

SOCIAL JUSTICE OUTLOOK IN 1937

by Rev. Raymond A. McGowan

The prospects for social justice in the next year or so depend on what Americans decide about three things. Social justice cannot mean a mere temporary growth of prosperity coupled with some further growth in employment and then followed, as in the past, by another crash. Instead it means a country moving along on a steady keel, one producing regularly from its resources and its human abilities all that it can to meet the needs of its people and distributing the goods regularly so that the people will have them. To that end it needs a people determined to establish social justice and it needs a people organized in their industries and professions and using their government to obtain a full output, steady work and a full distribution of its production.

The prospects depend upon whether Americans will become determined to establish social justice, become organized to establish it and use their governmental units to further it. In all three respects, there is grave reason to doubt that we shall run fast enough to keep even in the race. In fact, the determining majority of us may decide for the time not to run at all.

Shall the American people become converts to social justice? Shall even all Catholics become converts to social justice? Certainly great numbers of Catholics are lukewarm, or are even renegades to the cause of social justice in the United States and the world. Many others are so confused in their ideas and their emotions that they follow every wind of strange doctrine which promises to blow a rain before nightfall.

Catholics in the United States have the opportunity to stand in the vanguard of a sound transition to a new American life. Of us in particular the words of Pius XI upon this very matter have a special force. "The destiny of the human family lies, with the assistance of Divine Grace, in our hands." The time has passed when most of us were immigrants. We can now speak with full knowledge of American life. Bigotry has died down immeasurably. We are in nearly every walk of life. Our Church provides us the channels of grace. It teaches us the saving principles of social justice and the guiding lines for attaining it. We are more than twenty million strong.

Yet many Catholics still believe in that individualism which holds, as Pius XI said in condemning it, that "in free competition" economic life possesses "a principle of self-direction" for the common good. Others hold that the suzerainty of the wealthy, the great executives and the banks bring social justice, even if Pius XI in assailing it said that the "economic dictatorship" could "still less" than competition be the "true and effective guiding principle." Others pin their faith to one or other had tradition in American governmental life. Others want to abandon the city to self-destruction as hopeless and turn their faces towards artisan-ship and the farm. Others insist that a change in the money or credit system is all we need. Others hold up consumers' organization as the solely necessary means to economic welfare.

In the maze of voices the thing necessary is for Catholics to turn to Pius XI's "Reconstructing the Social Order" and Leo XIII's "Condition of Labor." Probably more than upon anything else the future of social justice in the United States depends upon Catholics' understanding Catholic social teaching. They can, I think, then be depended on, with the help of the Sacraments and the Mass of which they faithfully partake, to do their part in practice and to make known to non-Catholics the social teaching of the Church. The most important way to learn Catholic social teaching is through lay organization working with and under the Church, that is to say, the organization of the laity called Catholic Action.

If this analysis is true, the first condition of a great advance in social justice in 1937 is the growth of Catholic Action in the United States

and an extension of its work of "imbu-ing Catholics" with the principles of Catholic social teaching and "training them for the Apostolate" of social justice.

The advance or retrogression of Social Justice in 1937 depends, secondly, upon whether or not American labor will organize, whether American farmers will organize and whether American labor and American employers (who are already widely organized) will get together to guide peacefully the life of their industries for the good of all engaged therein and the good of the public. For the "social order" of the title of Pius XI's great Encyclical, which, with the help of government, is depended on to obtain social justice, is an economic system made up of self-governing, organized industries, federated and working for the common good. As an approach to this order farmers must organize to guide agriculture. Likewise, as an approach, labor must organize in free and effective unions for collective bargaining. Those employers not yet organized, those business firms not yet organized, those professional men and women not yet organized, should likewise enter the organizations of their class or service or profession.

In other words, the second condition of social justice in 1937 is a vast movement for the self-organization of the American people around their work. And the crucial phase here is whether or not American labor will organize and whether or not American employers will deal with the unions. If peaceful collective negotiation can start becoming the rule in the United States, the way is open for a quick advance to the stage in which organized employees will cooperate in the general direction of their industries for the common good.

Here is an issue greater than all the others in American economic life. Labor will organize and it has the right to organize. If labor unions are attacked and crushed, the outlet of revolution. Even if labor unions are met grudgingly, the road is open only to strikes which grow in bitterness as they feed on more strikes. If the labor unions do not seek more than mere bargaining, then they meet the employers solely on matters about which they and the employers differ and the logical development again is a perpetual and increasing fight. The tragic alternatives in any case are a class-conscious victory by employers which in its heightened form is now called Fascism, or a class-conscious victory by communist-leaders among labor, and the outcome is an attempt at a communist society or submission and defeat by spineless employees in a decaying country.

