

The Catholic Church and Communism, 1789–1989*

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The collapse of communism has taught many lessons, not only about politics and society, but also about human nature itself. In the case of the role played by the Roman Catholic Church, however, it is now necessary to look further back into history to grasp the significance of the communist experience, and how it affected the Church's relations with secular ideologies.

In this paper, we will present three theses. First, that in the period following the French Revolution a faultline opened up in Europe between the two streams of radical social reformism and conservative Christian ethics, which contributed significantly to the disasters of the twentieth century. Second, that the Catholic Church allowed itself to be caught out by the advance of social and economic disorders and was initially unable to provide effective answers to emerging Marxist and socialist movements. Third, that it was not until the advent of a Polish pope in 1978 that the Church began to realise its own power in relation to totalitarian regimes, and to see that its key challenge lay not only in promoting social and economic justice, but also in defending the dignity and subjectivity of human beings.

To illustrate the first thesis, we must delve into the distant past.

Keep out the ravening wolves who do not spare the flock of innocent lambs. Unless the great license of thinking, speaking, writing and reading is repressed, it will appear that the strategy and armies of wise kings and generals have relieved us for but a short time from the evil which has crushed us for so long. So long as its stock and seed are not removed and destroyed, it will spread abroad and be strengthened to reach over the whole world. To destroy it later or to rout it out, legions, guards, watches, the armouries of cities, the defences of empires will not be enough.¹

These words were written by Pope Pius VI in May 1800, a decade after the fall of the Bastille. At some time in the late eighteenth century something profound had begun to happen to the refined civilisation of Europe. The change cannot be dated precisely, or even summarised satisfactorily. But it spawned an attitude of mind which refused to recognise any preordained human or divine authority. It also brought an end to the Church's unquestioned authority. It would be simplifying history to draw a direct connection between the Enlightenment and modern totalitarianism. But the Enlightenment vision gained expression in various movements, from liberalism to socialism, the latter later diversifying into numerous streams and currents,

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including communism.

We find the first formal reference to the 'unspeakable doctrine of Communism' in an encyclical, *Qui pluribus* (1846), in which the newly-elected Pius IX dismissed it as 'most opposed to the very natural law', and warned that it would 'completely destroy men's rights, their property and fortune, even human society itself'.² The document appeared two years after Marx described religion as the 'opium of the people'. Two years later, in 1848, the year of revolutions, the *Communist Manifesto* would list the pope with 'the tsar, Metternich and Guizot, French radicals and German police spies' as being among the 'powers of the old Europe' which had formed a 'holy alliance' to exorcise the 'spectre of communism'.³ At that stage the pope saw 'communism' and 'socialism' as a conspiracy, a radical wing of the republican movements making a bid for power in Rome, Paris and Vienna. In 1864, the year of the First International, Pius IX published his famous *Syllabus errorum*, with its famous proposition rejecting the notion that 'the Roman pontiff should reconcile himself or reach agreement with "progress", liberalism and recent departures in civil society'. He again warned against 'communism' and 'socialism', this time listing them with secret societies and liberal clerical associations as 'pestilences' of the day.⁴

It would have required severe blindness not to see a link between the rise of communist and socialist agitation and the excesses and injustices of the Industrial Revolution. From the late 1860s onwards papal pronouncements put increasing stress on the need for economic and social reform to offset alienation and disaffection among Europe's workers. But the emphasis remained firmly on the need for a balance between component parts of the body politic – a vision of the unequal, but harmonious and just, social order for which Émile Durkheim and others coined the term 'Solidarism'. In France the Church had conspicuously taken the side of 'order' in the conservative backlash which followed the failed revolution of 1848. Inevitably, this had eroded the creditworthiness of Catholic social initiatives. Anti-church feeling was to reach its bloody apogee in the murder of the archbishop of Paris and at least 50 priests in the shortlived 1871 Commune. 'Religion was looked on by the masses as a political weapon', the French Cardinal Ferrata wrote in his memoirs, 'as a monopoly of the aristocracy, a relic of the *ancien regime*'.⁵

By the accession of Leo XIII in February 1878, however, church assumptions were coming under pressure. *Das Kapital*, the first volume of which appeared in 1867, had been widely read in France and Germany. The revolutionary theories of Marx were winning converts as never before. At the same time the Church's alliance with Europe's ruling regimes was looking shakier. The savage suppression of Poland's 1863 January Uprising, co-led by Catholic priests, had strengthened the hand of imperial Russia. Protestant Prussia had gained a dominant position through the unification of Germany, and had defeated the Catholic powers of Austria and France. In Italy the Risorgimento swept away the Papal States and left Rome occupied in 1870. There were many who believed the time was coming for the Church to realign itself more wholeheartedly with the cause of social reform and to build up its social influence rather than relying on the wielders of power.

