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The Moral Dimension of Third World Development
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Introduction

The 1987 Encyclical of Pope John Paul II, *Solicitudo Rei Socialis* is a most remarkable statement on the problem of development, particularly in relation to the Third World. While following the tradition of the social teaching of the Catholic Church, as outlined in previous Encyclicals from the famous *Rerum Novarum* of Pope Leo XIII onwards, and while commemorating in a particular way the publication in 1967 of Pope Paul VI's Encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, this document is impressively original in its definition of the development problem and in its suggestions towards a solution.

At the outset, the Pope makes it clear that the Church is not in the business of putting forward technical solutions to such human problems, and neither does she favour one particular approach towards problem-solving over another, so long as the proposed solution does not offend against human dignity. In fact the Pope makes it clear that the Church is favourable neither to Marxist nor Liberal-Capitalist definitions of the development problem, and in presenting her own interpretation of the issue and suggestions for the future, she is not putting forward a third way between these two extreme models.

Nevertheless the Pope stresses that the Church, as an ‘expert in humanity’, has a right and an obligation to speak about development, even though this issue might appear to be a technical problem. In fact, the Pope is at pains to emphasise that it is precisely when the development issue is reduced to its technical dimensions that people in general lose out. The main point of the Encyclical is to argue, that unless the moral dimension of the development problem is taken on board, it is unlikely that much progress will be made, and that the failure to take account of this dimension largely explains the extremely disappointing performance in dealing with this issue during the past twenty years.

What is most striking about this perspective on development is how much it contrasts with the bland ‘UN-speak’ which has characterised the
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extensive documentation emanating from the various UN world conferences such as Cairo, Copenhagen and Beijing in recent years. While attempting to deal with largely similar issues of development, the UN perspective has been notable for lacking a clear moral vision.

While Pope John Paul II acknowledges that there is abundant evidence showing an inability or an unwillingness to come to terms with the various aspects of development during the past two decades, he stresses that the Church is hopeful of a solution, primarily because her hope is based on faith in God, but also because she hopes in the ability of people, especially the laity, to deal with these issues. He points out that it is the obligation of the Church to make clear to her members and to all people of goodwill, that they must engage themselves in these issues. From a moral perspective, their own happiness depends on reaching out to the major problems of so many poor people. In attempting to deal with these problems humanity will discover its fulfilment.

Defining the problem
The Church's role in developing and diffusing her social doctrine is to 'read events as they unfold in the course of history' and to help people to 'respond to their vocation as responsible builders of society' with the help of 'rational reflection and the human sciences' (1). This social teaching remains identical 'in its fundamental inspiration, in its "principles of reflection", in its "criteria of judgement", in its basic "directives for action", and above all in its vital link with the Gospel of the Lord' (3). Thus while this Encyclical provides a most impressive metaphysical framework for examining anew the old problems associated with development, it is in the first instance a theological perspective on these issues. The social scientist might usefully speculate on the extent to which the 'detheologising' of the social science during the past two hundred years, may have contributed towards the emergence of definitions of development, which have been injurious to overall human development. This Encyclical, to the extent that it is calling for a deeper and more moral perspective, might be seen to concur with such a view.

All such documents have taken their point of departure from the Encyclical Rerum Novarum of Leo XIII, and in this case while building on the Encyclical Populorum Progressio of Paul VI in 1967, it is concerned with formulating, on the basis of a theological investigation of the present world, 'the need for a fuller and more nuanced concept of development and how to put in into effect' (4). The Church in Her awareness of Her mission of service, which is distinct from that of the State is concerned with 'the notorious inequalities in the situations of these same people' and it stresses its teaching on the 'universal purpose of goods' (7). In addition to pointing
out the obligations of each person, according to the degree of each one’s responsibility, to contribute towards seeking solutions, the Encyclical reminds us of the call of Populorum Progressio to attend to the ‘most serious duty’ incumbent on the more developed nations ‘to help the developing countries’ (7).

Drawing on Populorum Progressio the Encyclical reminds us that the social question has acquired a worldwide dimension and that the ‘multitudes of human beings who lack the goods and services offered by development are more numerous than those who possess them’ (9). It awakens us to a ‘serious problem of unequal distribution of the means of subsistence originally meant for everybody, and thus also to an unequal distribution of the benefits deriving from them’ (9). It goes on to make clear that this situation is ‘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’ (9). Rather than taking its inspiration from any of the fashionable interpretative models of the social sciences, this view derives from ‘an objective analysis of reality, and its originality is in ‘the moral evaluation of this reality’ which it presents (9). It is directed towards each person’s conscience, which is the source of moral decisions.

