

# origins

## NC documentary service

Bishop Ramirez

## U.S.: Testing Ground for Church Social Teachings

*"The United States is a good testing ground for the social teachings of the church.... There are several reasons to think that the church in this country has the potential to lead the way in social justice in the world," Bishop Ricardo Ramirez, CSB, of Las Cruces, N.M., said in an address this spring at the University of Notre Dame. He spoke April 24 to a conference titled "The Recent Social Teachings of the Catholic Church: The Making of an Economic Counterculture," whose proceedings will be published by Notre Dame. Ramirez said that "the American church has come of age, we are 'insiders' in that we have left forever a ghetto existence." At the same time, he said "we are still 'outsiders' in the sense that as American Catholics we have a distinct identity, an identity not an all un-American but certainly pro-American in that we feel we have ... something extraneous, but sacred nonetheless, to offer debates on public issues." Ramirez examined several areas of U.S. culture in which the social teaching of Pope John Paul II might be applied. Ramirez said he is convinced that there is "a strong intuitive inclination among our Catholic and most other Christian people toward alleviating the plight of the poor. Unfortunately," he added, "this intuition*

*usually stops with charity and does not make the crucial leap toward the structural justice question." His text follows.*

Each age of the church seems to have its unique gifts. One of these gifts that we have received in the latter days of the 20th century is a rapid development accompanied by a steady unfolding of the church's teaching on matters regarding social justice.

We are truly in an exciting time in the study and analysis of Catholic social thought. This gathering at Notre Dame is indicative of this gift. The recent U.S. bishops' pastorals on peace and economic justice, the writings, speeches and actions of John Paul II point to one thing: The church, no doubt through the actions of the Holy Spirit, is serious about translating the social teachings implicit in the Gospel to the modern world — speaking to those issues that are real and pressing.

I would agree with those who say that these times that devote as much attention to Catholic social thought are creating a "heightened sense of possibility and commitment perhaps unequalled since Vatican II burst on the scene almost a generation ago." What contributes to the excitement are not only the rich, profound and sometimes

practical ideas, but the captured attention given papal pronouncements and episcopal processes of pastoral letter writing and bishops' letters themselves by the mass media. *Pastoral letter* has become a household word or at least one used at racketball clubs and maybe on the golf course.

What is at issue in speaking of the dialogical posture between "U.S. culture" and the social teachings of John Paul II is the Gospel's clear and unequivocal challenge to conversion. It is the age-old tension because culture tends to consume religion as much as religion, particularly one with clear, radical and revolutionary purposes such as Christianity, wants to transform the cultural world in which it finds itself. Once more Vatican II in *Gaudium et Spes* repeats the tension between the prophets and the Jewish kings, the early Mediterranean church and the Roman Empire, the Latin American missionaries of the 16th and 17th centuries and the colonial powers of Europe; it's Jesus in one corner and Caesar in the other.

Jesus did not solve the church-state problem by his comment on the coin, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." Popular thinking naively sees the phrase as pro-

phetic of the American resolution of the problem. What Jesus really meant was that Caesar should not be given what pertains only to God. Caesar should receive only what is his due and no more. He cannot demand worship nor treatment as a deity. Seen in this way, Jesus was being critical of the empire's political understanding of itself and critical as well of the way the people whose land was occupied by the Romans might be accommodating to the imposed rule.

But getting back to the topic under consideration, John Paul II has from the beginning of his pontificate challenged the church, and indeed the world, with the application of Gospel principle to the contemporary sin of injustice. He specifically challenges the U.S. church and people at large in the *ad limina* visits with the U.S. bishops and in his visits to the United States. In his last visit in 1987, meeting with the bishops in Los Angeles, he responded to the presentation of Archbishop Weakland on "The Role of the Laity in Society and the Church in the United States," by asking some questions: "How is the American culture evolving? Is this evolution being influenced by the Gospel? Does it clearly reflect Christian inspiration?"<sup>2</sup>

He made Paul VI's *ad limina* talk of 1978 his own:

"Your efforts have been directed to the eradication of hunger, the elimination of subhuman living conditions and the promotion of programs on behalf of the poor, the elderly and minorities. You have worked with the improvement of the social order itself. At the same time, we know that you have held up to your people the goal to which God calls them: the life above, in Christ Jesus (cf. Phil. 3:14)".<sup>3</sup>

Without a doubt, Pope John Paul II sees himself as the classical missionary sent to preach the good news of salvation, affirming what is good, and challenging to continued conversion of the individual and of social structures.

