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The Pastoral Letter on the Economy: A Latin American Church View

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Let me begin by expressing an unqualified vote of enthusiasm for the United States Catholic Bishops' first draft of "Catholic Social Teaching and the U. S. Economy." Both its purpose and achievements thus far are laudable. In this brief presentation, I will try to tell you what I find appealing about the draft, and where, in my opinion, it might be improved. Mine is the opinion of an insider, a Roman Catholic Bishop who has lived through the Council and the present era of the Church, an insider also in that I know the States well. My father was from Trenton, New Jersey; I lived and studied in the United States for many years when younger, and I feel and sympathize greatly with the United States and its people. Mine is also the opinion of an outsider, born and raised in Panama, active for many years in Chile, a Bishop in my own country for these past twenty-four years, and a participant in the development of so many similar documents with the bishops of Panama, Central America, and Latin America. These are my credentials—or my prejudices—as you will.

I. THE BACKGROUND: VATICAN COUNCIL II AND A WORLD CHURCH VIEW

Thirty or forty years ago, the U.S. bishops would neither have published nor even conceived of a document like the Pastoral Letter on the Economy. At that time, the assembly of U.S. bishops did not consult, deliberate and publish their positions on public matters as they do now. Nor would they, either singly or in groups, have examined this kind of subject in precisely this way.

During the 1930's and 1940's, the U.S. bishops, either singly or jointly, made some excellent statements. As the draft letter which we are now discussing reminds us, the Catholic Church, through its pastors, constantly supported

* Archbishop of Panama. This is the revised text of an address given at the Catholic Community Services and Florida International University Forum on the U.S. Bishops' Pastoral Letter on the Economy at Miami, Florida on March 28, 1985.
workers in their unions, unions in which the bulk of Catholic immigrants and their children were fighting for a fairer share of the nation's life. The bishops appealed to Church social teaching regarding such basic tenets as the living wage, the family wage, workers' rights to organize and, when needed, the right to strike. Their positions flowed from principles of social morality drawn from both the social encyclicals and natural law.

What first differentiates the approach of the document which we now consider from these earlier documents is its perspective: the economy letter is based upon a fundamentally biblical and Christian vision of the human person, of men in society, of the whole of our social effort. Second, the draft letter presents a more careful and powerful observation of the situation under discussion: the United States economy itself and its impact upon the people of this country and the world, especially the poor. Through critical observation of the problem and attention to the biblical vision of man in society, the bishops take some very strong moral stances considered later in this commentary.

The draft letter is a document developed in the spirit and the method of the Second Vatican Council held, as we all remember, from October 11, 1962 to December 8, 1965. Those short thirty-nine months were soul-shaking for the Catholic Church of the modern world insofar as they marked a strong return to the sources of our faith in the scripture

2. National Catholic Welfare Conference, Church and Social Order paras. 33, 41-42 (Feb. 7, 1940), reprinted in Pastoral Letters, supra note 1, at 338. See also National Catholic Welfare Conference, Economic Crisis para. 8 (Nov. 12, 1931), reprinted in Pastoral Letters, supra note 1, at 289.
4. National Catholic Welfare Conference, Church and Social Order, supra note 2, paras. 55-63. See also National Catholic Welfare Conference, The Crisis of Christianity, supra note 1, para. 30; United States Catholic Conference, Present Crisis, supra note 3, para. 70.
6. Strong emphasis on the natural law approach to social doctrine characterizes the first two great social encyclicals, Leo XIII, The Condition of Labor (Rerum Novarum) (1891) and Pius XI, On Reconstruction of the Social Order (Quadragesimo Anno) (1931).
and a marked concern for bringing this faith to bear upon both our personal and social lives.

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, published on the next to last day of the Council, established the model for the economy letter. The Pastoral Constitution calls on all of us, as the Church, to scrutinize the signs of the times and to interpret them in the light of the Gospel so that "in language intelligible to each generation, [the Church] can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other."7 To do so, the Council adds, "We must ... recognize and understand the world in which we live, its expectations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics."8 The Council text then gives a brief description of what it sees as the signs of the times and their meaning: "Today, the human race is passing through a new stage of its history [characterized by] profound and rapid changes [which] are spreading by degrees around the whole world."9

We begin a new epoch of humanity, full of hope and danger, as the following text dramatically states:

Never has the human race enjoyed such an abundance of wealth, resources, and economic power. Yet a huge proportion of the world's citizens is still tormented by hunger and poverty, while countless numbers suffer from total illiteracy. Never before today has man been so keenly aware of freedom, yet at the same time, new forms of social and psychological slavery make their appearance.

