

Comment

An Unfinished Agenda : Centesimus Annus

It might be thought that the more important an event the less frequently it needs to be positively called to mind. Evidently this is not always the case with papal encyclicals. At the outset of his most recent letter *Centesimus Annus* Pope John Paul II reminds us that Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* was commemorated on its fortieth anniversary by Pius XI, on its eightieth by Paul VI and twice during the present pontificate: on its ninetieth and now on its centenary. Leo's historical vision might seem quaint and slightly antiquarian today, but it contained the seeds of prophecy. Pope John Paul interprets *Rerum Novarum* as a response to a new conception of society and of the State and, consequently, of authority itself. Leo's encyclical marked a decisive shift in papal policy away from reliance on the Christian princes towards a closer association with the popular movements of the time. He took the papacy to the people. His vision was universalist, appealing beyond the nationalistic rhetoric of the emerging totalitarian states of Europe to a broader humanitarian vision. *Rerum Novarum* was part of a Leonine programme aimed at the rebuilding of a Christian world-view, soundly based in an international vision and encompassing a transformed order of society built around the Christian image of man.

Pope John Paul uses an interesting phrase to describe Leo's achievement. He sees *Rerum Novarum* as giving the Church 'citizenship status' amid the changing realities of public life. Leo had inherited a diplomatically isolated and forlorn papacy dangerously entangled in the morass of Italian politics and tinged by the operatic flourishes of Italian nationalism; in 1881 he even enquired if the emperor of Austria would offer him asylum should he have to flee Rome. However, by his death in 1903 he had transformed the papal ministry by his own breadth of vision and political astuteness into a highly respected international force. The Pope had accepted citizenship in the modern world. Leo's pontificate aimed at a Catholic *restauratio*, to be achieved through a highly creative re-reading of the sources; just the kind of re-reading that Pope John Paul II attempts in *Centesimus Annus*. The present pope's encyclical is a critique of the economic and diplomatic polity of international society. His position is in radical continuity with *Rerum Novarum* and takes up Pius IX's denunciation, in *Quanta Cura*, of the delusions of socialism and the pagan character of economic liberalism which find no place for morality in the dialogue between capital and labour. Pope John Paul, like his predecessors, deals out criticism in equal measure to Socialist and Bourgeois liberals alike, seeing their errors as anthropological rather

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than simply economic or political. What both deny is the transcendent value of the human person.

John Paul II, like Leo XIII, has a wide-ranging political vision. A model for Leo's papal ministry was Innocent III, whose body he transferred to the newly-embellished basilica of the Lateran in 1892. Leo was never able to visit his cathedral in life but chose to be buried there opposite the tomb of Innocent. Throughout his pontificate Leo made frequent reference to the moral authority exercised by his predecessors as spokesmen for and arbiters of a new international order. Naturally, to his mind and to that of John Paul II the Church and, in particular, the papacy had a special role in nursing the birth of a Europe founded, as Leo once said, on 'a strong faith verified in the conscience of the peoples'.

The citizenship to which the Church aspires does not fit into the contemporary pattern of international relations. One of the more ominous passages in *Centesimus Annus* voices a veiled criticism of the inadequacy of international political and economic structures in dealing with the conditions of an internationally inter-dependent community. The structures evolved at the end of the Second World War were based on property rights writ large. States were seen as exercising exclusive authority within their own frontiers. Particular communities were understood as deriving their identities and *raison d'être* from being over-against other similarly defined groups. International order was guaranteed by mutual respect for agreed frontiers. International peace-keeping agencies thus become sophisticated traffic wardens. A state was not internationally accountable for what it did within its own boundaries until, that is, awkward international treaties confused matters by defining crimes like genocide and recognising the notion of human rights. We have gone some way towards accepting some international notion of the common good but lack the effective international institutions which can carry the weight of that perception. Clearly, unless we are to commit ecological and spiritual suicide, such institutions are essential to our survival.

Centesimus Annus, echoing Leo XIII, stresses that private ownership must be compatible with the Common Good. Widespread pressure on reluctant governments to provide aid to the Kurds, the people of Bangladesh and the temporarily invisible victims of famine in Africa suggests a keen popular awareness of that interdependence of the international community which the pope points to in his latest encyclical. It also implies that John Paul II has discerned the signs of the times more clearly than many other international statesmen. What the Pope points to in *Centesimus Annus* is his unfinished agenda.

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