Let me offer at this point a working understanding of the term *culture*. For our purposes here, I see culture as a unique system whereby people *organize*, relate and perceive themselves, others and the universe. Culture seen as a human achievement apart from the fine arts appears to be a 20th-century concept. The concept as used in the social sciences was introduced into English in the latter part of the 19th century.<sup>4</sup> It would be interesting to trace the concept in theology and in church documents.

The most notable attention given culture is in *Gaudium et Spes*, Chapter 2, Nos. 53-62. In that section the council fathers point out the function of the good news of Christ in relation to culture:

"The good news of Christ con-

tinually renews the life and culture of fallen men; it combats and removes the error and evil which flow from the ever present attraction of sin. It never ceases to purify and elevate the morality of peoples. It takes the spiritual qualities and endowments of every age and nation, and with supernatural riches it causes them to blossom as it were from within; it fortifies, completes and restores them in Christ" (No. 58).<sup>5</sup>

The general impression that is held regarding U.S. culture, and I would not disagree with this, is that we are marked by high degrees of materialism, individualism and a spirit of competition. On the plus side, we are seen as a people that are industrious, generous and innovative. These, of course, are extremely general and could be considered stereotypes; yet in every stereotype there is some degree of truth.

(Having worked at the Mexican American Cultural Center for several years and struggled with the identification of the Mexican-American culture, I can assure you that it is almost impossible to do a good job in identifying the culture of any group. As soon as an adjective pops up, it is just as quickly shot down as a stereotype.)

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But back to the point, none of us would disagree with the pope when he challenges the U.S. bishops and anyone else in position of leadership in the church in the United States when he, in response to Archbishop John Quinn's description of American morality, said that "it would be altogether out of place to try to model this act of religion (the act of faith) on attitudes drawn from secular culture."<sup>6</sup>

We are here because we have the conviction that the church indeed has something to say to the American cultural scene, and John Paul II expresses what is rooted deeply in our Catholic tradition and he does it in a powerful and persistent way. I am convinced, and this is from observation in my own diocese, that there lies a strong intuitive inclination among our Catholic and most other Christian people toward alleviating the plight of the poor. Unfortunately, this intuition usually stops with charity and does not make the crucial leap toward the structural justice

question.

There is no doubt in my mind that Catholicism has a profoundly unique element that is absolutely essential to its teaching, and that is its consistent challenge of social justice in the world. The synod of 1971 called it the "constitutive element."

It is interesting to note that one of the first post-Vatican II synods would capture the new focus given social justice in *Gaudium et Spes*. This is why I lament with the deepest sorrow the departure of Roman Catholics to fundamentalist sects who see the world as intrinsically evil, to be shunned and that one must simply await the heavenly kingdom. Being "born again" in that context means absolving one's responsibilities to our sisters and brothers in reducing salvation to a privatized and highly individualistic approach to God.

It goes without saying that this attitude exists among many Roman Catholics in this country and elsewhere. The church of Vatican II and the papal teachings following it teach that to be church we must be the *gaudium et spes*, the joy and hope of the people of our day, and the *lumen gentium*, the light of all nations.

In what areas of our culture might we especially apply the teaching of John Paul II? I would like to suggest seven areas for our consideration. These are not the only ones that exist, but I offer them as examples of Pope John Paul II's challenge to our U.S. culture and society.

### 1. Workers

"These are hard times for American workers. Unemployment is high, real wages have declined, wage cuts and givebacks are the order of the day and unions are under assault. The rights of workers are eroding in a manner unprecedented in recent history."<sup>7</sup>

In *Laborem Exercens*, John Paul II affirms the dignity of work and places work at the center of the social question. The encyclical states that human beings are the proper subject of work. Work expresses and increases human dignity. He emphatically stresses the priority of labor over things and criticizes systems which do not embody these principles. He supports the rights of workers and labor organizations and concludes by outlining a challenging "spirituality of work." In a society where the worker has become a disposable commodity, the words of John Paul II are most timely and challenging.

### 2. The Family

In the United States 70 percent of all mothers with school-age children work outside the home. "This is the greatest single shift in family life in this century, perhaps since the founding of our republic: For an increasing number of families the second income has

become a necessity for economic survival, especially since average weekly earnings for families have declined 14.3 percent since 1973, after accounting for inflation. More than 25 percent of today's families are single-parent families, and more than 95 percent of these families are headed by women. Adequate day care and after-school care for children has become truly a national emergency.... We have not adjusted our consciousness to facing the changed reality of the American family."<sup>4</sup>

Among other places, John Paul II presents a wide array of issues in his own responses regarding the present plight of the human family in his apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*. In our country we cannot ignore his "Charter of the Rights of the Family," wherein the Holy Father speaks of families' right to rely on adequate policies on the part of public authorities in the juridical, economic, social and fiscal domains without discrimination. Families have a right to a social and economic order in which the organization of work permits the members to live together and does not hinder the unity, well-being, health and stability of the family. He goes on to enumerate families' right to housing, protection from harmful drugs, pornography, alcoholism, the right of the elderly to have a dignified life and death, and the rights of families to emigrate in their search for a better life (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 46).

