

On Distributism: Answer to John Cort

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Summary: Repudiates John Cort and other Catholics who see distributism as an agrarian visionary dream. Quotes from Pius XI, Pius XII and Leo XIII in support of small and medium-sized businesses, employee ownership, and a back to the land movement. Discusses the evils of capitalistic industrialism and urges the long-range plan of distributism. (See DOC #159 and DOC #160) (DDLW #161).

First as to our disregarding the Popes. Our pages in the *Catholic Worker* are filled with excerpts from little-headed addresses of the Holy Father. Here is one:

“Life on the Land is a matter deserving special concern and consideration, though too often our sociologists and politicians tend to turn their minds instead to the problems raised by the concentration of large-scale industry. These latter problems have indeed an urgency and acuteness which we are far from questioning, but **haec oportuit facere et illa non omittere**, it was right to heed the one wrong not to heed the other. – Matt. 23: 23.” Pius XII.

Here is another good one:

“The Church wants some limit set to the dwarfing of man himself in these days through the emergence and dominance of the machine and the continued expansion of large scale industry. Among small craftsmen, personal work, till now at least, has kept its full value. The craftsman transforms his raw material and carries through the whole of a work; to that work he is closely linked, and in it there is an ample field for his intellectual skill, his artistic capabilities, his good taste, his deftness and delicacy of touch in making things that, from his point of view, are greatly superior to impersonal and standardized mass-produced things. And therefore small craftsmen as a class are, one may say, a picked militia defending the dignity and personality of the workmen.”

And most familiar is that paragraph of Pius XI: ‘Bodily labor, which was decreed by Providence for the good of man’s body and soul, even after original sin, has everywhere been changed into an instrument of strange perversion: for dead matter leaves the factory ennobled and transformed, where men are corrupted and degraded.’”

Also Pope Pius XI, in 1931: “We must reassert it the more strongly now, his (Leo XIII) salutary injunctions have been too often consigned to oblivion, either

through deliberate suppression or in the belief that they were impractical—a false belief, for they can and must be applied today . . . for modern machinery and industrialism rapidly flooding great tracts of territory—alike in the new world and in the ancient civilizations of the Far East—have enormously increased the numbers of dispossessed proletarians, those whose groanings go up from earth to God.”

And here is our mandate:

Pope Pius XII on Sept. 1, 1944, “made explicit and formal Catholic social teaching what had hitherto been an inference from reason, reputable by anyone sufficiently dishonest or sufficiently interested,” (writes Harold Robbins).

"Small and medium holdings in agriculture, in the arts and trades, in commerce and industry, should be guaranteed and promoted . . .

"And it should not be said that technical progress is opposed to such a scheme, and that in its irresistible currents it carries all activities forward towards gigantic businesses and organizations before which a social system founded on the private property of individuals must inevitably collapse.

"No. Technical progress does not determine economic life as a destined and necessary factor. It has, indeed, too often yielded timidly to the demands of the rapacious, selfish plans calculated to accumulate capital indefinitely.

“Why should it not, then, yield also to the necessity of maintaining and ensuring private property for all—that cornerstone of social order? Even technical progress as a social factor should not prevail over the general good, but it should rather be directed and subordinated to it”

And in April, 1939, Pope Pius XII had said:

“In this age of mechanization the human person becomes merely a more perfect tool in industrial production and—how sad it is to say it—a perfected tool for mechanized warfare.”

And as for the system as a whole: “The wounds and bruises of individualistic and materialistic mankind cannot be healed by a system which is materialistic in its own principles and mechanistic in the application of them.”

It is sad to point out that these quotations are not the ones which John Cort, or even Fr. Smith or Fr. Cantwell seem to be familiar with.

Let me quote from a letter from a “worker priest in France.”

“My life in the factory has begun to be a slow and increasing revolt against the capitalist world. This began with the inhuman attitude of the employer who inspects the workers like a room of machines. It continued with the question of the wages, of efficiency, of the conditions of women’s work, the fighting for union rights, with all this atmosphere of factories, while the worker for a century has felt that he has been oppressed and exploited. Outside my own experience I had in the same line the reactions of our mechanic who is weighted down with forty

years of work; he appears to me as a beautiful example of a specialist worker, who is conscientious, a type of man whom I love as much as a scientist or a statesman. His conversations which are rare are almost always echoes of this revolt slowly growing in the heart of the working class. Either it be that the worker has no right to eat his bread between seven and noon, or it be that his time is checked and his efficiency scheduled. The wage earner is not a free man, he is sold out. He is not a man who works with an engineer or an employer, but a factor of production which has been hired and will be exploited to the maximum, not even directed by a human feeling of efficiency but rather solely by the profit of money. Capitalism distills today more than ever, in the consciences of the workers the feeling of being pawns and the urge to revolt.” And the priest goes on to link up the indifference of the Masses to religion with their resentment towards the Church which they feel has exploited them and lined up with the capitalist.

The above papal quotations were sent me by my son-in-law, David Hennessy, of Stotler’s Crossroads, West Virginia. He adds, “for side reading in the debate in the Commonweal, reread Eric Gill in ‘The Factory System and Christianity,’ page 21, in **It All Goes Together**. Fr. McNabb in his **Old Principles and the New Order, Action Stations**, page 111, and follow this up with reading ‘**Sertum Laetitiae**’, Pius XII’s address to the American Bishops, in 1939. Remember he had a good look at America in his visit here. The N.C.W.C. edition, page ten, carries a list of the vices of the day here in America, in the midst of which he placed, the ‘flight from the land.’ You will note that this evil is not mentioned for discussion in the study club section and is not even listed in the index as the twenty other odd vices are!”