In March 1870, four months before the adoption of the dogma of papal infallibility, a *postulatum* at the First Vatican Council openly acknowledged for the first time that the 'evil of socialism' had its root cause in the greed of employers, and urged the Council to clarify church teachings on employer-worker relations.⁶ In December 1878 Leo XIII's encyclical *Quod apostolici muneris* again denounced 'that sect of men who, under various and almost barbarous names, are called Socialists, Communists or nihilists', and whose 'wicked confederacy' was now

'openly and boldly marching forth in the light of day'. Yet Leo XIII conceded that anticlerical liberalism and unrestricted capitalism were as much to blame. God intended 'that there should be various orders in civil society, differing in dignity, rights and power'; but he also held 'over the heads of the rich the divine sentence that unless they succour the needy, they will be repaid by eternal torments'.⁷

In 1885 *Immortale Dei* switched the emphasis to 'liberalism' entirely, pointing out the danger to moral norms and social stability contained in its advocacy of a secular state. The Church believed that ideas like popular sovereignty led to violent revolution, the encyclical made clear; but it was not opposed to democracy and intellectual enquiry. Finally, in 1891 the pope put the record straight with a document showing that Catholic teaching could offer an alternative to both liberalism and socialism/communism. *Rerum novarum* appeared two years after Leo XIII had enunciated his policy of *ralliement*, urging French royalists to make their peace with the Third Republic. The condition of the working classes, he now wrote, was 'the pressing question of the hour':

By degrees it has come to pass that working-men have been surrendered, isolated and helpless, to the hard-heartedness of employers and the greed of unchecked competition. The hiring of labour and the conduct of trade are concentrated in the hands of comparatively few; so that a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of labouring poor a yoke little better than slavery.⁸

Yet if abusive capitalism was the root cause of modern poverty and misery, socialist proposals – a community of goods, abolition of private property, a classless society – also violated Christian teaching and natural law. In fact, Leo XIII insisted, they would make the working classes poorer still. What the pope offered instead was a reaffirmation of the harmonious Christian order in which workers received a living wage and had their interests protected by associations or unions. The human dignity of the working class majority had to be fully respected. Workers were by nature 'members of the state equally with the rich'. If Christians were exhorted to improve the social order they were not expected to change it. Their task was, in the end, humanitarian rather than political.

This largely explains why, although many contemporaries praised *Rerum novarum* as the sign of a comprehensive shift in the Church's position, others saw it as a ruse, having far more in common with Pius IX's social conservatism than with any new-found commitment to social justice. In France the socialist Jean Jaurès called the encyclical a 'socialist manifesto in its decisive parts'. But Jaurès also believed the Catholic Church would continue to 'cast its lot with the forces of political and social reaction'.⁹ The Church's defence of private property continued to set Catholics at odds with socialists – whose 'false doctrines' about its elimination threatened, in Leo XIII's words, to 'strew the paths they travel with blood'.¹⁰ Confrontation with anti-clerical liberals was increasing too. Far from bringing the sides closer, the passage of time was polarising divisions.

By the time of the accession of Pius X many Catholic reformers still regarded all socialists as diabolical conspirators, and resented their success in mobilising the working classes. But the Church's own counter-efforts were weak by comparison. Catholic labour organisations in Italy could claim just 70,000 members, compared to the 570,000 enrolled in the socialist-dominated General Confederation of Labour (CGL) and Chambers of Labour. By 1910 Catholic groups still accounted for no more than 12.5 per cent of the country's organised labour force.¹¹

Pius X soon put paid to any remaining hopes that Leo XIII's teachings could be given a political application.

It is in conformity with the order established by God in human society that there should be princes and subjects, employers and proletariat, rich and poor, instructed and ignorant. ... The true friends of the people are neither revolutionaries nor innovators, but traditionalists.¹²

By then socialist agitation had intensified in Eastern Europe too, particularly among disaffected worker communities in Austrian-ruled Hungary and Bohemia. But it was in backward Russia that socialism achieved power for the first time. Initially the Vatican tried a policy of cautious engagement with Lenin's Bolshevik regime. Indeed, it was even optimistic that the 'revolution' would taper out. Such hopes were soon put paid too, however, by the regime's antireligious excesses. 'Communism teaches and pursues a twofold aim', Pius XI declared in 1931:

merciless class warfare, and complete abolition of private property. This it does, not through secret, hidden methods, but openly, publicly and by every means, even the most violent. To obtain these ends, communists shrink from nothing and fear nothing; and when they have acquired power, it is monstrous beyond belief how cruel and inhuman they show themselves to be.¹³

The effects of Soviet persecution were felt most clearly by the Russian Orthodox Church. Before 1917 the Church had boasted 54,000 parishes, 50,000 schools, 1,000 monasteries and 40 seminaries. By the late 1930s it had lost virtually everything. At least 45,000 churches had been left in ruins, 200,000 priests, monks and nuns executed, and half a million more imprisoned or deported, in the greatest wave of persecution in Christian history.

