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IS AMERICA LIBERAL?

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WHenever a new document expressing the social teaching of the Church is issued, the shorthand of common parlance tends to turn it into the document (encyclical, pastoral letter, exhortation, etc.) on economics or politics. This is not merely sloppy; it creates erroneous expectations and interpretations. The Church does not have anything to teach within the disciplines of economics or political science, any more than its teachings fall within the disciplines of biology or electrical engineering. The Church teaches theology. But theology is relevant to politics and economics because every political question, and every question of economic theory, is at root theological.

The most important thing to know about economics is that economics is not the most important thing. This truth has been affirmed, more or less explicitly, in every one of the magisterial documents touching on the moral dimension of social and economic life.

In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, Pope John Paul stresses that “the Church does not propose economic or political systems or programs ... provided that human dignity is properly respected and promoted...” In *Centesimus Annus* he repeats, “The Church has no models to present.... Her contribution to the political order is precisely her vision of the dignity of the person revealed in all its fullness in the mystery of the Incarnate Word.”

In her teaching capacity, the mission of the Church is to expound the Gospel, to help men know Jesus Christ, and hence to know themselves and their destiny. The Church speaks to us as “an expert in humanity.” So it is, as Pope John Paul insisted in *Sollicitudo*, that the social doctrine of the Church belongs to the domain of theology, and specifically of moral theology, and not to that of economics or the social sciences. It is precisely for this reason that the social doctrine of the Church is binding in conscience. A religious assent is required of Catholics, not to any set of propositions in the domains of economics or politics, but to the truths of moral theology which comprise Catholic social doctrine.

This is certainly not to say that the Church is indifferent to social, political and economic institutions. Far from it! But the ground on which a particular social theory or institution is judged worthy or unworthy of human dignity is not an exercise of social science or of efficiency, but of morality.

In his most recent encyclical, commemorating and carrying forward a tremendous century of Catholic social teaching, the Holy Father praises the “business economy” and asserts a right to economic initiative as a constituent element of human dignity. The business economy is deemed good not merely on pragmatic grounds (although its practical efficiency is acknowledged), but in principle. It is a social structure in keeping with human nature and human dignity.

This comes as sweet music to the ears of those who admire the American experience and American principles of social organization, and their gratification is not without foundation. While it may be too much to say that the Church has formally extended its blessing to the socio-economic order which has grown up in this country, it is certainly true that the Church rejects the complaints of those who, in the name of Christian faith, condemn as fun-

damentally and irretrievably immoral the business economy as it exists in our country.

Moreover, it is certainly true that the Church does reject, as fundamentally and irretrievably immoral, state socialism of the kind that the peoples of Eastern Europe are in the process of freeing themselves from and which, sadly, has been the desideratum of many of those same critics of the American economic order. Nor is this condemnation novel. It was clearly delivered in *Rerum Novarum* and the Church has never wavered in that judgment.

But in *Centesimus Annus* Pope John Paul was not judging a debate between the Chamber of Commerce and the Politburo. The practical policy conclusions that might be drawn from this or any encyclical would have to be regarded as, at best, peripheral.

What we Catholic Americans need to do in response to a new articulation of the Church's social doctrine is to assess our own culture and its institutions, to see how they measure up against the principles taught by the Church, and to imagine how our society might be brought into closer conformity with a Christian vision of society.

In considering the encounter between Catholic social teaching and the American experience, the question of socialism is hardly relevant. The United States is one of the few developed nations in which socialist ideas have never been embraced by any large segment of the people. On the contrary, the central question facing Catholic Americans is whether our culture and our social and political arrangements are in fact liberal, as that term is used in the tradition of Catholic social teaching.

The Church's firm and unwavering condemnation of socialism has been matched, since even before Pope Leo, by an equally firm and unwavering condemnation of liberalism. And liberalism has been a dominant current in American social thought. It is necessary, therefore, to discern what the Church means by liberalism, and what liberalism means in the American context, in order to offer a sound judgment on the American order in the light of the Church's social teaching.