In our society we need to evaluate laws and evolving patterns of family life and judge them in the light of Gospel values. The teachings of John Paul II are a good place to start.

### 3. Racism

We, the U.S. bishops, have spoken of the seemingly inextricable evil of racism in our midst. In our letter on economic justice, we pointed out that, despite the gains which have been made toward racial equality, prejudice and discrimination in our time as well as the effects of past discrimination continue to exclude many members of racial minorities from the mainstream of American life. We go on to say in our pastoral letter that discriminatory practices in labor markets, in education systems and in electoral politics create major obstacles for blacks, Hispanics, native Americans and other racial minorities in their struggle to improve their economic status ("Economic Justice for All," 182).

In the pastoral letter "Brothers and Sisters to Us," we described this racism as a sin, "a sin that divides the human family, blots out the image of God among specific members of that family and violates the fundamental human dignity of those called to be children of the same father"(No. 9).

Pope John Paul II, very mindful

of racism in U.S. culture, at various times during his last visit to the United States, particularly in his message to black Catholics in New Orleans, addressed the issue of racism. The church, he said, "must continue to join her efforts with the efforts of others who are working to correct all imbalances and disorders of a social nature. Indeed, the church can never remain silent in the face of injustice, wherever it is clearly present."<sup>5</sup>

Even after a century-plus of the freedom of the slaves in our country, we continue to be seriously bothered by racial prejudice. No sooner do we think we have made great strides when the horrible phenomenon of the human indignity of racism reappears.

### 4. Growing Disparity Between Rich and Poor

The situation of poverty in the United States is as follows: The working poor are a significant and rising proportion of the poor. In 1986, 41.5 percent of all poor people over the age of 14 worked. This is equal to the highest percentage of poor who worked since 1968. Furthermore, in recent years the fastest-growing group among the poor is the working poor, not the welfare poor, whose ranks have remained level in that period.

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In 1979, 6.5 million working people fell below the poverty line. By 1983, the number had risen to 9.4 million. In 1986, after four consecutive years of economic recovery, the number of working poor had fallen only slightly, to 8.9 million.

Another alarming statistic is that children constitute the poorest age group in the United States. In 1986, 20.5 percent of all children lived below the poverty line; 22.1 percent of all children under the age of 6 were poor. Among the black and Hispanic children, approximately 40 percent were poor, more than three times the rate for all Americans.<sup>10</sup>

We are also faced with the contemporary phenomenon of the "feminization of poverty." Since 1965, the annual earnings of full-time, year-round working women have hovered at about 60 percent of the earnings of men.<sup>11</sup>

John Paul II in 1979 delivered

one of his most significant contributions to the understanding of social justice in regards to the poor. He addressed the Indian peasant farmers of Oaxaca and Chiapas. It is well known he rewrote the text the night before he delivered it in order to do justice to the poverty he had seen firsthand.

He said that he, the pope, chose to be their voice, the voice of those who cannot speak or who have been silenced. He expressed his wish to be the "conscience of consciences, an invitation to action, to make up for lost time, which has frequently been a time of prolonged sufferings and unsatisfied hopes."<sup>12</sup>

In his *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, the Holy Father writes of the unequal distribution of the benefits of the world economy. This, he points out, happens not through the fault of the needy people and even less through a sort of inevitability dependent on natural conditions or circumstances as a whole.<sup>13</sup>

In the light of these statements, John Paul II reminds us that we have an unfinished agenda and that we have not responded to the Third World needs within our own U.S. boundaries.

### 5. The Arms Race

The facts are these: In 1978, the greatest peacetime military buildup in U.S. history began. All categories of military spending grew, but expenditures on personnel, operations and maintenance shrank relative to the military budget as a whole. The fastest-growing category was weapons and other procurement. 1988 accounted for 34 percent of military spending; by 1987 it accounted for about 43 percent.

These expenditures are, of course, a boon to large corporations in military-related industries. In 1984, the top 10 military contractors won over 34 percent of all military contracts. But the lack of competitive bidding, as well as other problems, led to widely publicized embarrassments such as the three \$7,600 coffee pots purchased by the Air Force.<sup>14</sup>

Further statistics show that in 1981, military spending was 24 percent of the total U.S. government budget; by 1985 defense spending had risen to 29.4 percent. Right now the U.S. military budget is around \$300 billion.

