

## TO THE EDITOR: ON THE DISTRIBUTION OF PROPERTY

According to Balthasar's summary (*Communio*, Spring 1990) of "the uniformly common teaching of the Christian theology of private ownership up to and even beyond Thomas Aquinas," there was "no such thing as private ownership" in Paradise before the Fall. The right to own property derives not from the natural law, but from the law of nations created after the Fall to regulate social relations between men who had become avaricious and ambitious for power. At first sight, this seems to conflict with the uniformly common teaching of recent popes that (in the words of Leo XIII in *Rerum Novarum*) "To own goods privately . . . is a right natural to man," and that one may find "in the law of nature itself the basis of the distribution of goods." But there is no real conflict here. "The fact that God gave the whole human race the earth to use and enjoy cannot . . . serve as an objection against private possessions. For God is said to have given the earth to mankind in common, not because he intended indiscriminate ownership of it by all, but because he assigned no part to anyone in ownership, leaving the limits of private possessions to be fixed by the industry of men and the institutions of peoples" (*ibid.*). Furthermore, when it comes to the use of possessions, Leo quotes St. Thomas: "man ought not regard external goods as his own, but as common so that, in fact, a person should readily share them when he sees others in need." (As Balthasar points out, St. Thomas actually re-

gards the needy person as having a right to what he needs from the property of others.) John Paul II synthesizes this tradition in *Laborem Exercens* with his statement that "the right to private property is subordinated to the right to common use."

God gives man the whole earth as his property, to "subdue" in the sense of cultivate—that is, to impress upon it the imprint of his own personality, and thereby reflect the creative action of God. This common property received from God passes into individual hands to the extent that private ownership does not interfere with the common human task, and indeed facilitates it. By working on that part of nature which is entrusted to him, man becomes "more a human being." John Paul II destroys any dualistic opposition of capital and labor by referring everything to the human person, who is the "subject of work" as well as the owner of the means of production, and as such never reducible to an object. All of us are laborers, whether we labor at a desk or at a ditch, in a board room or on a production line. Work in this sense is nothing less than the human vocation. We may possess no more than our own limbs and talents, but by using them as we ourselves choose, we shape the world around us, our own lives, and even our eternal destiny.

Can we discern in the gradual development of Catholic social teaching since *Rerum Novarum* any clues to its future direction? Now that the collapse of Communism has shifted the intellectual focus well and truly on to the various forms of Capitalist alternative, it is no longer so necessary to defend the right to own property: the question is, how is property

to be distributed and transmitted? What will be the Church's attitude to the free market? In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, John Paul II was concerned to emphasize that "The Church's social doctrine is not a 'third way' between liberal capitalism and Marxist collectivism," because it exists not on the level of ideology but rather of moral theology. Nevertheless, the fact that private property is under a "social mortgage" because "the goods of this world are originally meant for all" must have profound implications for the way we structure our societies. It is no secret that certain exponents of liberal Capitalism and the "American Way" are unhappy with the tenor of papal teaching on the virtue of "solidarity" and its practical implications.

At the heart of the Gospel is the message that love is the meaning and ultimate goal of existence. Perfect love has been revealed and is incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. The essence of love is found in giving and in receiving: Jesus receives his being from the Father; he gives back his Spirit to the Father through loving obedience and ultimately from the Cross. We are "saved" by being caught up in his comprehensive self-gift to the Father. We receive our own existence from God: we return it in gratitude and praise to the Father through, with, and in the Son. From these root principles of Christianity, the Church's social teaching grows and flowers. The Trinity is itself a society: one could say therefore that social doctrine belongs at the very center of theology, and should never be a peripheral concern.

Since love is the meaning of life, we possess nothing—not even our

own existence—except to give it away. I may possess money or land, but I must be prepared to part with it, since by its very nature it is "for" others. My right of ownership is really nothing more than my right of disposal: I have the right to personal property in that I may choose when and to whom I give it; I have the right to hold on to it for as long as I am capable of exercising that choice, but no longer. If I do not give or bequeath my property to others while I have the chance, I shall be forcibly dispossessed by death.

It is love, in the sense of self-gift, of sacrifice, that creates community. A theology of community, which will also be a theology of the distribution of property, starts from the fact that the three Persons of the Trinity each give themselves without reserve to the others. It is the possession of the one, undivided divine nature in three ways, as given, as received, and as shared, that constitutes God as three Persons. The closest analogy on earth to this loving exchange is found in marriage, where a vow by each spouse binds the two together as one flesh until death. In this way, the community of marriage becomes the foundation of human society in general. Re-reading Genesis with the help of *Laborem Exercens*, we can discern the reasons for giving such weight to the family in Catholic social teaching. Nature is entrusted to humanity as a whole, summed up in the first human couple. As humanity multiplies, the land passes into individual hands, but always by way of the family, and always under God, whose right it is to give and to take whatever he creates. God gives the land to his people in a series of cov-

enants: with Adam, with Noah, with Abram, with Israel. The Covenant always involves a mutual giving of self to create a new community (or renew an old one). God gives the land, and in return the people give him their fidelity. When they break trust, the land reverts to God, and he has the option of renewing the Covenant if they repent. It is always the commitment to *self-gift* in one degree or another that creates a community with a right to own property. In the case of Israel, it was adherence to the Law that gave a right to the Promised Land. In the case of marriage, one might argue, the vow by which the spouses give themselves to each other under God is what constitutes them as a community, and it gives them the right to own property sufficient to sustain themselves and their children.

If these thoughts are correct, they provide conclusions quite similar to the "Distributism" proposed earlier this century by G.K. Chesterton and Hillaire Belloc. The earth is given to humanity, the land of Israel to the Chosen People; the covenant of marriage gives a *family* the right to what the Distributists called a smallholding. Defined as that minimum property (of whatever kind) on which a family can sustain itself, the smallholding is to the family what the common earth is to humanity. The right to it is inalienable for as long as

the marriage holds, for it ensures the service of a common good.

The admission that families should have a constitutional right to the property that would enable them to sustain themselves, *regardless of their ability to purchase it*, would change the nature of our society. It would be an admission that human beings are persons whose very existence is relational, and who are engaged in a common enterprise on this earth, rather than being mere individuals whose nature is to be isolated and in a sense interchangeable. The fulfillment of personhood is found in relationship. The axis of human relationship is our dependence on our Creator. Its structure is given by the divine Trinity, whose image we reflect. The priority of the family in the social order is a necessary echo of the priority of the Trinity in the order of being. Poor families should not have to depend on the benevolence of the rich: they have rights that the market economy must be compelled to take into account. To recognize love as the goal of society, and as the force that binds it together, is to call for a real alternative both to Capitalism and to Socialism, which by treating persons merely as individuals build into society a pressure against relationship and against love.

Stratford Caldecott  
London, England

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