For light on the meaning of liberalism as it is used in the tradition of the papal teachings, I turn to a non-ecclesiastical source, the Spanish statesman and phi-

losopher Juan Donoso

Cortes. I do so because Donoso rendered the most trenchant critique of liberalism and socialism that I know; and also because he had a direct influence on the teaching of Pope Pius IX, as well as an indirect influence on the whole tradition of Catholic social doctrine, an influence which is evident even in the writings of Pope John Paul. It was Donoso Cortes, for example, who first introduced the concept of "solidarity" into Catholic discourse on the socio-political order, and Pope John Paul has made that very concept the cornerstone of Catholic social teaching for our time.

Another reason why Donoso Cortes provides an appropriate angle of approach to the question is, I believe, that he framed the issue correctly. We are accustomed to using spatial metaphors to understand philosophical conflict, and especially conflicts in political philosophy; and the tendency of many commentators is to place liberalism at one extreme, socialism at the other, and the Catholic view somewhere in the middle. But Donoso understood liberalism to be a way-station to socialism, and socialism to be the logical culmination of liberal principles. Catholicism is the truth; liberalism an error; and socialism a more extreme case of that same error. The history of liberalism over the past century and a half attests to the clarity of Donoso's vision. Liberalism did not drift from John Stuart Mill to Leo XIII to Karl Marx. It drifted directly from Mill to Marx. Liberalism has proven to be not the antidote, but the antechamber to socialism.

Liberalism, according to Donoso, is the socio-political manifestation of a theological error, namely, the denial of original sin, or as he put it, the affirmation of the immaculate conception of man.

Assuming the immaculate conception of man, it follows that the human intellect and the human will are perfect. If the intellect is unclouded, it is capable of discovering the truth on its own; and if the will is steadfast, it is capable of desiring what the intellect knows and



Juan Donoso

choosing what it desires. Truth emerges out of methodical doubt, like Minerva from the head of Zeus, through the medium of free discussion - the marketplace of ideas. (Hence, liberalism is inevitably relativistic.) Even more characteristic of liberalism, however, is its peculiar notion of freedom. According to the liberal dogma, the exercise of free will - the highest of all human acts - consists precisely in choosing freely between good and evil.

Now, this definition of freedom, which is the very core of liberalism, would probably be accepted as a mere truism by most people in the Western world. It seems so obvious that it would be difficult to imagine an alternative definition of freedom which is not cynically Orwellian. Yet it is an understanding of freedom which is absolutely false, which is condemned in Sacred Scripture, and condemned by the highest authority of the Church. Dr. Buttiglione has alluded to the falsity of this notion in an address he delivered earlier this year linking *Rerum Novarum* with an earlier encyclical of Pope Leo, *Libertas*. He argued the inextricable linkage between freedom and truth, a linkage which I wish to stress.

Freedom does not consist in the power to choose between good and evil. If it did, then God is not free. If it did, then man could not remain free as he grows in moral virtue, nor grow in virtue if he remains free.

Freedom consists in the power to do good; and we know what is good by becoming enlightened as to the truth. Our Lord was not indulging in metaphor when He said, "the truth shall make you free." He who does not know the truth cannot choose the good, and therefore is not free. There is no freedom which is not grounded in an apprehension of truth.

There are certain social and political institutions that are compatible with, indeed natural to, liberalism defined as Donoso and the Popes define it. They include democracy, civil liberties and a market economy. (I hasten to add that liberalism is not necessarily the only soil in which these institutions might grow.) And historically, it cannot be denied that liberalism was a major contributing factor in the shaping of America's most important social and political institutions.

But what the Church condemns in liberalism is not the institutions of democratic capitalism. Indeed, it has judged those institutions in themselves to be good and in conformity with human dignity. What is in ques-

tion is the ethical and cultural system which produces these institutions, the spirit which animates them, the philosophic premises which sustain them.

Liberalism is admittedly one strong current in the shaping of American culture. But is it therefore correct to say that American society is simply liberal? Are there not other, more wholesome forces that have shaped and continue to shape our society?

