

7. The Morality of Nations: Rich Man, Poor Man . . .

If there were such a thing as a historical map of shame—a map colored with the terrible consequences of sinful structures of bygone days—great human atrocities inevitably produced by those structures would loom as the tallest, grimmest mountains dominating that map.

Nearest the United States in place but the most distant in time would be the pre-Columbian institutions of Latin America that regularly and by accepted law doomed tens of thousands yearly to brutal death. It is difficult for us even to imagine fifty thousand people garroted and eviscerated on the same day and in the same place. Institutionalized impoverishment of over eight million Irish during the worst centuries of English Penal Codes, Ottoman Turk attempts to liquidate all Armenians, Stalin's cool disposing of fifteen million Ukrainians, Hitler's dreadful "Final Solution" spelled out in numbers running to six million Jews, the Allied betrayal of some hundreds of thousands of Slavs back into Stalin's hands and certain murder, the liquidation of the East Timorese by the central Indonesian government—this would be a partial list of such promontories and peaks of human horror on a historical map of shame.

If there were such a thing as a contemporary map of shame—a map of shame in our world now, as it is being prepared for its geopolitical debut at the end of the second millennium—that map would be dominated by whole new mountain ranges of institutionalized exploitation. It would be dominated by structures and by systems of structures that foster, connive at or simply allow the domination of eighty percent of the world's population by the other twenty percent.

In short, that contemporary map of shame would be the graphic expression of the atrocity we have come to describe so blandly as the division of the world into North and South, which is to say, in plainer

terms, the division of nations, and of populations within nations, into rich and poor. Such a map of shame might find some way to show us the homeless, the refugees and the stateless—the human throwaways of our new world—who increase in their millions year by year, region by region, nation by nation.

Such a map would surely show the enormity of the most active volcano in our midst, formed by the greater part of our human family, which can be said to go to bed hungry and wake up miserable, with no hope today, tomorrow, next year that the coagulated mass of their suffering will be diluted and reduced and finally eliminated.

It is just such a map of shame that Pope John Paul does hold up to the world in his moral assessment of the geopolitical arrangements that are setting up our future for us. In his private conversations with the architects of those arrangements, in his meetings with secular leaders, in his speeches delivered in the Vatican and around the world, in his speeches and encyclicals delivered to the faithful of his Church, Pope John Paul's constant theme is the moral and human unacceptability of this appalling mountain chain of human suffering and injustice. And his constant warning is that those mountains will either be reduced by our willingness to change or, by the very weight of their own misery, come crashing down upon all our hopes as human beings, shattering all our selfish visions of the good life, and burying in their rubble whatever peace we might have thought to fashion in our single-minded rush to development.

On the modern map of world shame that is the subject of so much of John Paul's attention, North and South do not figure as precise geographical terms. Instead, they are the global frontiers where wealth and poverty divide not only nations, but societies within nations. They are the frontiers by which most of humanity is systematically and deliberately separated from any share in the prosperity and enjoyment of life to which each of us has a basic moral claim.

Deliberately. That is the operative principle. For, in his assessment, John Paul leaves no doubt that in the North-South division of the world, the North countries—steeped for the most part by now in their preoccupation with the race to superdevelopment—are steeped as well in immoral complicity in the sinful structures that contribute to and perpetuate the sufferings in the South countries. He leaves no doubt in the mind of anyone he speaks to that the multiple structures based in the North countries—industrial, financial, monetary, fiscal, political—line the pockets of many in the North and a few in the South, while the suffering of millions is prolonged beyond endurance. By definition, those structures must be called sinful.

To the discomfort of more than a few, John Paul underlines two main characteristics of the North. The first is its advanced state of industrialization. The North countries have a head start of immense size in regional and global entrepreneurship, and a growing—almost monopolistic—participation in the recent advances of the technotronic era.

The second main characteristic of the North is financial domination. Domination in the worldwide flow, management and use of capital and of manufactured goods. This wealth provides the North, among many other things, with a capacity for extensive investment in the South countries, and a capacity to make financial loans to the South.

By contrast, John Paul defines the South in terms of a series of crippling conditions that he has seen firsthand and whose details fill hundreds of reports that reach him yearly. These are conditions that only deepen and widen the already enormous gap that separates the South from the North countries.

Illiteracy; no possibility of higher education; economic and social inability to join in building one's nation; discrimination that cuts deep ravines along religious, social, political and financial lines; denial of the right to economic initiative; inadequate housing; helter-skelter urbanization by millions as a last resort for mere survival; widespread unemployment and underemployment. This is but a partial litany of those crippling conditions—a minisurvey of the vermin endemic to the South and eating away at its vitals.

