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# THE BISHOPS AND THE ECONOMY†

REVEREND MONSIGNOR GEORGE P. GRAHAM\*

Recently, the second draft of the American Bishops' Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the Economy of the United States appeared.<sup>1</sup> This letter is planned as a call for the reform and renewal of the American economic system.

In preparing to issue such a letter, the bishops are continuing in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council (the "Council"). The Second Vatican Council initiated a period of reform and renewal in the Catholic Church. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy continued the reform of the liturgy which had been started by Pope Pius XII. The Constitution on Divine Revelation set forth the Church's teaching on the Word of God and its transmission through the ages. That Word of God is a summons to salvation. The Constitution on the Church is an attempt to bring to all men and women of our day the light of Christ which shines out clearly from the Catholic Church. The Church is the sign and instrument of communion with God and of unity among all peoples. Through these constitutions, the Council proclaimed the need for a reform and renewal of the Church in the light of the Gospel.

At the Council, the bishops were not only facing inward. As Pope John XXIII said in his opening address to the Council, the Church wishes to offer its assistance in leading men and women to a more human life. The Church prepares and consolidates the path towards the unity of humanity, to serve as the foundation of an earthly city where truth reigns and charity is the law. In The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, the Council tried to discern in the events and in the

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† Based upon the Sermon at the Red Mass of the Catholic Lawyers Guild of the Diocese of Rockville Centre.

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<sup>1</sup> Subsequent to the writing of this article, a third and final draft entitled *Justice for All: Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy* was issued on November 13, 1987. See Pear, Citing "Scandal," *Bishops Insist U.S. Do More For Poor*, N.Y. Times, Nov. 14, 1987, at A1, col. 4; see also Silk, *Beyond Parley, Bishops Stir Dispute*, N.Y. Times, Nov. 14, 1987, at A15, col. 1 (economic analysis of pastoral letter).

needs and longings of people of our time what may be genuine signs of the presence and the purpose of God. After establishing a foundation on the dignity of the human person, the Council dealt with some of the more urgent problems which affect the human race in the present day; dealing with marriage and the family, cultural, economic and social life, politics, and the solidarity of people and peace.

Since the close of the Council, the American bishops have continued the work which the Council started. Their statements on the political and social order from 1966 to 1980 fill a sizable volume entitled *Quest for Justice*. Nevertheless, it is in the last six years that the bishops have taken their most ambitious steps in teaching Catholic social doctrine. In 1983, they issued the pastoral letter on *The Challenge of Peace*. This year, they hope to issue the final draft of the pastoral letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the Economy of the United States.<sup>2</sup>

The first question one might ask about these letters is whether the bishops should be speaking out on matters such as peace and war or science and economics. What do they know about fighting a war? What experience have they had in the market place?

I think the bishops would admit that they are not military scientists or economists. They are, however, living witnesses of the Church's moral tradition. They call upon experts in many secular disciplines, as well as in the theological disciplines. Nevertheless, the pastoral letter on war and peace and the economic pastoral are documents of moral teaching, and such moral teaching is the direct responsibility of the bishops.

One might further ask: "What does the Bible say about these questions?" This question is based perhaps on the misconception that everything the Church teaches should be backed up by Scripture texts. The Second Vatican Council had a different perspective. The Constitution on Divine Revelation taught clearly that God has revealed Himself and has made known the mystery of His Will. This revelation is realized by deeds and words. The revelation is completed in Christ who is both the mediator and the sum total of revelation. As the Epistle to the Hebrews points out, "God spoke in many and varied ways through the prophets. In this, the final age, He has spoken to us through His Son." (Heb. 1:1) That one Word of God revealed for the salvation of all peoples remains in the Church to be transmitted to all future generations. This transmission of the Word of God takes place through the two channels of Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. In Sacred Scripture, the human writers produced their works under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit as they committed the message of salvation to writing. In Sacred Tradition, we recognize that the Apostles handed on God's revealed word by the spoken

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<sup>2</sup> See *supra* note 1.

word of their preaching, by the example they gave, and by the institutions they established. They handed on the message which they had received from the lips of Christ, or from His way of life and His works, from which they had learned at the prompting of the Holy Spirit. God has spoken to humanity, and the one Work of God is handed down to us through Scripture and Tradition. The Second Vatican Council encourages us to turn to both Scripture and Tradition as we open our hearts to the Word of God.

In the preparation of the pastoral letter on the economy, the bishops have drawn upon Sacred Scripture as well as Catholic Tradition, and it is clear that the Bible does in fact have much to say that can help us to form a Christian understanding of our economic system.

The bishops drew upon the work of eminent biblical scholars in the elaboration of the Christian vision of economic life. Without attempting to summarize their entire section on biblical perspectives, one might reflect briefly on several biblical insights which have guided the bishops in their work. First of all, the bishops recall the story of the creation of the whole world by God. God is the creator of heaven and earth, and all creation proclaims God's glory. "God looked at everything He had made and found it very good." (Gen. 1:31). With this theology of creation goes the conviction that no dimension of human life lies beyond God's concern and loving care.

At the very summit of creation stand men and women who have been made in God's image. Every human being thus possesses an inalienable dignity. The dignity of the human person is prior to any consideration of race or nation or culture or human achievement.

This Old Testament vision of creation has provided one of the most enduring legacies of Church teaching. From earliest times, the Church has taught that the world's resources are for all humanity, and that it is wrong to deprive people of God's gifts to all.

In preparing the pastoral letter, the bishops also recall a second major element in the biblical message. Yahweh is a God of Justice, who loves justice and delights in it. The Old Testament prophets thundered out their condemnations whenever they saw that their society was ungenerous in its treatment of the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the stranger. Such people are often alone, and they have no protector or advocate. The prophets reminded their fellow Israelites that it is God who hears their cries. They admonished the Kings who, as God's anointed, were commanded to have a special concern for the poor.

In preparing the pastoral, the bishops also drew upon a third element in the Biblical message, the Great Commandment of love. When Jesus was asked which was the greatest Commandment, He answered in the words of the Old Testament:

This is the first:

Hear O Israel! the Lord Our  
God is Lord alone.  
Therefore, you shall love the Lord your God  
With all your heart,  
With all your soul,  
With all your mind,  
And with all your strength.

This is the second:

You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

This dual commandment of love is at the basis of all Christian morality. Jesus illustrated this command in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Unlike the other people who looked at the wounded man and passed by, he looked and had compassion. He stopped. He tended the wounded man and took him to a place of safety. Christian love is not mere emotion. Love is made real through effective action.

The bishops have engaged themselves in the preparation of this pastoral letter on the economy as an invitation to dialogue. They are not attempting to do something similar to what Pope Paul VI did in his encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. That letter dealt with a question with respect to which the Church has been teaching the same doctrine for almost two thousand years. It is a single question, with a single answer. The American economy, however, is a very complex system and there are many new questions about it for which the Church must still work out answers.

Archbishop Weakland said recently that the bishops know that the new pastoral on the economy will be inadequate to solve all the problems. Nevertheless, they are convinced that it is necessary to make a beginning. If this forthcoming pastoral letter leads thoughtful Americans to think theologically and to discern the moral imperatives in the renewal of our economy, that will be in itself a major achievement.

If there is anyone who would like to begin serious thinking about the moral questions relating to our economy, where should he begin? Archbishop Weakland recommended a good starting point to the priests of our diocese and I make the same suggestion to you: Read the Sermon on the Mount!

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.