

# Distributism Versus Capitalism

Dorothy Day

*The Catholic Worker*, October 1954, 1,6.

*Summary: Criticizes those Catholics who affirmed the Industrial Council Plan that supported co-management. Calls for co-ownership as the only means to alleviate the injustice caused by industry and quotes "Osservatore Romano" on its condemnation of capitalism. Also criticizes those who call the Industrial Council Plan the Pope's plan, and repudiates the claim by quoting Pius XII's 1952 Christmas message which calls for an agriculture economy. (DDLW #175).*

David Hennessy was talking enthusiastically about the latest pamphlet he had received from England, Aquinas Paper No. 22, Financial Justice, by J.F.L. Bray, a Blackfriar's publication. He sat there with a child on each knee, the baby crawling around the floor, sampling everything from building block to discarded crust, learning according to her capacity. Susie and Eric were building a tent in the corner, and Beckie was reading quietly in the middle of the room, oblivious to the noise and confusion around her. Sometimes we had to raise our voices above those of the children to be heard. The dining room and the kitchen adjoin, and there was a good fire in the kitchen stove, it being a cold rainy day in the midst of the equinoctial storms of September. Tamar was trying to cook supper, take care of one demand after another of the children, and participate in the conversation.

"This is a good pamphlet to review in the light of that article you had in the last issue of the Catholic Worker about the controversy between the Council of Business and Professional Men of the Catholic Faith, and Monsignor George G. Higgins, of the Social Action Department of the National Catholic Welfare Council. Monsignor Higgins, together with Fr. John F. Cronin, Sulpician and Fr. William J. Smith, Jesuit, Gerald Schnepf, Society of Mary, and Ed Marciniak, editor of Work, not to speak of John Cort, of the Commonwealth and Association of Catholic Trade Unionists are in favor of the Industrial Council plan, which stands for co-management. The former group, which also has the backing of Fr. Edward A. Keller, director of the Bureau of Economic Research of Notre Dame, which has the backing also of Archbishops and Bishops, is all in favor of no interference by labor in the management and are all for pure and unadulterated capitalism.

"As a matter of fact, both sides are for capitalism. They believe that it is here to stay. Monsignor Higgins says that the Industrial Council Plan is here to stay. It isn't even here yet. It is just a plan to make the best of our present capitalistic system, patching it up in other words,—it is a design for the corporative state, not the corporative order. Here is what **Osservatore Romano** has to say about capitalism:

“Capitalism seizes, confiscates, and dries up wealth, i.e. reduces the numbers of those who may enjoy riches, holds up distribution and defies Divine Providence who has given good things for the use of all men. St. Thomas Aquinas says that man must not consider riches as his own property but as common good. This means that communism itself, as an economic system, apart from its philosophy – is not in contradiction with the nature of Christianity as is capitalism.

“Capitalism is intrinsically atheistic. Capitalism is godless, not by nature of a philosophy which it does not profess, but in practice (which is its only philosophy), by its insatiable greed and avarice, its mighty power, its dominion.’”

Nickie left his father’s lap and began to climb on top of the high chair as though it were a diving tower and leaping off into the middle of the room.

“The Industrial Council Plan is all for co-management, but Distributism is for co-ownership,” David went on. “The one is for working from the top down, the other works from the bottom up. The trouble is, in schools, colleges and seminaries, the Industrial Council Plan is always talked of as the Papal Plan. The Pope has said that all ways should be explored. His 1952 Christmas address has many things in it which are pertinent to these problems.”

Dumping Mary unceremoniously to the floor where she started to turn a backward somersault, David seized some of his valuable Catholic Documents which publish all the Pope’s speeches, and found the one he wanted to read. It was the 1952 Christmas message.

“Of course people can say that you are taking statements out of context, but you can’t ever quote without that risk. Look at this: ‘It is superstitious to expect salvation from rigid formulas mathematically applied to the social order, for this attributes to them almost a prodigious power which they cannot have; while to place one’s hopes exclusively in the creative forces of the activity of each individual, is contrary to the designs of God, who is the Lord of order.

“We wish to draw to the attention of those who step forward as benefactors of mankind, to both these mistakes, but particularly to the first; to the superstition which holds for certain that salvation must come by organizing men and things in a strict unity directed towards ever higher capacity to produce.

“They think that if they succeed in co-ordinating the energies of men and the resources of nature in a single organic structure for the highest possible production, by means of a plan carefully made and executed, then every kind of desirable benefit will spring forth: prosperity, security for the individual, peace.

“One knows where to look in social thought for the technical concept of society: it is in the gigantic enterprise of modern industry... what must be denied is that modern social life should be regulated by them or made to conform to them.

“It is above all a clear principle of wisdom that all progress is truly such if it knows how to add new conquests to old, to link new benefits with those acquired in the past: in a word if it knows how to make capital of experience. Now, history teaches that other forms of national economy have always had a positive influence upon all society, an influence which benefited both the basic institutions of family, state, private property, and those other institutions

freely formed by men. We may point by way of example, to the undeniable advantages which have followed where an economy based chiefly on agriculture or the crafts has been to the fore.”

“In the face of all the present Pope has to say it is amazing to hear the Industrial Council Plan always spoken of as the Pope’s plan. We should read all the statements that the Holy Father has made! The text books used in Catholic schools and seminaries uphold industrial capitalism and little attention is given to that body of thought among American Catholics which sets its face against this godless system. **The Social Justice Review**, published at St. Louis, has very good material in it and so has **The Living Parish**, published by Monsignor Hellriegel at Baden, St. Louis, although the latter is more liturgy than sociology. It considers the life of the family however. Fr. Rembert Sorg’s book **Holy Work** has the essence of this teaching. **The Sun of Justice** by Harold Robbins contains the best thinking ever done on Distributism. And always, all the social writings of the present Pope. Here is the theory of the Green Revolution, and all the little people, all the families scattered in small towns and villages, all the people in the toeholds on the land which we hear of from one end of the United States to the other, should be reading these things and spreading these ideas.”

By this time Tamar had finished spooning some apple sauce into Margaret, the baby, and David was hollering for supper. “Here I am,” he said ruefully, “spreading the seeds (Let’s not call them germs) of the Green Revolution through my booklists in *The Catholic Worker* every month, and working in a smelter which is controlled by one of the largest monopolies in the world and compelled to belong to what is considered a communist-dominated union. Life is made up of fantastic, paradoxical situations.”

But who could think of life in that book-filled, child-filled room, with the good smell of fresh homemade bread in the air with anything but gratitude to God who gives us a rule of life and instruction, and gives us, too, the joy of this strong conflict.