That these same conditions are becoming a plague in some areas in the North countries—even though they are still limited and usually controllable—is something John Paul takes as a preliminary tap on the shoulder of the North countries, as part of Heaven's early warning system to the North's leaders and citizens alike that institutionalized moral evil travels ever so easily back to bite the hands that feed it.

It is as obvious to the Pontiff as it is to many others that, beset by such an array of crippling conditions, the South countries cannot lift themselves by their own bootstraps out of their continuing poverty. At the same time, however, it is just as obvious that in their present ways of working, the much vaunted international trade, financial and monetary systems of the North cannot mesh and harmonize adequately with the limited possibilities of the South. That pair of basic facts is highlighted in every facet of the relationship—if it can be called that—between North and South countries.

Take, for instance, the billions of dollars in so-called foreign aid, and the billions more in profligate loans that have already been poured by the developed North countries into Africa, Asia and Latin America.

What effect, the Pontiff has asked pointedly more than once, and in

more than one way, can come from aid or from loans when there is lacking in the South any adequate infrastructure—physical, social, technological, educational—onto which the North's cooperation can be grafted?

The overall answer to that critical question can be written by too many millions—if they can write at all—with one word: “tragedy.” But “dangerous” might not be a bad word to use either, when you glance at the total national debts among the South nations—or even if you look at some of the debts in Latin America alone.

By the end of 1988, the national debt of Brazil was \$120.1 billion. The national debt of Mexico was \$107.4 billion. Yet neither country has the gross national product or the sophisticated financial, industrial, economic and educational underpinnings that will keep it from being crushed by debts of that magnitude.

Or focus even briefly on the case of Bolivia and Argentina. Bolivia is one of the poorest of the poor countries of Latin America, while Argentina is one of the most developed and cosmopolitan countries in the region. But both are engulfed in the same deadly dilemma. A large chunk of Bolivia's meager national income depends on its sale of natural gas to Argentina. Bolivia depends on that income just to pay its national debt. But Argentina, racked by its own debt and by hyperinflation, has stopped all payments to Bolivia. So Bolivia in its turn has to renegotiate repayment of its debts. Yet without a bridge loan, which will carry it still deeper into debt, it cannot enter into such negotiations.

That dismal spectacle, which is not confined by any means to Bolivia and Argentina, becomes almost lurid when yet another essential question is asked. What has happened to all the billions that have been poured into the South countries? Indeed, what has happened to the domestic earnings of oil-rich Venezuela, which has a debt of \$35 billion? What has happened to the domestic earnings of oil-rich Nigeria, which owes \$30.5 billion?

Or take the case of Gabon. With a total output of 160,000 barrels of oil a day from its giant Rabi-Kounga onshore field, Gabon—after Nigeria and Angola—is black Africa's third-largest oil producer. Yet, with a population of a mere one million, Gabon's foreign debt in 1986 was \$1.6 billion.

The culprits blamed here were depressed oil markets and the weak dollar. And no doubt about it, they are part of the story. But that leads right back to the sinful structures John Paul talks about. For the management of the dollar's value and the fixing of oil prices are both in the hands of those who could—with new and benign policies—avoid putting

Gabon's economy in jeopardy. Significantly, in fact, Rabi-Kounga is jointly owned by two groups that are a portrait in miniature of the affluence and the power of the structures of the North countries: Shell Gabon, which includes the Royal Dutch/Shell Group of the United States; and Elf Gabon, which includes Elf Aquitaine of France.

So mightily do the problems escalate in the South, and so desperate does the climate of life become, that a kind of cannibalism begins to operate. For there can be no doubt that in virtually every South country—in Brazil, in Nigeria, in the Philippines, in Venezuela—anywhere you care to look, in fact, there are successful South disciples of North policies. In each poverty-stricken place there is a moneyed class, mainly entrepreneurs and investors who have managed to plug themselves as individuals into the good life of their North counterparts. But without the systematic help of the North countries, there is no possibility that these tiny groups can build the infrastructure by which they could, even if they wished, begin to spread the benefits in any way that might begin to make a difference.

Thus, while the wealthy few in the South lead flourishing lives just the way they see it done in the North, they are as impotent as eunuchs in a bedraggled harem. They see what surrounds them; but they have no means of doing anything significant about it. And so they carry on with their isolated lives, while the poverty and general helplessness endemic to the bulk of the populations in their individual countries only increase from year to year.

Nor do the problems end even with such an awful litany. Incomprehensibly enough, blithe and cruelly misleading conclusions about the South are drawn in the North. The mistakes are honest ones, surely; and probably these are made in the hope that things are turning around—that maybe they're not so bad after all.

In March of 1989, to illustrate with one case upon which John Paul has remarked privately, a World Bank report found that in the forty-five sub-Saharan countries, agricultural production and the gross national product had risen since 1985; and that for the first time since 1970, food output in the region was expanding faster than the population. "Africa," the report concluded, "has begun a fragile but sustainable economic recovery."

