

The Social Thought of John Paul II: A Symposium

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This symposium contains works based on papers presented at the 1999 conference of the American Political Science Association. A panel on the social thought of Pope John Paul II was sponsored by the Society of Catholic Social Scientists. The contributors did not attempt a systematic study of John Paul II's thought or an in-depth look at some aspect of it, but sought to highlight elements of it that have been ignored or distorted in standard media accounts.

Introduction

-by Kenneth L. Grasso

A few years ago, it is said, a group of sociologists sought to measure the relative religiosity of various societies in the contemporary world. They concluded that India was the most religious society in the world and Sweden the least. As far as America was concerned, their conclusion was that there existed a pronounced disparity between the religiosity of ordinary Americans and that of cultural elites: America was a society of Indians presided over by an elite of Swedes. Whatever one may think of the study's characterization of the religiosity of the bulk of American society, its characterization of American elite culture is hard to gainsay. This is certainly true of the world of contemporary social science, one of whose most striking characteristics is its thoroughly secular character.

One of the ways in which the Society of Catholic Social Scientists has sought to counter, in some small way at least, this state of affairs, has been

through the sponsorship of panels at the annual meetings of the American Political Science Association. These panels have run the gamut from examinations of the responsibilities of Catholic public officials to the exploration of the proper posture of faithful Catholics towards the American regime to analyses of different aspects of the Church's social teaching. Through its program at the association's meetings, the Society has sought to further its mission of disseminating Catholic social teaching, fostering scholarly inquiry into this teaching, promoting dialogue between the Church and the modern world and in particular, the world of contemporary social science, and contributing to the establishment of an authentically Catholic social science.

At the APSA's 1999 meeting in Atlanta, one of the Society's panels explored "The Social Thought of Pope John Paul II." Co-sponsored by the APSA's own Normative Political Theory Division, this well-attended roundtable featured not only one of America's most respected political theorists, Jean Bethke Elshtain of the University of Chicago, but also one of the most prominent members of the American hierarchy, Francis Cardinal George, O.M.I., Archbishop of Chicago. This might well be the first time a session at the meeting was devoted to the thought of a pope, and it is almost certainly the first time a member of the American hierarchy has been featured on the program of the association.

The roundtable did not attempt either to systematically explore John Paul's social thought as a whole or to examine in depth some particular segment of it. Rather, it was designed to offer a brief overview of a variety of aspects of John Paul's social thought so as to provide some indication of its breadth and richness. In particular, it sought to highlight aspects of John Paul's thought, ignored or distorted in the standard account of it offered by the mass media.

The essays that compose this symposium are based upon the remarks delivered on this occasion. I want to thank the contributors for the willingness to both participate in the roundtable and to allow us to include their contributions here. I particularly wish to thank Professor Elshtain and Cardinal George for their support of our efforts. I know I speak for the whole society in saying that we are truly honored that the Cardinal would take time out of his extraordinarily busy schedule not only to travel to Atlanta for the panel, but to also prepare the remarks he delivered there for publication in the *Review*.