Although the world of today has a very vivid sense of its unity and of how one man depends on another in needful solidarity, it is most grievously torn into opposing camps by conflicting forces. For political, social, economic, racial, and ideological disputes still continue bitterly, and with them the peril of a war which would reduce everything to ashes. True, there is a growing exchange of ideas, but the very words by which key concepts are expressed take on quite different meanings in diverse ideological systems. Finally, man painstakingly searches for a better world, without working with equal zeal for the betterment of his own

8. Id.
9. Id.
This remarkable passage introduces the concrete description of today's world and the challenge to question the world about man, his meaning and his destiny in light of the Gospel. This meaning and destiny are considered through the remainder of the Constitution, the longest document published by any of the twenty Ecumenical Councils held during these twenty centuries of Catholic Church life.

A profound reason for all this questioning is a declining sense of God and of God-given moral values. "[A]theism must be accounted among the most serious problems of this age, and is deserving of closer examination," the Council states, and then adds that "modern civilization itself often complicates the approach to God, not for any essential reason, but because it is excessively engrossed in earthly affairs."

The Council defines secularism, a philosophy which attributes to the things of the world their own inherent and proper value but excludes any other purpose or meaning than the strictly mundane. The Council counters secular philosophy by reminding us that the things of the world exist in and through God's creative purpose. The secularism of modern civilization tends to separate religious faith from daily living. The Council states:

This split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age.

... [L]et there be no false opposition between professional and social activities on the one part, and religious life on the other. The Christian who neglects his temporal duties neglects his duties toward his neighbor and even God, and jeopardizes his eternal salvation. Christians should rather rejoice that they can follow the example of Christ, who worked as an artisan. In the exercise of all their earthly activities, they can thereby gather their humane, domestic, professional, social and technical enterprises into one vital synthesis with religious values, under whose supreme direction all things are harmonized unto God's glory."

An interesting phenomenon has become part of the set-

10. Id.
11. Id. no. 19.
12. Id.
13. Id. no. 43.
ting for the present pastoral letter. In more religious times, moral and ethical values in the social domain, unclear as they were, influenced both personal and social life. During this century, we have certainly developed and clarified the Christian social ethic, but because of the more secular times, even professed Christians or Jews exclude religious or ethical concerns from the practical domain. We thus have the phenomenon of a more developed ethic in a less ethically oriented world!

Herein we find the underlying problem of the pastoral letter on the economy. To whom is it speaking? Who is listening? With what argument may the letter approach them?

The letter clearly specifies that it addresses itself to those of Christian faith,14 to those who do not share this tradition,15 and to each group with arguments meaningful to them. The letter also clearly points out, as did the letter of May 3, 1983 on “The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response,”16 the difference between matters the Church proposes as part of our faith, as applications of our faith (and moral values), and the concrete area of economic problems and their solutions, which are matters of individual or group free opinion.

This is all very positive and instructive. It encourages reflection on problems within a “healthy pluralism” of possible solutions, and it advocates a healthy recognition and acceptance of the moral values involved. The primary purpose of this letter is clearly the presentation of moral values. As previously mentioned, the letter aptly and forcefully presents a diagnosis of the U.S. economy in the full context of a biblical vision of man in the world of God’s creation.

The bishops’ letter could more clearly explain the link between the economy, the present world situation, and the teaching of Vatican II. That teaching provides the context of the Church’s dialogue with its people, not only in the United States but in all nations.


It is my impression that the first draft of the pastoral document does not have enough of the pastoral touch and tone. It is often heavy and pedantic where it need not be, a difficulty compounded by the considerable length of the text. The text is also unnecessarily repetitious. The same situations or the same doctrine is presented in a variety of contexts in the letter. This lengthens the text and weakens its coherence. Perhaps it would be possible to position, in a first part, a description of the U.S. economy as the bishops, as pastors, see it. Following this part could be a section on “Biblical and Theological Foundations,” and then a third section which presents the “Policy Application.” This sequence would stand as a simpler approach to the “see-judge-act” method which the Vatican Council taught us. This may, however, be a personal prejudice, because it is the way we compose all of our important Church documents south of the Rio Grande and Miami.

Another round of consultation on the draft of the letter is taking place this year. This time all can join in; parishes and other church groupings are warmly invited to participate and give more life to the wonderful doctrinal analysis already in the text.

II. THE DOCUMENT ITSELF: CONTENT

Obviously, the most important question is: What does the document say, and what does it not say? From such a wealth of information, reflections and recommendations, I can only single out a few aspects here; hopefully, they are central or at least important aspects of the letter.