Such misleading optimism was quickly and correctly blasted out of the water by the United Nations Commission for Africa. Pointing precisely to the underlying condition that makes moral mockery of such baseless predictions of "sustainable economic recovery," the U.N. Commission showed that no signs of a solid infrastructure had yet appeared in those

sub-Saharan countries. In fact, the commission painted a future of no recovery at all, but one of "dire long-range consequences for the future of the African people and economies."

Pope John Paul had no need of either report to tell him of the conditions he has seen for himself, in Africa and in too many other places where he has spoken over and over again of the conditions that make our world increasingly a place of shame.

"Is it merely a rhetorical question," the Pontiff wondered publicly in Zambia on May 3, 1989, "to ask how many more infants and children must die every day in Africa because resources are now being swallowed up in debt repayment?" In the same vein, is it merely a rhetorical question to ask why the average Zambian man must be dead and buried by the age of fifty? Are such questions, as John Paul said, no better than rhetorical? Is anyone in the North countries listening?

Possibly not. For the developed North nations deepen the misery of the South countries yet further by their policies of destroying or storing surplus supplies of basic foods, instead of arranging for their allocation to offset the waves of hunger that continually lay waste to whole populations.

In the main, what puny efforts there are to supply food to even a fraction of the most desperate peoples are isolated at best. They are frequently complicated by wars waged by poor South surrogates of wealthy North powers. More often than not, those efforts are undertaken not with surplus supplies but with special donations from average citizens. More often than not, those efforts are undertaken only after enormous pressure is brought to bear by those same average citizens. And by comparison to the capabilities available for the job—capabilities demonstrated and improved every day in more profitable enterprises—even the biggest and the best of those efforts must be judged as poorly organized and inefficiently carried out.

Other structural arrangements by which the North steadily accelerates its superdevelopment imply equally reprehensible policies and decisions. There are the import and export arrangements that benefit elitist groups within South countries. Favors and facilities are accorded to special-interest lobbies. Exploitation of the South's natural resources, and regulation of prices on the world markets for raw materials, are managed in a way that benefits the large cartels at the expense of far larger populations. Special tariff-relief arrangements benefit chiefly foreign investors. Acquiescence is prolonged in the entire roster of fiscal deficiencies plaguing the South countries, because it helps North countries in their international policies with South countries—usually the ones with

strong-arm or one-man governments that are called democratic for reasons of convenience.

Governmental complicity among the North countries in the sinful structures that cause and prolong suffering in South countries becomes still more sinister, morally speaking, when yet one more aspect of activity is factored into the equation of sinful global structures.

It is a fact known not only to Pope John Paul but to all governments that companies in the United States, Germany, France and Switzerland provide governments in South countries with both materials and technology—not to mention financial “aid”—with which the “weapons of hell” are manufactured and then used primarily on the populations of other South countries.

Thus, at least forty West German companies shipped chemicals and technology to the well-known Libyan plant that is uniquely geared—to the tune of forty tons a day in production capacity—to turn out the instruments of chemical warfare. Already those weapons have been used against Iranians and elsewhere in the Middle East, as well. Because sauce for the goose is generally sauce for the gander, particularly if the sauce made money for the goose, a Swiss company has negotiated with Iran for the construction of a similar plant.

There is much more. Syria, Iraq and Iran all have been given assistance in building missiles. Both Pakistan and India have received clandestine help in providing themselves with nuclear capacity. But however long and whatever the grim particulars of such a list, the prime motive behind the activity is profit.

Structures whose primary motives are profit, power and superdevelopment—structures that outlast the life span of the individuals who planned and erected them—have become the vehicles of clearly terrible actions whose consequences are suffered on a global scale never before seen.

To a T, then, these are living, functioning embodiments of Pope John Paul's definition of sinful structures. And day by day, with the deepest complicity of the North countries, the chaff spewed out by those structures in their global harvest of superdevelopment is all that is left to the South to sustain the economies of its nations and the lives of its people.

Change and alleviation, not blame, are Pope John Paul's motive in his analyses of the world's sinful structures and in his constant and candid exhortations to other world leaders concerning the conditions they all see as well as he.

In that respect, however, perhaps the most compelling reason for John Paul's moral appraisal of the way the South fares amid all this entrepreneurial activity of North countries is that at present he sees no sign that even the most pernicious of the conditions crippling the South are the serious targets of the developed countries as they fine-tune their own expanding structures of finance, trade and industrialization.

If this state of affairs were to continue, said Kazuo Haruna, Economic Committee chairman of the Japanese corporate giant Keidanren, "it would result in what could become an irreversible and irremediable divergence in the standard of living of the populations of these two regions [the North and the South], and an eventuality of this kind would inevitably raise important ethical questions."

