As we approach the year 2000, many Americans await with baited breath the political platforms of the various Presidential candidates. Who will be the most inspired? Who will address the most pressing issues? Who will even be able to get to the issues, vaulting over the distraction of personal peccadilloes?

I vote for Pope John Paul II. Ok, so he is not an American citizen, he lives in the eternal city, and he is in the sunset of life. Too bad. For while plumbing the depths of man's dignity and vocation with the light of Creation, the Incarnation and Redemption, John Paul II brings forth the most humanly compelling program in his encyclical letters *Laborem Exercens* and *Centesimus Annus*.¹

The fulcrum of the Pope's compelling program is, of course, the landmark encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, meaning "New Things," which Pope Leo XIII promulgated on May 15, 1891, to precisely address the "new things" which the Industrial Age had ushered in. And the "new things" were not all positive. In this class-based era, capital, not land, was the primary engine of wealth, and labor was given a secondary place, squeezed as it was to yield maximum product for minimum wages, thereby ensuring the greatest possible profits for their rich capitalist employers. Laborers, no longer afforded the protection of by-then disbanded trade guilds of the Pre-Industrial Age, bore in Pope Leo XIII's words "a yoke little better than slavery itself." In seeking to throw off this yoke they were incited to violence and lured by the theory of socialism, one of the gravest threats among the "new things," with its promise of relief through collectivization of wealth.

In his encyclical, Pope Leo XIII presciently unmasked the false promises and solutions of socialism and offered a remedy to the ills of capitalism. To make his argument, he strongly defended the right to private property, explaining that this right benefited both classes, especially the poor by creating wealth, from which flowed the opportunity and incentive to work, save and acquire one's own property. And, he emphasized the rights and responsibilities of working men and their wealthy employers, both of whom beautifully complement and are utterly dependent upon one another.

Ninety years later, in *Laborem Exercens*, Pope John Paul II provided us with penetratingly sharp insights on *Rerum Novarum*, made all the more compelling by his experience with the misery and human degradation wrought by communist collectivist schemes. His reflections on the relationship of "subjective" man to "objective" work, and that of labor to capital provide particular insight:

Man has to subdue the earth and dominate it, because as the "image of God" he is a person... a subjective being capable of acting in a planned and rational way, capable of deciding about himself, and with a tendency to self-realization. As a person, man is therefore the subject of work. As a person he works, he performs various actions belonging to the work process; independently of their objective content, these actions must all...
serve to realize his humanity, to fulfill the calling to be a person that is his by reason of his very humanity...

... We must emphasize... the primacy of man over things. Everything contained in the concept of capital in the strict sense is only a collection of things. Man, as the subject of the work, and independently of the work that he does — man alone is a person. This truth has important and decisive consequences.

... human thought (set capital in opposition to labor)... as though they were two impersonal forces, two production factors juxtaposed in the same “economic” perspective... considering labor solely according to its economic purpose... This fundamental error of thought can and must be called an error of materialism...

Ten years later, on May 1, 1991, the hundredth anniversary of Rerum Novarum, Pope John Paul II gave us Centesimus Annus, an inspired document that “looks back,” “looks around” (i.e. “at the ‘new things’ which surround us”) and “looks to the future.” In the “look back” the Pope recounts:

A new form of property had appeared — capital; and a new form of labor... The result of this transformation was a society “divided into two classes, separated by a deep chasm.”... The prevailing political theory... sought to promote total economic freedom by... a deliberate lack of any intervention... another conception... was... appearing in an organized and often violent form, one which implied a new political and social structure... At the height of this clash... Pope Leo intervened with a document that dealt in a systematic way with the “condition of the workers.” (An earlier encyclical of particular note) Libertas Praestantissimum... called attention to the essential bond between human freedom and truth... Indeed, what is the origin of all the evils to which Rerum Novarum wished to respond, if not a kind of freedom which, in the area of economic and social activity, cuts itself off from the truth about man?

Indeed, the Pope closes the first chapter with the following summary statement:

... the guiding principle of Pope Leo’s encyclical, and of all of the Church’s social doctrine, is a correct view of the human person and of his unique value inasmuch as man... is the only creature on earth, which God willed for itself.” God has imprinted his own image and likeness on man (cf. Gen 1:26), conferring upon him an incomparable dignity... Beyond the rights which man acquires by his own work, there exist rights which do not correspond to any work he performs, but which flow from his essential dignity as a person.

The Pope then reflects on how the incorrect view of the human person led to World Wars I and II. With its roots in atheism, this incorrect view led to a reorganization of the social order “without reference to the person’s dignity and responsibility.” For “by responding to the call of God... man becomes aware of his transcendent dignity.” Otherwise, “the essence of freedom” is transformed into “self-love carried to the point of contempt for God and neighbor, a self-love, which... refuses to be limited by any demand of justice.” With great clarity, the Pope trumpets, “Without the terrible burden of hatred... such cruel wars would not have been possible....”

