

“THE MOST DANGEROUS RADICAL OF THEM ALL”

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THE city in which I live has a daily newspaper called. . . . Factually, it gives our . . . population an exhaustive report of the state of our various markets and other financial interests. Editorially, it specializes in economic heresy hunting. It can ferret out a potential “red” from beneath the most unlikely disguises. One day this paper announced that it had uncovered the most dangerous radical of them all—the red who would come closer to upsetting the present social appletart than any Stalin. This most menacing in its extensive list of menacers the . . . identified as Pope Pius XI.

“The cause of this financial newspaper’s agitation was, of course, the publication of the Papal encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*.”

The man who wrote the above account is a radical critic, who thinks Pope Pius’ social doctrine too conservative. He is reporting the alarm of a conservative critic, who thinks the doctrine too radical!

The reader probably is amazed that two critics should come to such diverse conclusions about the same fact but, if he is experienced, he will recognize that he is dealing with the fruit of prejudice, not of reason.

Pius XI is not too conservative, neither is he too radical. He is just too just to suit extremists who want the whole pie or nothing, an attitude which is not at all new in human affairs and which requires no new moral principles for its solution.

The truth of the matter is that some persons have too much private property, every tittle of which they mean to keep; others have no private property and they look with covetous eyes on the possessions of those who have. One class would keep all and the other would take all. Justice is entirely forgotten. Hence, the Pope, mankind’s moral teacher, recalls to the minds of men their mutual rights and obligations—and his sweet reasonableness is denounced by hot-heads in both factions!

This is the day of “The New Deal.” Catholics should know what their Church teaches in regard to private property, that they

may not be unduly alarmed should progressive but legitimate measures be taken for the common weal; on the other hand, that they may detect any proposals which violate the just rights of any section of the community.

The validity of the *right* to own private property was recognized in the Old Law as well as in the New. It was defended by the Fathers of the Church. The early Christian Church formally condemned heretical sects, such as the Apostolics and the Pelagians, which denied the right to own private property or tried to force upon the entire Church the system of community property. Recent Popes have been most active in the defence of the rights of private ownership against the attacks of Socialists and Communists. Their arguments for the most part have been based upon St. Thomas' treatment of the question.

The Angelic Doctor reasons that man because he has an intellect and a will may turn to his use the objects which he finds in nature; thus he can provide for his present needs and the future security of himself and his dependents. This subordination of the lower order of creation to the superior being, man, is in accordance with the Divine plan of creation.¹ On this point reason is confirmed by Divine revelation. In the Book of Genesis God reveals to us His plan of creation: "And he said: Let us make man to our image and likeness: and let him have dominion over the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the air, and the beasts, and the whole earth, and every creeping creature that moveth upon the earth."²

Thus it is perfectly natural for man to make use of the goods of the earth. But why is private and exclusive possession of these goods preferable to common tenure? Man derives his *right* to external property sufficient for his needs as a necessary consequence of his nature, but it is not *absolutely* necessary to fulfill man's needs that he own private property. As a matter of fact, some men are able to live reasonable human lives under the rule of community property. However, it is St. Thomas' teaching³ and the doctrine of the Church that private ownership is morally necessary for the human race as a whole because of man's degradation as a result of original sin. If men could be depended upon to act with justice and charity towards their fellow men, perhaps common ownership would be practicable. But considering men as they actually are—lazy for the most part,

¹ *Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 66, a. 1.

² *Gen.*, i, 26.

³ *Summa Theol.* II-II, q. 66, a. 2, ad 1.

selfish, often vicious—it is unreasonable to entrust entirely the present and future security of the individual to the callous conscience of the community as a whole. As a result, the right of private ownership has been secured by incorporation in the fundamental laws of all peoples.

Basing his judgments on the experience of the race throughout history, St. Thomas urges that private ownership is necessary because men are actuated more by self-interest than by community interest, so that if property were held in common each individual would be inclined to leave the difficult and unpleasant tasks to the other fellow; secondly, human relations are more orderly when each individual has a personal interest in certain definite possessions: the worst confusion would result from a system wherein the individual is uncertain as to just what is in his care; thirdly, interminable quarrels and dissensions would arise where each individual is conscious of an equal right with every other individual to all the property of the community. Even under the system of private ownership, strife and bitterness frequently arise over questions of ownership.

Furthermore, the good of society is more efficaciously advanced when the individual knows that assiduous application to his work and the consequent greater fruitfulness of his efforts will redound to his own personal benefit, to the greater ease and comfort of his family now and even after his death. A system of community tenure would stifle initiative and woefully decrease production.

As a last consideration, but by no means the least, human liberty would be throttled and human genius nipped in the bud under a system of community property where man is a mere cog in the great industrial machine; where the dispensing of the necessities of life and the allocation of a particular type of work to each individual is in the hands of a bureaucrat who would be more concerned to experiment with his theories than to protect the rights of the individual, and who would strive more to please his political clique than to render justice to all.

