



Centesimus Annus 25 Years Later



Everyone knew that Pope John Paul II would issue a social encyclical in 1991 to mark the 100th anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum novarum*, but expectations were low. The Pope had issued a social encyclical, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, in 1988, delayed past its official 1987 date commemorating the twentieth anniversary of Pope Paul VI's *Populorum progressio*. Many wondered whether he would have anything significantly new to say. However, these subdued expectations were dramatically altered by the events that transformed the Pope's homeland in 1989.

In August of that year a Catholic intellectual, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, was elected Prime Minister of Poland. By early October, the finance minister, Leszek Balcerowicz, announced detailed plans to convert the nation to a market economy. Already engaged with the upheavals in Poland brought about by the worker's union, Solidarity, the Pope became deeply involved in the question being asked throughout Eastern Europe: what should the nation's economy look like? The preliminary drafting of a relatively minor anniversary document was taken over by the Secretary of State and the Pope himself by the time the Polish government implemented these reforms in early 1990.

This direct involvement by the Pope also entailed efforts to engage the best of contemporary economic thinking on the issues. He himself proposed that the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace organize a symposium of leading economists to help him develop an informed perspective on the economic prospects for Eastern Europe at the time. Nearly twenty internationally distinguished economists, including Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and others, were invited to present answers to a list of detailed questions. Fifteen economists participated in a gathering in

November of 1990, which included a lunch and long afternoon discussion with the Pope in his personal residence. At the end of the session, the Pope told the group he was deeply impressed by the concern these economists showed for the moral dimensions of economic life.

Popes from Leo XIII onward had relied on individual social scientists for assistance in drafting social encyclicals, but this consultation represented the most thoroughgoing interaction of a Pontiff with social scientists in an effort to improve the content of church teaching. And the experience of this consultation was undoubtedly part of the Pope's later decision to establish the Pontifical Academy of Social Science in 1994: so that the Holy Father and all Vatican offices would have access to the most current social scientific research relevant to the Church's teaching.

In light of this history, it is eminently appropriate for the Pontifical Academy of Social Science to organize a symposium on the 25th anniversary of *Centesimus annus*. Remaining faithful both to St. John Paul's own intellectual preparations for the document and to the Academy's own charter, this gathering will not be a commemorative event but a serious academic discussion. Papers and the conversations they generate are not intended to be confessional or fideistic or simply celebratory of past insight in either tone or content. The symposium will focus on two major questions. The first concerns the changes in the world situation – economically, politically, and culturally – over the past 25 years. The second will investigate *how* Catholic social teaching has engaged the world in order to ask how best the Church can do so in the coming years and decades.

Assessing changes in the world situation

Just as John Paul II made a careful assessment of the world around him, this symposium will propose the question: what have been the major changes in economic, political, and cultural life over the past 25 years to which the Church must respond today? As we reflect on *Centesimus annus*, to what extent do the new realities in the world situation today affirm or call for further development of the insights there.

Changes in the world economy since 1991

The fall of the Soviet Union was the major economic backdrop of *Centesimus annus*. Much has occurred economically since. What are the most salient changes in global economic life since then and how well does the economic insight of *Centesimus annus* illuminate those changes? What do recent economic crises and recent changes in economic thinking suggest for the future of economic life of ordinary people, especially the poor and marginalized?

Changes in the world political situation since 1991

The fall of the Soviet Union and the democratization of Eastern Europe formed the major political

backdrop of *Centesimus annus*. What is the global political situation today and how is this different from the recent past? Which elements require greater attention by both the international community and by Catholic social teaching in order to improve the political involvement of and political outcomes for ordinary citizens, especially the poor and marginalized?

Changes in the world cultural situation since 1991

The Church is an expert on the human person, and this insight imbued the analysis of *Centesimus annus*. Yet the past 25 years have seen remarkable developments in culture, with the impact of the internet, the marketization of life, the importance of Islam, new dynamics of secularization, etc. How ought we to think about the cultural situation today and what realities call for further reflection within Catholic social thought today to better understand the situation of ordinary people, especially the poor and marginalized?

How Catholic Social Teaching Engages the World Situation

Like *Rerum novarum* a hundred years earlier, *Centesimus annus* engaged the world situation of its day. *How* social encyclicals have engaged the world – and not simply *what* they had to say about it – has much to teach us going forward. As the fathers of the second Vatican Council reminded us, the Church, both clergy and laity, is called by the gospel to engage “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties” of our age, “especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted” because “these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.” Pope Francis has called the pastors of the Church to be so close to their flocks that they take on the odor of the sheep and has challenged all believers to engage personally with the suffering of so many in our world today.

The Academy recognizes that it plays an important role in how the church engages the world. Its purpose is a scholarly one, and so offering the insights of social science can help both church leaders and ordinary Catholics better understand what is happening around them. At the same time, however, the Academy’s scholars reject any belief that a top-down, deductive declaration of truth from any discipline can suffice for understanding of the contemporary situation. Careful observation, analysis, and theorization of what is occurring and a generous listening to the multiplicity of “grass-roots” groups and movements around the globe is critical for an adequate grasp of social reality today.

The challenge of the gospel, the integrity of social science, and the common good in our day all press us to attend carefully both to what is occurring in the world around us and to how we engage that world.

