

# THE COMMON CAUSE

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# The Church Fathers on Wealth and Ownership

By Rev. John A. Ryan, D. D.

[*Introductory Note.* Many of us are acquainted with the assertion of Socialists that the Fathers of the Church denied the right of private property and advocated common ownership. The basis of this contention is certain sayings, cited more or less correctly, by Bebel (*Die Frau*, p. 297, note), de Laveleye (*Le Socialisme contemporain*, p. ix), or Nitti (*Catholic Socialism*, p. 64). In all probability these writers got the extracts directly or indirectly from a work entitled, *Traite de la morale des peres* (p. 144) written at the beginning of the eighteenth century by a French Calvinist named Jean Barbeyrac. The following article contains all the important passages used by these writers and the Socialists, and also typical extracts from *all* of the strongest statements made by *all* of the Fathers on the question of private property and wealth. At least, such has been my aim. While some of the citations are brief, they are sufficiently comprehensive to present adequately the thought of their authors on the specific point under discussion. None of them has been wrenched from the context; none of them would take on a different meaning if the context were added.

In subsequent articles I shall submit the most striking of those passages to a critical study, and present others, in order to determine whether any of the Fathers can fairly be classed as an opponent of private ownership. Were I malicious-minded I should suggest that any clerical reader desirous of creating a sensation might make the experiment of committing to memory all the passages given in this article, and then preaching them to his congregation without note, comment, or explanation! I am inclined to think that his wish would be fairly well rewarded.

The figures in parentheses, following the name of each writer, describe the years between which he lived, while the references at the end of each extract are to the volumes and columns of Migne's *Patrologia Graeca* or *Patrologia Latina*. Thus, "P. L., 15: 1303, 1304," means *Patrologia Latina*, volume 15, columns 1303 and 1304." Similarly, "P. G., 61:86," is the abbreviation for "*Patrologia Graeca*, volume 61, column 86." The translation of the extracts was made by one of the students in my class of moral theology in the St. Paul Seminary. Mr. John L. Byrne.—The Author.]

### I. The Greek Fathers

St. John Chrysostom (347—407).

**J**UST as, therefore, it is a vice of the stomach to retain and not distribute food, and thus cause injury to the whole body; so likewise it is a vice of the rich when they retain among themselves those things which they possess; for this injures them and others. P. G., 61: 86.

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Neither is any one able to become rich without injustice. Christ declared this, saying: "Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of iniquity" (Lk. 16:9). "What," you say, "if one received paternal goods by heredity?" The goods which he received were gathered together through iniquity. For his forefathers did not get their wealth from Adam: they must have been preceded by many other possessors, among whom many a one had seized goods that belonged to his neighbor. P. G., 62: 562.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tell me, whence are you rich? From whom have you received? From your grandfather, you say; from your father. Are you able to show, ascending in the order of generation, that that possession is just throughout the whole series of preceding generations? Its beginning and root grew necessarily out of injustice. Why? Because God did not make this man rich and that man poor from the beginning. Nor, when He created the world, did He allot much treasure to one man, and forbid another to seek any. He gave the same earth to be cultivated by all. Since, therefore, His bounty is common, how comes it that you have so many fields, and your neighbor not even a clod of earth? "My father," you say, "left it to me." From whom did he receive it? From his forefathers. But, if you continue, you must at last get back to the beginning, Jacob was rich, but his wealth was received as the reward of his labor. But I shall not go into this matter too deeply. Riches may be just, and free from all robbery; nor are you at fault if your father was a robber. You possess, indeed, the results of plunder, but you have not plundered. Granted even that your father despoiled no one, but extracted his gold from the earth. What then? Are riches therefore good? By no means. "But they are not evil," you say. If they were not acquired through avarice or violence they are not evil, provided that they are shared with the needy; if they are not thus shared, they are evil and dangerous. "As long as one has not done evil," you say, "he is not evil, even though he does no good." Correct; but is it not wrong to hold in exclusive possession the Lord's goods, and to enjoy alone that which is common. Are not the earth and the fullness thereof the Lord's? If, therefore, our possessions are the common gift of the Lord, they belong also to our fellows; for all the things of the Lord are common. Do we not see such a disposition of things in great houses? An even share of food is supplied from the owner's substance to all; his house is open to all. Common, too, are the goods of the king: cities, streets, colonnades, are common to all; in them we are all equally partakers. Behold the economy of God as it appears to me. He made certain things