Speaking of David Hennessy reminds me of another crack of John Cort’s, and that is that most of the agrarians are firmly entrenched in New York City. Irene, Mary Naughton and I have been gathering names of those families, friends of ours, who have toeholds on the land, and we have reached well over sixty. They are pretty busy people so they don’t have much time to enter into controversies.

But there are plenty of the priests and the people who are on our side, but perhaps they are not in high places, not so articulate nor so readily heard. I presume John means me and Bob Ludlow being firmly entrenched in the city. If he knew how many times I escape to my daughter’s to garden, to can, to take care of the children; and then there is the farm at Newburgh which provided a bread line of 350 with pork (six pigs) apple sauce, potatoes and tomatoes on Thanksgiving day.

As a practical man, as a father, and as a tenant who is about to be evicted, I should think John would see our point, but he never has, in all the years we have known and been fond of one another. He is a willful and a wayward son!

This is an ‘old controversy that is being carried on. *Blackfriars* in England opened up its columns to it thirteen years ago or thereabouts. In the columns of *The Catholic Worker*, 1939, there was a controversy between Fr. Paul Hanley

Furfey and Fr. John J. Hugo on “romantic agrarians.” All the while John Cort was with us on Molt street it went on. He well knows our stand through all the years (I wish he would go over the back issues sometime) and that we begged people not to confuse immediate issues and a long range program, every time we were engaged in any industrial dispute. One of the reasons why he talks of our changing our position is because we were indeed active in '36 for instance, both in the seamen's strike and during the early organizing of the CIO, which we upheld in spite of all opposition then from press and pulpit. There was never a strike, whether it was the Ohrbach strike, the National Biscuit Company strike, a brewery strike, a stock yards organizing campaign, steel and auto strikes, or the sitdown strikes in which we were not accused of being either Communist or Communist sympathizers.

It is true we have been inactive in that field since the outbreak of the war. We could only look with dismay on the prospect of bettering the conditions of workers in industries which were helping out and working along with the war effort. As for the General Strike, advocated not only by Robert Ludlow but also by me since the beginning of the war (see the early issues of *The Catholic Worker*), we advise people to think of it a bit more seriously, and not just as an anarchistic and nihilistic dream. Jack London, whose works on socialism and the class struggle are still best sellers in Russia, wrote a pamphlet once on the General Strike in the form of a story. The self-discipline, the thoughtful care of the sick, the weak, the children shown in this little study, are worthy of study in the days of violence, when the use of force has come to be the only weapon accepted by Communist and Christian alike.

Yes, we are quite willing to think in terms of immediate needs, the immediate struggle and I think we show that willingness to deal with the actual and the concrete in every issue of our paper which reach, we remind you, 65,000 people every month. That is the number of papers which go out. As to how many people see them, that is another matter. Oftentimes statisticians think in terms of so many readers to each paper, so that circulation figures are not too certain.

We deal with conditions of work, with wages, with housing, and the existence of our Houses of Hospitality in New York, for men and for women, in Rochester, in Harrisburg, in Pittsburgh (there it has been taken over by the diocese, but we started it), in Cleveland and Detroit testify to that. Our breadlines become longer. In New York, where jobs are scarce in spite of full employment in the rest of the country, we serve 800 meals a day at least. We have our feet in the gutters. Louis Murphy, of the Detroit house, says that we are the gutter sweepers of the diocese.

Just the same, I'd like to call our farm at Newburgh, *The Ivory Tower*. It is a title of the Blessed Mother, you will recall.

But we plead with our readers to keep a long view, a long range program of action. Hilaire Belloc, in his *Restoration of Property*, gives a good blueprint for action. He talks about large-scale machinery, what must come under common

ownership (and he endorses communal as against state ownership) and what can be broken up into smaller units. His book is short, is factual, is practical, and it is just republished by Sheed and Ward, for two dollars in this country, and there is a seventy-five cent paper covered edition published in England.

One of the saddest things about this whole controversy is that our opponents look upon agrarianism as visionary. Here is what Chesterton said about such a criticism:

“They say it (the peasant society) is Utopian, and they are right. They say it is idealistic, and they are right. They say it is quixotic, and they are right. It deserves every name that will indicate how completely they have driven justice out of the world; every name that measure how remote from them and their sort is the standard of honorable living; every name that will emphasize and repeat the fact that property and liberty are sundered from them and theirs, by an abyss between heaven and hell.”

This sounds pretty harsh from the gentle Chesterton, but we, who witness the thousands of refugees from our ruthless industrialism, year after year, the homeless, the hungry, the crippled, the maimed, and see the lack of sympathy and understanding, the lack of Christian charity accorded them (to most they represent the loafers and the bums, and our critics shrink in horror to hear them compared to Christ, as our Lord Himself compared them) to us, I say, who daily suffer the ugly reality of industrial capitalism and its fruits—these words of Chesterton ring strong

As to the industry councils which John Cort and his friends advocate, here is what the bishops said in their 1948 statement. “Such a program of social order (industry councils) seems to us to be the answer to the questionings of high minded leaders of industry, and to the explicit proposals of the sound and responsible leaders of organized labor. We bespeak for it in these critical times dispassionate consideration and calm, open discussion in an atmosphere of good will, and in a disposition to seek solutions by agreement rather than by force, whether political or economic.”

These industry councils, made up of “representatives of management and labor, under the supervision, and not the control of government” if they ever do get together, could well study the problem of decentralization, and the control proposals of such men as Hilaire Belloc. (I wish to emphasize how practical a blue print this book is.)

But meanwhile, Ed Willock, looking upon things as they are, points out in the Christmas issue of *Integrity*, in a far clearer way than I can, the issues involved in this controversy, pointing out that controversy is good, but not misunderstanding.

So let us keep up the controversy for the clarification of thought, and it will be with good will, because we have that basic unity of those of one faith.