

Comment

“The name for that deep amazement at man’s worth and dignity is the Gospel”. This sentence alone puts *Redemptor Hominis* in a different class from other papal encyclicals. There have been greater ones (*Pacem in Terris*, for example, and *Populorum Progressio*) but what distinguishes the new encyclical is the boldness and freedom of the Pope’s handling of philosophical and theological concepts.

The document provides a coherent vision of Christianity as centred on man: “Christ, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully reveals man to himself.” Of course this way of putting things is hardly new (certainly not to readers of this journal) and the Pope is quite right to claim that he is simply carrying through the work of Vatican II, yet there is a freshness and new confidence here.

The ‘man’ at the centre of this vision is not abstractly defined but seen historically and (if the word may be allowed just this once) existentially in terms of his love and, more especially, his fears. The Gospel is seen as responding not simply to sin conceived moralistically, nor to a formless *angst*, but to the concrete perils threatening the human race today, the concrete manifestations of man’s strange urge to self-destruction: “All too soon what the manifold activity of man yields is not only subject to alienation in the sense that it is simply taken away from the person who produces it, but rather it turns against man himself, at least in part, through the indirect consequences of its effects returning on himself. It is, or can be, directed against him ... Man, therefore, increasingly lives in fear ... of an unimaginable self-destruction, compared with which all the cataclysms of history known to us seem to fade away. This gives rise to a question: Why is it that the power given to man from the beginning by which he was able to subdue the earth turns against himself, producing an understandable state of disquiet, of conscious or unconscious fear and of menace, which in various ways is being communicated to the whole of the present-day human family?”

The Pope goes on to outline the manifestations of this self-destructive tendency in the form of a critique of the capitalist ‘consumer civilisation’ in which, he says, man himself becomes “subject to manipulation in many ways – even if the manipulation is often not perceptible directly – through the whole of the organisation of community life, through the production system and through pressure from the means of social ‘communication’, so that man can become “the slave of things, the slave of economic systems, the slave of production, the slave of his own products.”

The consumer civilisation results inevitably, he says, in the unjust distribution of consumption itself: "So widespread is the phenomenon that it brings into question the financial, monetary, production and commercial mechanisms that, resting on various political pressures, support the world economy. These are proving incapable either of remedying the unjust social situations inherited from the past or of dealing with the urgent challenges and ethical demands of the present. By submitting man to tensions created by himself, dilapidating at an accelerated pace material and energy resources, and compromising the geophysical environment, these structures unceasingly make the areas of misery spread, accompanied by anguish, frustration and bitterness".

The Pope then speaks of the evil of class-structures, though he sees these rather in terms of consumption (rich and poor, whether individuals or nations) than in the more fundamental terms of the control of production, and calls for a 'daring creative' response to this problem. Curiously, at this point he suddenly makes reference to 'the laws of healthy competition'. Was this some high official of the EEC jogging his elbow, or is it, as seems more likely in the context, a reference to price-rigging in the terms of trade between rich and poor countries? In this context he also refers to the substitution of the arms trade for genuine international aid.

Of course there is a great deal more in this encyclical, and much we must leave to another occasion: there is criticism plainly aimed at the east European stalinists; they are compared to the old fascist "regimes that to all appearances were acting for a higher good, namely the good of the State, while history was to show that the good in question was only that of a certain party, which had been identified with the State", and, of course, there is protest about the religious intolerance still to be found in some professedly atheist regimes. As always, this criticism would come rather more gracefully if accompanied by some acknowledgement of the Catholic Church's own record in this respect, but I suppose you can't have everything.

What is most striking, though, is the self-confident spirit that pervades this letter. His warnings about errant theological trends, for example, are not uttered with Pope Paul's feelings of anxiety, but with a real sense that when the world is waiting for the Church to speak and act we have more important things to do than to "make of theology a simple collection of our own personal ideas". For the Pope, the Church has a sacred obligation to mankind "for the future of men on earth and therefore also for the course set for the whole of development and progress." Let us make a start.

H.McC.