

THE CHURCH AND CAPITALISM¹

THE meetings and conferences of May 1st and the coming anniversary of the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* make this subject one of actual up-to-date interest, because of what has been said of the Church as allied to capitalism and of the contrary statement issued in that well-known document which set all Catholic thought and action in motion against this social malady.

We refer to that economic organism, independent of and superior to business and businessmen, which arises out of the accumulation of fortune and an ever-increasing concentration of wealth, stretching over four centuries, and which has resulted in modern capitalist enterprise as distinct from that enterprise which united capital and labour. Here—according to the most authoritative scientific definition—we have ‘the reign of capital represented by money and securities, which can be quickly concentrated anywhere’; in almost every country the predominance of this phenomenon as a basic rational form of economic life’; here we see a distinct cleavage between those who provide capital and those who contribute to production solely by their work—a double-faced thing, one side of which shows a system of economic relations in which the upper classes who possess the means of production are predominant; while the other side shows an illicit function of capital, evil in its origin, disproportionate in its realisation, harmful in its effects—a veritable social cancer: the formation of a non-specific cellular proliferation, its continuous and progressive growth governed by laws of its own, differing from those of normal tissues, independent of the organism in which it grows and develops, and on account of this independence and expansiveness, parasitic and deadly.

The teaching and attitude of the Catholic Church concerning this fearsome phenomenon, as in respect of peace and against war, may be seen throughout history. From the very beginnings, from the time when her divine Founder seemed almost to forget the universality of his mission (to quote Giuseppe Toniolo) and only to look after the needy and the outcasts, taking as subjects for this most eloquent parable the farm-worker, the harvester, the labourer in the vineyard, the workmen waiting for employment in the public square, the beggar languishing at the rich man’s gate; and speaking at greatest length and most intimately with the crowd of anxious and suffering folks who followed him about: from the time when Christ in his teaching had for the rich nothing but exhortations to charity and justice and dreadful warnings as to the temp-

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tations to which their riches exposed them, even to giving the impression that their situation was of itself a fateful obstacle to their salvation. The Good News came as sublime and astounding doctrine, hitherto unheard of here below, which apart from its inner meaning certainly laid down an order of social economy under which the welfare of the poorer classes was to hold a predominant place.

Faithful to these principles and to these directions, throughout the ages the Church fights against the lust for wealth, which, no less than ambition and abuse of power—the three social demons of humanity—has upset the balance of rational and Christian order. The Church fights against that will to amass enormous possessions and to retain them and to make of them an instrument of domination, a system whereby riches shall be set up as a rock, not only capable of withstanding assault but also of attacking and vanquishing resistance.

An uneven combat, with unevenly distributed arms. The Church can only propose remedies.

In feudal times, under the great monarchies, with the gigantic growth of the State, wealth, capital has passed out of the moral sphere into a purely material one and thence into a sphere of jurisdiction which has become more and more removed from the Church's scope by a certain *laissez-faire*, not only of a juridical and political but also of a spiritual and doctrinal order.

Hence a fight on various fronts—against usury; for a 'just price'; in aid of those who are persecuted by capitalist oppression; for the regulation of loans at interest; for the prevention of undue profit on the loans themselves; lastly the offer of work under more loyal and more advantageous conditions.

Battles in divers sectors—as in the fight for peace and against war—with oases of immunity, with days of armistice, with a view to limiting the disastrous effects, the number of victims and the unhappy consequences.

Thus we saw the peasants and artisans placing their lands and workshops under the protection of abbeys, bishoprics and dioceses, as a shelter from the intolerable exacting of princes, so that a change of serfdom and vassalage seemed to them a kind of freedom. Thus also we saw certain townships who, cutting themselves off from the empire and attaching themselves to the churches, inscribed Liberty on their standards.

All these fights, these battles and the arms used, were in proportion to the obstacles existing when wealth was not yet an exclusive force and when capital was the auxiliary of labour and not yet subsidised labour's adversary. The Church has never ceased to oppose the complete Christian programme to the ever-increasing

flood of that great economic force which has now become capitalism.

Leo XIII reminded us of the Apostle's teaching: 'Charge them that are rich in this world . . . that they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate . . .'—which, for the nineteenth century, in a new and more complete social sense, means: 'Give this order to the capitalists' so that the words *dote quod superest* apply to wealth which should not only reward labour, not only share equitably with labour the tasks, responsibilities and profits, but also render labour itself more beneficent and more useful to all concerned.

The Catholic Social Studies which took their title from the Union of Fribourg and which gradually drew up the Social Code of Malines and finally that of Camaldoli are the same which produced the programme of Milan in 1894 and its declaration, which might be called the declaration of Catholic right to democratic citizenship, when it was laid down that: 'We do not wish to support only one side of a social organism which is trembling and crumbling on all sides and which will fall into dust under the dishonourable pressure of plutocracy'.