I refuse to grant that American culture is simply liberalism incarnate. I refuse to grant that Christians live in America only on sufferance, only so long as we burn our incense before the altars of the liberal idols. Liberalism has not been and is not now the only formative influence shaping American culture.



Since Columbus - and even since Jamestown and Plymouth Rock and Lord Baltimore - America has been part of Christendom. Historically, Christianity has been at least as strong an influence in the shaping of American culture as has liberalism. True, that Christianity may have been a truncated, impoverished, reformed Christianity. Nonetheless, the Christian Bible, Christian ethics, a Christian understanding of man and of history have been the dominant forces shaping the real, living America.

Christianity and liberalism have always coexisted, and always in tension, in American culture. The problem is that, because American Christianity was not of the robust Roman sort, the task of reflecting on American social and political institutions and of articulating them philosophically has been dominated by the liberals. The only language that has been current to describe our institutions of democracy and civil liberties and the market economy has been the language of liberalism; and as a consequence, the more educated Americans become, the more they tend to adopt a liberal understanding of these institutions.

But consider some truths about the real America, even the present-day America.

Americans prize individual freedom, but we are

not individualists. We spontaneously form voluntary associations to a degree unparalleled by any other culture. In practice, Americans have, and have always had, a strong sense of social solidarity - the very pinnacle of Catholic social teaching. We are by inclination communitarian, personalistic, responsible for one another. In fact, one of the less desirable characteristics of our deeply democratic culture is that we have a strong tendency to conformism. We are suspicious, though tolerant, of anyone who is markedly different, even in matters of taste.

Americans are wealthy, but we are not materialistic. We are more likely than the people of other nations to pay our taxes honestly, and to impose additional taxes upon ourselves to aid those less fortunate. And still, we contribute enormous portions of our wealth to all sorts of charities. We disapprove of greed, sharp dealing and ostentation, and we are moved less by the desire for personal gain than by spiritual ideals.

Americans think - because we have been told by our betters that this is the "American Way" - that we have to tolerate every sort of moral abomination as the price of a free society. But we still know right from wrong. We are too ready to concede that a mere evil is a necessary evil; but we are not so bereft of our senses as to imagine that what we take to be necessary evils are positive goods. The defenders of pornography and drugs, abortion and divorce intimidate us by insisting that if we are not free to choose these necessary evils, then we are not free at all. But they know better than to try to force us to admit that they are actually good.

America has an atheistic public order; but we are a religious people. Thanks to the arrogance of the liberals, ours is the only country outside of Cuba where it is unlawful to read the Bible in a public school, and ours is the only civilized country in the world where parents are financially punished for attempting to educate their children according to their own convictions. But Americans are more likely to go to church each week, more likely to pray daily, more likely to profess Christianity than the people of almost any other nation on earth.

Our economic system is described as capitalistic, a word that conjures images of robber barons and Wall Street wizards. Yet who owns our great economic enterprises? Bank depositors, insurance policy holders, the participants in pension plans - in other words, the great mass of the American people!

In short, the real experience of Americans, in our social, political and economic life, is considerably closer to the ideal envisioned in Catholic social teaching than it is to the mechanical diagrams of liberal ideology, in its nineteenth or its twentieth century formulation. Please note, I am not saying that America's social institutions attain that ideal; but rather that they are not essentially and irretrievably liberal and that they are potentially, if they are guided in the right direction, conformable with Catholic social teaching.

But the concepts and language we are accustomed to using to describe our society are inappropriately saturated with liberalism. And if we use the language of liberalism, we inevitably come to understand reality according to the philosophy of liberalism.

This poses a challenge for American Catholic leaders. We admire Catholic social doctrine because we can see that the Church, as the custodian of truth, as an expert in humanity, has successfully applied right reason to the questions of society. And right reason is something we can communicate to our non-Catholic neighbors far more readily and with far less resistance than we can communicate revealed truth. Catholic social doctrine gives us an alternative language to that of liberalism, and that alternative language is, frankly, better suited to describe the social reality which our nation has lived. By importing that alternative language into our nation's public discourse, we can help our fellow Americans understand our own culture better,