After the two World Wars, various responses to Marxism ensued, which marks the beginning of the Pope’s “look around.” One response sought to preserve “free market mechanisms ensuring... conditions for steady and healthy economic growth”... while avoiding “making market mechanisms the only point of reference for social life...” through “public control, which upholds the principle of the common destination of material goods.” Others were anti-Marxist ideological responses that increased the power of the state, setting up systems of “national security,” aimed at controlling the whole of society in a systematic way... in order to make Marxist infiltration impossible... (B)ut in so doing they run the grave risk of destroying the freedom and values of the person, the very things for whose sake it is necessary to oppose communism. A third response was:

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... "the affluent... consumer society (that) seeks to defeat Marxism on the level of pure materialism by showing how a free market society can achieve a greater satisfaction of material human needs than Communism, while equally excluding spiritual values... (but) insofar as it denies an autonomous existence and value to morality, law, culture and religion, it agrees with Marxism in the sense that it totally reduces man to the sphere of economics and the satisfaction of material needs.

At the same time, a widespread process of "decolonization" occurred, resulting in countries so young in their "journey towards the construction of a genuine independence" that the lure of communism as a shortcut to development, given other prevailing forces, is very real.

Finally, the Pope points to the "more lively sense of human rights" after World War II:

...a development in the awareness of the rights of the individuals... (and) rights of nations, as well as a clearer realization of the need to act in order to remedy the grave imbalances that exist between the various geographical areas of the world. In a certain sense, these imbalances have shifted the center of the social question from the national to the international level.

Continuing his "look around," with much relish the Pope discusses "The Year 1989" and the rollback of communism, thus bringing to fruition the principles of Rerum Novarum. As the Pope writes:

Certainly, the decisive factor, which gave rise to the changes was the violation of the rights of workers. It cannot be forgotten that the fundamental crisis of systems claiming to express the rule and indeed the dictatorship of the working class took place in Poland in the name of solidarity. It was throngs of working people, which foreswore the ideology, which presumed to speak in their name. On the basis of a hard, lived experience of work and of oppression, it was they who recovered and, in a sense, rediscovered the content and principles of the Church's social doctrine...

But, the Pope cautions "the events of 1989... have positive and negative consequences (which)... are opportunities for human freedom to cooperate with the merciful plan of God who acts within history." For instance, "social, regional and national injustices committed during and prior to the years in which Communism dominated" may reignite. Yet, even that circumstance provides the "opportunity" to "create or consolidate international structures capable of intervening..."

The final three chapters, "Private Property and the Universal Destination of Goods," "State and Culture," and "Man Is the Way of the Church" reaffirm with eloquence and grace the principles of Rerum Novarum and explain how they might be fully applied to the "new things" of today and the future. The Pope outlines the most pressing issues of the post-industrial world, and offers a program that adheres to the "truth about man" and the "merciful plan of God." In the view of the Pope, one of the most urgent tasks is that of giving aid to third and fourth world countries (i.e. developing and underdeveloped), who are not participating in the post-industrial economic boom for lack of resources and education, among other causes. Otherwise, the tensions caused by these "grave imbalances" will explode into regional, national and international conflicts. For it is this chasm between countries as opposed to the earlier chasm between classes that predominates in the world today and creates the conditions and possibility for instability and
The Pope’s prescience in this regard is, I believe, what will distinguish *Centesimus Annus* in years to come, not unlike *Rerum Novarum* was recognized for its prescience in foreseeing the Socialist threat.

Yes, I would vote for John Paul II, if I could. But, in lieu of that, hopefully the candidates for the 2000 presidential race will read at least *Centesimus Annus* and gain insight into the most important and compelling issues of 2000 and beyond.

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1 "Laborem Exercens" ("On Human Work") was promulgated on September 14, 1981; and "Centesimus Annus" ("On the Hundredth Anniversary") was promulgated on May 1, 1991.

2 Having laid out this groundwork, the Pope later spells out the rights of workers, which include:

   (1) “just remuneration for work done” and “the right to a working environment and to manufacturing processes, which are not harmful to the workers’ physical health or to their moral integrity;”

   (2) various “social benefits” (i.e., “the right to rest, the right to a pension and to insurance for old age and in case of accidents at work.”); and

   (3) the right to “form associations (i.e. unions) for the purpose of defending vital interests of those employed in the various professions.”

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3 “... labor for wages, characterized by high rates of production... determined solely by efficiency, with a view to increasing profits... its price determined by the law of supply and demand, without taking into account the bare minimum required for the support of the individual and his family... (and) continually threatened... by unemployment, which, in the absence of any kind of social security, meant the specter of death by starvation.”

4 This does not minimize the continuing need to reduce present-day disparities between rich and poor individuals and classes through just and humane policies; it is simply that the “new things” that most urgently command our attention are those that relate to redressing the “grave imbalances” between rich and poor countries.