The draft presents an admirable panoramic view of the Christian vision of men and women in the world, in society, in God’s plan of creation and salvation. Without pedantry, we are assured that the letter presents the framework of Church values in society, rather than a merely natural law ethic. The bishops write in the tradition of the rebuilding of Catholic social teaching which post-Council Catholics widely questioned for being too little biblical, too much an iteration of natural law, too static, and somewhat closed to new situations and new advances in knowledge.

Without entering into historical debates, it would be helpful if the present pastoral letter included some brief reference to the Council’s renewal of Church social teaching. It would be useful to consider the time required for clarification and development of teachings so that these teachings may be
brought more fully to bear on issues. This would help to explain the lack of emphasis on this same social teaching for a good number of the post-Conciliar years as well as the manner of its "re-instatement" in more recent years.

The letter could integrate, within the context of social doctrine, the vision of Pope John Paul II in his encyclical On Human Labor (1981). This Encyclical presents the same creative-redemptive biblical vision as the U.S. bishops present, but it better develops the sense of man's role in the process of creation—as co-creator. Furthermore, it examines the relationship of man's status to work, and to the product of his labor. This vision of John Paul II, rooted deeply in the Bible from Genesis through the Epistle to the Romans, enriches previous social teaching which centered economic reflections on private and public property. The focus is now on human work, as the prime source of production, wealth and property.

The letter could also include more references to other statements of the U.S. bishops regarding social doctrine and current world situations, particularly to the famous pastoral letter, The Challenge of Peace, of 1983. This letter includes passing references to the spending on arms build-up and to the relatively little spending in the war on poverty. I believe that these two concerns are closely linked and that the letter should address the intrinsic linkage.

Some critics contend that the letter does not sufficiently appreciate the positive aspects of the U.S. economy. After all, it has been recognized as an economy which is efficient and wealth producing, and which offers more economic opportunity to people than any other known system. This criticism is inaccurate, however, because the bishops frequently express heartfelt thanks for the natural gifts of this land and its people as well as for the openness and bountiful generosity of the United States over the years. The bishops' basic approach suggests that economic democracy in this country has not benefitted all of the people, that serious disparities exist among groups in society, and that a considerable proportion of the population must bear grave economic and social hardships.

This is the central theme of the text with regard to the

local scene, and it leads to excellent formulations on solidar-
ity and the common good, and to bold assertions that the
final test of any economy is its approach to the poor. This
line of thought leads the bishops to embrace the "preferen-
tial option for the poor." This traditional scriptural value is
found in the Gospel; it is reiterated forcefully time and again
through Christian history and is given particular emphasis in
our own days in many sectors of the Church.

The phrase itself, "preferential option for the poor," was
modernized in the Puebla document. In that document, and
in the entire Latin American context, the phrase connotes a
concern with a better material and spiritual life for all—a life
which comes from simplicity, from freedom and detachment
from the things of the world, and from a consecration of our
best efforts in the economic and social sector to improve the
conditions of the poor. Pope John Paul II has expressed this
view as his own, and he continually develops its many conno-
tations. Extensive development of the connotations of "pref-
erential option for the poor" could benefit the letter.

We know that some in Latin America have interpreted
"option for the poor" not as preferential, but as exclusive;
not as looking for economic and social reconciliation, but as
calling for revolutionary overthrow. This interpretation calls
for class struggle with violence as the vehicle of change, re-
sulting in a dictatorship of the proletariat. The present pas-
toral letter does not need to rebut this position. However, the
issue does suggest that the bishops should be concerned with
dealing specifically with the relationship between Catholic so-
cial teaching and present ideologies, whether Marxist or capi-
talist. I think that a clear and simple critique of these rela-
tionships would help to provide a better understanding of the
role of Catholic social teaching vis-à-vis all ideologies.

Perhaps the authors of the letter chose to keep out of an
area mined with ambiguities and differing definitions. Still,
the bishops could set forth traditional Christian values and
provide a context for discussion of the changes needed in the
current expression of capitalist ideology.

    note 14, paras. 69-72.
    note 14, para. 83.
    note 14, para. 89.
21. **THIRD CENTRAL CONFERENCE OF THE LATIN AMERICAN BISHOPS,**
The bishops' recommendations in "Policy Applications" derive from their concern for the poor. Some people have criticized the bishops for suggesting a return to liberal policies which, according to the critics, are outmoded, costly and ineffective.\(^2\) Nonetheless, the bishops' analysis of poverty and the poor is similar to that made by some of the critics of the draft letter, specifically by the Lay Commission on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy in their publication *Toward the Future*.\(^2\) The bishops and their critics agree that the cost of solving the problem of the poor is slight. The real difficulty is political: avoiding further dependence, and developing as many productive lives as possible. The difference seems to lie in the ideological approach, which superficially pits laissez-faire economy against the welfare state. This should be an area for discussion.

