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Do we have an absolute right to the possession of our property? In other words, is there any limit or check to our private possessions? From an individualistic point of view, there would seem to be no limit. In a (more or less) free economy, I can work hard, earn money, and buy stuff to my heart's content. I can amass land, houses, and clothing, businesses and stocks, technological gadgets of every description, and, provided that I am paying my taxes and not committing criminal offenses, no one will stop me.

But there are other lenses through which we need to view property. First, we must consider the *social* purpose of private ownership, and the duties each citizen has to the city or community of which he is a part. We are not isolated monads but social animals who depend on one another and who are required, in justice, to care for one another—at least to the extent of not willfully depriving others of what they need to live. Second, we must consider the ultimate purpose of earthly goods, which is the attainment of our final end in Heaven. A bad use of property, including its unwarranted accumulation, is an impediment to virtue, to sanctity, and to salvation, as all Fathers and Doctors of the Church have taught.

Universal Destination or Common Use

The doctrine I will examine in this column is often called “the universal destination (or purpose) of goods,” which some prefer to call “the common use of all things.” Either phrase has to be understood correctly or one may easily fall into error, particularly the error of Socialism, unfortunately so common in our post-Christian era because it functions as a secular substitute for the loss of Christian charitable habits and institutions. The doctrine is expounded principally in social encyclicals ranging from Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* (RN, 1891) to John Paul II’s *Centesimus Annus* (CA, 1991). As always, my quotations from more recent popes are by no means intended as a blanket endorsement of all that they said and did; rather, in keeping with the orthodox hermeneutic practiced by Archbishop Lefebvre, I value the teaching of these popes whenever it is in manifest continuity with Tradition. There is no need to throw out the baby with the bathwater.

“In the plan of the Creator, all of this world’s goods are primarily intended for the worthy support of the entire human race,” wrote John XXIII in *Mater et Magistra* (MM, 1961) 119. God’s command, “Fill the earth and subdue it!” (Gen. 1:28), said Paul VI,

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“teaches us that the whole of creation is for man, that he has been charged to give it meaning by his intelligent activity, to complete and perfect it by his efforts and to his advantage. Now if the earth truly was created to provide man with the necessities of life and the tools for his own progress, it follows that every man has the right to glean what he needs from the earth. The recent Council reiterated this truth: “God intended the earth and everything in it for the use of all human beings and peoples. Thus, under the leadership of justice and in the company of charity, created goods should flow fairly to all.” ([Populorum Progressio](#) [PP, 1967] 22, citing *Gaudium et Spes* 69; cf. *MM* 43)

John Paul II expands on this point:

“The original source of all that is good is the very act of God, Who created both the earth and mankind, and Who gave the earth to mankind, so that we might have dominion over it by our work and enjoy its fruits. God gave the earth to the whole human race for the sustenance of all its members, without excluding or favoring anyone. This is the foundation of the universal destination of the earth’s goods.” ([CA](#) 31).

“The principle of the common use of goods or, to put it in another and still simpler way, the right to life and subsistence” ([Laborem Exercens](#) [LE, 1981] 18) can even be called, in a way, “the first principle of the whole ethical and social order” (LE 19; cf. LE 14) and “the characteristic principle of Christian social doctrine” ([Sollicitudo Rei Socialis](#) [SRS, [1987] 42). It is first in a material sense: if human beings are not capable of staying alive, they can make no contributions as citizens of the earthly or heavenly cities, and they can receive no other benefits from their membership in societies human or divine.

How, then, should the Church’s insistence on the necessity and inviolability of private property be understood? “That God has given the earth for the use and enjoyment of the whole human race can in no way be a bar to the owning of private property,” writes Leo XIII.

“For God has granted the earth to mankind in general, not in the sense that all without distinction can deal with it as they like, but rather that no part of it was assigned to any one in particular, and that the limits of private possession have been left to be fixed by man’s own industry, and by the laws of individual races.

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Moreover, the earth, even though apportioned among private owners, ceases not thereby to minister to the needs of all." ([RN](#) 8).

Developing Leo XIII's doctrine, Pius XI explains:

"Nature, rather the Creator Himself, has given man the right of private ownership not only that individuals may be able to provide for themselves and their families, but also that the goods which the Creator destined for the entire family of mankind may, through this institution, truly serve this purpose. All this can be achieved in no wise except through the maintenance of a certain and definite order." ([Quadragesimo Anno](#) [QA, 1931] 45)

Pius XI's argument recalls Leo XIII's basic points. The practice of all ages has accepted private ownership as conformable to human nature, conducing to social peace and tranquility (cf. [RN](#) 11). By a socialist transfer of property, the worker himself would be the first to suffer (cf. [RN](#) 4); the dream of equality would be in reality a leveling down of all to the same misery and degradation (cf. [RN](#) 15). Socialization would rob lawful possessors, distort the State's functions, and create confusion in the community (cf. [RN](#) 4). "This great labor question cannot be solved save by assuming as a principle that private ownership must be held sacred and inviolable. The law, therefore, should favor ownership, and its policy should be to induce as many as possible of the people to become owners" ([RN](#) 46).

