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CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING AND THE ECONOMIC SITUATION

Summary

Official Catholic Social Teaching beginning with the Papal document *Rerum Novarum* (Leo XIII, 1891) has come to recognize the methodological necessity of interdisciplinary cooperation in the effort to achieve economic justice. Catholic Social Teaching together with the empirical sciences can make valuable contributions in this effort. In this article I suggest a way in which Catholic Social Teaching might be informed in an interdisciplinary dialogue so that it can address the actual situation faced by market economies with greater precision. I argue that statistical evidence taken from the United States does not support the thesis found in some Papal documents that the primary cause of economic misery is the domination of capital over labor. An analysis of modern economic power must first include a discussion of labor income. Labor receives the bulk of all income, and the distribution of this income varies quite significantly. Theological constructs developed to meet the needs of industrialized society must demonstrate awareness of this if they are to be as helpful as possible in the effort to achieve economic justice. The most recent document examined here, *Centesimus Annus* (John Paul II, 1991), shows significant congruity with the statistical evidence and argument developed in the paper.

1. Introduction

Many readers will agree with me when I say that Catholic Social Teaching (CST) can make important contributions to a discussion about economic justice. It is certainly true that major Vatican documents concerning economic justice receive significant attention in the United States and in Europe. At the same time I believe that CST can and should be informed by important insights offered by other disciplines which also might aid in the achievement of economic justice. If we really wish to travel this road to economic justice, then a great deal of interdisciplinary cooperation will be necessary.

I will argue here that CST recognizes this methodological necessity, and has devoted systematic attention to it. I will then suggest in what way CST might be informed in an interdisciplinary dialogue so that it can address the actual situation faced by market economies with even more precision. Special attention will be given to empirical evidence from the United States. This is an especially interes-
ting project at this time in history given the spread of market economies and the consequent developments in CST.

2. The Signs of the Times

It has been well documented (Curran, 1985) that Catholic theology has come to accept a more inductive and historically conscious methodology. The Church has explicitly stated that a proper understanding of the 'signs of the times' is a necessary condition for it to carry out its earthly task:

Inspired by no earthly ambition, the Church seeks but a solitary goal: to carry forward the work of Christ under the lead of the befriending Spirit... To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. (Gaudium et Spes, para. 3-4)

When CST speaks to current economic conditions then it can not avoid interpreting these existing conditions in the development of an appropriate theology. When reading any document in CST, I believe there are necessarily certain economic assumptions present. There are assumptions about the present state of things, and the core problems in the achievement of economic justice. Furthermore, in some of the earlier documents, Quadragesimo Anno in particular, we also find more specific programs for reform. Fortunately I think the tendency to present such programs and invest them with magisterial authority has diminished. This is likely very wise given the expertise required to present complex solutions to complex problems. However, if a theology fitting to the situation is to be developed, there seems to be no way to avoid making certain more general judgments about the present state of things, and the core problems in the achievement of economic justice.

John Coleman, S.J., has stated that 'any definite theological position limits the variety of sociological positions compatible with it and vice versa'. (Coleman, 1977) The question we must then ask is how well CST has understood the present state of things and identified the core problems in the achievement of economic justice. If CST misdiagnoses the existing situation, then theological constructs will be developed which will not be as helpful in achieving economic justice as they might otherwise have been.

I will begin with a brief historical examination of several important documents. CST has diagnosed the core problems in achieving economic justice in various ways at various times. Before we move into more contemporary theology, it is helpful to begin with the historical examples to establish that the church does make