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Vatican II themes: The church as servant

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

A third major ecclesiological principle in the Second Vatican Council's teaching is that the mission of the Church includes *service* to human needs in the social, economic, and political orders, as well as the preaching of the word and the celebration of the sacraments.

Evangelization, or the preaching of the Gospel, essentially includes the pursuit of justice and the transformation of the world. As Pope Paul VI wrote in his 1975 apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii nuntiandi* ("On Evangelization in the Modern World"), evangelization involves "a message especially energetic today about liberation" (n. 29).

It is highly instructive that even so conservative a pope as John Paul II should have been so forthright about the Church's social teachings.

This was evident not only in his three major social encyclicals--in 1981 *Laborem exercens* ("On Human Work"), in 1988 *Sollicitudo rei socialis* ("On the Social Concern of the Church"), and in 1991 *Centesimus annus* ("The Hundredth Year" after Leo XIII's *Rerum novarum*)--but also in the homilies and public addresses he delivered in the United States and Canada, Central and South America, Poland, the Philippines, Africa, at the United Nations, and elsewhere around the world.

In his fourth pastoral visit to the United States in 1995, he called upon America not to close its arms to immigrants nor its heart to the poor and the powerless.

It would do well for us to listen again to John Paul II's prophetic words at Yankee Stadium in October, 1979: "We cannot stand idly by, enjoying our own riches and freedom if, in any place, the Lazarus of the 20th century stands at our doors. In the light of the parable of Christ, riches and freedom mean a special responsibility. Riches and freedom create a special obligation."

He made the same point again at Xavier University in New Orleans in September, 1987: "It is not enough to offer to the disadvantaged of the world crumbs of freedom, crumbs of truth, and crumbs of bread. The Gospels call for much more. The parable of the rich man and the poor man is directed to the conscience of humanity and, today in particular, to the conscience of America."

And preaching earlier in Edmonton, Alberta, in September, 1984, the pope used strong words that still ring with power: "In the light of Christ's words, this poor South will judge the rich North. And the poor people and poor nations--poor in different ways, not only lacking food, but also deprived of freedom and other human rights--will judge those people who take these goods away from them, amassing to themselves the imperialistic monopoly of economic and political supremacy at the expenses of others."

Finally, speaking at Giants Stadium in New Jersey in October, 1995, Pope John Paul II shaped his words specifically for an American audience: "Compared to many other parts of the world, the United States is a privileged, privileged land. Yet even here there is much poverty and human suffering. There is much need for love and the works of love; there is need for social solidarity" marked by "a great openness and sensitivity to the needs of [one's] neighbors."

But one paragraph in his speech stood out above all the rest. The pope introduced it with a pointed reference to the Statue of Liberty and its world-famous invitation: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses...."

"Is present-day America," he asked, "becoming less sensitive, less caring toward the poor, the weak, the stranger, the needy? It must not! Today as before, the United States is called to be a hospitable, hospitable society, a welcoming culture. If America were to turn in on itself, would this not be the beginning of the end of what constitutes the very essence of the 'American experience'?"

The Church, the council reminded us in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (n. 3), is a servant Church, like Jesus himself who came "not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

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The world and the Church of this new century and new millennium are looking for people who are prepared to lay down their lives, figuratively and sometimes literally, in the service of others, like Archbishop Oscar Romero and the six Jesuits and the four churchwomen of El Salvador, more than 30 years ago.

The Church and the world at large will turn away from those who seek only to lord it over others, and even to prevent them from reading and hearing theological and pastoral points of view different from their own.

Like Jesus himself, the Church is a servant.

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Over the next several weeks, Fr. McBrien's columns will explore the major ecclesiological themes or

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