

REMEDY FOR THE PRESENT WORLD-WIDE ECONOMIC DISCONTENT

(By ARCHBISHOP REDWOOD.)

To what extent does justice demand a change in the present economic system? How can the extremes of penury and wealth be avoided? How shall that class war now ravaging Russia and threatening the world be averted? It seems in accord with right reason to affirm that the world's peace, and the peace of each State, depend on the securing for the inhabitants of the earth an equitable distribution of the world's goods. Now, it may be found on inquiry that, if the income of wealth be justly divided, the whole problem receives a sound practical solution. What classes of men are the chief contributors to the production of wealth? Four—namely, land-owners, capitalists, business men, and laborers. Each of these four classes are distinct and necessary factors of production, though, of course, the same individual may occasionally discharge several of these functions. The problem is: in what proportion does justice claim that the wealth created should be shared among the four?

One discerns at a glance the number of burning questions which the consideration of these four classes of producers opens up. Waiving most of them in this limited article, we may note that, in the main, private ownerships, whether of land or of the other means of production, and also the taking of profits and working for wages, are justifiable in accordance with the principles of Christian economy. But it is undeniable that the great and long-established Catholic principles of the essential equality of all men and the sacredness of human personality, the recognition of which all sound systems of human welfare postulate, do not harmonise with many current commercial principles, as Dr. Ryan in his able book, *Distributive Justice*, clearly shows.

No project of reconstruction, no plans for the distribution of the national wealth but must begin with the question of the land, the source of all material goods. Unquestionably the land is badly distributed. England, for instance, is not owned by its inhabitants. Can anyone conceive a stable and peaceful community in which a prime necessity for existence and welfare is the exclusive possession of a comparative few? The land tenure of private ownership—so ably represented by Leo XIII. in his famous Encyclical *De Conditione Opificum*—would, it seems, be the best remedy. It would allow the individual full use and secure possession of his holding, full ownership of improvements and free power to transmit and transfer. Thus it would remedy many defects of the present system and promote both individual and social welfare.

The claims of the other three classes of producers—the capitalists, business men, and laborers—are so interconnected that it is impossible without confusion to take them together. We may at once state here—as was stated elsewhere—that the root of the present discontent is the melancholy fact that, even apart from land, other forms of capital too are concentrated in the hands of a few, who are thus able, and often do (in the oft-quoted words of Leo XIII.) "lay upon the teeming masses of the laboring poor a yoke little better than that of slavery itself." Hence the deplorable division of the State into two nations, ever at variance, ever a menace to order and stability, and a cause of serious weakness. Hitherto we have had class legislation in the interest of class. There is no unity. The gravest sign of the times is the permanent clashing of interests which will inevitably lead to civil war unless remedied in time. Let us look candidly at this indubitable fact: In great and overwhelming numbers exists a landless lack—property class, unable to get decent homes, to educate their children properly, to practise their religion, to safeguard their health, to provide for their old age, and, consequently, dependent on employers for their sustenance and on the State-aid, i.e., a fine levied on the rest of the com-

munity. But such a fact is a disgrace and an outrage on any civilised community. Who is responsible for it? The responsibility falls on the covetous human heart, unchecked inwardly by religion or outwardly by the law, which seeks and takes by every sort of usurious practice, payment for goods not delivered, risks not run, services not rendered. The responsibility falls on the teachers who abandoned Christianity and said that the love of money was the source of all good and not the root of all evil. No justice can be secured, no peace can be established, until conscience and law combine to forswear that false doctrine, to restore the worker to his human dignity, to guarantee his decent livelihood. The remedy for the disease of Capitalism is, not a system of State insurance, which would only change the form of the worker's dependence, but the transference, by one method or another, to the laboring class of income-bearing property. It may be done by a system of profit-sharing or co-operation. Until this is done Dr. Ryan writes: "The workers do not enjoy a normal or reasonable degree of independence, self-respect, or self-confidence. They have not sufficient control over the wage contract and the other conditions of employment, and they have nothing at all to say concerning the goods that they shall produce or the persons to whom their product shall be sold. They lack the incentive to put forth their best efforts in production. They cannot satisfy adequately the instinct of property, the desire to control some of the determining forms of material possession. They are deprived of that consciousness of power which is generated by property and which contributes so powerfully towards the making of a contented and efficient life. They do not possess a normal amount of freedom in politics, nor in those civic and social relations which lie outside the spheres of industry and politics. In a word the worker without capital has not sufficient power over the ordering of the State."

No need, then, to abolish the rights of property, but need to insist upon the duties and responsibilities of property. In any country where, owing to the tenure of property, the bulk of the people have not a fair share in the goods of the earth, the rights of property are being abused. The notion—so thoroughly human and Christian—that man is not the absolute owner of his property, but the steward, must be emphasised. He is not allowed to do what he likes with his own, but only to do what he ought, and his obligations are extensively regulated by his social circumstances. He must not—by excessive accumulation—be choked with superfluity, while his neighbor starves, or struggles in want. It is necessary to urge the duty (whether based on strict justice or on charity) incumbent on possessors of superfluous wealth to alleviate human misery. No man can logically deny this duty, who admits that men are intrinsically sacred and essentially equal by nature and in their claims to a reasonable livelihood from the common heritage of the earth. And, after all, he wants that a man supplies out of his superfluous goods are not necessary for his rational existence. For the most part that superfluous wealth brings merely irrational enjoyment, greater social prestige, or increased domination over his fellows. What comparison is there between its importance and that of his neighbor's needs, connected as they are with his humane living?

But Dives seated on his money-bags lends a deaf ear to this salutary gospel. Because the obligations, though real, most real, are somewhat indeterminate, the millionaire finds scores of excuses. So, in default of conscience, justice must turn to the State and invoke the civil powers to insist on an equitable distribution of the country's possessions. If moral influence proves insufficient, selfishness must be curbed by force. How the State may best do this, let the wisdom of statesmen quickly devise, or else the Have-nots may attempt to wreck the State, by direct action, heedless of their deliberations. It is a fact that organised society has never failed to safeguard property, but it has never formally faced the reality that excessive wealth in private hands is an evil both for the rich and for the

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