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The Bishops and the Economy

Daniel Jeremy Silver

THE BISHOPS' PASTORAL LETTER on "Catholic Social Teaching and the United States Economy" received impressive coverage. Many of us must have felt a twinge of jealousy as we compared this response to the deafening indifference which greets resolutions of the CCAR. We propose, and *Time* and *Newsweek* pay no attention; the bishops propose, and even the president takes notice. It is hard to imagine a coalition of *Who's Who* congregants being sufficiently exercised by our views that they invest serious effort in a counter-document, as William Simon or Michael Novak have done in this case.

The bishops deserve an "A" for care in preparation. Beside their own extensive research, the draft committee received thoughtful and lengthy testimony from a wide range of economists, human rights activists, theologians, government administrators, business executives and labor leaders, including our own David Saperstein and A. James Rudin. In contrast, our resolutions are prepared by a small committee writing a few paragraphs one afternoon and are based entirely on the knowledge of those in the room. It would seem thoroughness encourages self-confidence. The week the draft was released our local bishop, Anthony Pilla, a good friend, circulated it at a meeting of civic leaders and solicited comments from everyone. He made the point that the document was open for revision. I am sure the bishops will not be swayed by this essay or any other criticism they receive, but they did reserve final judgment. First, we promulgate; then we talk. The lesson here is that the appearance of openness increases interest and impact.

A comparison of the bishops' recommendations with the CCAR's resolutions reveals an impressive degree of agreement. Unemployment must be reduced to an absolute minimum. The bishops advocate government financing of sizable public works programs, the subsidization of job creation in the private sector, and the expansion of current placement services. They envisage a new economic partnership based on employee participation in management and ownership. They find the present level of public assistance support pro-

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grams unacceptable, and severely criticize the uneven and heavy-handed way in which current programs are administered. To correct these deficiencies they advocate a national eligibility standard pegged to a much higher benefit level, the development of recipient councils who have the authority to shape the local administration of these services, and the development of disbursement formulas which do not penalize the gainfully employed. Defense spending must be cut. Foreign aid, as well as a variety of domestic support programs, must be significantly increased. Foreign aid should be targeted for domestic assistance and development programs, not military procurement; the monies involved should be dispensed through international agencies rather than bilateral arrangements. Foreign policy considerations should not affect programs that aim to help the world's poor. If Nicaragua needs help, Nicaragua should receive help. Economic restrictions on debtor nations, which threaten the already low standard of living in these countries (such as those proposed by the International Monetary Fund), should be cancelled. When possible, the debt of poor nations should be forgiven. Despite the cost to some American industries, the U.S. must not raise trade barriers against the goods produced by the Third World.

My copy of the Letter has "embargo" stamped on it. The bishops wanted to make sure the Letter was not released before the presidential election, so that it would be judged on its merit and not as a partisan document. Their concerns were understandable. Few of the recommendations agree with policies enunciated in the Republican platform. The president will find little support for his economic policies here; conversely, as the Catholic bishops read the polls, which indicate that a majority of their communicants voted for Mr. Reagan, they must be awed by the extent of their teaching mission.

The heart of the Pastoral Letter is its two central sections: "Biblical and Theological Foundations" and "Policy Applications." Though the specific recommendations of the second section received the most media comment, in terms of consequence these are less important than the statement of guiding principles. Specific issues are time-bound and like-minded people may differ on proposed remedies. On the other hand, the "Foundations" statement lays out the long-term and clear thrust of the Church's interests. Even if the bishops do not convince most of their adult communicants of their economic views, they will try to train a new generation to appreciate these values and will use their significant lobbying opportunities to push for sympathetic legislation.

