The Realization of a Catholic Social Doctrine in the Context of the Rise of Nationalism in Northern Rhodesia in the 1950s

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Introduction

Until the late nineteenth century, the Catholic Church was regarded as the antithesis of the modern European nation-state. As Joll noted, ‘throughout the last years of Pius IX, who died in 1878, the Church seem to have been the embodiment of the conservative desire to resist change and to oppose the main intellectual, political and social trends of the day (…) hostile not only to the emerging socialist movements but also to the liberal state.’ It was only in 1891 that the Church began to respond to ongoing social and political transformations. In that year, Pope Leo XIII issued an encyclical – *Rerum Novarum* – dealing with the ‘rights and duties of capital and labour’. Inter alia, the encyclical stated that

[t]he elements of conflict are unmistakable; in the growth of industry and the surprising discoveries of science; in the changed relations between masters and workmen; in the enormous fortunes of individuals and the poverty of the
masses; in the increased self-reliance and closer combination of the working population; and finally in general moral deterioration.¹

He therefore urged governments to insist on the following: the protection of basic economic and political rights, including the right to a just wage and to organise associations or unions to defend just claims; the right to private property; and the rights of labour over capital. Positioning itself between capitalism and socialism, the Church commented on a number of issues relating to the negative consequences of industrialization, capitalism and communism, and called upon the governments’ moral responsibility to put policies in place that would prevent workers ‘from listening to dangerous revolutionary leaders and from putting the whole social structure in jeopardy.’ Pope Leo XIII’s statement is regarded as the mainspring of the so-called Catholic Social Doctrine, which was announced and spread by means of successive papal encyclicals throughout the twentieth century.

In this paper I would like to place the realization of a Catholic Social Doctrine in the context of the rise of nationalism in Northern Rhodesia in the 1950s. This will serve to illuminate: the origins of such Catholic social movements as the Catholic Action, the Legion of Mary and the Young Christian Workers; the emergence of ‘public’ Catholic elites; and the circumstances attending to the production of the first Catholic pastoral letter, a forerunner to those that would play such a prominent role in post-colonial Zambia. Indeed, it can be argued that the missionaries’ implementation of this social doctrine, which had had a very limited application in Europe, enabled the Catholic Church successfully to reposition itself vis-à-vis the emerging independent nation. A precondition for this development was the sidelining of a political theology that had led to the creation of ethnic Christian ‘kingdoms’ within the various denominations’ own spheres of influence and its replacement with a national church that could speak out with one voice on public matters. This was achieved through the formation of a Catholic Secretariat in the early 1950s and the establishment of a Northern Rhodesia Catholic Bishops’ Conference, a platform to discuss current issues, in 1959.

¹ Quoted in James Joll, Europe since 1870: An international history (Harmondsworth, 1983; 3rd ed.), p. 47.