

“The Pope, Liberty, and Capitalism: Essays on *Centesimus Annus*”  
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*When Pope Leo XIII wrote Rerum Novarum a hundred years ago, liberalism was the dominant political and economic doctrine in Continental Europe. Socialism, its great historical antagonist, had just entered the arena it was to dominate for much of the next century. Pope Leo leveled harsh criticisms against both great creeds of secular materialism.*

*Today, it is his criticisms of socialism that seem the more telling. By offering to provide for all the needs of man, socialism was drawn into imposing a materialist despotism which ultimately rendered him both poor and powerless. The melancholy prospect of Eastern Europe, revealed by the great revolutions of 1989, confirmed this papal analysis in almost every particular.*

*But Leo’s critique of liberalism now seems less happy. For capitalism was not a system on the lines of socialism. Indeed, it was not a system at all. It was what you got when the government did nothing to prevent it. As its justifying ideology, liberalism accordingly mutated to reflect new social and economic realities. Indeed, under the pressure of such realities, liberalism split in two – first in the English-speaking world, much later in Continental Europe.*

*Economic liberalism, politically homeless after being thrown out by liberal parties, was accommodated by a conservatism that was traditional in its moral values and prudent in its politics. Social liberalism, on the other hand, adopted collectivist economics and a radical style in politics as its new and rowdy progeny. The political battles of the non-totalitarian West have been fought between these two patchwork alliances ever since.*

*But the Vatican continued to treat liberalism as an undifferentiated whole – and one, moreover, that was hostile to religion and virtue. What is startling and important about Centesimus Annus, Pope John Paul II’s new encyclical issued to mark the centenary of Rerum Novarum, is that it is the first Vatican document to address realistically and subtly the state of affairs in which liberalism is both triumphant over socialism and at war with itself. That is why it is of interest far beyond the ranks of the Catholic faithful – and why NATIONAL REVIEW invited this distinguished symposium of Catholics and non-Catholics, liberals and non-liberals, to explore its meaning and significance.*

–JOHN O’SULLIVAN

This encyclical letter deserves our attention because it comes from the head of a major institution in the modern world, a pre-eminently multi-national institution with members in the hundreds of millions throughout the world, an institution that has great influence on the beliefs and day-to-day activities of these hundreds of millions. It deserves attention not because of its philosophical depth or lack thereof, not because of its wisdom or lack thereof, not because of its teachings, however admirable or the reverse, but because it offers evidence on how the present leadership of that institution is likely to exert its influence in coming years.

From that point of view, the message of this document is clear. Totalitarianism, Communism, “real socialism” are utterly rejected as political and economic models. So also is the attempt to find common ground between Marxism and Christianity – epitomized by “liberation theology,” though these words do not, I believe, appear in the 113 pages of the encyclical.

While rejecting these models, “the Church has no models to present” (p. 83). “The Church respects the legitimate autonomy of the democratic order and is not entitled to express preferences for this or that institutional or constitutional solution” (p. 92; italics in this and later quotations in the original) – which, of course, does not keep it from expressing preferences. Like any good political document, and the encyclical is of course a political document, it hedges its bets and has something for almost everyone – except Marxists, Communists, and supporters of abortion.

The many ringing phrases endorsing private property (p. 58), free markets (p. 68), even profit (p. 68) will warm the cockles of the classical liberal’s heart. The sharp attack on the welfare state (p. 94) and the strong defense of the family (p. 75) will appeal to traditional conservatives. The assertion that “profitability is not the only indicator of a firm’s condition” (p. 68) will appeal to the neo-conservatives and other believers in “corporate social responsibility.”

But there is also much for left-liberals. The many warm words for trade unions are accompanied by none of the qualifications attached to most other affirmations. The Pope refers to “workers and other people of good will” (p. 51), implying that all workers are “people of good will”! Apparently not even the Polish Pope is immune to the influence of Marx. Attacks on “the affluent society or the consumer society” (p. 40) and more generally on “consumerism” will appeal to John Kenneth Galbraith and his devotees. The Pope strongly endorses a statement in *Rerum Novarum*, the hundredth anniversary of which is the occasion for the issuance of this encyclical, that “man should not consider his material possessions as his own, but as common to all” (p. 59). The Pope asserts that “there are many human needs which find no place on the market” (p. 67). He assigns to the state an expansive role in “defending ... collective goods” (p. 78), assuring a just wage, controlling the market, and performing numerous other functions. So left-liberals and other egalitarians have no reason to feel abandoned by the Pope.

And I have only touched on a few of the issues covered in this remarkably thoughtful, comprehensive, and finely balanced document, which is pervaded with high-minded good intentions on every issue ranging from ecology (p. 73) to human rights (pp. 43, 46, 51) to religious freedom (p. 19) to world government (p. 101).

In keeping with its character as a political document, there is little recognition that various good things may conflict, that good intentions are not enough. There is no discussion of the really hard problems of reconciling conflicts between equally well-intentioned objectives. The noble spirit, the good will, that pervade the document offer the perplexed little help in choosing among alternative means for achieving their objectives, with two notable and important exceptions: first, the utter rejection of “real socialism” (p. 28); second, the strong endorsement of the longstanding “principle of subsidiarity”: that “a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to coordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good” (p. 94).

As a non-Catholic classical liberal, I find much to praise and to agree with in this letter addressed to the members of the Catholic faith. My stress on its political character, on the dominance of good will and high motives over substantive content, is not a criticism. For the Church is a political as well as a religious institution and this is a political document. But I must confess that one high-minded sentiment, passed off as if it were a self-evident proposition, sent shivers down my back: “obedience to the truth about God and man is the first condition of freedom” (p. 81). Whose “truth”? Decided by whom? Echoes of the Spanish Inquisition?

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