By now the Vatican believed it had evidence from other countries too of what awaited the Church once hostile socialist or communist regimes came to power. In France a 'Separation Law' in 1905 had been followed by socialist governments under Émile Combes and Édouard Herriot, both committed to rigorous anticlerical policies. In Budapest and Munich Béla Kun and Kurt Eisner had proclaimed proletarian dictatorships in 1919, while in neighbouring Austria, guided by Otto Bauer's 'Red Vienna', the Church was reputedly losing 30,000 members a year to new socialist and Marxist organisations. As for socialist revolutions, Russia itself was now joined in what was dubbed the *terribile triangolo* by Mexico and Spain. Anti-Catholic excesses by republican movements in both countries were a stark reminder of the fragility of the social order, and of the Church's vulnerability to mass popular uprisings driven or manipulated by socialist or communist agitators. The spectre of violence was not confined to Russia: it had appeared right in the heart of Europe.

It would be argued later that Pius XI was too obsessed with the dangers of communism and failed to make necessary distinctions between violent revolutionary groups and parliamentary socialist movements like the British Labour Party which were committed to peaceful, legal methods. Because of this, the argument runs, the pope failed to support a tactical alliance between Catholics and moderate socialists which might have succeeded in holding back the rise of Nazism and fascism. This criticism tends to ignore contemporary conditions, however. With the British exception, most European socialist parties were still anticlerical and Marxist in orientation in the 1930s. Meanwhile the pope had made it clear he had no objection to necessary social and economic reforms, and would condemn no doctrines which maintained

basic Christian values. 'The Church is never bound to one form of government more than to another, provided the Divine rights of God and human consciences are safe', Pius XI asserted in 1933. 'It does not find difficulty adapting itself to various civil institutions, be they monarchies or republics, aristocratic or democratic.'¹⁴ In the early 1930s, however, Pius XI could have been forgiven for thinking that Church and humanity had more to fear from communism and socialism than from fascism and Nazism. Both Mussolini and Hitler had attempted to woo the Church's support with tactical concessions, signing full-scale Concordats in 1929 and 1933 respectively. The key priority, the pope believed, was to defend the Church and Christianity against tactical fudges which might weaken their identity or spread confusion.

A new 'social encyclical' in 1931, *Quadragesimo anno*, showed that the Vatican had come a long way from the conspiracy theories of Pius IX and Leo XIII. It was the era of the Great Depression. The pope was aware of the drastic economic and social hardships on which extremes were feeding. They were, he believed, the ultimate consequence of the 'idols' of liberalism about which his predecessors had warned since the mid-nineteenth century. 'Free competition has destroyed itself; economic domination has taken the place of the open market. Unbridled ambition for domination has succeeded the desire for gain; the whole economic regime has become hard, cruel and relentless in ghastly measure.'¹⁵ Pius XI knew that Catholic social reformers had failed to find a convincing answer to poverty and exploitation. He also knew that exhortations to charity would not be enough to meet the 'urgent necessity of uniting forces to combat the massed ranks of revolutionaries'. Finally, he was conscious that socialism had undergone a division over the previous half-century – between communism of the Soviet kind, and the social democracy common in Western Europe, which had renounced violent class warfare and no longer condemned private property. Many Catholics saw possibilities of cooperating with the second, believing that a 'reformed socialism' was compatible with Christian principles. Yet if these Catholics now hoped for some kind of papal endorsement, *Quadragesimo anno* disappointed them.

If, like all errors, socialism contains a certain element of truth (and this the Sovereign Pontiffs have never denied), it is nevertheless founded upon a doctrine of human society peculiarly its own, which is opposed to true Christianity. Religious socialism, Christian socialism, are expressions implying a contradiction in terms. No one can be at the same time a sincere Catholic and a socialist properly so called.¹⁶

At the same time, the encyclical's emphasis should be noted carefully. Socialism pointed towards Bolshevism, Pius XI maintained; but its *parent* was liberalism. The Church regretted the 'indolent apathy' of governments which allowed the propagation of socialist doctrines 'which seek by violence and bloodshed the destruction of the whole of society'; but it condemned '*even more severely* [authors' italics] the foolhardiness of those who neglect to remove or modify such conditions as exasperate the hearts of people, and so prepare the way for the overthrow and ruin of the social order'.¹⁷ The pope offered what he thought was a coherent blueprint for a harmonious society – 'a community of communities' which depended on neither liberalism nor socialism. Its main pillars would be voluntary associations, vocational groups and 'committed young men', all interacting in the cause of social reconstruction according to the principle of solidarity. *Quadragesimo anno* talked vaguely about 'social justice' too. But the encyclical stressed that its 'soul' must be 'social charity' and a sense of common good.