Those who have not kept up with Catholic social pronounce-

ments will be struck by the degree to which the Letter diverges in approach and substance from such pronouncements by the medieval Church. Life on the planet is not described here as a *via dolorosa*, a rocky and unremittingly painful passage where trials and burdens must be borne with faith and grace in order to merit eternal bliss. Today, bishops have no patience with the Church's one-time assumption, so comforting to the privileged, that the poor will always be among us. Their approach is unabashedly activist. Where the medieval Church held that there will be no consequential reordering of the economic structure until God intervenes, this document assumes that economic policies devised and managed by human beings can and do make a substantial difference. A Church that once accepted the divisions of class and rank as essential to social order, now insists that all distinctions of class, race, and gender are artificial and must be overcome. The language of affirmative action and comparable worth resounds. I could not help thinking that had a local synod submitted this Letter to a medieval pope he would have accused them of Judaizing heresy. There is more of Moses and Amos here than of Paul and Augustine.

Community, Covenant, and Creation

The bishops base their recommendations on an analysis and affirmation of three biblical themes: Community, Covenant, and Creation.

Pauline Christianity tended to look upon the responsibilities of work and public office, if not family itself, as an impediment to and distraction from the religious life. By contrast, these bishops insist that "human life is fulfilled . . . in communion with others" (p. 4). "To be human is to hear the call of community; we can find true identity only through a sincere gift of ourselves" (p. 4). These bishops agree with the Pharisees: "Do not separate yourself from the community" (Pirkei Avot 2:5). They do not see those who withdraw into a regimen of private piety as higher in the pecking order of faith than those who labor in the vineyard.

To affirm community requires that the bishops set a high value on institutional structures and law. Paul's passion for the spirit led many in the Church toward a radical spiritual individualism which tended to dismiss law as an impediment to spiritual freedom and divine obedience. The apologetes of the medieval Church often emphasized this point by mocking the supposed legalism of the Jews as pedestrian, purely formal, and of limited value in the spiritual scheme

of things. Only the life of faith was of transcendent concern in their eyes.

The bishops present a quite different notion of Torah. To Paul, Sinai was a covenant of faith whose essential, and only critical, term was the affirmation "I am the Lord"; the bishops affirm the importance of the specific instructions of "the Decalogue and the Book of the Covenant" (Ex. 20:22-23:33):

Far from being an arbitrary restriction on the life of the people, these codes made life in community possible. The specific laws of the covenant protect human life and property and demand respect for parents and the spouses and children of one's neighbor. Social interaction is to reflect the norms of the covenant: reciprocal responsibility, mercy and truthfulness. Living like this brings "wholeness" (*shalom*). The laws manifest a special concern for the vulnerable members of the community: widows, orphans, the poor, and strangers in the land. The codes of Israel embody a life freed from slavery: worship of the One God, rejection of idolatry, mutual respect among people, care and protection for every member of the social body. Being free and being a co-responsible community are God's intent for us, according to the Bible. . . . Individuals are responsible before God both *to* and *for* the community (p. 11).

By signaling out the Decalogue and the Book of the Covenant for appreciation, the bishops withhold their *hechsher* from those Torah passages which mandate, *inter alia*, the ceremonies and practices that define Judaism. Otherwise I find little that is unacceptable in their analysis of Covenant.

Creation introduces the element of possibility to their world view. Instead of the once familiar disparagement of the world, they emphasize God's own admission that it is "very good." "Fruitful harvests, bountiful flocks and a large family are God's blessing on those who heed His word" (p. 12). The world has all the sources needed to support the human community in decency. The image of the human being as created in God's image presents the truth that we share some of God's creative powers. God created man and woman in His image "to re-present God to the world" (p. 12). "Creative engagement with God's handiwork is itself reverence for God" (p. 12). No one has the right to exploit for personal ends what God has intended to be enjoyed by all. We discharge our duty to God by acting as careful stewards of the goodness God has made available.

Creation is good. Careful management can increase everyone's degree of well-being. Here the bishops sound remarkably like some of our nineteenth-century predecessors pounding away at the image of the human being as partner with God in the work of creation. To be

sure, they do not set aside the Church's supernatural eschatology, but they emphasize the upward road carved out by humanity's united efforts—what nineteenth-century Reform called the Messianic Age. "Eschatology is not to be identified simply with utopian visions. Christians must embody in their lives the ethos of the new creation while they labor under the weight of the old" (p. 14). In this text the Second Coming plays a minor role. The bishops speak with hope of a "new creation" and do so at a time when the secular culture seems eager to embrace a tragic view of life whose latent image is that of nuclear winter.