Pius XII particularly insists on this last point:

"The dignity of the human person ... requires normally as a natural foundation of life the right to the use of the goods of the earth. To this right corresponds the fundamental obligation to grant private ownership of property, if possible, to all." (Christmas Message 1944, n. 28)

The "moral nobility of work" demands not only "a just wage which covers the needs of the worker and his family," but also "the conservation and perfection of a social order which will make possible an assured, even if modest, private property for all classes of society" (*ibid.*, 31.3).

Satisfactory vs. Unsatisfactory Property Distributions

Catholic teaching underlines the difference between satisfactory and unsatisfactory distributions of property. In other words, not any old distribution is conformable to natural and divine law, but only that which allows all citizens access to a dignified existence. The goal towards which society ought to be moving, under governmental guidance, is the extension of ownership to *all* members of society (cf. QA 58), an equitable division of wealth sadly lacking in the industrial nations (cf. QA 59-60). An economy can be considered well-ordered only when all members of society command the goods needed for life and well-being (cf. QA 75). In a statement utterly opposed to the American way of thinking, John XXIII notes: “The economic prosperity of a nation is not so much its total assets in terms of wealth and property, as the equitable division and distribution of this wealth” (MM 74), i.e., equitable because it is widespread, not amassed primarily in the hands of a few. “It is not enough to assert that the right to own private property and the means of production is inherent in human nature. We must also insist on the extension of this right in practice to all classes of citizens” (MM 113). Hence Paul VI can declare:

“All other rights, whatever they may be, including the rights of property and free trade, are to be subordinated to this principle [i.e., universal destination of goods]. They should in no way hinder it; in fact, they should actively facilitate its implementation. Redirecting these rights back to their original purpose must be regarded as a grave and urgent social duty.” (PP 22)

The right to private property—no question about it—is “fundamental for the autonomy and development of the person.” At the same time, “the possession of material goods is not an *absolute* right; its limits are inscribed in its very nature as a human right” (CA 30, emphasis added). “The dominion granted to man by the Creator is not an absolute power, nor can one speak of a freedom to ‘use and misuse,’ or to dispose of things as one pleases” (SRS 34; cf. RN 22).

Indeed, it is very striking what the Angelic Doctor St. Thomas Aquinas has to say: “Man should not consider his material possessions as his own, but as common to all, so as to share them without hesitation when others are in need” (cited by Leo XIII in RN 22). Leo XIII explains:

“Whoever has received from the divine bounty a large share of temporal blessings, whether they be external and material, or gifts of the mind, has

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received them for the purpose of using them for the perfecting of his own nature, and, at the same time, that he may employ them, as the steward of God's providence, for the benefit of others." (RN 22)

Regarding the duty of the rich toward the poor, Paul VI quotes another great Father of the Church, St. Ambrose of Milan: "You are not making a gift of what is yours to the poor man, but you are giving him back what is his. You have been appropriating things that are meant to be for the common use of everyone. The earth belongs to everyone, not to the rich." On this, the pope comments: "These words indicate that the right to private property is not absolute and unconditional. No one may appropriate surplus goods solely for his own private use when others lack the bare necessities of life," for "the right of private property may never be exercised to the detriment of the common good" (PP 23).

According to John Paul II, "private property, in fact, is under a 'social mortgage', which means that it has an intrinsically social function, based upon and justified precisely by the principle of the universal destination of goods" (SRS 42); if it obstructs this goal, private property "has no justification, and represents an abuse in the sight of God and humanity" (CA 43). Pius XI formulates this truth as the "twofold character of ownership, called usually individual or social as it regards either separate persons or the common good" (QA 45; cf. MM 120). Since citizens are truly parts of a social whole and their property exercises a social function, owners must look beyond their own advantage to the community's good, and for its part, public authority "can determine more accurately upon consideration of the true requirements of the common good, what is permitted and what is not permitted to owners in the use of their property" (QA 49).