By the late 1930s Pius XI had also condemned the actions of Italian fascists and German Nazis, at a time when local church leaders were flirting dangerously with both. In 1936 and 1939 Germany's bishops endorsed Hitler's claim to be saving Europe from Soviet expansionism. Once Germany had regained its strength, they declared in a nationwide pastoral letter, 'a Europe cleansed from Bolshevism and the entire rescued civilised world will be thankful to us'.¹⁸ Yet it was evident, even then, that the Vatican still saw communism as a greater menace. The two encyclicals addressed to Italy and Germany, *Non Abbiamo Bisogno* (1931) and *Mit Brennender Sorge* (1937), denounced fascist and Nazi practices, as well as aspects of each doctrine. But neither attempted to dissect and denounce them as ideologies. Just as crucially, both concluded with the hope that the Mussolini and Hitler regimes were reformable. This had never been said of communist regimes. Whereas fascism and Nazism were viewed as temporary fits of madness, luckily confined (for now) to Italy and Germany, communism was, by contrast, a fixed ideological system which could be neither moderated nor restrained. Modern socialist variants, as the pope had acknowledged in 1931, might show themselves open to democratic practices. But communism was inherently aggressive and had a long track record of atrocities. 'Communism is intrinsically evil', Pius XI reaffirmed in 1937,

and therefore no one who desires to save Christian civilisation from extinction should render it assistance in any enterprise whatsoever. Those who allow themselves to be duped and who connive at the establishment of communism in their own countries will be the first to pay the penalty.¹⁹

Yet the pope was well aware of communism's attractiveness, particularly among European intellectuals. He knew communism offered a 'pseudo-ideal of justice, equality and brotherhood' and a 'counterfeit mysticism' which thrived in the current climate of exploitation and poverty. Thanks to this, there was no shortage of Catholics among the ranks of what Lenin had called 'useful idiots'.

Like every other error, communism contains some element of truth, and its adherents make adroit play with this in order on occasion to disguise the repulsive cruelty which is intrinsic to the doctrine and its methods. They thus succeed in duping persons of more than ordinary integrity, these in their turn becoming apostles of error and instilling it in the minds of others.²⁰

The pope made it clear that the Church condemned communism not only because it was antichristian. It was, he stressed, 'a doctrine full of error and sophistry, contrary to revelation and reason alike', which destroyed the foundations of civil society and refused to acknowledge the true origin, nature and purpose of the state. But he still believed, like his predecessors, that it was the 'policies of economic liberalism', with their elevation of selfish interests over community loyalties, which had caused the rise of communism in the first place.

When it came to remedies, however, all Pius XII could offer was essentially a retelling of the same paternalistic Christian tradition. Like his predecessors, the pope was looking for the best means of upholding what he saw as the divinely ordained social order. In the late 1930s the Vatican failed to recognise that, with or without communism, the century's social and political emancipation had generated unstoppable demands which could be met only by a comprehensive rethinking of the Church's presence in society, and of the role of Christianity alongside other philosophical and intellectual currents.

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We can now jump forward 60 years, from March 1937 to March 1997

I believe he is the world's most left-wing leader. No one else reacts with such pain to poverty, injustice and human misery, to the tarnishing of human life even though it is a gift from God. I can see how he contributed to our understanding of communism, and helped expose the communist utopia. This is why I now agree with so many elements of his teaching.²¹

These words were spoken by Mikhail Gorbachev during a visit to Warsaw. He was talking about Pius XI's distant successor, Pope John Paul II. Many factors help explain why communism collapsed: economic crisis, ideological breakdown, nationalist revolt, western pressure; but no combination of these seems to account for the suddenness and near-total peacefulness of the collapse. Like the former general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, many believe that the Polish pope played a major role in the course of events. If it is true that he did so, it was as a catalyst for the pent-up dynamics of revolt. His luck lay in appearing at a particular moment of opportunity. But his greatness, if one can call it that, was in his ability to see and use his possibilities, both leading and learning from the people who gathered around him. He proved, in effect, that dreams come true and ideas shape realities.

'You were called the Church of silence', the pope told Czech Catholics in April 1990, 'but your silence was not the silence of sleep or death. In the spiritual order, it is in silence that the most precious values are born.'²² He was speaking at a time of lofty visions. Classical Greek and Judaic thinkers were back in fashion. Czechoslovakia's new playwright-president, Václav Havel, had revived a Hussite concept, 'the power of truth'. Poland's Catholic premier Tadeusz Mazowiecki had vowed to restore a 'spiritual dimension' to politics. There was talk of 'returning to Europe', of 'creating spaces filled with information', of a 'universum' of Eastern European states freed from communist 'internationalism' and capitalist 'integrationism'. Even amid the rejoicing, however, serious questions needed answering. Why had the Church proved so weak before the onslaught of communism? What had it learned from its communist-era experiences?