Social and Economic Justice

The concepts of Community, Covenant, and Creation led the bishops to establish justice as the primary standard for economic and social judgments. Where the medieval Church spoke eloquently of *caritas*, gifts motivated by the sentiment of love and Christian duty, the bishops speak eloquently of justice, *sedagah* (*sic*), the creation of effective and equitable social structures.

God's attribute of justice is offered as the ideal by which all judgments in the area of social teaching should be measured. The God of justice so often portrayed in an earlier day as the embodiment of the austere, unbending, hence unpleasant, Jewish standard of righteousness is now given His due.

Characteristic of biblical faith is the insistence that reverence for God as creator and fidelity to the covenant are expressed by an equal reverence and concern for the neighbor. The biblical terms which best summarize this double dimension of biblical faith are *sedagah*, justice (also translated as righteousness), and *mishpat*, right judgment or justice embodied in a concrete act or deed. The biblical understanding of justice also gives a fundamental perspective to our reflections on social justice and economic issues.

Justice has many levels of meaning. Fundamentally it suggests a sense of what is right or should happen. For example, paths are just when they bring you to your destination, and laws are just when they create harmony within the community. God is "just" by acting as God should, coming to the people's aid when they are in need and summoning them to judgment and conversion when they stray. People are summoned to be "just," that is, to be in a proper relation to God by observing God's laws which form them into a faithful community. When a society is just, prosperity and blessing result. As Isaiah says: "Justice will bring peace; right will produce calm and security" (32:17) (pp. 15-16).

So far, we march to the same drummer, but as I read on I became somewhat disturbed by certain conceptual limitations basic to their

analysis of justice. The bishops perceive as their special mandate "to speak for those who have no one to speak for them, to be the defender of the defenseless who, in Biblical terms, are the poor" (p. 18). They do so passionately and effectively, and I would not argue with many of their recommendations; but their recommendations are developed within some theory of the common good. Had this document been titled "Catholic Social Teaching and the Welfare of the Poor," I would raise no protest; but the bishops chose a broader theme, "Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy," and they do not treat the larger social issues. The bishops insist that they are concerned with the common weal. The Letter's opening sentence reads: "Every perspective on economic life that is human, moral and Christian must be shaped by two questions: What does the economy do *for* people? What does it do *to* people? (p. I). But they discuss only one aspect of this large issue, i.e., what the economy should do for and to *poor* people.

This Letter has the appearance of being an elaboration of a speech John Paul II gave in Mexico City several years ago to the priests who serve in Latin America. The Pope was determined to bring into line those of his clergy who had espoused what is conventionally called *liberation theology*, a theology which seems to justify the Church's cooperation with any cause or party which challenges class or economic privilege. The Pope argued for a more discriminating approach, but, at the same time, he was eager to indicate that he shared his clergy's impatience with the status quo. The Church, he said, must "have a special openness to the small and the weak, those that suffer and weep, those who are humiliated and left on the margin of society, so as to help them know their dignity as human beings and children of God" (p. 19).

The rabbis as well as the prophets recognize that the "poor man's life is not a life" (b. Beitsa 32) and that justice may demand that we "run after the poor" (b. Shab. 104a). But our tradition never defined justice as "running after the poor." Since God's justice must involve an all-embracing concern, human justice—insofar as it can be defined—must consider the well-being of all. The bishops quote the Holiness Code, "You shall not oppress your neighbor, nor rob him; the wages of a hired man shall not abide with you all night until the morning" (Lev. 19:13), but they do not go on to quote, "You shall not defer to the rich, you shall not defer to the poor; in justice you shall judge my people" (Lev. 19:17). We do not necessarily compromise our concerns for the well-being and riches of the other America when we acknowledge that an analysis of the common good cannot be lim-

ited to what the Pope called in Mexico City "the option for the poor." Simply put, justice requires that we look at the welfare of the poor and the welfare of the entire community.