The originality of Populorum Progressio is also related to pointing out ‘the basic insight that the very concept of development, if considered in the perspective of universal interdependence, changes notably’ (9). ‘True development cannot consist in the simple accumulation of wealth and in the greater availability of goods and services, if this is gained at the expense of the development of the masses, and without due consideration for the social, cultural and spiritual dimensions of the human being’ (9). The originality of this Encyclical also lies in the very concept of development which it outlines: “Development is the new name for peace” (10). However, it goes on to state that ‘if “development is the new name for peace”, war and military preparations are the major enemy of the integral development of peoples’ (10).

The Development of Peoples

Having reviewed the major contribution of Populorum Progressio, the Pope goes on to examine some of the characteristics of today’s world from the point of view of the “development of peoples”. Despite the efforts of many organisations such as the United Nations Organisation over the past two decades, it cannot be denied that the present situation of the world ‘offers a rather negative impression’ (13). He refers to the widening of the gap between the so-called developed North and the developing South and to the disappointing general picture illustrated by economic and social indicators. However, other indices must also be examined such as illiteracy, the
difficulty of obtaining higher education, the inability to share in the building of one’s own nation, the various forms of exploitation and of economic, social, political and even religious oppression of the individual (15).

He refers to the suppression of economic initiative, a right which is so important for the common good. Experience shows that limitation of this right in the name of alleged “equality” destroys the spirit of initiative, that is ‘the creative subjectivity of the citizen’ (15). This results in passivity and submission to the bureaucratic apparatus, which puts everyone in a position of almost absolute dependence. It asks the leading question: ‘is development which does not take into account the full affirmation of these rights really development on the human level?’ (15). It suggests that modern underdevelopment is not only economic but also cultural, political and simply human, and thus we need to ask ourselves ‘if the sad reality of today might not be, at least in part, the result of a too narrow idea of development, that is, a mainly economic one’ (15).

While some of the responsibility for the lack of progress must be placed at the feet of the developing nations themselves, yet it feels that ‘one must denounce the existence of economic, financial and social mechanisms which, although they are manipulated by people, often function almost automatically, thus accentuating the situation of wealth for some and poverty for the rest’ (16). These mechanisms which are manoeuvred by the more developed countries ‘will have to be subjected to a careful analysis under the ethical-moral aspect’ (16). The absence of such a critical analysis by scholars with a Judaeo-Christian philosophical perspective in recent decades has been notable, while much of the critique of capitalism to date has come from social scientists adopting a neo-Marxist perspective.

In keeping with the perspective of the dependency school of economic development, which has been researching these issues for many decades in Latin America, the Encyclical reminds us of the conclusion of Populorum Progressio, that under such systems ‘the wealth of the rich would increase and the poverty of the poor would remain’ (16). It notes that ‘when this interdependence is separated from its ethical requirements, it has disastrous consequences for the weakest’, and this interdependence triggers negative effects even in rich countries as a result of a sort of internal dynamic (17). This then tells us a great deal about the nature of authentic development: ‘either all the nations of the world participate, or it will not be true development’.

The Encyclical examines in some detail some of the specific signs of underdevelopment such as the housing crisis and the phenomenon of unemployment and underemployment. These negative consequences must prompt us ‘to question seriously the type of development which has been followed over the past twenty years’ (18). Because of the universal nature of
the unemployment problem ‘it is a very telling negative sign of the state and
the quality of the development of peoples which we see today’ (18). The
third aspect which is examined is international debt, which has become a
brake on development and has in some cases even aggravated
underdevelopment.

In outlining the contribution to these problems of political factors such
as the emergence of the two opposing blocs of the East and the West during
the postwar period, the Pope explains that rather than being an opposition
between two different levels of development, this situation was based on an
opposition between two concepts of the development of peoples, ‘both
conds being imperfect and in need of radical correction’ (21). To make
matters worse, this opposition has been transferred to the developing
countries themselves, helping to widen the gap between North and South
(21). Thus the Church’s social doctrine adopts a critical attitude towards
both liberal capitalism and Marxist collectivism. Changes and updatings are
urgent and essential to such systems ‘in order to promote a true and integral
development of individuals and peoples in modern society’ (21). He
expresses particular concern about how social communications, based mainly
in centres of the North have frequently imposed ‘a distorted vision of life and
of man’, and have thus failed ‘to respond to the demands of true
development’ (22).