Communism had been brought to Eastern Europe on the bayonets of Stalin's Red Army; but it would have been a serious mistake to see it as no more than a heresy imposed by force of arms. Its propagandists, as indicated above, successfully exploited the social conflicts generated by prewar capitalist systems. They talked dynamically and alluringly of mastering the rules of history, bringing suffering and exploitation to an end. Prewar tensions and disorders had demanded a new kind of Christian sensitivity, capable of understanding and moderating the impulses behind contemporary social and political movements. But the Church had been dangerously weak on social issues, and even weaker when it came to demanding precautionary restraints on wealth and privileges.

It was with this flawed legacy behind it that the Church had faced the postwar communist challenge. Having never really grasped communism's attractiveness, its theologians and philosophers had been unable to offer an effective intellectual and moral response. It was only later, as social disillusionment set in, that the Church moved out of its self-defensive bastion and laid down an effective counter-challenge, ultimately identifying itself with the social movements which brought communist rule to an end.

One of the lessons to be drawn from the communist period concerned the Church's

place in society. The movements which brought communism down would not have emerged without solidarity – a readiness by diverse people to cooperate in opposition. The experience showed that this kind of active solidarity constituted a form of power – a power which became invincible when applied to the struggle of individuals and societies to rediscover and reassert their will. Christians could not achieve this by themselves. They needed the help of others. And this in turn presupposed tolerance and respect, a readiness to defend the rights of non-Christians too, and to accept the validity of views of mankind and the world which were born outside the Church. Another lesson was about the dangers of compromise – of sacrificing the Church’s independence for the sake of institutional protection. Corruption from within had, in the end, done far more damage than ham-fisted persecution. The Church had also learned that it was not enough to pay lip-service to values. The experience of totalitarian systems had shown that the striving for justice would never be satisfied by frenetic attempts by Left or Right to adjust the world to utopian models. Just because reality could not be made perfect, however, did not mean there was no duty to change it. Just because social justice required moral methods did not mean it could be ignored in practice.

These at any rate were some of the lessons highlighted by the communist experience. It was another question whether the Church had taken them to heart – and whether it had learned them for all time or just in response to temporary necessity.

What kind of legacy had John Paul II helped establish? The collapse of communism had overturned the new type of international system born at Yalta in February 1945. Pius XII had condemned it from the beginning. He had warned that security and stability would never be achieved by the arbitrary decisions of an oligarchy of powers at the cost of the rights and aspirations of nations. Pius XII had been sidelined by the East–West architects of postwar *Realpolitik*. Why had their successors in the 1980s been unable to ignore John Paul II? The chief reason was that the Polish pope had understood the potential power of the Church, by realising how spiritual loyalties could have political consequences. The world, he sensed, functioned not through governments but through people. Whereas the nineteenth-century popes had feared the potential of spontaneous social movements, John Paul II had seen them as an ally, a creative energy which the Church could harness and direct for godly purposes. These were the ‘movements of solidarity’ he had spoken of in his 1981 encyclical *Laborem exercens* – and it was not difficult to spot which particular ‘movement’ had inspired this reflection.²³ Another reason was that John Paul II had understood communism. After the Second World War Pius XII had tried to counter communism by confronting it, as Pius XI had done, and excommunicating its collaborators. By contrast, John XXIII had reversed the policy in 1958 and attempted to nurture cooperation with ‘the medicine of mercy rather than severity’. Meanwhile, from 1963 Paul VI had tried ‘to save what could be saved’ by showing what communists could gain from concessions and compromises. The Polish pope’s methods and assumptions had been different. He saw communism less in terms of sin than as a misunderstanding – a wrong turn towards a false conception of mankind and the world. In order to correct this error, it was first necessary to understand it.

By the time of John Paul’s 1978 election communism had been softened up by economic failures and political pressures, as well as by popular recognition of the false realities on which it fed. But ideals which had motivated Marxism’s earliest followers – social justice, participation, the dignity of work – were still alive. The pope’s aim was, in effect, to rid these ideals of their totalitarian and ideological

distortions, and to allow them to be reinterpreted and reapplied in a Christian way. In this way, illusory values could be transformed into genuine ones. History had taught that efforts to change the world had to begin with people – not with anonymous programmes, amorphous classes or abstract theories. Communism had elevated its own *praxis* above the rights of the person. The challenge now was to provide a convincing Christian reflection on ideas and concepts Marxism had expropriated, as well as on the real problems Marxism had highlighted: labour–capital relations, work and property, exploitation and alienation. The pope was not an ‘anticommunist’: condemning and combating communism were unnecessary. What *was* necessary was to find positive, liberating impulses to set against the negative, captivating resentments communist rulers used as tools of power. Communism could not be intimidated by confrontation or appeased by diplomacy. But it *could* be undermined through the power of values.

