

*The Social Encyclicals of John Paul II*

Edited with introductions by J. Michael Miller, C.S.B.  
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The primary aim of Miller's book is to provide the first compilation of John Paul's twelve encyclicals written to date. This, in itself, makes the book an extraordinary tool. But Miller's book offers more. Prior to introducing each of the encyclicals individually, Miller offers some details about John Paul's approach, his use of scripture, his style, and his philosophical influences. The description he provides demonstrates a scholarly understanding of John Paul's corpus of encyclicals. However, the reader unfamiliar with terms from specialized theological or philosophical language such as 'scholasticism,' 'neo-scholasticism,' 'personalist phenomenology,' and 'realism' might find some difficulty appreciating Miller's insightful commentary since these terms are introduced without definitions. As mentioned earlier in the context of Catholic theology, the definition of terms is necessary in undertakings of the multidisciplinary sort, such as in Miller's book. This is especially true for books aimed at a broad audience. Not all Catholics are theological masters, not all theologians are fluent in philosophy, and not all philosophers are acquainted with personalism or phenomenology.

Nevertheless, Miller dedicates some effort at clarifying 'phenomenology,' despite the difficulties presented by the absence of a single unifying school of thought in the broad phenomenological movement. Miller might not do justice to the differences in views within the phenomenological movement as a whole, but he depicts John Paul's phenomenology both non-controversially and succinctly.

Miller introduces each of the twelve encyclicals by John Paul II with a general commentary, summary, and discussion of the key themes in the encyclical. This organization is very useful for three reasons. First, the general commentary provides the reader with a glimpse of Miller's scholarship of the corpus of John Paul. For each of the encyclicals, Miller's commentaries include, among other things, comparative views of the encyclical

at hand in relation to other encyclicals (John Paul's and those of other popes), discussions of John Paul's style, and an analysis of probable factors that motivated the primary focus of the encyclical. Second, the summary provides the reader with a brief, well-organized description of the encyclical. Third, the classification of key themes allows the reader to identify the underlying structure of the encyclical in order to more clearly understand its overall message. Miller's introductory essays are thus valuable guides for both those acquainted with John Paul's writings and the uninitiated. The remaining discussion shall focus on Miller's introduction to John Paul's three social encyclicals: *Laborem Exercens* (1981) on human work, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987) on social concerns, and *Centesimus Annus* (1991) on the consequences of socialism in light of the hundredth anniversary of Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (1891).

### ***Laborem Exercens***

The central theme in this encyclical is, Miller writes, the dignity and role of human work. Miller observes that *Laborem Exercens*, although written in commemoration of the ninetieth anniversary of Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, does not cite quotes from this nor any other encyclical. This is not entirely correct. It quotes from *Redemptor Hominis* (John Paul II, 1979), and acknowledges points made in others, such as Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) and John XXIII's *Mater et Magistra* (1961). Whether an idea from a previous contribution is either quoted or referenced by means of a footnote does not make a significant difference—the idea is equally acknowledged as either support or authority.

Miller further observes that most of the footnotes cite biblical passages and, thus, this encyclical's primary inspiration is sacred scripture. Perhaps this needs some clarification. Clearly, passages from scripture play a significant role in John Paul's description of the "spirituality of work in the Christian sense" (in "Elements for a Spirituality of Work," Chapter V). But John Paul brings these to a modern light with references to Thomistic economic thought, as well as with a clear, yet sophisticated, understanding of economic analysis consistent with modern Christian social thought. All of these factors together, it seems, are the source of John Paul's inspiration for the answers to the problem that this encyclical addresses. John Paul begins his introduction by situating the encyclical's central theme of human work within the context of the new conditions and demands of the present day which "will require a reordering and adjustment of the structures of the modern day economy and of the distribution of work" (1.3). It appears,

then, that the muse behind this encyclical is precisely the impact that the changing conditions and demands of the present day have on our notion of human work, the distribution of human work, and the significance of human work in relation to capital as a new factor in production. John Paul steers the discussion to scripture for a rediscovery of the answers concerning “human value and of the moral order to which it belongs” (24.1), which mundane problems frequently obscure.