common to teach the human race modesty. Such are the air, sun, water, earth, heaven, sea, light, stars. He distributed all these things equally as among brothers. He created the same eyes in all, the same body, the same soul, a similar form in all. All things are from the earth, all men from one man, all live in the same house. He made other things common, as baths, cities, streets, colonnades. Observe how in all these common things, there is no strife, but all is peaceable. But when each one endeavors to usurp a certain portion, in order to make it his own, a quarrel arises, as if nature were moved to indignation when we, whom God has gathered together, endeavor to divide and separate ourselves, to acquire those common goods as our own, and to utter those chilling words, "mine" and "thine." Then comes contention; then quarrels, Where there is none of this, contention and strife do not arise. For this reason, community of goods rather than chance-determined private property was bestowed upon us, and is according to nature. Why does no one ever contend for the possession of the forum? Because it is common to all. But we see all quarreling about a house, and about money. Although the common goods are necessary for us, we do not, even in the smallest things, respect their social side. God gave us these common goods that we might learn to possess them in common; we, however, do not conform to His designs. But, as I have already said, how can he who has riches be just? He certainly is not. He is good only if he distributes them to others: if he is without riches he is good; if he distributes to others he is good; but as long as he retains them, he is not good. Can a thing be good, the possession of which makes men unjust, the distribution of which makes them just? It is not good, therefore, to have money; not to have it manifests the just man. Hence riches are not good. If, when you are able to take, you do not take, you are likewise good. If, when having riches, we distribute to others, or if we do not take them when they are offered to us, we are good; but if we take or retain them, the thing is not good. How can riches be good? Therefore, do not call them good. Because you have them not, you think them good, and regard them with longing. Have a pure mind and right judgment, and then you will be good. Learn the things that are truly good. What are these things? Virtue and beneficence; these are good, not riches. P. G., 62: 562, 563, 564.

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ST. BASIL (329-379).

If that were true which you have affirmed, that you have obeyed the commandment of love from youth, and have given to everyone as much as to yourself, whence, I ask, have you this wealth? For the care of the poor consumes wealth, when each receives a little for his needs, and all owners distribute their means simultaneously for the care of the needy. Hence whoever loves his neighbor as himself, will possess no more than his neighbor. Yet it is plain that you have very much wealth. Whence these riches? Undoubtedly you have subordinated the relief and comfort of many to your own convenience. Therefore, the more you abound in riches, the more have you been wanting in charity. If

you had loved your neighbor you would have thought of sharing your money with others. P. G., 31: 282.

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To whom, he says, do I injury when I retain and conserve my own? Which things, tell me, are yours? Whence have you brought your goods into life? You are like one occupying a place in a theater, who should prohibit others from entering, thinking that was his own which was designed for the common use of all. Such are the rich. Because they preoccupy common goods, they take these goods as their own. If each one would take that which is sufficient for his needs, leaving what is superfluous to those in distress, no one would be rich, no one poor. Did you not come naked from the womb? Will you not return naked into the earth? Whence then have you your present possessions? If you say, "by destiny," you are impious, because you do not acknowledge the Creator, nor give thanks to the giver; if you admit they are from God, tell us why you have received them. Is God unjust, to distribute the necessities of life to us unequally? Why are you rich, why is that man poor? Is it not that you may receive the reward of beneficence and faithful distribution, and that he may receive the great rewards of patience? Do you think that you who have taken everything into the unlimited compass of your avarice, thereby depriving so many others, have done injury to no one? Who is an avaricious man? He who is not content with those things which are sufficient. Who is a robber? He who takes the goods of another. Are you not avaricious? Are you not a robber? You who make your own the things which you have received to distribute. Will not he be called a thief who robs one, already clothed, of his garment, and is he worthy of any other title who will not clothe the naked if he is able to do so? That bread which you keep, belongs to the hungry; that coat which you preserve in your wardrobe, to the naked; those shoes which are rotting in your possession, to the shoeless; that gold which you have hidden in the ground, to the needy. Wherefore, as often as you were able to help men, so often did you do them wrong. P. G., 31: 275, 278.