The portion of the letter which I have found most illuminating is the section in which the U.S. bishops refute the myths about the poor as they are expressed by a tenet of laissez-faire ideology. This ideology sees poverty as the result of the indolence and vice of the poor and faults the poor rather than structural failures. The bishops disprove these allegations quite convincingly through their use of facts. I found most interesting the parallels between this section and attitudes against assistance to poorer nations; the laissez-faire arguments regarding the poor abroad match the arguments regarding the poor at home.

This international area, of course, swiftly catches the attention of a Latin American. The facts are well presented: the sharp and growing contrast between rich and poor nations; the constantly increasing reluctance of the U.S. government to support the best bilateral and multi-lateral programs of trade, aid and development; the increasingly obvious fact that this is the most costly approach for the United States and the Western World in terms of peace and prosperity, in both developing and industrial nations. These facts are clear. The international debt crisis testifies to these facts. Still, United States resistance to a new international economic order becomes more intransigent daily. This is not to speak merely of President Reagan; the people of this country who know his international stance gave him a resounding re-election.

According to the bishops' present draft, the once gener-

23. *Id.*
ous and effective United States approach to world economic recovery—as seen in the Marshall Plan; sketched, but not filled in by the Alliance for Progress; evidenced in other projects such as aid to Taiwan and South Korea—is taking a back seat to "national security" concerns. Today, the United States does not assist nations so much in terms of their need; rather, U.S. assistance is based on strategic importance to the safety and defense of the United States within the context of the East-West struggle for power. Thus, foreign aid in all areas has declined, and the United States (percentage-wise) is at the bottom of the western industrial nations in supplying aid. Increasingly, the bulk of U.S. aid is in the form of military assistance, as in the current Central American conflict.

These points are well made and well substantiated in the draft and give rise to the statement of another firm moral stance:

If we are to guide our international economic relationships by policies that serve human dignity and justice, we must first broaden our understanding of our own moral responsibility. Citizenship carries with it a vocation to serve the common good. Today that vocation extends to the service of the universal common good of the entire planet.24

Unfortunately, the United States is not currently heeding or effectively applying this fine, solid, high moral appeal. The draft illustrates this fact all too graphically. Perhaps it is important to question more deeply why this is the case.

Did this failure of the United States result from the prevalent and recurrent isolationism that marks its history? Does this result, in turn, from an ignorance of the rest of the world, from a large, powerful, apparently autonomous nation whose people are not aware of the interdependencies of all the nations and peoples of the world today, and how every action or omission of the United States impacts the entire world? Americans, on the whole, are provincial because of their size as a nation. Their interests are focused within their own frontiers; they know little and care less about the rest of the world, especially the poorer nations. Their study of history, geography and languages, through their educational system, does little to compensate for this isolation. The polls show that they do not support sustained foreign aid efforts. As a result, the executive and legislative branches of govern-

ment cannot sell aid programs to their constituencies.

In addition to this lack of information, a good quantity of misinformation makes the problem more complex. The communications media have managed to create in the minds of many Americans the persistent idea that the United States has always been extremely generous in its foreign aid to all, receiving only rebuff and ingratitude in return. Moreover, the undeniable fact of widespread corruption and misgovernment in the poorer nations, as well as violence and terrorism and the growing cancer of drug traffic, makes it easier to understand why so many Americans reject an enlightened approach to the international economic situation.

Here, the draft could be improved in two ways. First, the letter should analyze in greater depth the reasons for this persistent, anachronistic, and sometimes angry isolationism of the American public and its government. It should examine the contrast between a highly generous people dedicated to helping any and all in crises such as earthquakes, famines, or other natural causes, and in welcoming refugees from all parts of the world, and a not-so-generous people refusing to support any sustained foreign policy and aid program intended to alleviate the plight of the poorer nations. How do we understand this within the American ethos, or the "American civil religion," of which Bellah speaks?

Second, in the international area, the letter should stress not only the moral imperative, but the argument of self-interest. As the previous pastoral letter stated, the great truth is that everyone loses in a nuclear war. The present pastoral should emphasize the fact that the United States has everything to lose by the continued impoverishment of the third world, particularly Latin America, and everything to gain from the economic, social and political recovery and progress of third world nations.

Both of these recommendations spring from a need for a new "greening of America," a coming of age of a great people in their awareness of the world and of their immense responsibilities to the world. One suspects that the majority of U.S. Catholics, including priests and religious, do not share the international awareness and conscience demanded by the draft. The task of education must be undertaken by every possible means.

III. CONCLUSION

I beg your indulgence for having touched upon only the surface of this very wonderful document. To have done more would have required a writing at least as lengthy as the pastoral letter itself.