Miller characterizes the style of this encyclical as “distinctively Wojtylan” (151), thus apparently invoking John Paul’s corpus prior to his papacy. But this is not what Miller has in mind. Instead, the *Wojtylan* mark is “the Pope’s preference for combining a phenomenological description of experience with philosophical-theological meditation” (151). This is, perhaps, a very broad and even more ambiguous description of the *Wojtylan* mark. Phenomenology is a philosophical movement which does not fall into a single unifying school of thought. Wojtyla’s thought merits more elaboration for it falls into a unique camp of analytic Polish philosophy—established by Twardowski and traced through to Ingarden—imbued with Scheler’s moral value objectivism, Thomistic thought, and certain strands of personalist Christian philosophy (referred to briefly by John Paul himself in 15.1 and 15.2).

Miller’s summary of this encyclical and his discussion of key themes are both elaborate and helpful to the reader. There is, however, a significant quibble with one of Miller’s conclusions that is too compelling to ignore. Miller writes, “work, therefore, has an intrinsic value because it has man or woman as its subject” (154). This conclusion cannot be drawn from John Paul’s encyclical. John Paul argues for “the preeminence of the subjective meaning of work over the objective one” (6.6). The central idea that John Paul distills from the very complex theme of human work is not work in itself. Rather, John Paul addresses the dignity of the human person that is manifested in his being and every act. Work, then, is a means for the manifestation of the human person’s purpose and vocation; but work, in itself, has no intrinsic value. For, if by virtue of being performed by subjects work acquired an intrinsic value, work could be conceived as an objective basis or measure for classifying people. This is precisely what John Paul argues against. Man himself is the only measure of the work he performs as a conscious, free subject. Given the often conflicting tendencies of human nature, sometimes for the good and sometimes for the evil, the nature of work is conditioned by the ethical content of man’s acts but, in itself, work has no intrinsic value.

### *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*

This encyclical was written in commemoration of Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* (1967) but, as Miller indicates, John Paul does more than merely recall the relevance and doctrine of Paul VI's encyclical. John Paul raises the issue that the concept of development, compared to Paul VI's optimistic outlook, needs to be addressed in light of the widening gap between the developed and underdeveloped sectors of the world. Miller observes, aptly, that although the theme of this encyclical centers on the economic condition of peoples and nations, and on the opposition between collectivism and capitalism, John Paul is concerned with the moral dimension of the economic sphere of action.

In the summary, Miller mentions the most controversial interpretation of this encyclical, i.e., that John Paul advocates a third way between collectivism and capitalism. And Miller points to John Paul's unequivocal answer in 41.7: "The Church's social doctrine is not a "third way" between *liberal capitalism* and *Marxist collectivism*, nor even a possible alternative to other solutions less radically opposed to one another: rather, it constitutes a *category of its own*." Miller then closes the issue. Although John Paul anticipates the above-mentioned interpretation, the existence of suspicion concerning John Paul's hidden "third way" warrants further examination. What such a misconstrued interpretation of John Paul's message fails to grasp is the philosophical sophistication contained in this encyclical. Let us examine this assertion.

John Paul distinguishes the economic sphere from the moral sphere. Economic literature offers ample clarification of the scope of its own sphere. At best, economists explain, an economist may advance a positive judgment concerning this or that possible course of action in relation to a particular desired end. But economics is not occupied with normative, moral judgments of the *should/ought* variety. John Paul is no stranger to economic literature, and his discussions on economic issues reveal this familiarity. But, in this encyclical, he speaks as a philosopher adept at establishing distinctions.