Everything man works with, masters, and owns is first and always a gift from the Creator, to be used according to the Creator's plan (cf. LE 12). By working, a worker enters into two inheritances: natural resources and human artifacts. In using them, he asserts and establishes a claim to being benefitted thereby. Hence, "Christian tradition has never upheld this right [to ownership] as absolute and untouchable. On the contrary, it has always understood this right within the broader context of the right common to all to use the goods of the whole of creation: the right to private property is subordinated to the right to common use, to the fact that goods are meant for everyone" (LE 14). So inherently is capital ordered to the good of workers, that there is no ground for the possession of the means of production apart from the social benefits conferred through them (cf. LE 14). "Just as the person fully realizes himself in the free gift of self, so too ownership morally justifies itself in the creation, at the proper time and in the proper way, of opportunities for work and human growth for all" (*ibid.*).

Hard Truths Involve Moral Costs

There are moral costs to the acceptance of these hard truths—hard especially for those inured to the siren song of “free market capitalism.” If we took seriously the natural law demands of generosity, equitable distribution, fair wages, and thinking oriented to the common good rather than perpetual expansion and enrichment, the result would undoubtedly be “sacrificing the positions of income and of power enjoyed by the more developed economies”; it will require “above all a change of lifestyles, of models of production and consumption, and of the established structures of power which today govern societies” (CA 52, 58). The “God-given purpose” of all earthly goods (CA 37) is the benefit of each and every man, not any arbitrary use or endless acquisition. An economy that structurally favors an ever-widening gap between the rich and everybody else is a betrayal of this original purpose.

“But what of businesses, the profit incentive, entrepreneurship, wealth creation, and all that good stuff? Are we supposed to throw it away for a State-planned worker paradise that will end as a Soviet-era nightmare?” No, that’s not at all what the Church is saying.

For John Paul II, there is no conflict between the universal destination of goods and a profitable business enterprise, provided the enterprise seeks to benefit employees by way of just policies and customers by way of useful, well-made, morally acceptable products, instead of seeking an expanding profit for a few by way of worker exploitation or the provision of useless, shoddy, or immoral products (cf. CA 32-43). A business or market economy can be judged morally good or evil on the basis of whether or not it promotes, *in practice*, the dignity of workers, acceptable working conditions, an ever-widening distribution of property really worth having (primarily land or other real estate), a sense of moral accountability, and a capacity for self-control, for example, in setting a reasonable ratio between the highest-paid and lowest-paid employees. A shining example would be the Mondragon corporation in Spain, founded in 1956 by Fr. José María Arizmendiarieta in accord with the principles of Catholic Social Teaching, and still flourishing today—a worker cooperative in which talent and longevity of service are rewarded by increasing opportunities of ownership, management, and social services. The company is profitable and competitive.

Such results can occur only within a “strong juridical framework” and under the constant vigilance of statesmen animated by love for the common good (e.g., CA 36, 40, 42, *et passim*)—and, needless to add, only when Christians themselves live as witnesses to the Gospel, fruitful in works of justice and charity. We can see two reasons, then, why the universal destination of goods is today denied in theory and in practice: (1) weakness in civil rulership, pushed about by lobbies and monetary interests, and (2) the relative weakness of

the Christian witness in the modern West.

Conclusion

Two common misunderstandings must be guarded against.

First, the universal destination of goods does not imply—in fact, it decisively repudiates—all forms of Socialism or Communism, for these systems are incapable of securing even a minimally just distribution of earthly goods, much less the earthly paradise promised by revolutionaries. Human dignity requires awareness of one's own responsibility as a worker, incentive to work, and a reasonable hope of stability for oneself and one's family. A modicum of property—a roof over one's head, enough food and clothing—allows freedom for what truly matters in life: time with one's family and friends, leisure for festivity, recollection, worship.

Secondly, and contrary to the caricatures promoted by opponents of Distributism, the Church's proposals exclude a statist scenario in which government functionaries seize vast tracts of land or sums of wealth and redistribute them by executive fiat. This enterprise would likely end in the mere substitution of one plutocracy for another. In most cases, distribution of property is not the government's responsibility. Rather, the State must devise policies, laws, and incentives that will promote and protect a social order in which the greatest possible number of citizens become owners of stable property, shareholders, or business partners.

For further reading on this topic, I would recommend E. Cahill's *The Framework of a Christian State* (1932), pp. 35–46, 129–55, and 294–311; Hilaire Belloc, *The Servile State* (1912); Rupert Ederer, *Economics As If God Mattered: A Century of Papal Teaching* (1995); Emile Guerry, *The Social Doctrine of the Church* (1961), pp. 83–97 et passim; William J. McDonald, *The Social Value of Property According to St. Thomas Aquinas* (1939); Garrick Small, "Contemporary Problems in Property in the Light of the Economic Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas," in *Proceedings of the International Congress on Christian Humanism in the Third Millennium: The Perspective of Thomas Aquinas* (2005), 2:843–55; Thomas Storck, *Foundations of a Catholic Political Order* (1998; available at www.thomasstorck.org), esp. pp. 43–86.

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