

Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, The Social Concerns of the Church

Pope John Paul II, December 30, 1987

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OVERVIEW

Pope John Paul II paints a somber picture of the state of global development in *The Social Concerns of the Church*. He cites the originality of Pope Paul VI's *The Development of Peoples* and emphasizes the moral/ethical dimension of development. After surveying the difficult state of the poor countries, the Pope lays strong blame on the confrontation between the two global blocs, liberal capitalism of the West, and Marxist collectivism of the East. He refers to the obstacles hindering development as the "structures of sin" and calls for conversion toward solidarity and the option for the poor. While he does speak of the responsibilities of the poor countries, by far his strongest challenge is to the affluent world.

HISTORICAL NOTE

Twenty years after *The Development of Peoples*, Pope John Paul II celebrates that encyclical of Paul VI with a strong statement updating the Church's teaching on international development. The document reflects the severity of global economies at the end of the 1980s, with debt, unemployment, and recession seriously affecting the lives of millions not only in the developing countries but also in the more affluent countries. It echoes several of the justice-related themes addressed by the Pope in his worldwide travels.

DOCUMENT OUTLINE

Introduction

- Social doctrine seeks to lead people to respond to their vocation as responsible builders of earthly society (#1).
- It is marked by continuity and renewal (#3).
- Current encyclical celebrates twentieth anniversary of *The Development of Peoples*, and emphasizes need for fuller concept of development (#4).

Originality of *The Development of Peoples*

- Application of Vatican II
 - It responded to call of *The Church in the Modern World* (#6).
 - It applied Council's teachings to specific problems of development and underdevelopment (#7).
- Originality of Message
 - It emphasized ethical and cultural character of problems connected with development, and the legitimacy and necessity of Church's intervention in this field (#8).
 - It affirmed worldwide dimension of social question, and hence the duty of solidarity between rich and poor (#9).
 - It asserted that "development is the new name for peace," challenging the arms race and linking peace and justice (#10).



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DOCUMENT OUTLINE (continued)

Survey of Contemporary World

- Unfulfilled Hopes for Development
 - Twenty years ago there was widespread optimism about possibility of overcoming poverty and promoting development (#12).
 - But in general the present situation is negative (#13):
 - innumerable multitudes suffer intolerable burden of poverty;
 - many millions have lost hope, seeing their situation worsened.
- Widened Gap between North and South
 - Developing countries are falling behind developed in terms of production and distribution of basics (#14).
 - Unity of world is compromised, with division into First, Second, Third, Fourth Worlds (#14).
 - Cultural underdevelopment shown in: illiteracy, lack of participation, exploitation, religious oppression, racial discrimination, etc. (#15).
 - Right of economic initiative, for service of the common good, is often suppressed, frustrating people's creativity (#15).
 - Totalitarianism makes people "objects" (#15).
 - Other forms of poverty exist, e.g., denial of human rights such as right to religious freedom (#15).
 - Causes of worsened situation include (#16):
 - omissions on part of developing countries;
 - lack of response by affluent world;
 - mechanisms (economic, political, social) manipulated to benefit some at the expense of others.
 - Interdependence separated from ethical requirements is disastrous for both rich and poor countries (#17).
- Specific Signs of Underdevelopment
 - Housing crisis, experienced universally, is due largely to increasing urbanization (#17).
 - Unemployment and underemployment grow, raising serious questions about the type of development pursued (#18).
 - Global debt, forcing debtor nations to export capital, is aggravating underdevelopment (#19).
- Political Reasons for Underdevelopment
 - Existence of two opposing blocs, East and West, has considerable impact on development of people (#20).
 - Political opposition rests on deeper ideological opposition (#20):
 - liberal capitalism of the West;
 - Marxist collectivism of the East.
 - Military opposition results, with tensions of "cold war," "wars by proxy" (#21).
 - Church's social doctrine is critical toward both liberal capitalism and Marxist collectivism (#21).



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DOCUMENT OUTLINE (continued)

- Recently independent countries become involved in, sometimes overwhelmed by, ideological conflict, as two blocs tend toward imperialism and neo-colonialism (#'s 21-22).
- Exaggerated concern for security blocks cooperation (#22).
 - Competition between two blocs prevents leadership and solidarity (#23).
 - West abandons self to growing and selfish isolation(#23).
 - East ignores duty to alleviate human misery (#23).
- Arms trade flourishes, refugees are created, and terrorism increases (#24).
- Demographic problem is often met without respect for persons (#25).
- Positive Aspects of Contemporary World
 - Awareness grows of dignity and human rights, as expressed in UN's Declaration of Human Rights (#26).
 - Conviction increases regarding radical interdependence and solidarity (#26).
 - Peace is seen as indivisible; it is for all, and demands justice (#26).
 - Ecological concern grows, with recognition of limited resources and need to respect nature (#26).
 - Generous persons sacrifice for peace, and international organizations contribute to more effective action (#26).
 - Some Third World countries have reached food self-sufficiency (#26).

