

Land and Freedom

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Comment and Reflection

WHEN in times like the present—times in which principles are so easily sacrificed to the exigencies of the moment—a world leader, whose words influence millions of people, speaks out for first principles and natural rights, it is indeed cause for rejoicing. Such a declaration has come from Pope Pius XII, in a talk which was broadcast throughout the world on June 1. Whereas from all sides we are besieged with the doctrine of subservience to the state, from His Holiness comes a clarion call against this ideology. It is time, he suggests, for the *state* to sacrifice for the individual and the family, and to take thought of the simple truth—one so easy to forget—that man was not meant to be the slave of society, but society was meant to give more scope to his individual life. Shall we allow any emergency to obscure this relationship?

IT was on the fiftieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*—the famous encyclical of Pope Leo XIII—that Pius XII delivered his address. While the latter commended that encyclical to his hearers as “the Magna Carta of Christian social endeavor,” we are happy to note an advance in certain respects in the ideas of the contemporary Pontiff over those of the author of *Rerum Novarum*. True, the same faith in the dignity of man underlies the utterances of both. But on the part of Pius XII there appears to be more awareness of what is required for the achievement of man’s dignity. While Leo upheld private ownership of land, Pius emphasizes the need of allowing all mankind access to nature’s resources. “Goods,” says His Holiness, “which were created by God for all men should flow equally to all according to the principles of justice and charity.” And he speaks of the earth’s surface as “that surface which God created and prepared for the use of all.”

UNQUESTIONABLY, Leo XIII acknowledged the broad principle of man’s right to the use of the earth. However, in defending private property in land he not only did not make clear how equal rights to land could be maintained in a world of landed and landless men, but he pronounced a formula which militated against his own lofty purposes. Leo said, “The earth, though divided among private owners, ceases not thereby to minister to the needs of all . . .

Those who do not possess the soil contribute their labor.” This indeed purports to be our present system; and it does not require extraordinary vision to see that those who “possess the soil” do *not* share God’s gifts equally with those who “contribute their labor.” But Pius XII shows deeper appreciation of the fundamentals of our present world disorder, and he urges a more equitable distribution of wealth, fuller opportunities for every individual, and a more equal diffusion of population over the earth’s surface.

BESIDES his declaration of the right of all to the use of the earth, Pope Pius in other ways comes close to our thought; for he says: “Undoubtedly, the natural order deriving from God demands also private and free reciprocal commerce of goods by interchange and gift as well as the functioning of the state as control over both these institutions.” The Georgeist ideal has been happily summed up in the trinity of “free land, free trade, free men.” We find ourselves again on common ground with His Holiness when he avers that the attainment of material abundance for all is a means to an end; that in society “such abundance represents and offers a really effective material basis sufficient for proper personal development of its members,” including the mental, moral and spiritual aspects. The higher virtues are not to be alienated from any economic consideration of humanity. In that regard Henry George was perhaps unique among the economists. He deferred to the many-sidedness of man, and he considered his proposals as a means to the same end—“If, while there is yet time, we turn to Justice and obey her . . . the forces that now menace will turn to agencies of elevation . . . and who shall measure the heights to which our civilization may soar?”

IT is true that Pope Pius XII does not offer specific proposals to carry out the ideals he enunciates. But, all things considered, it would be ungracious to complain on that account alone. Let *Georgeists* be willing to assume the task of showing how those ideals can be realized. It sufficeth for us that a leader of thought has helped “make straight the ways.” We are only grateful that this Servant of the Servants of God has so forcefully invoked and evoked those principles which but tremble on the lips of other leaders—advocates of “expediency,” and false “realism.” Our task is made the easier for it.