

Comment

“The struggle against destitution, though urgent and necessary, is not enough. It is a question rather of building a world where every man, no matter what his race, religion or nationality, can live a fully human life, freed from servitude imposed on him by other men or by natural forces over which he has not sufficient control; a world where freedom is not an empty word.” This is what Pope Paul said ten years ago, and while nearly everybody else seems to be just waiting for the old man to resign or die, we would like before the decade is out to salute the memory of that great phase of his pontificate. *Populorum Progressio* was and is a great document; it is flawed by a central weakness but it marks a decisive point in the recent history of the Catholic Church—the point at which the papacy shed every last vestige of anti-socialism. In it the old capitalist order is explicitly condemned; neo-colonialism, racism, nationalism, the arms race, all are shown as fitting into a single broad pattern and a demand is made for “innovations that go deep”, for radical change. Ten years ago we read it through waiting for the conventional reservations about the socialist order, the standard attacks on the “extreme” left, but they are nowhere to be found. What we do find are statements that man “is responsible for his fulfilment as he is for his salvation” and that the gospel cannot be restricted any longer to a formula for individual goodness. “Civilisations are born, develop and die. But humanity is advancing along the path of history like the waves of a rising tide encroaching gradually on the shore.” History is no longer seen, as it generally was by the more intelligent Catholic conservatives as the fairly hostile environment which we must endure with patience and within which we must ‘make our souls’. History is seen as, at least potentially, man made; it is our mission to take control of history and to bring it to the Kingdom of God. The development of peoples is as intrinsic to the gospel as the development of the individual. The encyclical has a nuanced and dialectical approach to progress and in particular to industrialisation, seeing liberal capitalism as a phase only to be expected but urgently to be superseded. In one of his finest insights the Pope recognises that when injustice has been overcome, when oppressive social structures are no more and we have “passed from misery to the possession of necessities,” then men will be able to turn to the spirit of poverty. Greed and an obsessive concern with material

possessions he sees as characteristic of the world that capitalism has bequeathed to us: “avarice is the most evident form of moral underdevelopment.”

Populorum Progressio is not much remembered in the West for three reasons: firstly, the capitalist world was naturally not going to publicise it, secondly, very soon afterwards it became much more fun to talk about the pill and thirdly, those concerned with radical change found it lacking in one essential element. In one of Raymond Chandler’s stories, the hero rejects a District Attorney’s interpretation of a complex affair involving crime and politics: ‘what is wrong with your picture,’ he says, is ‘It doesn’t have enough fear in it.’ The encyclical is like that; there is plenty about suffering and hunger and illiteracy and general misery but nothing about the almost certain fate of those who seek to change things, nothing about the bitter struggle waged by the capitalist world through its agents, the armed forces, the CIA, the SAS and all the rest, against even those who are wholly non-violent in their opposition to “oppressive social structures”. Sheila Cassidy, Steve Biko and Helder Camara have no place here, still less have the thousands of obscure people tortured to death to preserve what the Pope calls the “empty word” of capitalist freedom.

The encyclical commends the “struggle against injustice” but does not spell it out. There is no mention of the class struggle and nothing about the urgent need to organise the power of the workers as the only conceivable agent of radical change. The Pope naively observes that capitalists are sometimes “not lacking in social sensitivity in their own countries; why then do they return to the inhuman principles of individualism when they operate in less developed countries?” That the power of organised labour might have something to do with it does not seem to occur to him.

And so the encyclical fell into obscurity, disliked by capitalists, found irrelevant by revolutionaries and soon obscured by all the excited chatter about sex. Nevertheless, for those of us who think the development of thinking in the Church itself important, it marked an encroachment of the tide which will be permanent; there can be no return to the mindless anti-socialism of the past, and for this we owe a great debt to Pope Paul VI.

H.McC.