

FAMILY VALUES AND PRIORITIES IN CONFLICT

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Within the context of a reflection whose main goal would be the preparation for one more celebration of work, this time in the year dedicated by the United Nations and the Catholic Church to the family, I deem it useful to take some time to consider what the Church offers as the foundations of society in the midst of a rapidly changing world whose impact on society and more particularly on the family are quite evident.

1. Most of what I present here is taken from the magisterium of John Paul II which constitutes the most recent expression of the Church's social discourse. In fact, the Pope's contribution in the field of social doctrine is significant. It is interesting to notice that he has been one of the most socially minded popes in the last century. Indeed, starting with his first Encyclical Letter on Human Redemption *Redemptor Hominis*,¹ the concern for the concrete, historical person is at the centre of his teaching: *this man is the primary route that the Church must travel in fulfilling her mission ... the way traced out by Christ himself, the way that leads invariably through the mystery of the Incarnation and the Redemption* (RH 14). Somehow the whole teaching endeavour of the Pope can be seen as an extensive catechesis on the famous Vatican II Constitution on the Church and the World today (*Gaudium et Spes*).²
2. The Second Vatican Council and, particularly this Constitution, are but the conclusion of a process which, in its more specific form, started with Leo XIII, namely, the opening of a dialogical relation to the world.
3. The 1971 Synod of Bishops made it clear that the commitment to justice is an integral part of the preaching of the Gospel. Four years later Paul VI introduced a new concept of evangelization which cannot ignore the concrete

1 Encyclical Letter REDEMPTOR HOMINIS (RH) of His Holiness John Paul II to the Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate, the Priests, the Religious Families, the Sons and Daughters of the Church and to All Men of Good Will on the occasion of the inauguration of His Pontifical Ministry. March 4, 1979.

2 Pastoral Constitution on the Church and the Modern World of the II Vatican Council: *Gaudium et Spes* (GS)

circumstances of human life and includes a necessary reference to the problems of development.

To John Paul II this is almost self-evident. In *Centesimus annus*³ we read that:

The Church devotes herself with ever new energies and methods to an evangelization which promotes the whole human being (CA 55). To teach and to spread her social doctrine pertains to the Church's evangelizing mission and is an essential part of the Christian message, since this doctrine points out the direct consequences of that message in the life of society and situates daily work and struggles for justice in the context of bearing witness to Christ the Saviour (Ib 5).

4. Christ offers salvation to the person in his or her historical situation. This means that salvation can be jeopardized by the circumstances under which the person lives. When the Church exerts her mission she cannot therefore ignore the concrete historical setting (social, cultural, economic, political) which can help the person to attain salvation or else can become an obstacle to it.

Thus the Church's social teaching is itself a valid instrument of evangelization. As such, it proclaims God and his mystery of salvation in Christ to every human being, and for that very reason reveals man to himself. In this light, and only in this light, does it concern itself with everything else: the human rights of the individual, and in particular of the "working class", the family and education, the duties of the State, the ordering of national and international society, economic life, culture, war and peace, and respect for life from the moment of conception until death (Ib 54).

5. In evangelizing the Church proclaims the truths she has received through Revelation. She has the obligation to proclaim the truth about the human person involved in a complex network of relationships in modern society. As Paul VI states: *In order to know how man, authentic man, man in his fullness, one must know God.*⁴ John Paul II develops this idea in *Centesimus annus* which is good expression of Christian anthropology to the point that to many this is what the Encyclical Letter is all about.

3 Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus* (CA) addressed by the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II to his Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate, the Priests and Deacons, Families of Men and Women Religious, all the Christian Faithful, and to all Men and Women of Good Will on the Hundredth Anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, May 1, 1991.

4 Dec. 7/1965. AAS, 58 (1966) 58.

The human sciences and philosophy are helpful for interpreting man's central place within society and for enabling him to understand himself better as a "social being". However, man's true identity is only fully revealed to him through faith and it is precisely from faith that the Church's social teaching begins. While drawing upon all the contributions made by the sciences and philosophy, her social teaching is aimed at helping man on the path of salvation (Ib 54).

6. Here we touch a focal point in the message the Church is trying to deliver to men and women of our day, whose profound understanding is central to the correct interpretation of her social discourse: the conception of the person as a social being.

Even though this conception has been present from the first social documents, its presentation has become more and more explicit especially after Vatican II. Prior to it the emphasis was more philosophical, almost too dependent on Aristotle's definition of man as "zoon politikon" (a social animal), whereas now there appears a clear theological grounding for it.