This is what makes the conflict in the labor movement over industrial versus craft unions so important. The craft unions organize craftsmen. But the majority of American labor are not craftsmen. They need to organize for a measure of social justice now and for a steady growth in social justice in the future. Traditionally American labor unions, even if they have fought many a bitter battle for recognition, have been unlike almost all labor movements elsewhere over the world. They have been animated by the desire to collaborate and cooperate with employers. But they can change. With the necessary growth of unions among the semi-skilled and unskilled and the factory operatives, they can change into non-cooperative and fighting unions. Or, they can move strongly and surely in the way they have been going. The issue depends, in the last analysis, upon whether American employers (helped greatly by Catholic employers) will accept labor unionism and whether Catholic social teaching will so imbue Catholic labor, and through it all labor, with the spirit of a perpetual drive to organize, to negotiate a measure of social justice and to advance step by step into a position of cooperation with the trade associations of the employers in the general direction of their industries.

Emphasis is laid upon the organization of city labor. Of less importance but of vast importance just the same is the organization of farmers. It is important because of the sheer

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weight of farming in the United States, the wretched condition of American farmers, the growing tenantry among them and their weakness in selling their products and buying their needs. But their organization is of somewhat less importance, although essential, than that of the organization of city labor because the condition of city labor is much worse and the way America will go depends mostly upon whether city labor wishes, or is forced solely to fight, or succumb, or cooperates.

1937 depends, also, upon what kind of governments are elected both federally and in the States and what

program of action they are committed to. In Catholic social teaching, government has a great deal to do regarding economic life and relations. It should act of itself to regulate economic life in the cause of justice and social justice. Moreover government should help to bring into existence the self-governing organized economic democracy that the Encyclical advocates, and then help it to function. The Encyclical is definitely pro-government.

The Encyclical says, in condemnation, that individualism, "long hampered effective interference by governments" and did so because individualism is "ignorant or forgetful of the social and moral aspect of economic matters." This goes to the heart of the issue, even if the old argument for non-interference in business competition has been carried over now to a time of monopoly and concentrated wealth and power. The Encyclical adds many other general and specific rules on government intervention but this point covers it: Economic life has a social and moral aspect as well as an individual one, i. e. all work and all wealth exist for the good of others as well as the individual worker and owner; and a very reason for government's existence is that it enforce the moral obligations of work and wealth so that they will attain the common good, or, in the terms of the Constitution, the general welfare.

Persons may differ upon whether this man or that law or this form of execution of the law is the best way to live up to the principle. But the principle cannot be denied. The Encyclical, in amplifying its general principles, specifically advocates protective labor legislation; laws to make property serve the common good, including the exact type of private ownership; laws to help make the living wage universal; governmental action, joining with employers and labor, to overcome bad management or unjust prices or other burdens which prevent fair-wages and, in case of their failure, to care for the workers in other ways; laws to help bring into existence the social order which the Encyclical advocates, and then to continue "directing, watching, stimu-

lating and restraining" it so as to attain social justice completely; laws to regulate competition and the new dictatorship held by great wealth, investment-control and finance; a measure of public ownership; international economic cooperation.

The traditional American anti-governmentalist hasn't an inch in the Encyclical to stand on; and the reason is that Catholic social teaching wants people to do the morally right and economically wise thing for the country, deliberately and directly day by day while, at the root, the anti-governmentalist has been holding that things come out right when everybody tries to do wrong.

We are these years changing from an older America to a newer one. With the coming of economic organization on a vast scale and with concentrated wealth and power the older competitive America has already gone. The federal, state and city governments have something to say about whether it will be a better America or a worse America. Social justice in 1937, and for years to come, depends upon decisions now to be made.

The decision reaches so far as a very change in the powers of the federal and state governments. From Supreme Court declarations, it now appears clear that neither the federal nor state governments can fulfill the functions of government which the Encyclical demands. And so the final point, in the prospect for 1937, is whether or not, apart from questions of men and details of policies, the American people will come to possess governmental power of the kind needed for government to do its part in the promotion of the general welfare.

At the beginning doubt was expressed whether we shall do enough quickly enough. The prospect of Social Justice in 1937 depends upon the advance of Catholic Action and economic organization, upon the elections and a Constitutional change. Upon one of these can there be sure prophecy. But if we do not act, the blood shall be on our heads; "for with the assistance of Divine Grace the destiny of the human family lies in our hands."

THE END

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