

FOR AN EVANGELICAL READING OF "POPULORUM PROGRESSIO"

By

Henri de Riedmatten, O.P.

Populorum Progressio presents itself as an echo of Christ's own voice, springing from the compassion that the Church shares with Him for men in need. It is a lesson of Christian charity in the strongest sense of the word before being a claim for international justice. It is set deliberately in the line of the Church's evangelizing mission, it owes its tone to the latter, it affirms some of its most typical concepts.



The Encyclical proceeds from "a renewed consciousness of the demands of the Gospel"; its interpretation of the world situation is made "in the light of the Gospel" (cf. 13). It is from the Gospel, in fact, that the Church has "what she possesses as her characteristic attribute: a global vision of man". This global vision of man is the premise of the argumentation of the document. It implies that the Kingdom of heaven, which it is a question of setting up even in this world, is not left out of account at any moment (cf. 13). It is the whole vocation of man that is taken into consideration, this man whose destiny as son of God (cf. 21, 43, 82) is to reach beyond himself continually, for "there is no true humanism but that which is open to the Absolute and is conscious of a vocation which gives human life its true meaning".

Opening to God is to be understood here in the whole supernatural force of the joyful Message of the Gospel. Paul VI presents a gradation of less human living conditions, experienced by so many individuals and peoples today, and of the more human ones to which it is a question of raising them. Doing this he passes from temporal considerations to eternal perspectives: "Conditions that are still more human are the acknowledgement by man of supreme values, and of God their source and their finality. Conditions that, finally and above all, are more human are faith, a gift of God accepted by the good will of man, and unity in the charity of Christ, who calls us all to share as sons in the life of the living God, the Father of all men".

That is why development, the main subject of the document, after being identified as man's growth, is polarized towards salvation in Christ: "Thus it is that human fulfillment constitutes, as it were, a summary of our duties. But there is much more: this harmonious enrichment of nature by personal and responsible effort is ordered to a further perfection. By reason of his union with Christ, the source of life, man attains to new fulfillment of himself, to a transcendent humanism which gives him his greatest possible perfection: this is the highest goal of personal development".



What is said of personal development, the Encyclical repeats in connection with the development of peoples, which it sees geared to the perspective of the fullness of Christ's mystical body: "Man's labour means much more still for the Christian... the mission of sharing in the creation of the supernatural world which remains incomplete until we all come to build up together that perfect Man of whom St. Paul speaks 'who realizes the fullness of Christ'." And in the great perspectives opened towards the end of the document. "This road towards a greater humanity requires effort and sacrifice; but suffering itself, accepted for the love of our brethren, favours the progress of the entire human family. Christians know that union with the sacrifice of our Saviour contributes to the building up to the Body of Christ in its plenitude, the assembled People of God".

It is in this perspective that the participation of Christian in the temporal enterprise of advancement is to be understood. The rightful autonomy of the realities of this world never authorizes them to forget that the *raison d'être* of men and their history is a vocation to a higher order. If the Encyclical says that man "is responsible for his fulfillment as he is for his salvation", these two terms should not be interpreted in isolation from each other but in the subordination of one to the other: fulfillment to salvation. This is the clear meaning of the whole context. It is not superfluous to recall this at a time when the new discovery of the mission of the Christian and of the Church in the modern world in the wake of the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, threatens to induce some of the best servants of the cause of human advancement to be silent about the most substantial part of the content of the Gospel: the call to a Salvation and a happiness which, after all, are not of this world even if they are acquired through life in this world. At the same time, Christians are reminded that the exalting task of serving men and peoples in history cannot be carried out without the grace of Christ and because of that is the

object of prayer: "The prayer of all ought to rise with fervour to the Almighty. Having become aware of such great misfortunes, the human race should apply itself with intelligence and steadfastness to abolish them".