All human experience confirms our claim that a system of private ownership is more practicable than a system of community ownership. The only successful attempt to live according to the principles of community ownership has been that of religious communities, undertaken under the most favorable conditions, namely, the voluntary acceptance of the system by each and every individual for a supernatural end. All other attempts have failed in a comparatively short time—when the zeal and the enthusiasm of the pro-

motors cooled and the human vices of avarice and covetousness came into play.

The question now arises: "Is man's right to private property absolute under every circumstance so that it may never be curtailed or limited?"

The answer is in the negative. Man is not an isolated individual, living of himself, by himself, and for himself alone. He is a social being, living a community life, and is an integral part of that extra-individual moral being called the State. If man desires to enjoy the benefits of social life, he must be prepared to assume some of the burdens and limitations required for the common good. It is the function of the State to advance this common welfare, to protect and defend each individual and each particular class from the unjust aggression of other individuals and classes within the State.

In pursuance of these functions, the State may exercise its right of eminent domain over the private property of any individual, not for the State's own profit but only when such action is necessary to promote the common welfare. In such cases, individual good must be subordinated to common good, but the State must make adequate remuneration to the individual.

A sovereign State has power in the interest of the common good to limit the amount of private possessions in the hands of any individual. It may accomplish this directly by statute, or indirectly by a system of progressive taxation.

When the citizenry of a State or any section of it is in dire distress which cannot be relieved by ordinary means, may the State adjust without compensation the use and ownership of the surplus possessions of the wealthy? In other words, may the State impose a capital levy on surplus wealth when the wealthy fail in their obligation of relieving the dire necessity of the poor? Provided equitable impositions are made, it seems that the State not only may do so but should do so.

It is evident that private ownership is not an end in itself; it is a means to an end, namely, that man may have for himself and his dependents present sustenance and future security. When affairs come to such a pass that the social obligations of men are entirely ignored, and the salutary right of private ownership is so misused as to render impossible the enjoyment of that right itself by a large section of the community, manifestly the *right* of private property is a mockery and in fact no longer fulfills the reason for its existence. Under these circumstances, it is the duty of the State to revivify this

right and make it universally effective by elimination of abuses, even should this require the adjustment of private fortunes. The adjustment must be made equitably in proportion to the wealth of single individuals.

Such action by the State will prove beneficial to all in the long run. It will eliminate much disorderly conduct and the possibility of a revolution. Every individual in extreme necessity may take sufficient to sustain himself wherever he finds it; a million individuals in extreme necessity may do likewise. It seems then that public good and public order would be more effectively preserved if the State made an equitable imposition on the surplus wealth of the rich for distribution to the needy, thus avoiding the multiplication of violent crimes and the danger of developing a class of chronic sneak-thieves and highway robbers.

The above conclusion, of prime moment at the present time, seems to accord with St. Thomas' views on private property. The Angelic Doctor, in his article dealing with the right of private ownership, defends the individual's *right* to acquire and dispose of private property; but with regard to the *use* of this same property, he says: "Man ought to possess external things, not as his own, but as common, so that he is ready to communicate them to others in their need."⁴

Finally, Pope Pius XI sums up and elucidates the age-old teaching of the Church, a teaching which is neither ultra-conservative nor radical but the product of justice and common sense. That this is true will be abundantly evident to the unprejudiced mind from a consideration of the following extracts from *Quadragesimo Anno*: "It follows from the two-fold character of ownership, which we have termed individual and social, that men must take into account in this matter not only their own advantage but also the common good. To define in detail these duties, when the need occurs and when the natural law does not do so, is the function of the government. Provided that the natural and divine law be observed, the public authority, in view of the common good, may specify more accurately what is licit and what is illicit for property owners in the use of their possessions. Moreover, Leo XIII had wisely taught that—'the defining of private possession had been left by God to man's industry and to the laws of individual peoples.'

⁴ *Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 66, a. 2.

"History proves that the right of ownership, like other elements of social life, is not absolutely rigid. . . .

"It is plain, however, that the State may not discharge this duty in an arbitrary manner. Man's natural *right* of possessing and transmitting property by inheritance must be kept intact and cannot be taken away from man by the State.

"The right to possess private property is derived from nature, not from man; and the State has by no means the right to abolish it, but only to control its use and bring it into harmony with the interests of the public good.

"However, when civil authority adjusts ownership to meet the needs of the public good it acts not as an enemy, but as the friend of private owners; for thus it effectively prevents the possession of private property, intended by nature's Author in His Wisdom for the sustaining of human life, from creating intolerable burdens and so rushing to its own destruction. It does not therefore abolish, but protects private ownership, and far from weakening the right of private property, it gives it new strength."⁵

How moderate, just and equitable is this doctrine! Avoiding the selfish extremes of Bolshevism and unrestrained Individualism, it offers the principles which ultimately must be adopted if men are to live in peace and concord and harmony with one another.

⁵ *Quadragesimo Anno*. N. C. W. C. Edition, pp. 17, 18.