This Letter explores at length the "option for the poor." As I read along I found myself remembering the tradition which tells us that when the sages met in council after the suppression of the Bar Kochba Rebellion, they passed—among other things—a regulation that no one should give away more than twenty percent of his wealth in any given year. Their reasoning was obvious: A million or more Jews had been killed; homes and cities were in ruin; farms had been ravaged; shops and tools had been vandalized; but, as in every disaster, a few had escaped the carnage. If the few "haves" gave away everything, the lot of the desperate would not be significantly improved, but the self-impoverished would no longer be able to purchase tools or seed and thus lead to the revival of the Judean economy.

In the Middle Ages a number of European Jewish communities maintained a factor on the Island of Rhodes. Pirates regularly brought their captives there for sale on the local slave market. The factor's mandate was to ransom any Jew who came on the market. Those who sponsored this rescue mission were devoted to the mitzvah of *Pidyon Shevuyim*, but they also told their representative not to exceed a certain price. Once the pirates knew that the factor would buy at any price, they would charge such exorbitant sums that the available funds would be depleted and many would languish in chains.

The bishops make the point that when Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor," he was not "blessing the conditions of poverty but the receptivity of the poor to the message of the kingdom" (p. 18). Judaism does not agree that the poor are especially sensitive to the spiritual reaches of life. Poverty tends to deaden the spirit; "The ruin of the poor is their poverty" (Prov. 19:15); the poor man is considered a dead man (b. Ned. 64b). The bitterness of our anger with poverty is that the poor are not only deprived of the necessities which sustain life, but in many cases of the will and capacity to live fully. Only if receptivity is defined denominationally as susceptibility to the Church's promise of salvation through Christ can any empirical evidence be cited which would validate the bishops' claim. But if by receptivity we mean an awareness of one's full human potential, then their assertion runs counter to all we know about the brutalization of the spirit occurring in the urban ghettos and impoverished kraals of the world.

One does not have to agree with the assumptions of free-enterprise conservatives such as Simon and Novak to make this observation. These critics insist, *ex cathedra*, that the bishops' espousal of

significant government regulation of the economy will kill the goose that laid the golden egg. History does not bear them out. From the New Deal through the Fair Deal our economy has been managed—sometimes with social justice goals in mind, sometimes with the advantage of pressure groups in mind—to grow from strength to strength. Some government interference is regressive; other forms of government activity enhance prosperity, equity, or both. However, these conservative critics are right at least in this: the bishops' almost exclusive concentration on the option for the poor limits the usefulness of this Letter as a fleshed-out guide to the development of just and effective economic policies. They have not thought out—at least they do not so indicate—which models of economic growth should be supported by public financing for research and development. I could not ascertain their approach to such basic questions as these: Are increased productivity and efficiency desirable goals in the age of robotics and population explosion? Should economic justice be pursued if the pursuit requires some diminution of political freedoms? The bishops are well aware that "the first line of attack against poverty must be to build a healthy economy that provides employment opportunities at a decent wage for all adults who are able to work" (p. 71). The problem is they do not get around to any serious analysis of how a healthy economy can be achieved and whether full employment remains a desirable, or even feasible, goal in the age of computerized industries.

Distributive Justice

Defining justice as concern for the "option for the poor," the bishops face the problem of offering standards by which social policies can be judged as just or not just. Here, too, I found the Letter less than comprehensive for its authors offer no specific standard except for frequent reference to "distributive justice," by which they seem to mean the creation of a political situation in which there would be a "fair distribution of income, education, wealth, job opportunities, and other economic good" (p. III). Distributive justice requires a fairer social order, but one must ask whether programs based on distributive justice will achieve the desired result.