Man and woman were created after God's image. God has revealed himself as the triune God, one God in three Persons. One God who is pure self-gift. God is the name of the relationship of an endless perfect mutual self-gift: in our traditional imagery, the Father gives himself to the Son, the Son gives himself totally to the Father, and the Spirit, proceeding from both, is the bond of that pure "agapic" love. In frequently used patristic image, God is the lover, the beloved, and the love between them.⁵ God is the very fullness of relatedness.⁶ In him being and loving are identical.

From this concept of God Christian tradition has developed the concept of personhood as relatedness to others. One becomes more fully the person one is, by entering ever more fully into ever more intimate relationships.

7. It is this conception that one can understand that for Catholic thinking, man and woman can be conceived only in society, relating to each other. However

5 St. Augustine, *De Trinitate* 8, 10, 14.

6 This idea is developed by Michael J. Himes and Kenneth R. Himes O.F.M., in their book, *Fullness of Faith: The Significance of Theology*, (Isaac Hecker Studies in Religion and American Culture; Paulist Press, New York 1993, 56-57.

not any relation will correspond to this conception. It has to be the Trinitarian analogy of self-giving out of pure love, not the usual trade-off type of relationship which prevails in western society today. The Pope describes this in a wonderful way when he says that:

The historical experience of the West, for its part, shows that even if the Marxist analysis and its foundation of alienation are false, nevertheless alienation – and the loss of the authentic meaning of life – is a reality in Western societies too.... The concept of alienation needs to be led back to the Christian vision of reality, by recognising in alienation a reversal of means and ends. When man does not recognise in himself and in others the value and grandeur of the human person, he effectively deprives himself of the possibility of benefiting from his humanity and of entering into that relationship of solidarity and communion with others for which God created him. Indeed, it is through the free gift of self that man truly finds himself (CA 41).

Now, this self giving is not something that remains in the abstract like a cause, and ideology, a party and so forth. *As a person he can give himself to another person or to the other persons, and ultimately to God, who is the author of his being and who alone can fully accept his gift (Ib).*

In creating man and woman God endowed them with the essential capacity of transcendence (going beyond oneself) in which we can distinguish two levels: the other persons, and God. *A man is alienated if he refuses to transcend himself and to live the experience of self-giving and of the formation of an authentic human community oriented towards his final destiny, which is God (Ib).*

This conception of the person becomes an essential criterion in assessing the validity of a concrete (historical) form of organizing social life. *A society is alienated if its forms of social organization, production and consumption make it more difficult to offer this gift of self and to establish this solidarity between people (Ib).*

A fundamental content of Divine Revelation is the communion of love between God and men and women. This communion finds a significant expression in the covenant sealed by man and woman through marriage. Marriage must therefore be a perfect expression of the donation of self to the other person and in it we discover a mysterious presence of God's love.

We find here also the true foundation for human rights. In fact, if this conception is properly understood then it is clear that the fundamental right of a person is that of participating in the life of self-giving. Contrary to the rather generalized notion which holds that human rights are prior to societal life, thus making of it a contractual reality, Christian social thought maintains that the foundation of human rights is freedom, but not freedom from interference, but rather freedom for self-gift in relationship, freedom for participation in community.⁷ It is the essential vocation to life in community which offers the grounding for human rights.

And it is in this context, and in this context alone, that one can fully understand the Church's critical attitude in the face of any historical form of organizing society, the polity, the economy, before the concrete forms that the family as an institution assumes in different socio-cultural context. It is in this light that the recent papal document, *Centesimus annus* has to be read and interpreted.

8. Coming to the issue which is supposed to be the centre of our attention, based on these premises which have become more evident in the course of these hundred years, the Church has maintained a critical stand in the face of historical models of society which contend to dominate the whole world, not only ideologically, but politically and militarily as well. In more recent times one of the models has proved a failure, thus apparently leaving no other alternative than capitalism. To many, the Church has finally endorsed this model which is being proposed as the only form of organizing society for an efficient economy and for democratic freedom. However, from an objective reading of the latest Encyclical Letter we come to the conclusion that the Pope is not endorsing any historical model of society. He is indeed referring to the collectivistic and the capitalist models, analyzing the cause of the failure of real socialist experience, and referring to capitalism, not so much as an economic system, but as an *ethical and cultural system*. In fact, *the entire socio-cultural system, by ignoring the ethical and religious dimension, has been weakened and ends by limiting itself to the production of goods and services alone* (CA 39).

This is due in part to the ignorance of the fundamental principle that: *Even prior to the logic of a fair exchange of goods and the forms of justice appropriate to*

it, there exists something which is due to man because he is man, by reason of his lofty dignity. Inseparable from that required "something" is the possibility to survive and, at the same time, to make an active contribution to the common good of humanity (Ib 34).