He warns that ‘the West gives the impression of abandoning itself to
forms of growing and selfish isolation’ and that a ‘leadership role among
nations can only be justified by the possibility and willingness to contribute
widely and generously to the common good’ (23). In relation to arms
production, which he regards as a ‘serious disorder’, he asks how it is that
‘while economic aid and development plans meet with the obstacle of
insuperable ideological barriers, and with tariff and trade barriers, arms of
whatever origin circulate with almost total freedom all over the world’ (24).

He also considers it very alarming ‘to see governments in many
countries launching systematic campaigns against birth, contrary not only to
the cultural and religious identity of the countries themselves but also
contrary to the nature of true development’ (25). Such campaigns often ‘take
the form of racism, or the promotion of certain equally racist forms of
eugenics’, which deserves the most forceful condemnation, since it is ‘a sign
of an erroneous and perverse idea of true development’ (25).

Having outlined clearly some of the most negative aspects of the
dominant models of development in the last twenty years, the Pope turns to
highlighting some very positive elements. Among these elements are: the
growing conviction of a radical interdependence and of the need for
solidarity; that the happiness to which we aspire cannot be obtained without
an effort and commitment on the part of all; a sign of respect for life despite
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all the temptations to destroy it by abortion and euthanasia; a greater realisation of the limits of available resources which is today referred to as ecological concern (26).

Authentic development

The Pope then goes on to consider what he regards as the true nature of the development of peoples. Examination of the contemporary world would lead us to note that ‘development is not a straightforward process, as it were automatic and in itself limitless, as though, given certain conditions, the human race were able to progress rapidly towards an undefined perfection of some kind. Such an idea linked to a notion of “progress” with philosophical connotations deriving from the Enlightenment, rather than to the notion of “development” which is used in a specifically economic and social sense now seems to be seriously called into doubt, particularly since the tragic experience of the two world wars, the planned and partly achieved destruction of whole peoples, and the looming atomic peril. A naive mechanistic model has been replaced by a well-founded anxiety for the fate of humanity’ (27).

At the same time, however, ‘the “economic” concept itself, linked to the word development, has entered into crisis’ (28). Today there is a better understanding that the mere accumulation of goods and services is not enough for the realisation of human happiness. The experience of recent years shows that ‘unless all the considerable body of resources and potential at man’s disposal is guided by a moral understanding and by an orientation towards the true good of the human race, it easily turns against man to oppress him’ (28). The most recent period indicates that side-by-side with the miseries of underdevelopment, we find a form of superdevelopment, which is also contrary to true happiness. This involves the civilisation of “consumption” or “consumerism”, which involves so much “throwing-away” and “waste”.

He reminds us of the difference between “being” and “having” and notes that one of the greatest injustices in contemporary society consists precisely in this: ‘that the ones who possess much are relatively few and those who possess almost nothing are many. It is the injustice of the poor distribution of goods and services originally intended for all’ (28). The evil does not consist in “having” as such, but in possessing without regard for the subordination of goods to man’s “being” and his true vocation (28). So while development has a necessary economic dimension, it must not be limited to this, because if it is, it turns against those whom it is meant to benefit (28).

The transcendent reality of the human being must be taken into account and development cannot consist in ‘the use, dominion over and

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indiscriminate possession of created things and the products of human industry. In addition to its socioeconomic dimension, therefore, development is 'an essential dimension of man's vocation' (30). This "development" then corresponds to the difficult yet noble task of improving the lot of man in his totality, and it is always man who is the protagonist of development (30). We must commit ourselves, therefore, to work together for the full development of others.

Today, more than in the past, the intrinsic contradiction of development limited only to its economic element is seen more clearly, and such development 'easily subjects the human person and his deepest needs to the demands of economic planning and selfish profit' (33). The moral character of development suggests the appropriateness of acquiring a growing awareness of the fact that one cannot use with impunity the different categories of beings simply as one wishes. Since natural resources are limited 'using them as if they were inexhaustible, with absolute dominion, seriously endangers their availability not only for the present generation but above all for generations to come' (34).