Mention was made earlier of the faultline between paternalistic Christian ethics and active programmes for social justice. John Paul II had thrown the Church’s authority into building bridges across this rift. One bridge had been a common philosophy of non-violent action, another the dignity of the human person, another the rights of conscience and the immutability of absolute values. In this way the Church had progressed from the ‘solidarism’ of the 1890s to the ‘solidarity’ of the 1980s. The ‘solidarity’ envisaged by the pope could be seen as a reinvoation of the once-distrusted ideals of the French Revolution: Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. But it gave all three a richer, deeper Christian interpretation, beyond the civic, political and secular dimensions of 1789. And it was on the half-forgotten ideal of fraternity that the main emphasis came to rest. No political system could build ‘fraternity’: history showed that attempts to do so led to the horrors of totalitarianism. But this did not mean that it should be abandoned as a moral postulate in the minds of people.

Thus the wheel had turned full circle from the era when Marx and Engels had identified the pope as a ‘power of the old Europe’.²⁴ The Church had been forced by the abuses of communism to take its stand alongside the common man. It had become a symbol of freedom.

In *Redemptor hominis*, his first 1979 encyclical, John Paul II had insisted that the Church did not reject any system or culture *a priori*, but that all required ‘continual revision’ and an alertness to their original ideals. This has been the aim of dissident philosophers like Leszek Kołakowski and Jan Patočka too – to recall the true values and positive aspirations behind both liberalism and socialism, and to restore a sense of balance to contemporary society and culture: a plurality of ideas and opinions within a framework of unassailable values. This, at least, is how the programme of John Paul II’s pontificate could be interpreted, as it looked in 1989. What has happened since then?

In the pope’s native Poland, many Catholics still think in ideological categories. Some have seized on an American model of ‘democratic capitalism’, with its perfect vision of a society combining religion and morality with democracy and prosperity. Others have espoused the prewar dream of a corporatist state, in which the Church’s position is constitutionally guaranteed, and the Solidarity slogan – ‘God, Honour, Fatherland’ – replaces the tolerant, pluralistic outlook of Solidarity. But has John Paul II himself been able to sustain the central message of his mission, which reconciled Christian ethics with contemporary notions of justice, freedom and human rights? His position in Eastern Europe has changed. In a March 1996 questionnaire most Poles thought the pope’s most important concern was abortion, whereas only one in ten believed it was human rights and democracy. Fewer than a third could

even remember when he was elected, and most appeared confused about his role in relation to Solidarity. Half believed the pope had played no role in the collapse of communism or did not know whether he had or not. Although 90–94 per cent cited him as an authority in religious, moral, intellectual and national issues, evidence suggested that his authority was envisaged as abstract: that of a national symbol with little direct relevance to real life. Two-thirds of Poles believed that John Paul II was above criticism.²⁵

If John Paul had underestimated something, it was the staying-power of ideology. Communism had collapsed; but liberal capitalism was resurgent, buoyed by powerful lobbies, many of them within the Church. In *Centesimus annus* (1 May 1991) the pope attempted to work out the Church's response.

The encyclical is dominated in its early part by a diatribe against socialism. It says that socialism's mistaken conception of Man derives from its atheism – an atheism closely connected to the 'rationalism of the Enlightenment' which *views* (note the present tense) human and social reality in a mechanistic way. In its place, John Paul offers the same vision set out in *Quadragesimo anno*, in which Pius XI talked of a conflict which 'abstains from enmities and mutual hatred', and 'gradually changes into an honest discussion of differences founded on a desire for justice'.²⁶

Overall, the pope describes *Centesimus annus* as a 'rereading' of Leo XIII's *Rerum novarum*. But there are several points on which the encyclical is inaccurate and ahistorical. For one thing, it distorts the relationship between socialism and liberalism in Leo XIII's teaching. It gives the impression that church and state responded to nineteenth-century injustices, and that socialist agitation disrupted the continuity of reform. But Leo XIII, as already demonstrated, regarded the abuses of liberal capitalism as the prime cause of late nineteenth-century disorders. For another thing, *Centesimus annus* fails to make sensible distinctions between socialism past and present. Not even Leo XIII in all his paternalism branded socialism atheistic. On the contrary, he more readily laid the charge of spreading atheism at the door of liberal capitalist states, accusing them of 'setting aside the ancient religion' and spreading 'moral degeneracy'.²⁷ *Centesimus annus* also distorts Leo XIII's conception of state and society, in an effort to portray *Rerum novarum* as a forerunner of late twentieth-century theories of limited government. Leo XIII said the state's actions should not interfere with natural law and family rights. But the state *could* be used to ensure labour conditions, family bonds, even religion and morals. This was hardly the 'limited role' claimed by *Centesimus annus*.