When the Church evaluates historical events she considers them only in so far as they favour or hinder salvation, that is, in the sense that they can be a help or an obstacle to the personal fulfilment of the call to absolute self-giving. The necessary references to more concrete aspects of these realities (economic, political, cultural), are to be understood under this moral perspective.

9. From the above mentioned principles one can understand on the one hand that the family would be the ideal setting for the realization of this conception of the human person, as well as the ideal and fundamental community in any society, and on the other, the difficulties for its realization within the context of the dominating culture, one which is being imposed sometimes, or even more often assimilated without a critical approach, by the majority of persons today. It is clear to us that, as the Pope says, the wrong conception of the human person determined to a certain extent the failure of the socialist model. However, a similar conception is at the core of the new culture. More than of anthropology we should speak of a sort of narcissism which appears under the form of a search for personal fulfillment and which has become an obsession for the individual realization even at the price of any tie or bond (familial, of friendship, communitarian, political, of class, even blood ties). This narcissism is opposed to any form of altruism, of self-sacrifice as a form of solidarity, even to love. This attitude responds very well and perhaps has its origins in the spirit of capitalism.

Still referring to the Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus* which I see as a prophetic vision of society in which those aspects which are not in conformity with Gospel values are criticized while Christian criteria for the construction of a more humane society are offered, we can make a brief reflection on some important concepts.

9.1 *The concept of work.* The human person can be described as a working being, one that has been created and placed in the world to transform it and to secure from it all that is necessary for a truly human life. The person's social nature find its expression through work. The need for transcendence, both towards others and to

God, manifests itself also through work:

It is ordinarily by his labour that a man supports himself and his family, is joined to his fellow men and serves them, and is enabled to exercise genuine charity and be a partner in the work of bringing God's creation to perfection. Indeed we hold that by offering his labour to God a man becomes associated with the redemptive work itself of Jesus Christ, who conferred an eminent dignity on labour when at Nazareth he worked with his own hands (GS 67).

Thus, work is a duty and, consequently, a right which has to be protected. This is particularly true in reference to the constitution of a family and its maintenance. The relevance of work in this context becomes more evident when one thinks that man and woman are called to fulfil their vocation precisely in the family.

John Paul II has elaborated further this conception of Vatican II, linking the original universal destination of creation to the activity of man and woman. Private property is at the service of this original plan of God:

It is through work that man, using his intelligence and exercising his freedom, succeeds in dominating the earth and making it a fitting home. In this way, he makes part of the earth his own, precisely the part which he has acquired through work; this is the origin of individual property. Obviously, he also has the responsibility not to hinder others from having their own part of God's gift; indeed, he must cooperate with others so that together all can dominate the earth (CA 31).

Against any possible reading which might make of this statement the support for an individualistic conception of work the Pope adds that: *work is work work with others and work for others: it is a matter of doing something for someone else. Work becomes ever more fruitful and productive to the extent that people become more knowledgeable of the productive potentialities of the earth and more profoundly cognizant of the needs of those for whom their work is done (Ib).*

Anticipating the issue of unemployment which has become one of the central issues in the most industrialized countries today, whose effects on family life are evident, the Pope offers us the criteria to judge the morality of this trend, as well as the call to apply all our intelligence in the search for a just solution to the problems posed by industrialization and modernization required by the growing phenomenon of economic interdependence:

A society in which this right is systematically denied, in which economic policies do not allow workers to reach satisfactory levels of employment, cannot be justified from an ethical point of view, nor can that society attain social peace. Just as the person fully realizes himself in the free gift of self, so too ownership morally justifies itself in the creation, at the proper time and in the proper way, of opportunities for work and human growth of all (Ib 43).

9.2 The Enterprise. The dominant system of production has developed a type of enterprise in which certain aspects demand an ethical evaluation in function of the principle that human labour is superior to other elements of economic life. Particularly since the times of John XXIII the Church conceives the enterprise as a community of persons, which is in perfect coherence with the conception of the person we have seen:

In fact, the purpose of a business firm is not simply to make a profit, but is to be found in its very existence as a community of persons who in various ways are endeavouring to satisfy their basic needs, and who form a particular group at the service of the whole of society.

Profit is a regulator of the life of business, but it is not the only one; other human and moral factors must also be considered which, in the long term, are at least equally important for the life of a business (Ib 35).

A business cannot be considered only as a "society of capital goods"; it is also a "society of persons" in which people participate in different way and with specific responsibilities, whether they supply the necessary capital for the company's activities or take part in such activities through their labour (Ib 43).