Authentic Human Development

- Challenges to Development
 - Development is not straightforward “progress” in Enlightenment sense (#27).
 - After world wars and with atomic peril, “naive mechanistic optimism” has been replaced by “well-founded anxiety” (#27).
 - Narrow economic emphasis is questioned (#28).
 - Side-by-side with miseries of underdevelopment is inadmissible superdevelopment which involves consumerism and waste (#28).
 - “Having” does not contribute to human perfection unless it contributes to maturing and enriching of “being” (#28).
 - One of the greatest injustices in contemporary world: “poor distribution of the goods and services originally intended for all” (#28).
 - “Having” can detract from “being” if one disregards the quality and ordered hierarchy of the goods one has (#28).
- Development and Human Nature
 - True development calls for recognition of spiritual, transcendent nature of human beings (#29).
 - Biblical story shows humans developing (#30):
 - having dominion over creation but obedient to Creator;
 - falling into sin but responding to divine call.
 - Faith in Christ reveals plan for reconciliation of all to him (#31).



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DOCUMENT OUTLINE (continued)

- Church therefore has pastoral duty to concern itself with problems of development (#31).
- Early teachers of Church had optimistic vision of history and work (#31).
- Church cannot ignore needs of the poor in favor of “superfluous church ornaments and costly furnishings for divine worship” (#31).
- Cooperation for Development
 - This task is not individualistic; there is an obligation to collaborate with all others in this field (#32).
 - People and nations have a right to their own development (#32).
 - Moral character of development requires recognition of rights (#33):
 - at internal level, respecting life, family, employment, political community, religion;
 - at international level, respecting peoples, culture, equality of all;
 - within framework of solidarity and freedom.
- Respect for Natural World
 - There is growing awareness of the “cosmos”—the natural order of all beings, living and inanimate (#34).
 - Natural resources are limited and cannot be used with absolute dominion (#34).
 - Pollution of the environment threatens the health of all (#34).

Theological Reading of Modern Problems

- Situation of Sin
 - In years since *The Development of Peoples*, “there has been no development—or very little, irregular, or even contradictory development” (#35).
 - Main obstacle to development is not political but moral (#35).
 - World divided into blocs, sustained by ideologies, and dominated by imperialism is a world “subject to structures of sin” (#36).
 - Individual actions against neighbor introduce into world influences and obstacles that go beyond individuals, interfering with the development of peoples (#36).
 - Two typical structures of sin are (#37):
 - all-consuming desire for profit;
 - thirst for power, imposing one’s will on others.
- Path of Conversion
 - Profound attitudes which define relationships with self, neighbor, and nature must be changed (#38).
 - “Conversion” is needed, toward interdependency, solidarity, commitment to common good (#38).
 - Solidarity requires (#39):
 - on part of influential, a responsibility and willingness to share;
 - on part of weaker, an active claiming of rights.



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- Church has evangelical duty to stand by the poor (#39).
- Solidarity helps us see the “other” as “neighbor,” “helper,” and is the path to peace and development (#39).
- As Christian virtue, solidarity is rooted in vision of human beings in relationship to Trinity (#40).

Some Particular Guidelines

- Church’s Social Doctrine
 - Church offers not technical solutions but “set of principles for reflection, criteria for judgment, and directives for action” (#41).
 - It is not a “third way” between liberal capitalism and Marxist collectivism (#42):
 - not an ideology but a theological interpretation;
 - a condemnation / proclamation as part of prophetic role.
 - Today especially it must be open to international outlook (#42).
- Option for the Poor
 - Whole tradition of Church bears witness to “love of preference for the poor,” a special form of primacy in exercise of Christian charity (#42).
 - This affects individual action and applies equally to social responsibilities (#42).
 - Growing numbers of poor, in desperate situations, must be a priority in all development plans (#42).
 - The goods of the world are originally meant for all, and hence private property has a “social mortgage” (#42).
 - Special form of poverty includes being deprived of rights, particularly right to religious freedom and right to freedom of economic initiative (#42).
- Imbalance of International System
 - International trade system discriminates against developing countries, and international division of labor exploits workers for profit (#43).
 - World monetary and financial system compounds poorer countries’ problems of balance of payments and debt (#43).
 - Technology transfer is unfair to poorer countries (#43).
 - International organizations need reform, without being manipulated by political rivalries (#43).
- Responsibilities of Developing Countries
 - Developing countries must take up their own responsibilities (#44).
 - They should promote self-affirmation of their own citizens through programs of literacy and basic education (#44).



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- They need to set priorities (#44):
 - food production;
 - reform of political structures;
 - promotion of human rights.
- Solidarity among developing countries will call for greater cooperation and establishment of effective regional organizations (#45).

Conclusion

- True Liberation
 - There is an intimate connection between liberation and development, overcoming obstacles to a “more human life” (#46).
 - Church affirms possibility of overcoming the obstacles, with confidence in the goodness of humans (#47).
- Urgent Appeal
 - Everyone must be convinced of seriousness of moment and of responsibility to take steps “inspired by solidarity and love of preference for the poor” (#47).
 - As agents of peace and justice, laity have preeminent role in animating temporal realities with Christian commitment (#47).
 - Special cooperation urged with other Christians, with Jews, and with followers of world’s great religions (#47).
 - The fact that the Kingdom of God is not identified with any temporal achievement cannot excuse us from lack of concern for concrete situations of today (#48).
 - Eucharist is special call to commitment to development and peace (#48).
 - In Marian Year, we ask Mary’s intercession in this difficult moment of the modern world (#49).

Discussion Questions

Why is Pope John Paul II critical of both liberal capitalism and Marxist collectivism?

Has the socio-economic life of people in the rich countries of the world improved in the past twenty years? Of people in the poor countries?

Why is “development” more than simply economic progress? What is “authentic human development”?

What “structures of sin” could you name in the present global situation?