Whatever Mr. Haruna may have meant by "ethical questions," John Paul insists that the "eventuality" is already upon us. The few signs of acknowledgment that the problem must be addressed seem too half-hearted to promise that a genuinely professional solution for the ominous North-South gap will get under way anytime soon.

U.S. Treasury Secretary Nicholas F. Brady raised expectations in the debt-ridden South countries when, in his much publicized "Brady Plan," he proposed greater debt relief action on the part of commercial banks. But the amount of debt relief encompassed by that plan—about 20 percent—would not make a dent in the overall problem. Nothing so far proposed by the "Brady Plan," or by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, promises remotely to mitigate the \$350 billion debt of the South. Or even to mitigate the interest payments on that debt, which are higher than the net earnings of the debtor nations. And so the misery continues.

To ask, meanwhile, as do many giant lenders of the North, why the South countries incurred such debt in the first place, if they had no hope of repaying it, is something Pope John Paul finds worse than begging the question. It is more in the nature of asking why a drowning man would grope for a lifeline if he hadn't the strength left to pull himself to safety. And it is, in any case, to ask the wrong question.

It might be more profitable in every sense to consider the shortsighted motives of North countries as they rushed to pour high-interest loans into areas that neither could prepare, nor were given significant help in preparing, those structures of finance, trade, education and industrialization without which almost any sum of money, no matter how grand the total, must be seen as no more than a doubtful and momentary life preserver.

Lest the North countries forget, meanwhile, there is still that rising

hillock of trouble already extending the mountain ranges of misery into certain nations of their own region.

In May of 1989, the American Economic Association published a study that confirmed a fact that had already become starkly evident. The wealthiest 20 percent of American families increased their share of the national income from 39 percent in 1973 to 43.7 percent in 1989. In the same period, meanwhile, the share of the nation's income in the hands of the poorest 10 percent of American families sank from 5.5 percent to 4.6 percent.

American children did not fare very well either. Another report showed that in 1966, back when superdevelopment was young, some 17.6 percent of American children were living below the poverty line. In 1987, the misery figure for the young had risen to 20.6 percent.

In such numbers is portrayed the fact that the United States—the giant who jump-started the global race for superdevelopment, and has ever been its inspirational leader—now has an unexpected and unwanted new growth industry: its quasi-permanent urban and rural underclass.

There is nothing foreign to the American public in Pope John Paul's insistence that we should be morally disturbed by an economic system in which the steeply rising earnings of professional corporate managers contrast shockingly with the condition of millions of their homeless and hungry fellow citizens. It is not hard to see that the highest incomes recorded in 1988 for a handful of individual Americans—incomes of \$53.9 million, \$45.7 million, \$40 million—grossly exceed any common sense of equity and justice. And even discounting any extremes of wealth and poverty, it is difficult to justify structures in which the average chief executive of a large American company is paid ninety-three times more money than the average factory worker, and seventy-two times more than the average schoolteacher.

Whether it is applied in the confines of the United States, or in the world at large, John Paul's moral assessment of North and South is simple and clear. In a morally adjusted economy, he insists, the rich should not get richer if the poor get poorer.

The warning that goes with the papal assessment of North and South is just as simple and just as clear. It may well be that those suffering masses we refer to so impersonally as the South will be allowed no real say—and no real participation—in the building of our near-future global community. It may be that they will continue to be herded and dragooned down a tortuous path, increasingly bereft of human dignity.

But if that is the way matters are permitted to go, then the new world community already carries within it the seeds of its early disintegration,

seeds visible even now in the shooting war between desperate poverty and unlimited greed that erupts every day in the streets of cities such as Medellín and New York and Los Angeles, seeds whose harvest is more visible still in the rubble that was once Beirut.

As surely as a lethal cancer, warns Pope John Paul, the inhuman fate already afflicting millions upon millions of men and women, children and infants, must infect the entire body of humanity. It must surely produce convulsions and agonizing pain. It must surely end in our death as a civilized human community.

8. The Morality of Nations: . . . Beggarman, Thief

Geopolitically speaking, the two greatest contenders with Pope John Paul II in the arena of the millennium endgame are at one and the same time the best of enemies and the worst of friends. And thereby hangs the tale of the division of the world in our time into East and West.

That tale of East and West has its similarities, its differences and its points of direct intersection with the wretched story of North and South. The similarities are all told in terms of human misery and suffering created, fostered and maintained by means of sinful structures; and in terms of the motives of the West nations that spurred them to connivance with all of that.

The differences lie primarily in two areas. The first is the fact that to some degree at least, conscious decisions of West leaders at crucial turning points led directly to the creation of the East as an empire and as an increasingly dominant power in human affairs at the end of the second millennium.

The second is the fact that by those conscious decisions, the West connived for far longer than was justified by any crisis, and for its own material benefit, at the wholesale theft of people's sovereignty over their