We could say that almost every working person is linked to an enterprise and that this relationship has a decisive impact on his or her daily life and consequently on the family. It is precisely the prevailing model of enterprise which generates and maintains new forms of alienation. Of special interest is the situation of the woman in the enterprise. How far her right to work and at the same time to motherhood as an essential dimension of her vocation are respected in and by the enterprise? Can we speak of true participation, for instance in management positions, of responsibilities shared by women in the enterprise? Or else are only irrelevant jobs reserved to women often considered second class workers?

9.3 *The concept of Society.* Consonant with premises so far given, society is conceived as the natural place where social persons find and build the necessary conditions for a full realization through self-gift. The basic idea of Catholic outlook is that people accept their interdependence as both empirically and normatively true, thereby enhancing a shared sympathy and purpose, and accepting responsibility for the well-being of one another and the community.⁸

Society must be built upon real solidarity. And it becomes ever more evident that we cannot restrict the concept to a nation, but we must think in terms of world society. In his previous Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo rei socialis*⁹ (the social concern for the Church) the Pope tells us that the increasing phenomenon of interdependence, when considered under a moral perspective, should lead us to the practice of solidarity as a moral virtue. *Stronger nations must offer weaker ones opportunities for taking their place in international life, and the latter must learn how to use the opportunities by making the necessary efforts and sacrifices and by ensuring political and economic stability, the certainty of better prospects for the future, the improvement of workers skills and the training of competent business leaders who are conscious of their responsibilities* (CA 35).

The Pope looks at a future society built upon free work, the enterprise and participation. *Such a society is not directed against the market, but demands that the market be appropriately controlled by the forces of society and by the State, so as to guarantee that the basic needs of the whole of society are satisfied* (Ib).

One of the dominating concepts in *Centesimus annus* is that of freedom. Here again, the concept is related to what the Church has received from Revelation. True freedom has to be related to that truth. *Obedience to the truth about God and man is the first condition of freedom, making it possible for a person to order his needs and desires and to choose the means of satisfying them according to a correct scale of values, so that the ownership of things may become an occasion of growth for him* (Ib 41). This conception of freedom becomes a pivotal criterion to assess the validity of social, political and economic institutions

⁸ See Himes & Himes, *Fullness of Faith*, p.65.

⁹ Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II to the Bishops, Priests, Religious Families, Sons and Daughters of the Church and All People of Good Will for the Twentieth Anniversary of POPULORUM PROGRESSIO. December 30, 1987.

9.4 Culture is the result of interaction of the members of a society with their environment. Values are central to a culture. A culture, acceptable to the Christian vision, should be based on the conception of the person as the source, the centre and the purpose of socio-economic life (GS 63). In other words, the economy, the polity, should be centred around the fundamental value in society: the person. The culture of a nation should derive its character from the open search for the truth as it is proposed by the Pope. The use of natural resources should take into account, first of all the service rendered to the people, not only to present generations, but to the future ones as well. It is precisely in the context of culture that we speak of ethical values, and it is to the ethical value-system that the Encyclical Letter is mainly addressed.

Although not exclusively, a human group develops around the ways of satisfying basic human needs. This is one of the reasons why the economy takes a prominent place in any group or society. The Pope suggests that the different institutions of any society develop around the "vision" that society has of the person:

The manner in which new needs arise and are defined is always marked by a more or less appropriate concept of man and of his true good. A given culture reveals its overall understanding of life through the choices it makes in production and consumption... In singling out new needs and new means to meet them one must be guided by a comprehensive picture of man which respects all the dimensions of his being and which subordinates his material an instinctive dimension to his interior and spiritual ones (CA 36).

John Paul II advocates for the overcoming of today's widespread individualistic mentality through a *concrete commitment to solidarity and charity* (Ib 49), which is no other than the acceptance of the ever present reality of interdependence, giving it a more noble expression as the result of love for others. *It is therefore necessary to create life-styles in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of common growth are the factors which determine* all our choices in practical everyday life (Ib 36).

The Church, therefore, is not endorsing any system nor any historical mode of society. She is inviting everyone to take Christian values seriously assuming an attitude of discernment in the face of new values which, at least partially are the result of the prevailing modes of production and consumption which are determining new cultural patterns, in a common endeavour to make of this world a more human

place, one where everyman d woman can attain their full realization. A place in which the mutual gift of self by husband and wife creates an environment in which children can be born and develop their potentialities, become aware of their dignity and prepare to face their unique and individual destiny (CA 39). A world in which the family may fully develop as the primary school of social sharing in an environment of mutual respect, justice, dialogue and love.

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