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Vittorio Vaccari

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The true meaning of an address of Pius XII to Catholic Employers

THE MESSAGE OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

VITTORIO VACCARI

Already it has been said that the address of Pope Pius the twelfth to Christian employers¹ is a great social document. It should be interpreted in the light of the social directives which, beginning with the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, the Papacy has never ceased giving the people of the earth, in order that technique should not betray conscience, nor economic power smother human needs.

There are some who wrongfully note in this speech a change in trend with regard to the principles enunciated in the other documents, particularly the Christmas messages of the Pope broadcast during the War years.

There are others in sundry countries, who wish deliberately to ignore the address and its affirmation of principles, particularly that which deals with the order, the legal structure of the enterprise and its private character. And it must be said that there are certain groups of employers who, restricting themselves to a superficial and partial examination of the address, have mutilated its organic construction so as to interpret it as an exposition of the natural rights of the employer rather than equally an exposition of his duties.

As we have said, this address can be interpreted only in the frame-work of the complete pontifical social doctrine as expressed in the documents which have preceded it and in those quite recent ones which have followed it, particularly the broadcast of September the fourth to Catholic Germany, and the short speech addressed to the pilgrims of the Belgian Workers' Movement a week later.

In this last speech, the Holy Father wanted to make clear that the decree of condemnation and excommunication for Communism had no connection with « the opposition between rich and poor, between capitalist and proletarian, between proprietors and those who possess nothing ». And He pointed out why it is not at all necessary for

the working world to fall into atheistic Communism.

The Central Point of the Christian Social Doctrine

The focal central point of the Christian social doctrine always remains the human being, with his moral aspirations and his material requirements. These latter are indispensable for the development of the former. Nobody can teach virtue to him who has not the wherewithal to live. Nobody can expect contentment from him who has not a minimum of economic security and a guarantee of work for the morrow.

That is why the Papacy repeats from time to time the directives which would endow the worker as a human being with an existence conformable with his moral dignity and his economic needs, and procure for all workers the legal and moral equality of association and expression destined to safe-guard their rights and « to maintain them at the level of modern requirements ».

Thus, the Christian social doctrine affirms the right to a « family wage » doing further than the individualistic conception of the wage system. It affirms the right to a sanitary and suitable dwelling, to trade instruction and to social security. And, finally, it has given voice to the suggestion that we go ahead of the wage-earning system in order to permit a better and more complete development of the personality of the worker. It is here that uncertainty frequently arises as to practical methods. This uncertainty is born and increases while one-sided considerations and special political contingencies influence the social world which should, on the contrary, be looking beyond to the meeting of the moral law with the technical requirements of economic and productive organization.

It is at this moment that the conception of social justice so often invoked, becomes at times a « fausse idée claire ». It is not necessary to be

(1) Pius XII, Address to Catholic Employers, May 7, 1949, *Bulletin des relations industrielles*, Vol. 4 No. 9, pp. 81-83.

reminded that often, according to circumstances, this conception of social justice is identified with union claims or with an irrational levelling of material wealth, or even with the pure and simple overturning of the present economic order. So it is that we speak of social justice as if it were the antithesis of the present social values rather than the perfecting of an economic order founded on the natural basis of society and resulting from the union of the economic productivity with the moral and economic requirements of the community. So then, the specific value of these principles tends rather to reside in the idea of *overturning* than in that of a final better ordering of society.

It goes without saying that this is a materialistic conception which neglects the fact that social relations are expressed first of all in the moral reality of each day and that they find their roots in the conscience of each individual. We must stress, however, that the consequences of such a conception are disastrous. The methods of economic collectivism, even though short of their impedimenta of marxist doctrine, are sufficient to overthrow the present social order.

When the intransigence of the classes is provoked to the point where all collaboration between employers and workers is rendered impossible, where claims on the enterprise go beyond all reason, where the union exceeds its natural function and uses its power to bring pressure on the State, then the peril for the entire community is grave. It is true that the enterprise to-day finds itself facing the prospect of a rapid evolution which will permit the worker as human being, to take the place which is his due. But, it is indispensable that such an evolution be an evolution towards the best, tending not only to economic improvement but also to moral progress. If we pay no attention to this, the so-called reforms of structure, in spite of their technical perfection, will become only a manifestation deprived of meaning.

When we say — let us change radically the present order and we will obtain a change in the distribution of present values — we say nothing at all. Actually, the change could be negative. And often it tends to remain negative, whether because we ignore the necessities of productive organization or because we forget (as if they were negligible) the responsibilities and difficulties encountered by those called to direct and produce.