In his address to the United Nations in 1979, John Paul II repeated the same impassioned plea for peace of Paul VI. He expressed his concern over the increasing number and size of the means of war and how this increases the risk that sometime, somewhere, somehow, someone can set the war machinery in motion, bringing with it general destruction.<sup>15</sup>

Pope John Paul II approaches the nuclear arms race in his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, and in his address at Hiroshima. Modern

technology, he says, can move beyond both moral and political guidance, thus submitting the human person to an impersonal power. New improvements in weaponry seem to be always one step ahead of any attempts to control them. We are challenged as the human community to re-establish the primacy of ethics and politics over technology.<sup>14</sup>

### 6. Consumerism

Consumerism is a symptom of greed. Greed is a drive for the attainment not only of basic human needs, but for status, power and material goods in excess of what we actually need. When we succumb to the enticement of greed, we lose our perspective as citizens of the world with the responsibilities that this entails.

Consumerism, someone has said, is a "bloated late 20th-century version of the American dream" that divides the rich from the poor. In this scenario, prosperity is maintained and advanced at the expense of the marginalized. Bonds of solidarity are destroyed, and indifference and even a sense of moral and political powerlessness afflict consumers.<sup>15</sup>

In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, John Paul II describes that "side by side with the miseries of underdevelopment, themselves unacceptable, we find ourselves up against a form of superdevelopment, equally inadmissible, because like the former it is contrary to what is good and to true happiness" (No. 28). He goes on to say that this superdevelopment, which consists in an excessive availability of every kind of material goods for the benefit of certain social groups, easily makes people slaves of "possession" and of immediate gratification, with no other horizon than the multiplication or continual replacement of the things already owned with others still better.

The Holy Father describes what happens to the human person caught up in the web of consumerism, how empty it is and that it merely leads to radical dissatisfaction because, he says, "one quickly learns ... that the more one possesses the more one wants, while deeper aspirations remain unsatisfied and perhaps even stifled."<sup>16</sup>

The human person's vocation implies, John Paul II goes on to explain, that while being called to use other creatures, we must always remain subject to God's will, who imposes limits upon the use and dominion over things.<sup>17</sup>

This is indeed an important challenge to our American culture, obsessed with the drive to possess, to have and to hold more and more of the beautiful, and sometimes not so beautiful, things that are produced.

### The Environment

An area of grave concern to us

in the United States is that of the contamination of our environment. Recent events such as the great Exxon oil spill off the coast of Alaska, the attention given in the media to pesticides in our daily food intake and the growing problem of how to dispose adequately of waste material make us think of the moral implications regarding correct use of the created world around us. A study released last week by the Environmental Protection Agency states that over 22.5 billion tons of toxic waste material are produced in our country alone.

A story in the Washington Post recently reported that industrial European countries are dumping chemical wastes in poor countries such as in Africa. Third World countries, anxious for any assistance from richer countries, receive payment for the disposal of these wastes within their borders. This is being done without much study as to how those countries will be affected in the long run. It is a problem of planetary proportions.

Pope John Paul II has not spoken or written at length on this topic, but he does make reference to it in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (No. 34), where he says that the dominion granted to us in the created world is not an absolute power. Indeed it appears that the pollution of the environment is but one more result of superdevelopment and again, as in other contemporary phenomena, the problem is growing faster than the rate of controlling it.

It is rumored that the Holy Father will be writing a document on the question of the environment. It would not be a bad idea if we U.S. bishops did the same thing.

### Questions and Challenges

I have no insight in the practical order as to just how we in the United States are to approach the myriad problems in our back and front yards. I do have questions and challenges, some for the practical-minded, others for those who do the all-important critical reflection on social justice principle vis-a-vis the U.S. problematic that I have attempted to describe.

What are the implications, for example, of the "option for the poor" we — John Paul II for the universal church and ourselves, the U.S. bishops — have made? Is this option to be taken seriously or were we just trying to match the sometimes heroic Latin American church in its own "preferential option"? My own diocesan budget does not reflect this option; neither do I personally expend most of my energy in direct service to the poor.

Regarding the question being discussed here of the possible making of an economic counterculture, in our own U.S. Southwest, given the limited natural resources, the scarcity of jobs, the need for better working conditions,

the demands for an educated work force, the need for affordable housing, the overdependence on the military-industrial complex — the challenge by the sacred teachings of the church takes on prophetic proportions. The quality of justice in our part of the world will be measured by the treatment given those most vulnerable and marginalized in our society.