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#### ST. GREGORY OF NYSSA (d. 386).

For all things are truly His who is our Father. For we are brothers. Wherefore, since we are united by birth as brothers, it were indeed better and more just to receive the inheritance in equal portions; but when that is not done, and one or another wishes to appropriate more, let the rest receive at least one portion. But if one wishes to be absolute master of all, to obtain the entire inheritance, and to exclude his brothers from even a third or fifth part, he is not a brother, but a harsh tyrant, a rude savage, nay, more, an insatiable beast that would devour the whole sweet banquet with his own gaping mouth. P. G., 46: 466.

## CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA (150-215).

I know that God has given us the use of goods, but only as far as is necessary; and he has determined that the use be common. It is absurd and disgraceful for one to live magnificently and luxuriously when so many are hungry. P. G., 8: 543.



## II. The Latin Fathers

## ST. AUGUSTINE (354-430).

Behold how only a few things suffice for you; nor does God ask much of you. Seek as much as He has given you, and from that take as much as is necessary; the superfluous things which remain are the necessities of others. The superfluities of the rich are the necessities of the poor. They who possess superfluities, possess the goods of others. P. L., 37: 1922.



Let your charity abound; for from those things that we possess individually come quarrels, enmities, discords, wars among men, tumults, dissensions, scandals, sins, iniquities, murders. On account of what? On account of the things which each of us possesses. Do we quarrel over the things which we have in common? We have the same air in common, we all see the same sun. P. L., 37: 1718.



## ST. AMBROSE (340-397).

They [the Philosophers] counted it a requisite of justice that one should treat common, that is, public, goods as public, but private goods as one's own. This is not, indeed, according to nature; for nature gives all things in common to all. So God commanded all things to be created in such a way that food should be common to all, and the earth the common possession of all. Nature, therefore, created the common right; usurpation made the private right. P. L., 16: 62.



How far, O rich, do you extend your senseless avarice? Do you intend to be the sole inhabitants of the earth? Why do you drive out the fellow sharers of nature, and claim it all for yourselves? The earth was made for all, rich and poor, in common. Why do you rich claim it as your exclusive right? P. L., 14: 731.



You do not give to the poor man of your own, but of his. That which was given for the common use of all, you have usurped for yourself. The earth belongs to all, not to the rich; but those who do not enjoy their shares, are fewer than those who do. Therefore, you are paying a debt, not bestowing a gift. P. L., 14: 747.

Since, therefore, he is your equal, it is unjust that he is not assisted by his fellowman; especially since the Lord our God has willed this earth to be the common possession of all men, and its fruits to support all. Avarice, however, has made a distribution of property rights. It is just, therefore, that if you claim as your own anything of that which was given to the human race, indeed, even to all living beings, in common, you should distribute at least a part among the poor, in order that you may not deny sustenance to those who ought to be fellow sharers of your private possessions. P. L., 15; 1303, 1304.



#### ST. GREGORY THE GREAT (540-604).

They must be admonished who do not seek another's goods, yet do not give of their own, that they may know that the earth from which they have received is common to all men, and therefore its products are given in common to all. They, therefore, wrongly think they are innocent who claim for themselves the common gift of God. When they do not give what they have received, they assist in the death of neighbors, because daily almost as many of the poor perish as have been deprived of means which the rich have kept to themselves. When we give necessities to the needy we do not bestow upon them our goods; we return to them their own; we pay a debt of justice rather than fulfil a work of mercy. Hence when Truth Himself spoke about mercy prudently shown, He said: "Take heed lest you do your justice before men." (Matt. 6-1). The Psalmist agreeing with this opinion said: "He has distributed. He has given to the poor, and His justice remaineth for ever." (Ps. 111-9). Since He had fore-ordained a great bounty for the poor, He did not wish to call this mercy, but justice; for it is surely just that what is given by our common Lord for everyone should be used in common. P. L., 77: 87.



#### ST. JEROME (340-420).

All riches come from iniquity, and unless one has lost, another cannot gain. Hence that common opinion seems to me to be very true, "the rich man is unjust, or the heir an unjust one." P. L., 22: 984.

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[A critical analysis of these passages will appear in *THE COMMON CAUSE* for July.—The Editors.]

