foregoing discussion analyzed only one aspect of the encyclical teachings. One should also take into consideration the evolution of social reality. Just as socialism or capitalism were not the same in 1967 as they had been in 1891, so the “workers issue” no longer meant the same thing, and the relationship of capital-work, social welfare, and so forth, also signified something else. It is worth looking at the critical though intriguing thought of Robert Royal who, in analyzing the language of the encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, observed: “In this, as in many other recent papal documents, *la question du style* is not insignificant. In *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), the two cornerstones of modern Catholic social teaching, the language is crisp in a way that is largely absent in the later encyclicals. The drafters of the earlier texts were particularly careful because they thought someone might, at some point, ask them to form a government on their principles. Subsequent encyclicals, with no such possibility in view, exhibit a corresponding lack of meticulous attention to social problems. In the later texts, genuine moral urgency frequently jumps to quick political conclusions or even outright simplifications of complex social realities.”<sup>1</sup>

## **The Meaning of *Centesimus Annus***

By calling our attention to “new things” at the end of the twentieth century, and by taking up a truly innovative perspective on the matter at hand, *Centesimus Annus* itself signals something new in the social teaching of the Church—and its significance extends far beyond the boundaries of Catholicism. What determines the essential significance of this encyclical for social teachings is the consistent way in which it links these teachings to anthropology—at work here is a methodological anthropocentrism.

First of all, due to the fact that the focus and the fulcrum of these reflections is the *subject* of social life—in other words, the human being himself. Such methodological anthropocentrism opens up a broad-based meeting ground

upon which many people, Catholics as well as persons of other confessions, religions, and worldviews, can comfortably come together.

Second, this approach liberates the Church's teachings from the complex tangle of historical circumstances that had in former times caused it to adopt a negative position, even (and often!) an inimical position, with respect to modern liberal democracy. To approach things from the perspective of anthropology, however, makes it significantly easier to recognize that the fundamental institutions of democratic liberalism are themselves the products of Christian culture and that they arose in a Christian environment. Therefore, the idea that had previously been abroad in the Church—that these institutions were genetically amoral and intrinsically opposed to the teachings of the Gospels—simply does not hold water.

Third, by introducing the *person*—the human being endowed with transcendent dignity but wounded by sin and fulfilling himself through work, cooperative solidarity, and creative exploitation of human freedom and intelligence—into the world of democratic and free-market institutions, we free ourselves from ideological descriptions of political and economic reality. (That was not always the case in the twenty centuries of Church history.) The anthropological perspective enables us to view the arena generated by democratic politics and capitalist economy as a place where it is possible to realize the Christian vocation. We are also put in a position to take up a meaningful and positive discussion regarding how to shape social life.

Connected here—as a fourth point—is the relationship to socialism. Numerous socialistic analyses and promises formulated to appeal to Christian ears notwithstanding, the anthropological approach allows us to discern the basic “anthropological flaw” in socialist thinking—the degeneration of any economic and political system constructed according to its tenets. Thanks to such a diagnosis, *Centesimus Annus*, while criticizing concrete manifestations of capitalist reality, avoids the temptation of statism as well as the traps of socialization and central planning. Nor does it become entangled in argumentation as to the possibility of Christian socialism or the quest for a Third Way. In the end, it becomes clearly apparent that to avoid the abuses and pathology of capitalism, it is necessary to undertake intensive work in the field of education and culture. It is *not* the intention of the Church to declare war on the institutions of democratic capitalism or to impose social institutions believed to possess a more “confessional” character. Rather, the point is to evangelize the human being living in a democratic world and working within a free-market structure.

A further weighty achievement of *Centesimus Annus* is found in its return to an organically conceived view of social reality. This holistic view had already been at work in *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno*. (Nota bene: A “holistic view” *does not* mean a systematized view, nor does it mean a total view.) In earlier encyclicals a selective and ad hoc approach to social themes had sometimes resulted in an exaggeratedly abstract level of analysis, and what is worse, these encyclicals all too often tended toward ideology and left themselves open to all-too-free interpretations.

The great historical service rendered by the encyclical at hand is its clear introduction of a distinction between faith and ideology. This issue had never before been so unambiguously taken up in Church teachings, and its presentation is significant and even vital for several reasons.

First, this distinction—faith/ideology—makes it possible within the Church itself to distinguish between behavior and attitudes based on the Gospels and behavior and attitudes based on ideologies.<sup>2</sup> The borders between them are not hard and fast, and to an outsider there appears to be many similarities: Both positions, for instance, strive for orthodoxy, and both are characterized by profound commitment—and sometimes by heroic witnessing. In effect, this meant that until recently no systematic distinction had been drawn between them.