It is likewise in the light of the Gospel that the Encyclical tackles the problem of the solidarity among men on which the construction of a better world is based. The world is presented as a family all the members of which, all men, are brothers. The terms "brother", "brotherhood" recur a dozen times in the course of the text. The question is above all to arouse full awareness of this brotherhood: "The world is sick. Its illness consists less in the unproductive monopolization of resources by a small number of men than in the lack of brotherhood among individuals and peoples". This brotherhood must be understood in the strong sense of the Scriptures: we are bound to one another by the common filiation which we have from God. Paul VI repeats the words of his Bombay Appeal: "Man must meet man, nation meet nation, as brothers and sisters, as children of God".

Relations between brothers are entirely based on love, friendship and affection, other terms which recur continually throughout the Encyclical; terms which suggest a new type of human relations and a far more agreeable formulation of mutual duties than in the case of harsh demands or the cold distribution of a justice which has well-balanced scales but is blindfolded.

The love, friendship and affection in question are always the ones proclaimed and communicated by Christ; they are certainly set at the level of supernatural charity. It is said of the obligations of better-off nations that they "stem from a brotherhood that is at once human and supernatural". The legitimate feelings of jealousy of their national unity among young peoples and pride in their tradition among ancient civilizations "should be ennobled by that universal charity which embraces the entire human family". So the present effort of the Church to help to solve "the social question" which "has become worldwide" (cf. 3), is in perfect continuity of inspiration with all its past contribution "to foster the human progress of the nations to which she brings faith in Christ". She does not cease "to pay tribute to these pioneers who have been too often forgotten" (by the present-day movement of advancement) "who were urged on by the love of Christ, just as we honour

their imitators and successors who today still continue to put themselves at the generous and unselfish service of those to whom they announce the Gospel".



There is no doubt — the whole Encyclical bears witness to it, especially in its sections on "action to be undertaken", "aid for the weak" and "equity in trade relations" — that charity does not prevent but rather demands a scrupulous analysis of the conditions of in quality that reign in the present world and of the socio-economic factors likely to end them. The fact remains that it orders an approach to problems by which the evangelical inspiration is recognizable. It is fashionable today often to have recourse to the style of the prophets of the Old Testament to support affirmation of the rights of the poor and denunciation of the iniquities of the rich. In this connection the Encyclical is no less forceful. It borrows from the Gospel and from the Fathers of the Church the tones with which the avarice of some is contrasted with the want of others. The continued greed of the rich "will certainly call down upon them the judgement of God and the wrath of the poor, with consequences no one can foretell. If today's flourishing civilizations remain selfishly wrapped up in themselves, they could easily place their highest values in jeopardy, sacrificing their will to be great to the desire to possess more. To them we could apply also the parable of the rich man whose fields yielded an abundant harvest and who did not know where to store his harvest: "God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you'."

The feeling that inspires this "cry of anguish" is not just revolt at glaring injustices but deep suffering at the sight of the extreme poverty of brothers: "No one can remain indifferent to the lot of his brothers who are still buried in wretchedness, and victims of insecurity, slaves of ignorance. Like the heart of Christ, the heart of the Christian must sympathize with this misery".

Avarice is condemned not only because of the injustices it causes, but also because it shuts hearts to the demands of human brotherhood. It is in this sense that "both for nations and for individual men, avarice is the most evident form of moral underdevelopment". The following words are inspired by the concern to convert the rich, and in their greater interest: "All growth is ambivalent. It is essential if man is to develop as a man, but in a way it imprisons man if he considers it the supreme good, and it restricts his vision" (ibid.). So the poor are warned of "this temptation which comes to them from wealthy nations" and which consist in sacrificing superior values to material goods. Furthermore, "the turning toward the spirit of poverty" is put among

the better conditions to which mankind must be raised, together with increased esteem for the dignity of others, cooperation for the common good, and will and desire for peace (cf. 21).



The primary concern of development is always, to repeat the leit-motiv of the Encyclical which has been so widely read, "being more" rather than "having more". "Being more" cannot be quantified nor is it obtained by a mere transfer of resources, however fair it may be. It is a question of another order of realities, "a new humanism which will enable modern man to find himself anew by embracing the higher values of love and friendship, of prayer and contemplation". This gives us an inkling how the term "development" ties up with that of "evangelization" in the proper meaning of the word.