The church is lonely out there in the desert. We oftentimes feel we are the only one speaking of the possibilities of what can and should be; our voices fall on ears of people that jeer more than cheer, on ears that are not used to hearing this language.

The United States is a good testing ground for the social teachings of the church. We are in many ways the epitome of contemporary culture; our cultural ways and patterns of behavior are seen and emulated around the world. What the church leadership may be able to do to influence the restructuring of society in this country would be seen as real possibilities elsewhere. There are several reasons to think that the church in this country has the potential to lead the way in social justice in the world. We have, as was pointed out in the Los Angeles dialogue between the Holy Father and the U.S. bishops, the most educated Catholic laity ever. We are one of the two largest episcopal conferences, and we have the means to communicate to the world in ways unequalled anywhere.

Meetings such as this bring together the best theological and social minds. Your interest in the topics being discussed is indicative of your own strong convictions for social justice. You share with us U.S. bishops the function of being links, connections between church teaching and its application to our cultural and societal milieu.

In this conference, I notice that you are going beyond the critique of Catholic social teaching to the analysis, to the creative synthesis needed between the American dream and the ideals set forth in church documents. Your work is crucial, for from a bishop's perspective it reinforces what we as official teachers have to offer.

Finally, I like to hear that we are in a new era of appreciating church teaching on social matters. We U.S. bishops are trying to echo and parallel the papal focus on justice issues and want nothing less than to be a prime factor in influencing social change.

The American church has come of age, we are "insiders" in that we have left forever a ghetto existence in this country. The hostility, unease and suspicion experienced by our immigrant ancestors are now things of the past. But we are still "outsiders" in the sense that as American Catholics we have a distinct identity, an identity not at all un-American, but certainly pro-American

in that we feel we have — out of our accumulated Catholic wisdom something extraneous, but sacred nonetheless, to offer debates on public issues.

We American Catholics have an acute interest in the commonwealth that carries with it the dream of the founders of this republic. I agree with Charles R. Strain that the ideals of Catholic social teaching and the vision of the American republic in the imaginative design of the founding fathers are not far from each other.<sup>10</sup> Indeed they are both rooted in the deepest of human aspirations for a community of citizens driven by the same yearnings for liberation, democracy and justice for all.

#### Footnotes

<sup>10</sup> Charles R. Strain, ed., *Prophetic Visions and Economic Realities* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1989), p. 186.

<sup>1</sup> Pope John Paul II, in *Unity in the Work of Service, On the Occasion of His Second Visit to the United States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1987), p. 150.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>3</sup> G.O. Lang, "Culture" in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 4 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1967), p. 522.

<sup>4</sup> Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (New York: Costello, 1981 ed.), p. 963.

<sup>5</sup> *Unity in the Work of Service*, p. 144.

<sup>6</sup> Helen Ginsburg, "Teachings of John Paul II on Work and the Rights of Workers," in *The Social Teachings of John Paul II* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Charities USA, 1987), p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Rose Oaxar, "Pope John Paul II and Family Policy," in *Social Teachings of John Paul II*, p. 134.

<sup>8</sup> *Unity in the Work of Service*, p. 54.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Hamington, Robert Greenstein and Eleanor Holmes-Norton, *Who are the Poor? A Profile of the Changing Faces of Poverty in the United States in 1987* (Washington, D.C.: Campaign for Human Development, 1987), p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> *Pueritia ana Beyond*, trans. John Eagleson and

Philo Scharper (New York: Orbis Books, 1979), p. 31.

<sup>12</sup> *On Social Concern, Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1988), No. 9.

<sup>13</sup> Nancy Folbre, *A Field Guide to the U.S. Economy, The Center for Popular Economics* (New York: Pantheon, 1987), p. 65.

<sup>14</sup> *Pilgrim of Peace: The Homilies and Addresses of His Holiness Pope John Paul II on the Occasion of His Visit to the United States of America, October 1979* (Baltimore, Md.: Garmon-Pridemore Press Inc., 1979), p. 22ff.

<sup>15</sup> J. Bryan Hehir, "John Paul II: Continuity and Change in the Social Teaching of the Church," in *Co-Creation and Capitalism: John Paul II's Laborem Exercens*, John W. Houck and Oliver F. Williams, eds. (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1983), pp. 138-139.

<sup>16</sup> Drew Christiansen, "Social Justice and Consumerism in the Thought of Pope John Paul II," in *The Social Teachings of Pope John Paul II*, p. 67.

<sup>17</sup> *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 28.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.