Distributive justice is really little more than the old concept of *caritas*, "give to those who need," dressed up in twentieth-century clothes. It is a statement of compassion, not a standard of justice. Distributive justice appeals instinctively to many Americans who find the existence side-by-side of Park Avenue and East Harlem morally unacceptable. Its value also seems to be moved by our national experi-

ence. The income transfer—which began with the graduated income tax, grew into the New Deal, and matured into A.D.C., Food Stamps, and Public Welfare—dramatically transformed the social order over the course of a half century. But distributive justice would not have accomplished any goals without concurrent social and civil rights reforms, and a whole market basket of programs devised to encourage investment, productivity, scientific research, technological progress, and international trade. The importance of these and other factors has become increasingly clear recently as the policy of income transfers no longer seems able to make inroads on the number of the poor. Since the mid 1970s, several years before the support cuts imposed by the Reagan Administration, the number of those below the poverty line began to increase and has continued to increase. Those who speak of the aging of the liberal distributive justice agenda suggest that such programs seem no longer able to attack the structural and psychological realities threatening to create a permanent underclass.

The issues facing our economy are various and complex and, as the Letter makes clear, require policy decisions involving questions of justice as well as economic prudence. Does distributive justice require a negative income tax which guarantees everyone a basic burse? Does it require the concept of comparable pay, which, theoretically—under the city-mouse/country-mouse theory of value—would require similar pay for everyone? To what degree should the government intervene in the economy to guarantee full employment? Do attempts to maintain high levels of employment in mature industries delay the society's necessary adjustment to new market conditions?

The Letter deals at length with north-south relationships and with the responsibility of the United States to provide massive financial help to the poor of the Third World. In this respect, it reflects not only reality but the Church's preoccupation with areas such as Latin America where one-half of the Catholics of the world will be found by the end of the century. The poor nations clearly require massive aid programs, but distributive justice is a policy of compassion, not a program for effective, long-term, structural reform. From the point of view of distributive justice, development aid is a self-evident good. From the point of view of justice, its value is not self-evident. It is a question of how much, for what, and in what way will the aid be used. Industrialization inevitably weakens traditional social structures and increases the pace of population growth, over-crowding, and environmental deterioration. The same can be said of investment aids.

There can be investment requiring distributive justice, but the tragedy at Bopahl raises frustrating questions. The Indian government asked for the plant because chemical fertilizers were needed to make possible India's Green Revolution. Indian designers were involved in the plant's construction; Indian workmen manned its pumps. The Indian officials who sat in its offices apparently delayed acting on American recommendations for certain safety revisions. If economics is not to be the most dismal of subjects in our world of limited resources, serious thought must be given to programs and policies which go beyond redistribution.

Even if we limit our social thinking to the needs of the poor, distributive justice does not address many problems. How does a country receiving aid preserve the values indigenous to its culture? How does such a country provide the education needed to manage a twenty-first century economy? And then there is the problem of mass: Forty percent of those who live in the underdeveloped world are below the age of fifteen; almost seventy percent are thirty years of age or younger. This flood of humanity swamps even the most ambitious and well-conceived development programs. Where a Green Revolution is successful, the flood of human beings often drowns its benefits and leaves the country with more, rather than fewer, undernourished children. America's limited foreign aid to the Third World is rightly criticized, but our government's prohibition of support to birth control programs is equally reprehensible. In the area of population control, I am afraid, the Church is part of the problem rather than the solution. No program of distributive justice can catch up with the poverty, ignorance, and frustration which are directly linked to the population explosion.

The needs of the poor are urgent, and few of us will deny the charge that current American policies do not take these needs adequately into consideration, but poverty is not the only issue which needs to be addressed. No part of the body can function effectively when the heart beats weakly. The pie must be large enough for everyone to get an adequate piece. It should be recognized that in developing a fully articulated social welfare program, patience must be combined with compassion and considerations of economic development; social value must have a plan beside policies of income transfer.

As a corrective to the cold-eyed economics of recent years, this Letter makes a welcome contribution. As an analysis of justice, it is not fully developed and, therefore, not ultimately wise.