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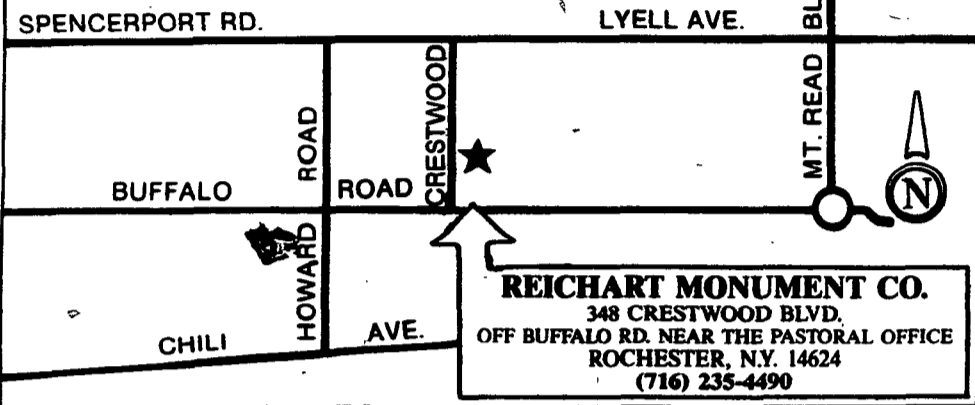
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Columnists

The social thought of John Paul II

By Father Richard P. McBrien

Pope Pius XII, one of the most prolific of modern popes, never produced a single social encyclical in the 19 years he served as Bishop of Rome.

It is all the more remarkable, therefore, that Pope John Paul II, who has been in office only half that time, has already produced three major social encyclicals: *Redemptor Hominis* (Redeemer of Man) in 1979, *Laborem Exercens* (On Human Work) in 1981, and *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (The Social Concern of the Church) this past February.

More remarkable still is the capacity of politically conservative Catholics to have thus far ignored or explained away their favorite pope's "lapses" on matters of economic and social justice, and human rights.

Politically conservative people do not take to the notion that the goods of this earth are meant for everyone, that no one has an absolute right to what they own. As far as they're concerned, that's socialism.

But Pope John Paul II teaches otherwise. In his most recent encyclical, he states it as a "principle that the goods of creation are meant for all" (Nos. 39 and 42).

Private property, he insists, is "under a 'social mortgage,' which means that it has an intrinsically social function, based upon and justified precisely by the principle of the universal destination of goods" (No. 42).

He made the same point in *Laborem Exercens* (No. 14), and, in fact, called it "the first principle of the whole ethical and social order, namely the principle of the common use of goods" (No. 19).

One of the greatest injustices in the world today, he declares, is the "unequal distribution of the means of subsistence originally meant for everybody, and thus also an unequal distribution of the benefits deriving from them" (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, Nos. 9 and 28).

This dangerous gap between rich and poor affects nations as well as individuals. Just as rich individuals have an obligation in justice to the poor, so do rich nations have an obligation in justice to poor nations (No. 39).

Pope John Paul II is fond of the parable of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16:19-31. He cited it in his powerful *Yankee Stadium* homily in 1979, in his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis* (No. 16), and again in his latest en-

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cyclical (No. 42).

The rich nations of the world, he says, are like the rich man of the Gospel and the poor nations are Lazarus, the beggar at our gates.

The pope obviously intends the parallel as a warning, because in the biblical account the rich man finds himself eventually in Hell, begging a few drops of water from Lazarus's finger.

John Paul II also challenges our belief that we have a right to spend what we have in any way we please. The pope calls this the sin of consumerism, and he applies it to nations as well as to individuals.

His criticism is even stronger in his latest encyclical, where he declares the "the Church's social doctrine adopts a 'critical attitude towards both liberal capitalism and Marxist collectivism'" (No. 21).

