

WHY SOCIAL JUSTICE

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CAMPAIGN of social justice is being vigorously pushed to-day. It is an attempt to popularize a subject that is not new in America. The periodicals of 1912, 1913 and 1914 are an evidence of this. During the day of trust suits (trust-busting), public opinion was against "big business" and writers stressed social justice. They pointed out the flagrant violations that were sins against the common good.

A decade previous to that, Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical *Graves de Communi*¹ had brought to the attention of the world the principles of social justice that are older than the Church itself, but without giving them the name of social justice. It was the present Pontiff, Pius XI, who in his characteristic fashion employed the term in such a way that it became a catch word, apt and pungent in meaning.

The doctrine embodied in this term represents what St. Thomas taught in his orderly and summary way. To ascertain the meaning of social justice, it is necessary to study his writings on legal and general justice, since all three are identically the same in principle. St. Thomas lived in the age of monarchical government. His treatise on political and social philosophy, based on the nature of the state, was applied to his conception of the ideal state, that is, a limited monarchy. The principles, however, can be applied equally well to any form of government.

He speaks of legal or ruling justice and says that it resides primarily in the ruler, and secondarily in the subject.² Hence it binds the ruler to promote the welfare of the masses by doing all that is conducive to the common welfare; secondly, it enjoins the subject not only to take an active part in procuring the common good, but also to place no hindrance to the promotion of the good of the state.

¹ *Christian Democracy*, Jan. 18, 1901.

² *Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 58, a. 6.

The duties of citizens to act according to social justice devolve upon each individual according to the dictates of the natural law. Because his nature demands it, man must ordinarily belong to society. His dependence upon other individuals is more marked than that of creatures in the animal kingdom.³ More helpless in infancy than the animal, and more defenceless in life than the beast, man depends upon fellow creatures for food and protection. As an intellectual being, man cannot attain his perfection without the aid of others. In the main, it is the natural perfection of man that social intercourse brings to maturity. For reasons of development, man belongs to society.⁴ In the development of society, he discovers his own development. Hence man finds he must promote the common good of all in society if he expects to further his own development.

Society in which man attains his spiritual and material well-being is composed of individuals, free individuals, who join together according to the dictates of the social nature to perfect their personalities. Contrary to Rousseau's notion that man is non-social and joins society just for what he can get out of it by way of personal aggrandizement, man becomes a member of society because his nature demands it. Although he can never be indifferent to embracing society, he does so freely. Acceptance of society is not a transference of rights. Moral compulsion forces man to perfect himself by living in company with others.

Adam and Eve, joined together by God, formed the first society. To perfect their nature, man and woman had to beget children, as postulated by the faculties for that purpose. Ordinarily man is motivated by two ends, the preservation of his own being, and then that of the race. The first he never can fail to insure; the second is not so necessary. If the perpetuity of the human race can be safely guaranteed by others, an individual may forego the assumption of marital responsibilities to assume the obligations of a higher state perfectly in accord with right reason.

Individuals, therefore, constitute the society of the family, and the family is the unit in the formation of the state. The individual seeks in the wider field of opportunity afforded by society that which the limited scope of family life cannot supply. His educational opportunities in the family circle are limited. Hence man must seek intellectual development outside of it. A student set on economics

³ *De Regimine, lib. I, cap. 1.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

must have others who will do the manual labor⁵ and supply his food, while the student in turn contributes tabulated information which aids in the better development of the resources of man.

To keep order and to see that the desires of each one are satisfied is the duty of the ruler of the state. Men appoint him to promote the common good. The citizens in turn strive to attain the purpose for which the group was founded. The individual by deriving vast good from society owes something to it, and on the other hand can demand something from society for what he gives to it.

Ordinarily a man is not directly benefited by what the state does for him. Yet indirectly, by promoting the welfare of the nation at large, benefits filter down to the individual from the indirect influence for good of the grades of society that are above the individual. Hence if Congress passes a bill approving of the institutions of labor, the first to feel its effect is the labor organization, then those affiliated with it. Or in a case of legislation with regard to education: first, it is the school, then the child, and then his family; finally, society itself is benefited by a salutary measure.

Legal justice directs all actions to the common good. As charity causes all human acts to gravitate toward Divine Good, so legal or social justice 'sub-orders' the same acts to the common good.⁶

"Like the sun existing completely distinct from other beings, and playing in their regard the role of a universal cause in developing them with its lumination, and in transforming them with its heat, social justice has for its function the promotion to the common good of the acts of all the other virtues. But that does not militate against the fact that social justice is a special virtue, for it has as its proper object the common good distinct from the proper objects of the other virtues."⁷

The common good embraces the sum of goods of the material and moral orders which man can procure in a well organized society. What constitutes the proper good of society and the common patrimony of its members falls into a threefold classification:

1. The moral forces which act directly on souls and contribute more efficaciously to the formation of the minds and hearts of the members of society.

2. The material forces of the state, placed at the service of the moral forces, which must not be confused with the private resources

⁵ *De Regimine*, lib. I, cap. 1.

⁶ *Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 58, a. 6.

⁷ M. S. Gillet, O.P. *Mélanges Thomistes*, 1923.

of the individuals. These are notably the facilities of exchange and of "relations," the division of taxes, guarantee of sanitation, and the security indispensable to the normal activity of citizens.

3. The power of public authority placed at the disposal of the moral and material forces.

These three united forces ought to assure (a) to all individuals the opportunity to practice their rights; (b) to the greater number, the facility of developing their personalities; (c) to the more gifted the means of utilizing profitably their exceptional gifts.⁸

⁸G. C. Rutten, O.P., *La doctrine sociale de l'Église*, p. 74.