

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING AND MIDDLE AMERICA

COMMEMORATING THE CENTENNIAL OF *RERUM NOVARUM*

The workshop proposed to examine the communication, reception and implementation of official Catholic social teaching among the American middle class. The moderator opened noting that Catholic social thought is one field of Catholic theology which has evoked positive interest in the wider American society.

Emily Binns, of Villanova University, standing in for Judith Dwyer, traced popular hesitation over Catholic social teaching to ecclesiological roots. When he drafted *Rerum Novarum*, she reported, Leo XIII had been influenced by the ecclesiology of Johann Adam Moehler. The American church, she said, has not been preaching social justice for a century, because Leo's organic "Body of Christ" ecclesiology focused on the church to the neglect of the world as the locus of Christian activity. The spiritual formation of many people during the pontificate of Pius XII in this model of church resulted in a suspicion of social concerns which continued through the period after Vatican II.

James Hug, of the Center of Concern, spoke from his experience in ministry to business corporations. Social teaching does not meet the middle class, Hug argued, because it is nonparticipatory, dominated by male clerics, not well modeled, and aimed at those with wealth and power. Middle class Catholics find it threatening because it threatens myths of American life, challenges the consumerist lifestyle, and is guilt-inducing. To reach Middle America, Catholic social teaching must become "good news." It must liberate lay people through participation, and be modeled in alternative communities of witness.

Gerard Powers, of the United States Catholic Conference, advanced the thesis that Catholic social teaching and action on behalf of justice will become integral to the faith and life of Catholics in Middle America when the Church takes seriously the privileged place of the laity in transforming the secular order. The principal focus of institutional church activity, he contended, is to catalyze and guide this lay apostolate, especially through infusing family life and the world of work with the social virtues. Furthermore, according to Powers, a lay-led quest for justice should be marked by deep respect for legitimate diversity and pluralism.

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