

Comment

On Easter Day the Bishop of Durham told listeners on BBC Radio 4 that Mrs Thatcher's proposed changes in social security benefits were 'verging on the wicked'. He was, of course, absolutely right. So, for that matter, is the poll tax which she is bringing in 'verging on the wicked'. And some of the clauses of her Education Reform Bill, although the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales do not use quite such strong language. But we are not going to waste space on analysing the wrongdoings of Mrs Thatcher. Plenty of others have done that.

What *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, the Pope's latest encyclical, makes us realise (if we haven't realised it already) is that there is never going to be a universally acceptable answer to the tired old question whether clergymen should meddle in politics, whether bishops and publications like this one should fire at Mrs Thatcher. Mrs Thatcher's own views on the subject are known, and the Pope himself has said that priests should keep out of government posts. But this major document of his on development, issued to mark the twentieth anniversary of Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio*, contains a 'theological reading of modern problems' (nn. 35—40) which reveals only too clearly how big in fact is the gap in thinking between Mrs Thatcher and John Paul II.

Surprisingly big. It is hard to understand how such an ardent supporter of organisations like Opus Dei could promulgate a text like this one. It is not, of course, 'Marxist'. Nobody with a knowledge of the team that helped to draft *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* could call it that. Denial of the freedom 'to take initiatives in economic matters' is one of the forms of impoverishment of the human person which it calls us to resist (n. 15).

No, the difference is more basic. Mrs Thatcher has said that there is no such thing as 'society', that there are 'only individuals and their families'. The Pope, on the other hand, is commanding us to recognize that we do not belong merely to our narrow private worlds. And this, surely, is the fundamental reason why even those of us deeply involved in Church life can—and must—go on commenting on what is happening in politics?

In this latest encyclical the Pope tries to put a new shot of life in a word that has been ailing lately, 'solidarity'. It is, he says, 'not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far', but a recognition of our interdependence 'sensed as a system determining relationships in the contemporary world,

in its economic, cultural, political and religious elements, and accepted as a moral category'. Solidarity is, he says, 'a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good' in the awareness that 'we are all really responsible for all' (n. 38). It is 'based upon the principle that the goods of creation are meant for all' (n. 39).

Yet how likely is it that many of us will come to see the world in this way? As the Pope admits himself, in the poor South of this world full development is being hindered by an 'all-consuming desire for profit' and 'thirst for power' (predominantly of the rich North) which are the very opposite of what the Gospel commands. He speaks about the world being subject to 'structures of sin' (n. 36). Not only Marxists are inclined to think that we are socially conditioned, and that we will only lose our greed and craving for power if our society changes. But the Pope disagrees.

Social sins, he said in 1984, in *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, are 'the result of the accumulation and concentration of many personal sins'. Structures of sin are 'always linked to the concrete acts of individuals who introduce these structures, consolidate them and make them difficult to remove' (n. 36).

It's a bit more complicated than that, isn't it? All the same, even if we think that John Paul II may be a little weak on social analysis, his insistence on the *moral* aspect of authentic development, and of the search for world peace that goes with it, is saying something important to us. The hopes for development, so lively twenty years ago, 'today appear very far from being realised' (n. 12). 'Whatever affects the dignity of individuals and peoples, such as authentic development, cannot be reduced to a "technical problem",' he insists. And so, he argues, the Church has something to say on the subject (n. 41). 'At stake is the dignity of the human person' (n. 47).

We are talking, then, about salvation, not just about a personal political inclination. The option for the poor, the changes of political and economic perspectives, the work of solidarity, are imperative. And we are *all* involved, we all have a responsibility, if only by the way we live.

This is unwelcome news for politically right-wing Catholics ... but for some left-wing ones too. For, if John Paul is correct, you are not likely to achieve much by being high-minded about what is happening in South Africa or Central America or even in the deprived parts of Thatcher's Britain, if at the same time you are living a messy selfish private life.

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