



## THE 'SOLIDARITY' ENCYCLICAL

"Positive signs in the contemporary world are the *growing awareness* of the solidarity of the poor among themselves, *their efforts to support one another* and their *public demonstrations on the social scene* which, without recourse to violence, present their needs and rights in the face of the inefficiency or corruption of the public authorities". (ON SOCIAL CONCERNS - *SOLICITUDO REI SOCIALIS* - encyclical of JOHN PAUL II, 1987: No. 39)

### THE QUESTION

For almost one hundred years now, since *Rerum Novarum* appeared in 1891, the Church has insisted on the obligation of every society and its governments to ensure that all have their basic needs provided for. However, the question 'How do we achieve this objective?' was never answered with any clarity.

### THE RESPONSE OF PREVIOUS POPES

Leo XIII, at the end of the last century, would insist that we seek this objective by appealing to those in power to make the necessary changes. But if they refused, what then? For Leo, you had to wait for your reward in heaven! John XXIII, another strong supporter of the need for social justice, was an optimist - for him, all you had to do was to point out to those in power what needed to be done and of course they would do it. He never seemed to ask the question, what if they refused? Paul VI was a political realist - his encyclicals show his growing concern that, despite the evidence for change, no changes were being made by those who had the power to make them. Yet he saw no alternative except violence and he was so opposed to violence that he believed that only very exceptional situations justified that course of action. So he too could not provide an answer to that question.

### JOHN PAUL'S CONTRIBUTION

John Paul II in his encyclical, *On Human Work*, saw the answer to lie in solidarity, solidarity of the poor and with the poor. It is through solidarity that the poor have strength and can demand change; they have every right to insist on change; and so it is the Church's duty and mission to promote that solidarity, to be part of it, and to ensure that it is successful. John Paul has in mind of course the

example of the Trade Unions. Improvements in the living conditions of workers and their conditions of work did not come about through a change of heart on the part of employers but through the struggle, often confrontational, of the Trade Unions. In this encyclical, he once again confirms the central importance of solidarity as the process through which change will come about. "The solidarity which we propose is the path to peace and at the same time to development" (No. 39). This solidarity enables the poor to confront the "structures of sin" which maintain the exploitation and oppression and often annihilation to which they are subjected. The two structures of sin to which he returns again and again are 'the all-consuming desire for profit' and the thirst for power' which he sees as indissolubly united. These two structures of sin reveal a form of idolatry, of money, ideology, class or technology. There can be no compromise with these sinful structures, created and maintained by those in power. The courage to confront them, as Jesus did, is demanded by the Gospel. Solidarity of the poor is the condition which makes this confrontation meaningful. ■