Because of the essentially moral character of development, the obstacles to development likewise have a moral character. Thus 'the decisions which either accelerate or slow down the development of peoples are really political in character' (35). The main obstacles to development will be overcome only by means of essentially moral decisions. He points out that one cannot easily gain 'a profound understanding of the reality that confronts us unless we give a name to the root of the evils which afflict us' (36). Among these are "selfishness" and "shortsightedness", "mistaken political calculations" and "imprudent economic decisions". Each of these evaluations involves an ethical and moral dimension. The Pope here makes clear that he is involved in a religious evaluation of the situation than merely a socio-political analysis.

What is required, therefore, is 'the urgent need to change the spiritual attitudes which define each individual's relationship with self, with neighbour, with even the remotest human communities, and with nature itself' (38). He points towards the moral value of the growing awareness of interdependence among individuals and nations, and suggests that evidence of this is to be found in the 'fact that men and women in various parts of the world feel personally affected by the injustices and violations of human rights committed in distant countries' (38). Another positive sign is the growing awareness of the solidarity of the poor among themselves. Yet, the stronger and richer nations must have a sense of moral responsibility for the other nations. Solidarity, a Christian virtue, helps us to see the "other" whether a person, people or nation not as somebody to be exploited but as a "neighbour", a "helper" (39).
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While the Pope emphasises that the Church's role is not to provide technical solutions, he identifies a number of specific areas which require attention. Beginning from the characteristic principle of Christian social doctrine that 'the goods of this world are originally meant for all', he explains that 'private property is under a “social mortgage”, which means that it has an intrinsically social function, based upon and justified by the principle of the universal destination of goods' (42).

He points to the need to reform the international trade system, which discriminates against developing countries. He also refers to the international division of labour and the exploitation of workers in countries with weak labour laws. The world monetary system characterised by excessive fluctuations of exchange rates and interests rates create problems for poorer countries with large debts and a weak balance of payments. Poorer countries also are negatively affected by various forms of technology transfer, which sometimes results in developing countries being sent useless technologies. Finally, he refers to the urgent need for the reform of International Organisations, whose only purpose should be working for the common good.

Conclusion

The message of Solicitude Rei Socialis builds on the tradition of social teaching in the previous Encyclicals, and in a particular way on that of Populorum Progressio, which it commemorates. Yet this Encyclical is quite original in its own right and challenges Christian thinkers, policy makers, and all people of good will to take on the task of the development of peoples in a serious manner. It warns contemporary society that failure to meet this challenge will have grave consequences for all of humanity, and that the future happiness of human civilisation depends on each person seeing their own fulfilment through having a greater concern for others.

Looking back on the rather poor performance of the more developed North during the past two decades in reaching out to the large and impoverished populations of the poorer South, the Encyclical seeks answers, not in further socio-political analysis of the problem, but rather in asking people to examine their conscience and to recognise their own selfishness in promoting a throw-away consumerist society, which has little regard for protecting non-renewable resources or the environment. It notes with great sadness the continued evidence of inequality between the few who benefit inordinately from the wealth-creating system, and the many who are marginalised by poverty and unemployment. It questions the integrity of an international political system, which facilitates the free movement of armaments, yet fails to foster a more level playing pitch for poorer countries in international trade.

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Despite the failures of the past, however, this Encyclical expresses hope based on the potential of the laity to take this challenge to heart and to seek their own happiness, through promoting a more authentic form of development, one based on the virtue of solidarity. The growing awareness of the interdependence of mankind is one of the positive signs of hope for the future. The more authentic model of development, which the Encyclical proposes, is based on the idea of ‘being’ rather than ‘having’, a model that takes on board the essential moral dimension of human existence, and one which is therefore more complete in its perspective than the predominantly economistic strategies which have resulted in such serious levels of inequality to date.

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Notes

1 The numbers in brackets refer to the numbered points in the Encyclical.

A POEM

THE ROAD FROM EMMAUS

T Kretz

To the shave April morning planned
as only Sunday can be; time
a lean gift from a jealous hand,
hours of scribbling reams of rhyme;

and then he stumbled through my door
with a look of nothing to do.
Good Lord, I knew what lay in store
for me unless I could eschew

his boredom, his way to my chair.
I gave him a hint of a clue;
he turned and was no longer there.
Spring morning shot to hell - he knew

me in the tossing of stale crumbs.
Scrap one more human relation;
Christ rarely calls before he comes,
or sits down to hesitation.

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