The encyclical is one-sided in other ways too. It seeks to depict Leo XIII as an early exponent of the 'option for the poor'; but the material notion of poverty in *Rerum novarum*, with its appeals to the 'heroism of charity', has little in common with the dual conception – material and moral poverty – which John Paul himself helped pioneer. *Centesimus annus* says nothing about the Church's dilemmas in responding to early worker movements, nor does it throw any light on the causes and consequences of nineteenth-century radicalism. Worst of all, the encyclical makes no more than a single concluding reference to the 'ideology of liberalism'; yet popes down to Pius XI saw this as the root cause of socialism and communism. Three years before *Rerum novarum* Leo XIII reserved his strongest denunciations for it, blaming liberalism for the very same crimes against Church and religion which *Centesimus annus* now attributes to modern-day socialism.²⁸

Later in *Centesimus annus* John Paul II turns to the key question: 'Can it be said that, after the failure of communism, capitalism is the victorious social system, and that capitalism should be the goal of countries now making efforts to rebuild?'

The answer is obviously complex. If by 'capitalism' is meant an economic system which recognises the fundamental and positive role of business, the market, private property and the resulting responsibility for the means of production, as well as free human creativity in the economic sector, then the answer is certainly in the affirmative. ... But if by 'capitalism' is meant a system in which freedom in the economic sector is not circumscribed within a strong juridical framework which places it at the service of human freedom in its totality, and which sees it as a particular aspect of that freedom, the core of which is ethical and religious, then the reply is certainly negative.²⁹

In its section on state and culture the encyclical reiterates the Church's acceptance of democracy. But democracy must be rooted in a 'correct conception of the person' and a concept of 'freedom based on truth'. Without these, it 'easily turns into open or thinly disguised totalitarianism'. This applies to the economy too. The state has a duty to guarantee the security of individual freedom, private property, a stable currency and efficient services. But the protection of human rights is a responsibility for groups and associations. The state cannot guarantee the right to work. It must avoid the 'excesses and abuses' of the modern 'Social Assistance State', which has undermined society's sense of responsibility and generated an exorbitant bureaucracy.

It has been said that *Centesimus annus* marked a turning point by bringing Catholic social teaching up to date. Yet there are many gaps in the text. For one thing, it endorses the efficient, wealth-creating mechanisms of the market economy, on the precondition that they are based on values. But the 'values' it has in mind are weakly articulated, and extend little further than an appeal to 'mutual understanding and knowledge', helped by 'sensitivity of conscience'.³⁰ The pope's use of concepts is confusing too. He distinguishes what he calls 'new capitalism' from 'primitive capitalism', but appears unsure whether capitalism in either form signifies a 'model of economic organisation' or a 'social system'. Most remarkably of all, he makes 'freedom' the only criterion for what he calls 'positive capitalism' – not justice, not truth, not ethical values.

Despite its references to culture and society, the view of mankind set out in *Centesimus annus* is overwhelmingly economic. It links economic life with moral reconstitution, and lists 'truthfulness, trustworthiness and hard work' as economic virtues. It is the 'radical reordering of economic systems', the text makes clear, which is the key priority after communism – not social recovery, moral renewal, education or the rule of law.

In his 1981 text *Laborem exercens* the pope examined the 'pathologies' of both communism and liberalism, and criticised all attempts to 'ideologise' ideas and values. But in *Centesimus annus* he comes close to making the same mistake himself, by using an ill-defined concept as the hub of his new world vision.

Of course, *Centesimus annus* was published in 1991, a veritable age away. Since then the pope has warned of the limitations facing democracy in *Veritatis splendor* (6 August 1993) and *Evangelium vitae* (25 March 1995). In a 1993 interview with Italy's *La Stampa* daily he contradicted the thrust of *Centesimus annus* altogether by speaking of 'seeds of truth' in socialism.³¹ Meanwhile in an apostolic letter, *Tertio millennio adveniente* (10 November 1994), he also acknowledged the 'sins and errors' for which the Church's members must make an accounting of consciences.

The wheel of fortune has turned full circle in other ways too. 'In these times of the

building of a democratic state, in these times of dynamic economic development, we see with particular clarity all the shortcomings of social life', John Paul II told Polish citizens at Legnica in June 1997. His description of current conditions, worth quoting at length, is strikingly similar to those of Leo XIII and Pius XI.