On the one hand, there are boundaries to the sphere of economic action. But, on the other, there are actions which transcend the economic sphere into the moral sphere. It is not the case, as Miller writes, that John Paul "betrays his ever-present attention to the human subject" (416). Rather, John Paul addresses the moral considerations of specific economic actions, such as "the use of the elements of nature, the renewability of resources,

and the consequences of haphazard industrialization” (34.6). Clearly, all of these are actions that fall squarely in the economic sphere. But, as John Paul points out, since these economic actions affect the nature of each being’s health and welfare, these economic actions also have moral relevance. The reason for this is because, central to the moral concerns of Church doctrine which John Paul addresses lies the human person, his actions, and all actions that affect him. Here, Miller’s reading does not do justice to the magnificence of John Paul’s insight.

### *Centesimus Annus*

Written on the hundredth anniversary of Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* (1891), this encyclical grounds the themes of the right to private property, the right to a ‘just wage,’ the right to establish professional associations such as trade unions, and the right to religious freedom upon Leo’s contribution. Upon such a foundation, one motivated by “a correct view of the human person,” John Paul develops his devastating criticism of socialism, namely, that socialism proved to be a remedy “worse than the sickness” (12.3) because it compromised free choice and the dignity of the human person (13.1). Miller summarizes these features of *Centesimus Annus* quite satisfactorily.

However, Miller does not discuss John Paul’s analysis of the role of the state in relation to economic life. The state has an indirect role, according to the *principle of subsidiarity*, “by creating favorable conditions for the free exercise of economic activity, which will lead to abundant opportunities for employment and sources of wealth” (15.5). And the state has a direct role, according to the *principle of solidarity*, “by defending the weakest, by placing certain limits on the autonomy of parties who determine working conditions, and by ensuring in every case the necessary minimum support for the unemployed worker” (15.5).

John Paul’s analysis is significant because it connects what he calls “the fundamental error of socialism” (i.e., an incorrect view of the human person, in 13.1) with the political control of economic life. It is upon this basis that John Paul asserts that “the free market is the most efficient instrument for utilizing resources and effectively responding to needs” (34.1). Here, John Paul distinguishes the free market as a natural order from capitalism as an institutionalized political system. But Miller does not apprehend such a subtle distinction because he employs the terms *free market* and *capitalism* synonymously. This is why Miller writes, “Here [John Paul] has in mind not the unbridled capitalism of the past, which he roundly

condemns, but the 'new' capitalism or market economy of the developed western nations" (576). In 42. 2, John Paul anticipates the common equivocation of *free market* and *capitalism* which Miller also commits. John Paul writes, "If by 'capitalism' is meant an economic system which recognizes the fundamental and positive role of business, the market, private property and the resulting responsibility for the means of production, as well as free human creativity in the economic sector, then...it would perhaps be more appropriate to speak of a 'business economy,' 'market economy' or simply 'free economy'" (42.2). John Paul adds, "But if by 'capitalism' is meant a system in which freedom in the economic sector is not circumscribed within a strong juridical framework which places it at the service of human freedom in its totality and sees it as a particular aspect of that freedom, the core of which is ethical and religious" then such so-called *capitalism* is not the model to follow (42.1 and 42.2). Miller simply misses John Paul's subsequent criticisms of this latter, inadequate model of capitalism.

### **General Remarks**

This review has advanced some objections to Miller's readings of John Paul's social encyclicals. But these are not meant to cast a negative light on Miller's extraordinary project of compiling John Paul's encyclicals and framing them by means of commentary and summary in order to be accessible to a wide readership. More importantly, however, is the vehicle that this book serves as a means for promoting the discussion of the content of John Paul's encyclicals. Miller's own reading of these encyclicals, advanced in his commentaries, certainly risk disagreement. But disagreement is the motivation for disputed thought and critical thinking—all of which benefits the community of individuals who are interested in truth. This is, after all, the legacy of the Scholastic tradition to Christian social thought. We should hope that most Catholics would take such an approach in their scholarship and understanding of Catholic doctrine. On this score, Miller is a model to follow.