Many passages from the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* are a kind of continuation and extension of these teachings of *Populorum Progressio*. All Christians, individuals and Organizations or Agencies, engaged in the enterprise of development, will take inspiration from it if they care about the evangelical authenticity of their action. I am thinking above all of sections II and III of the Exhortation entitled "What is evangelization?" and "The content of evangelization". Paul VI, who refers explicitly on several occasions to what was said in the course of the 1974 Synod of Bishops, dwells on the "profound links between evangelization and human advancement" (EN, 31). These links are of an anthropological order, of a theological order, but above all they are links of "the eminently evangelical order, which is that of charity: how in fact can one proclaim the new commandment without promoting in justice and in peace the true, authentic advancement of man" (ibid.) But the Pope warns against the danger of cutting off work in favour of these values from its close connection in the eyes of the Christian with man's complete vocation and with the most specific part of the Gospel's announcement. Under the title "without reduction or ambiguity", the paragraph following the one we have just quoted draws the attention of "many generous Christians" to the temptation "to reduce the Church's mission to the dimensions of a simply temporal project. They would reduce her aims to a man-centred goal; the salvation of which she is the messenger would be reduced to material well-being. Her activity, forgetful of all spiritual and religious preoccupation, would become initiatives of the political or social order" (EN, 32). That is why "the Church", and what is said here of the Church applies to all Church organizations, to every effort made in her name, "reaffirms the primacy of her spiritual vocation and refuses to replace the proclamation

of the Kingdom by the proclamation of forms of human liberation; she even states that her contribution to liberation is incomplete if she neglects to proclaim salvation in Jesus Christ" (EN, 34).

It goes without saying that in practice there is a division of tasks. The intermediate stages must not be blocked with the end. The pedagogy of all advancement demands prudence in the proposals made to the persons concerned. It also goes without saying that collaboration with "men of good will" leads to deep respect for the convictions of everyone, and that, above all, the very nature of evangelization and conversion shrinks from ugly proselytism. Nevertheless, the Christian who operates for the human advancement of his brothers, is never exempt from the wholesome ambition of seeing them, too, touched by the Good News which inspires his own commitment.



Without going into the various consequences of such principles in throwing light on the question, which is continually arising, of relation between "the apostolate" and "human advancement" let us point out in conclusion how much the behavior of all Catholics active in the latter is influenced by its solidarity with evangelization.

Our methods in welcoming applicants, in the planning and implementation and supervision of projects in the field, must bear the stamp of our inspiration. It seems to me that chapter 13 of the First Letter to the Corinthians, the Pauline hymn of charity, is rich in suggestions in this connection. To take inspiration from it will guarantee our actions this value of witness to the Gospel that we are never dispensed from bearing: "Above all the Gospel must be proclaimed by witness. Take a Christian or a handful of Christians who, in the midst of their own community, show their capacity for understanding and acceptance, their sharing of life and destiny with other people, their solidarity with the efforts of all for whatever is noble and good. Let us suppose that, in addition, they radiate in an altogether simple and unaffected way their faith in values that go beyond current values, and their hope in something that is not seen and that one would not dare to imagine. Through this wordless witness these Christians stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live" (EN, 21).



The passage just quoted presents us with a kind of summary of the individual and collective attitudes of those who, in Christ's name, make their contribution to the work of human advancement. reactions, our initiatives and our work. For some people, contribu-

tion to evangelization will be carried out essentially at this level. No one will dispense himself too easily, however, from harbouring at least a concern, if the opportunity occurs, to go further and prolong example with the explicit word for "the Good News proclaimed by the witness of life sooner or later has to be proclaimed by the word of life". How many workers in the field, how many lay missionaries, how many cooperators have already experienced the openings that the service of human advancement offers in this connection, especially in simple and patient personal contact! How many have not remained insensitive and have heard the appeal of their neighbour who is hungry not only for bread but for every word that comes from God!