The clear distinction drawn up by John Paul II thus sensitizes the Church to the necessity of protecting the deposit of faith entrusted to it from the danger of ideologization. At the same time, it makes possible a theological criticism of religious ideology. As the great bishop and theologian Walter Kaspar aptly noted,

Anyone who thinks that Christian freedom means to pass beyond the rule of law in the name of a utopian society liberated from any and all domination; anyone who promulgates such a utopia as a pretext for destabilizing legal structures (assuming that they are indeed legal and generally just) and working for revolutionary changes, even if only by his speech—that person cannot claim any support neither from the Old Testament nor from the New, nor from the early or pre-Constantine Church. Indeed, that person betrays the message of Christian freedom and deforms it in the name of ideological goals that are and remain foreign to it.<sup>3</sup>

The distinction between faith and ideology brings much-needed new support to the task of adequately describing and effectively circumventing the polarization of “integralists” and “fundamentalists” on the one side, and “modernists” and “liberals” on the other—a dangerous polarization present and active in the Church since the Enlightenment. This kind of dichotomy

inevitably galvanized both positions as well as fed the antagonism between them. In the light of the distinction introduced by the pope, it becomes easier to perceive the weightiness of the justifications and arguments on both sides as well as the serious dangers that flow from the acceptance of one or the other positions in their ideologically charged versions.

Second, the distinction between ideology and faith enables us to claim to people beyond the Church (and in succinct and clear language accessible to the layman) that Christianity *in its essence* has nothing at all to do with totalitarian aspirations. For the majority of believers this point is instinctively clear, but not so for people outside the Church. Not only is the point not immediately seen but—what is worse—the suspicion that totalitarian aspirations are at work in the Church's activities—that the Church aspires to an ideological vision of social life—has historical justification. These fears can find confirmation not only in a widespread variety of false clichés and stereotypes but also through the presence of some highly visible groups of activists (fortunately, not all that numerous) who would reduce Christianity to fundamentalist ideology, and whose activities produce a strong reaction on “the other side.” Needless to say, all this greatly hinders the real evangelical work.

The introduction of this demarcation between ideology and faith can therefore aid in clarifying the genuine nature of the Church, in dispersing unnecessary fears and in demonstrating the Church's ability to recognize the danger posed by religious fundamentalism and the ideology that flows therefrom in the contemporary world. The Church is the unambiguous opponent of this sort of fundamentalism.

Third, the distinction between ideology and faith puts the relation between the Church and the world of liberal culture, politics, and economy in a new light. In large part, after all, this world arose in opposition—often in radical opposition—to Christianity, and particularly to Roman Catholic Christianity. This opposition, insofar as it was directed against an ideologization of faith (most clearly in evidence in the “religious wars”)<sup>4</sup> had weighty arguments in its favor. In such a situation, opposition brought renewed vitality into all spheres of social life. However, by opposing *faith itself* and the *Church as such*, it yielded to such an ideologization. In the name of freedom, equality, and brotherhood it did not stop at packing mortified priests and nuns onto overloaded barges and drowning them in the Seine; with the slogan “A free Church in a free Nation,” it confiscated Church possessions, closed hospitals and schools, and disbanded religious orders.

From the perspective elaborated in *Centesimus Annus*, one can easily perceive that the real opponent of liberal democracy as it took shape in the post-



Enlightenment era, was faith reduced to the level of ideology. Looking now from the Church's point of view, it becomes easier to recognize that it was neither the free-market economy, nor democracy, nor liberalism, nor capitalism as such, that were antithetical to Christianity, but rather—and only—the ideological interpretation of them. Moreover, it becomes obvious (though, admittedly, in the last centuries it was obvious to almost no one) that they were conceived within Christian culture and constitute one of its most significant manifestations.

There is more, however: A vital culture is essential to the effective functioning of these institutions. Now that *does not* always have to have a strictly Christian inspiration, but it does implicate, at least in principle, an anthropology that coincides with Christian thinking. The great paradox is that liberal political and economic institutions in themselves are not capable of creating such a culture.

And so the question arises: Will these institutions yield to slow erosion or will they open themselves up to a transcendental dimension? We will discover the answer to this question in the years ahead—and, to some extent, we will be its co-creators. “Interesting” times await us. On the one hand, I am reminded of an old curse: “May you have to live in interesting times!” On the other hand, “Providence has put before us a really exciting task!”

## Notes

1. R. Royal, “*Populorum Progressio*,” in *A Century of Catholic Social Thought*, eds. G. Weigel and R. Royal (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1991), 115.
2. See Maciej Zieba, “Koúció i ideologie,” in *ChrzeúcijaŃstwo—demokracja—kapitalizm* (Pozna: 1993); “O Fundamentalizmie,” in *Po szkodzie? Przed szkodzie?* (Kraków: 1996); “Papieœe i kapitalizm” (Kraków: 1998), 64–73.
3. W. Kasper, “Koúció i wolnoúe,” in *Chrzeúcijanin w úwiecie 2* (1995): 38–39.
4. “The controversies and religious wars brought society to ruin. To secure its own survival, as well as for the sake of peace, society was forced to make Christian profession a private matter and to adopt ‘the right of the generality’ as the standard of correct procedure” (Ibid., 40).