In every country where Catholics have been able to organise their social action: in Austria, Germany, Belgium, Italy and later in France, social and economic works, saving and lending, etc., have shewn the marks of this profession of faith and have tended towards the triumph of an order of Christian collaboration and socialisation, carried high the standard of Catholicism in the open warfare against Capitalism, fought with the arms and ammunition of the enemy—banks and industries being imbued with Christian principles.

The inequality of the opposing forces only underlines the courage of our bold scheme as does the Church's accusation against the social octopus—accusation which shews clearly the Church's will to redeem modern society.

The encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, published some 20 years ago, recalling the 40th anniversary of the Charter of Leo XIII, declared:

In present times, there is not only concentration of wealth but accumulation of enormous power, giving despotic sway into the hands of a small number of men who are often not owners but holders and administrators of capital, of which, however, they dispose according to their whim. This power becomes more and more despotic especially in the case of those who hold the reins of finance, directing and controlling credits and loans, thus distributing the very lifeblood of the economic organism in such a way that economic life is in their hands and none may breathe without their consent.

Ten years later, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, Pius XII declared:

Wheresoever capitalism is based on erroneous conceptions, taking upon itself unlimited power over property without any consideration of the common weal, the Church has condemned it as contrary to natural law. We see that the ever-growing army of workers finds itself in opposition to this excessive concentration of economic riches, which, often under cover of anonymity, succeeds in shelving its social obligations and making it impossible for the worker to acquire any personal property whatsoever. We see the smaller properties weakened and constricted—forced into a defensive fight which offers little hope of victory.

Such is the spirit, the doctrine and the attitude of the Church in regard to Capitalism, which, for Christians, is a sin against nature just as birth control is a sin against nature in the light of the commandment 'increase and multiply'.

Capitalism seizes, confiscates and dries up wealth, i.e. reduces the number of those who may enjoy riches, holds up distribution and defies divine Providence who has given good things for the use of all men. St Thomas says that 'Man must not consider riches as his own property but as common goods'. This means that Communism itself, as an economic system—apart from its philosophy—is not in contradiction with the nature of Christianity as is Capitalism, except when Communism professes and applies atheistic principles. Capitalism is intrinsically atheistic. Its god is gold, not the God who declared that gold should be accessible to all men: gold from the earth and gold from the workshop, gold produced by property and by labour. Capitalism is godless, not by virtue of a philosophy which it does not profess but in practice (which is its very philosophy)—by its insatiable greed and avarice, its mighty power, its dominion.

To accuse the Church of being in alliance with Capitalism—chained to its triumphal chariot—is to make an allegation which, being in conscious contradiction with truth, becomes calumny.

In the face of such evidence, there are some who—thinking to be objective and conciliatory—speak of 'necessary complicity' with Capitalistic control and domination—in society and under a regime of moral and religious freedom not opposed to Capitalism.

But this also is untrue. The Popes have condemned this state of affairs, this tyranny against which all social and political efforts are helpless.

Pius XI—after the diagnosis of which we have spoken, continued: This accumulation of power and resources brings about three kinds of struggle for mastery: for economic, political and international predominance; the various States either using their political power to obtain economic mastery or their economic might to settle political differences.

All this goes to show that the theory that war is a consequence of capitalistic politics is not a communist invention but a fact discerned and made known by the Church—shewing that State slavery leads to social prostration.

Pius XII points this out in his 1941 message:

We see on the one hand the princes of finance predominating over all private and public economic life, and on the other hand the countless throngs of those who, feeling the insecurity of their livelihood, turn away from spiritual values, from true freedom, and throw themselves blindly into one or other political party, becoming slaves of whomsoever promises them their daily bread with some measure of tranquillity. Experience has shown to what tyrannies mankind in these days is capable of submitting.

There seems to be one last objection, the *ultima ratio*—the last argument of one who has his back to the wall and is out of breath.

In theory—no objection. It is just as we have said in regard to the Church and war—but in practice—the facts are there to prove the opposite.

Either the facts and their subjective interpretation have been identified, or it is supposed that secularised modern society, continually on guard against any approach to the Gospel principles and fighting for its officially-professed atheism, does not allow the Church to 'act'.

True, the Church has only the 'word' of which modern society tries to prevent the incarnation and growth. But this teaching itself is a fact and one which will eventually prove all accusations to be false. The teaching as to the diagnosis of the evil and its cure is inspired by Christian morals and appeals to human conscience; man must first be cured before society can be cured. Christian principles are the only ones in accordance with economic laws, basis of social balance and prosperity.

Communism does not do this in the face of Capitalism. One is the negation and antithesis of the other, but the latter applies only reactionary and temporary measures; Communism applies the surgeon's knife to the social cancer, cutting away at the same time vital and healthy tissues without preventing the spread of the malignant growth, so that Capitalism becomes a thing of the State without changing its morbid and deadly nature, thus spreading and poisoning the whole social organism.

This is a reality, but one which in no way justifies the assumption that the pages of Catholic sociology are a manual of alliance with plutocracy, much less justified by the assertion that a marriage has been arranged between Catholicism and Capitalism since such a marriage would be invalid according to any treatise *de matrimonio* on the grounds of *disparitas cultus*.

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