The Message of Social Responsibility

Whoever knows recent history realizes that occasionally economic individualism has been the direct cause of revolutionary movements and that it has helped collectivism to bring about a lowering of the average level of the life of the community.

We see a general decline of a « sense of responsibility » in the economic and social fields. It must be said that this decline is attributable in part to employers. Some of them, at least in European countries, have been in fact, whether consciously or not, the propagators of a strongly individualistic theory and practice. They have not understood their social role and when they have taken into consideration the social needs of the workers, they have not done so spontaneously but under pressure from powerful workers' organizations or in fear of some extremist party. Fundamentally, these ways of acting — delay, unwilling concessions, blind egoism, have created an atmosphere tense with opposition in the labour world. The electric potential, in a manner of speaking, has been permitted to build up instead of being discharged from time to time by means of the customary meetings with workers and their organizations. It is evident then, that when the potential increases the discharge becomes dangerous; it has violent repercussions and menaces the social peace and the existence of the whole community.

In the address of Pius XII, as we have said, we find the logical development of the Christian social doctrine. It should be said once again that this address might be defined as « the message of social responsibility ». In His directives the Supreme Pontiff does not restrict himself to reminding us that in the enterprise there is no irreducible opposition between employers and employees, He also emphasizes the community of activities and interests and suggests a community of responsibilities.

In the enterprise it is the capacity, the responsibility, and the risks which determine the gradation of values. This consideration implies then a fundamental distinction between the rights to which workers are entitled as human beings independent of their productive ability (family wage, housing, education, vocational training, regular employment, social security) and the rights which they cannot claim from outside because

they are the expression of their personal capabilities (possibility of sharing more deeply in the life of the enterprise under the form suggested by requirements).

If these rights could appertain to all, independent of their abilities, the personal issue which calls for the flowering of each individual according to his abilities would be avoided.

Private enterprise appears to be the most likely place for the development of this sense of common responsibility in as much as it is « the living product of the free initiative of individuals and of their freely constituted groups ». On the contrary, Statism, product of the public ordering of the economy, cannot become the normal rule in a society which wishes to conserve the supremacy of the individual.

The common welfare does not result from the transposition of the attributes of the individual to the community; it is the product of the activity of the individuals themselves in so far as that activity is displayed in common and guided in the same direction. That is why His Holiness Pius XII in his speech to the Belgian Workers' Movement recommends the combining of the efforts of employers and workers in « immediate drafting of a public law covering economic life and all society according to the organization of industries and professions ».

It is then social responsibility which becomes the leaven of social justice just where the legal structure of the enterprise would exclude distributive justice. This sense of social responsibility, become important in the organization of the forces of production, also comprises practical consequences for the employers, especially since there is another factor to take into account — time.

Economic Realities

The economic reality of the epoch (says the Holy Father) offers risks because of the penury of capital and the difficulties of international exchange. Why not then, « while there is still time put things into effect in the full knowledge of common responsibility ? » To-morrow, following

events which we cannot foresee, the situation may change and make impossible, or at least more difficult, the setting up of common responsibilities. This is what happened with regard to the suggestions made by His Holiness Pius XI in the encyclical « Quadragesimo Anno » concerning the industrial organization of the different branches of production.

It would seem useless to stress the importance of the fact that measures should be taken in time. Perhaps here in this country we are less aware of this necessity than elsewhere. In Europe, Communism finds an effective field for its program in the aspirations of the masses and, in this fashion, it camouflages those precise political aims which do not correspond with a real desire for social progress. It is necessary to make haste. To-day, as some-one said in a recent publication, there are only two possible solutions — that of accepting the progressive transfer of responsibility to the revolutionary union masses who will then become a group of hard and implacable managers; or that of developing the progressive and orderly transfer of personal responsibility to all those sharing in production who thus run their share of the risks.

This second solution, without any doubt, is in the spirit of the principles of the Christian social doctrine and corresponds with the directives given by the Holy Father to the leaders of enterprise. Furthermore, it is certain that these directives, given on occasions when the importance of the social organizing of the Catholic employers was recognized, represent for them a challenge to co-operate for the realization of a Christian social order as much on the level of the enterprise as on the level of the industry.

The time is no longer when we could leave social problems exclusively to the initiative of employers' paternalism although there are still some attached to this outmoded idea. That is why employers should see in all its amplitude their economic, industrial and social duties and integrate their daily action as leaders and their effort at co-operation with the workers into the Divine plan which presides over the economy of all created things.