

Comment

'Once more the fundamental principle must be repeated;' proclaims Pope John Paul toward the end of his new and, in so many ways, excellent encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, 'the hierarchy of values and the profound meaning of work itself requires that capital should be at the service of labour and not labour at the service of capital.' (CTS Trans. p 83) That often repeated principle and others like it, for example 'in the first place work is "for man" and not "man for work".' (p 22), provide the foundations for a vision of work which is hearteningly both theological and humanist.

In his concluding remarks the Pope says that he was only able to revise the text after his stay in hospital. He should have called for the assistance of a bold and ruthless editor, for the encyclical is far too long, too repetitious and littered with redundant sentences and parentheses. It would be very sad if that put people off reading it, for it has many splendid insights, some hefty swipes at multinationals and exploitative landowners, and a good deal of encouragement (though not explicit approval) for those Christians who embrace socialism as the political system closest to the humanism of Jesus' teaching.

'In the final analysis it is always man who is the purpose of work, whatever work it is that is done by man.' (p 23) Guided by that principle, the encyclical sees human work neither as a profit making tool in the hands of capitalists, nor as the anonymous cog in the wheel of state bureaucracy, but as an activity which is distinctively human, (p 4) a vocation to make life more human; (p 8) 'a good thing for man – a good thing for his humanity – because through work man not only transforms his nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes "more a human being".' (p 33) Work, in the view of Pope John Paul, far from being a draining drudgery to sustain life or provide capitalist drones with profit, should have the nobility of a vocation which enables man to contribute 'to elevating unceasingly the cultural and moral level of

the society within which he lives in community with those who belong to the same family.' (p 3) In this sense work should unite people because of its social power to 'build community' (p 74) It is an essential aspect of man's labour, he insists, that through it 'human dignity, brotherhood and freedom must increase on earth' (p 98).

A vision of human work as noble, then. A nobility which derives from human labour's capacity and potential to unite men and women in the vocation of building a community of dignity and mutual love. Heady stuff certainly, and of course impossible to achieve either under capitalism or in the sham socialism of state bureaucracy. The Pope seems to reject both systems; what he calls 'rigid capitalism' and 'excessive bureaucratic centralization'. Thus, 'the position of rigid capitalism continues to remain unacceptable, namely the position that defends the exclusive right to private ownership of the means of production as an untouchable "dogma" of economic life.' (p 52) and, 'excessive bureaucratic centralization. . . makes the worker feel that he is just a cog in a huge machine moved from above, that he is for more reasons than one a mere production instrument rather than a true subject of work with an initiative of his own.' (p 56) Pope John Paul uses the word 'socializing' to describe what he considers a truly human relationship between work and the means of production which would safeguard the dignity and freedom of the worker. Merely taking the means of production out of the hands of their private owners 'is not enough to ensure their satisfactory socialization.' He says, 'We can speak of socializing only when the subject character of society is ensured, that is to say, when on the basis of his work each person is fully entitled to consider himself a part-owner of the great workbench at which he is working with everyone else' (p 54)

Is capitalism *as such* open to such 'socializing'? Is socialism as practised in Eastern Europe, say, open to it? The Pope doesn't offer an explicit answer. But he does give some pretty explicit encouraging pats-on-the-back to the Polish Solidarity movement. Christians who are socialists, (and other socialists too of course), would join with him in that, for they see Solidarity not as an anti-socialist reaction, (that is the dream of western right-wing media and the convenient dismissive label given by the sham socialists), but a group of workers, mostly Christians, who want socialism to be taken seriously.

The Pope steps back from rejecting capitalism *tout court*, (it is 'rigid' capitalism that he judges unacceptable), but while it is true that merely taking the means of production out of the hands of their private owners is not a *sufficient* condition for 'socialization',

it is hard to see how it is not a *necessary* condition for any programme designed to erect the excitingly human society which John Paul appeals for. 'Socialization', when you spell it out, sounds very like Socialism. 'Socialized Capitalism' sounds like a contradiction. That it is a contradiction is the substance of the debate happily going on in the Labour Party. That it isn't is the sneaky snare lying behind the seeming attraction of the centrist Social Democratic Party – "We are a party committed to neither one interest or another", John Roper, MP, SDP. Those who are not against capitalism are for it.

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