The pope's favored social programs are those which conservatives have opposed and resisted for years: unemployment benefits, health and accident insurance, guaranteed pensions, safety regulations governing the workplace, labor unions, the right to strike, the rights of the handicapped in employment, and those of immigrant workers (*Laborem Exercens*, Nos. 18-23).

He is a forceful critic of the arms race because it deprives the poor of needed resources (*Redemptor Hominis*, No. 16), a committed environmentalist (No. 15), and an uncompromising advocate of human rights (No. 17) — as "authoritarian" politicians discover when the pope comes to pay a call in their countries.

Some Catholics believe that being a true and faithful Catholic means accepting everything the pope teaches — no ifs, ands, or buts.

But when the popes, including John Paul II, teach about social justice and human rights, the rule doesn't seem to apply. Why not?

Perhaps they got dispensations.

The voyage of the 'Two Maidens'

By Cindy Bassett

From the ship's log of the "Two Maidens," as detailed by its captain: location — the Island of Malta.

Three months have passed since we were shipwrecked here. How we landed on Malta in the first place was bizarre. I've spent most of my life at sea, guiding the course of a ship by the position of the stars. Paul's life is controlled by his God with something called faith. When we first arrived here, Paul healed the governor's father in the name of Jesus. After that, the rest of the people of Malta began bringing their sick to him. He has cured all of them. But let me start at the beginning of the strange tale.

Day 1: location — Myra, Province of Lycia.

We docked briefly here on our voyage from Egypt to our final destination, Rome. The "Two Maidens" was carrying a full cargo and more than 200 passengers. When I was approached by Julius, a Roman centurion, about taking on more passengers, I was reluctant to grant permission. These passengers were prisoners who were being taken to Rome by soldiers, and I feared trouble. But Roman law prevented me from denying the request. The "Two Maidens" sailed from Myra with a total of 276 passengers and crew.

Day 3: location — Fair Havens.

We encountered some rough sailing en route. I noticed one prisoner, Paul, who seemed different from the rest. I asked Julius what Paul had done. "He preaches about Jesus Christ as the Son of God. The Jewish leaders, who opposed his teaching, had him arrested on some false charge," Julius replied. "Paul is a Roman citizen, and intends to appeal his case to Caesar." I thought no more about Paul for the moment. But as we prepared to leave Fair Havens, Paul came to me directly. "I fear trouble ahead if you sail on to Rome," he said. "There could be loss of cargo, shipwreck, even death if you continue." Strange words, I thought at the time. The ship's owner and the rest of the crew dismissed the warning.

Day 4 — 17: location — unknown.

No one suspected what was ahead of us as

The Bible Corner

we left Fair Havens. We were sailing close to shore with light winds guiding us, when suddenly the weather changed abruptly and gale winds forced us far out to sea. The crew tossed out all of our cargo in a vain attempt to steady the ship. For days, not a single star was visible to direct our course. Death seemed certain, yet Paul was strangely calm. "The ship may be destroyed, but not one life shall be lost. As I was praying last night, an angel of God appeared," he told me. "If we trust God now, we shall all be saved." There was nothing more to be done.

Day 18: location — somewhere near land.

It is somewhat calmer at midnight. The sailors have sounded and advise me that we approach land. Because they fear being driven onto rocks, they start to abandon the ship. "We will die unless everyone stays," Paul told me. Then he brought out food for everyone. "No one has eaten for 14 days," he said. "Come and nourish yourselves. Have faith in God's promise."

Day 19: location — the Island of Malta.

We are almost to shore when the "Two Maidens" hits a sandbar and starts to break apart. "Kill the prisoners," someone yelled, but Julius refused to allow it. Those who can swim head for shore. Others hold onto planks of wood from the ship and float to the island. When Paul reaches Malta, the first thing he does is thank God. All 276 of us are alive, just as God has promised.

Scripture reference: Acts, Chapter 27-28:10. Meditation: "Call to Me when trouble comes. I will save you and you will praise me" Psalms 50:15.