

Some still not straight on encyclical

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

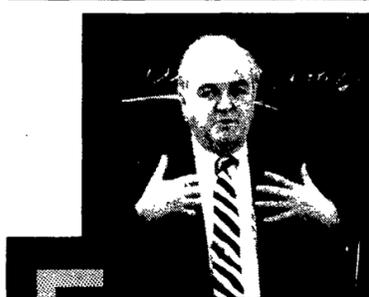
One of these days some Catholic business executive is actually going to sit down and read Pope John Paul II's social encyclical, *Centesimus Annus* ("The Hundredth Year"), and fly into a fit of anger — not at the pope, but at those who coned him into thinking that the encyclical posed no problem for him.

When asked recently by an interviewer for a conservative newsletter if he felt "vindicated" by *Centesimus Annus*, William F. Buckley Jr. replied, "Oh, yes, I certainly do. It seems to be an extraordinarily important encyclical, which straightens out the extent to which left-minded social Catholics attempted to take *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo* (sic) *Anno*, so I think it an enormously important statement"

Buckley is a busy man. Perhaps he read *Centesimus Annus* too quickly. Or perhaps he relied on the word of the neo-conservative trinity who assured him, in simultaneous op-ed pieces in three major newspapers, that the encyclical really was right down his political alley.

What follows are just a few of the teachings one who actually reads the encyclical will find in it.

- Regarding unions: The right to form trade unions and other associations is "a natural right of the human being, which therefore precedes his or her incorporation into political society" (n. 7; see also n. 15).



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

- Regarding government intervention on behalf of those in need: "the more that individuals are defenseless within a given society, the more they require the care and concern of others, and in particular the intervention of governmental authority" (n. 10; see also n. 48).

- Regarding the "preferential option for the poor:" there is "continuity within the church of the so-called 'preferential option for the poor,' an option which I defined as a 'special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity'" (n. 11, see also n. 57).

- On economic rights: "social security, pensions, health insurance and compensation in the case of accidents, are to be seen within the framework of greater respect for the rights

of workers" (n. 15).

- Regarding capitalism: "In spite of the great changes which have taken place in the more advanced societies, the human inadequacies of capitalism and the resulting domination of things over people are far from disappearing" (n. 33; see also n. 42).

- Regarding government regulation of the market: "a society of free work, of enterprise and of participation ... demands that the market be appropriately controlled by the forces of society and by the state so as to guarantee that the basic needs of the whole of society are satisfied" (n. 35; see also n. 40, in which the pope criticizes an "idolatry" of the market).

- On the pursuit of profits: "In fact, the purpose of a business firm is not simply to make a profit, but is to be found in its very existence as a community of persons who in various ways are endeavoring to satisfy their basic needs and who form a particular group at the service of the whole of society" (n. 35; see also nn. 41, 43, 48).

- Regarding debtor nations: "... it is not right to demand or expect payment when the effect would be the imposition of political choices leading to hunger and despair for entire peoples ... In such cases it is necessary to find ... ways to lighten, defer or even cancel the debt compatible with the fundamental right of peoples to subsistence and progress: (n. 35).

- On investment and the relocation of companies: "... even the decision to invest in one place rather than another, in one productive sector rather than another, is always a moral and cultural choice" (n. 36).

- Regarding the environment: "It is the task of the state to provide for the defense and preservation of common goods such as the natural and human environments, which cannot be safeguarded simply by market forces" (n. 40; see also n. 37).

- Concerning regulation of the international economy: "... this increasing internationalization of the economy ought to be accompanied by effective international agencies which will oversee and direct the economy to the common good ..." (n. 58).

- Regarding Operation Desert Storm: "No, never again war, which destroys the lives of innocent people, teaches how to kill, throws into upheaval even the lives of those who do the killing and leaves behind a trail of resentment and hatred, thus making it all the more difficult to find a just solution of the very problems which provoked the war" (n. 52).

Centesimus Annus is indeed "an enormously important statement." It is not, however, a correction or revision of the previous 100 years of Catholic social teachings nor of the U.S. Catholic bishops' own 1986 pastoral letter on the economy.

But you have to read the encyclical to know that.

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