Every day we become aware of how many families are suffering from poverty. How many single mothers are struggling to take care of their children! How many old people are abandoned without means to live! In institutions for orphans and abandoned children there is no lack of those without enough food and clothing. How can we fail to mention the sick who cannot be given proper care because of the lack of resources? On the streets and squares the number of homeless people is increasing. ... Alongside the problem of unemployment, there is also the attitude of those who consider the worker as a tool of production, with the result that man is insulted in his personal dignity. This phenomenon of exploitation is often manifested in conditions of employment in which the worker not only has no guaranteed rights but is subjected to such an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear of the loss of his job that he is in practice deprived of any freedom of decision. This exploitation is also often seen in the fixing of work schedules which deprive the worker of the right to rest and provide for the spiritual good of his family. It is often associated with inadequate pay, together with a negligence in the areas of insurance and health assistance. Nor are there lacking cases in which the right to personal dignity is denied, especially with regard to women.³²

For now, there can be no conclusion. The world is still waiting to see just what the legacy of the Church's encounter with communism will be, and whether, for all its many advances, mankind is really any closer to finding a solution to the very same conflicts and tensions which confronted it two centuries ago.

Notes and References

- ¹ Pius VI, encyclical letter *Diu satis*, 15 May 1800, nos 14, 16, 25.
- ² Pius IX, encyclical letter *Qui pluribus*, 9 November 1846, in *Acta Pii IX*, vol. 1, p. 13.
- ³ From the first paragraph of *The Communist Manifesto*, published in February 1848.
- ⁴ Pius IX, encyclical letter *Quanta cura*, 8 December 1864, no. 4.
- ⁵ Quoted in Henri Daniel-Rops, *L'Église des Révolutions: un Combat pour Dieu* (Fayard, Paris, 1964), p. 83.
- ⁶ William Purdy, *The Church on the Move* (Hollis and Carter, London, 1966), p. 88; Klaus Schatz, *Vaticanum I 1869–1870. Band III: Unfehlbarkeitsdiskussion und Rezeption* (Ferdinand Schöningh, Paderborn, 1994), pp. 207–96.
- ⁷ Leo XIII, encyclical letter *Quod apostolici muneris*, 28 December 1878, nos. 6–7.
- ⁸ Leo XIII, encyclical letter *Rerum novarum*, 15 May 1891, no. 2.
- ⁹ Paul Misner, *Social Catholicism in Europe: From the Onset of Industrialisation to the First World War* (Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1991), p. 218.
- ¹⁰ Quoted in Bill McSweeney, *Roman Catholicism: The Search for Relevance* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1980), p. 61.
- ¹¹ Sando Agocs, *The Troubled Origins of the Catholic Labour Movement 1878–1914* (Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1988), pp. 126–31.
- ¹² McSweeney, *op. cit.*, p. 84.
- ¹³ Pius XI, encyclical letter *Quadragesimo anno*, 15 May 1931, no. 112.
- ¹⁴ Pius XI, encyclical letter *Dilectissima nobis*, 3 June 1933, no. 4.
- ¹⁵ Pius XI, *Quadragesimo anno*, no. 109.

- ¹⁶ *ibid.*, no. 120.
- ¹⁷ *ibid.*, nos. 112, 122.
- ¹⁸ Guenter Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany* (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 1964), p. 206.
- ¹⁹ Pius XI, encyclical letter *Divini Redemptoris*, 19 March 1937, no. 82.
- ²⁰ *ibid.*, no. 24.
- ²¹ *The Tablet*, 7 March 1997; Catholic News Service, 3 March 1997.
- ²² *Speech to Clergy, Religious and Committed Laity* (Holy See Press Office, Prague, 21 April 1990).
- ²³ John Paul II, encyclical letter *Laborem exercens*, 14 September 1981, nos. 7–8.
- ²⁴ From *The Communist Manifesto*, February 1848.
- ²⁵ Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej (CBOS), 21–25 March 1996, cited in Jonathan Luxmoore and Jolanta Babiuch, ‘Popierają, ale czy rozumieją?’, *Rzeczpospolita*, 11 June 1996.
- ²⁶ Pius XI, *Quadragesimo anno*, no. 114.
- ²⁷ Leo XIII, encyclical letters *Libertas praestantissimum*, 20 June 1888, no. 10, and *Rerum novarum*, nos. 1–2.
- ²⁸ Leo XIII, *Libertas praestantissimum*, nos. 10, 19–20.
- ²⁹ John Paul II, encyclical letter *Centesimus annus*, 1 May 1991, no. 35.
- ³⁰ *ibid.*, nos. 35, 52, 58.
- ³¹ *La Stampa*, 2 November 1993.
- ³² *Homily at Airport Mass* (Holy See Press Office, Legnica, 2 June 1997).