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A Catholic Layman Looks at George

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The author, Justice J. P. O'Regan, was inspired to write it, so *The Catholic World* tells its readers, by an earlier article by Joseph H. Fichter, S. J., which appeared in the February, 1941, number of that periodical under the title of "The Revival of Georgism."*

Justice O'Regan is a native of New Zealand of Irish stock, a member of the New Zealand bar and sole Judge of the Compensation Court, a tribunal with exclusive jurisdiction in cases of accident arising under the Workers' Compensation Act. Widely read and an eloquent speaker, Justice O'Regan is in much demand as a lecturer throughout his native land.

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A Catholic Layman Looks at George

* I WAS WELL-PLEASED with Father Fichter's article, "The Revival of Georgism," which appeared in *The Catholic World* of February, 1941. Henry George has been misrepresented badly, and I regret to say that Catholic publicists must be reckoned among the transgressors. Yet his teachings are so clear and convincing that, as Father Fichter puts it, "even the man in the street can learn the simple scheme so well that he can teach it to others." Herein lies one of the reasons why "the Prophet of San Francisco" has so many exponents among the generality of mankind, and herein probably also is the explanation why the learned economists who fill chairs in the seats of learning affect to ignore him. That political economy is the simplest of the sciences is a proposition untenable among those who are wont to invest it with that nebula of mystery which seems to enhance the importance of its expositors!

One set of critics brackets George with the Socialists. Every follower of his, however, will say with Mr. Chodorov, "Actually we are the greatest individualists in the world." With the Stoics of old we say that every man is committed primarily to his own care. We maintain further, however, that every man has a natural right to equality of opportunity to enable him to carry out his task. That we maintain the doctrine of natural rights in itself suffices surely to say that we are not Socialists.

The Socialist has no patience with what he calls "the

capitalistic system," and so he desires to sweep it away utterly. He gives us no definite scheme whereby we are to attain that end, but there are Socialists who do not shrink from revolution, and they tell the workers that they have "a world to gain and nothing to lose but their chains." The Marxes and the Gronlunds scout the idea of natural rights. They are avowed materialists in whose view the State is absolute, and so they have no real conception of liberty. I remember that Gronlund, sometimes called the Marx of America, in the *Co-operative Commonwealth*, quotes approvingly Hegel's dictum that it is only in virtue of his being a member of a well-organized State that the individual has any rights at all! Accordingly the Socialist would place everything under the control of the State. He calls his ideal the "classless State." It never occurs to him that such a social monstrosity would govern through an inquisitorial bureaucracy, the members of which would be the worst of tyrants.

In the denial of natural rights the Socialists are in agreement with our scientists who proclaim pontifically "the struggle for existence." Long ago that pretentious impostor, Malthus, explained the paradox of poverty in the midst of plenty by the theory that population is constantly pressing beyond the means of subsistence, and then came Darwin to tell us that his doctrine of the struggle for existence was that of Malthus applied to the whole animal and vegetable kingdoms! Let us see how George, in his matchless refutation of Malthus—Dr. Halliday Sutherland calls it "a masterpiece of the language"—states the issue:

"Here is the difference between the animal and the man. Both the jayhawk and the man eat chickens, but the more jayhawks the fewer chickens, while the more

men the more chickens. Both the seal and the man eat salmon, but when a seal eats a salmon there is a salmon the less, and were seals to increase past a certain point salmon must diminish; while by placing the spawn of the salmon under favorable conditions man can so increase the number of salmon as to more than make up for all he may take, and thus, no matter how much men may increase, their increase need never outrun the supply of salmon.

"In short, while all through the vegetable and animal kingdoms the limit of subsistence is independent of the things subsisted, with man the limit of subsistence is, within the final limits of earth, air, water and sunshine, dependent upon man himself. And, this being the case, the analogy which it is sought to draw between the lower forms of life and man manifestly fails."

Thus George throws down the gauntlet to the Darwinians. He never employs demagogic platitudes. Such phrases as "the capitalistic system," "the capitalistic means of production," "the master class," etc., never mar his regal composition. On the contrary he realizes, as Adam Smith does, that there is a natural order in human society, that natural laws are infinitely wise and beneficient, and that the ills afflicting us are due solely to men's failure to conform to them. In other words, though there is clearly something amiss, there is more to admire in human society, even as it exists, and so what is required to correct it is not revolution, but reform. The marvelous fact about human society is that it exists without any man taking thought, and its mysterious and unfailing efficacy arises from the specialization of function incidental to the division of labor. To illustrate: I am writing this article in the Supreme Court Buildings at Auckland, New Zealand. I shall

presently enclose it in a frail envelope and write thereon the address, really my instructions to the many people whose duty it will be in the course of its transit to obey. In due course it will reach the Editor of *The Catholic World*. The liner in which, with thousands of other letters, it will be conveyed across the ocean is manned by people I can never know. Yet they will do their work as thoroughly as though I had specially employed them! To enable me to read the newspaper this morning, men have been at work throughout the world while I slept, some gathering news and committing it to writing; some transmitting messages, others at this end of a cable thousands of miles long receiving them; some casting type throughout the night, and everyone whose labor contributed to the production of that newspaper—the correspondent at the war front, the telegraph operator at the other side of the world, the men who mined the metal out of which the type was made, the men who ran careful eyes over the proofs, the maid who pushed the paper under my bedroom door—have all been co-operating to enable me to read the news! Words cannot describe the tenderness with which the mother rocks the cradle to induce her babe to sleep, but the engine-driver of a railway train or the man who steers an ocean liner is not less careful about the passengers who eat, sleep and live their lives on board, though he knows them not! As George puts it in the first Chapter of *Progress and Poverty:*

"Keeping these principles in view we see that the draughtsman, who, shut up in some dingy office on the banks of the Thames, is drawing the plans for a great marine engine, is in reality devoting his labor to the production of bread and meat as truly as though he were garnering the grain in California or swinging a lariat

on a La Plata pampa: that he is as truly making his own clothing as though he were shearing sheep in Australia or weaving cloth in Paisley, and just as effectually producing the claret he drinks at dinner as though he gathered the grapes on the banks of the Garonne. The miner, who, two thousand feet underground in the heart of the Comstock, is digging out silver ore, is in effect by virtue of a thousand exchanges, harvesting crops in valleys five thousand feet nearer the earth's center; chasing the whale through Arctic icefields; plucking tobacco leaves in Virginia; picking coffee berries in Honduras; cutting sugar cane on the Hawaiian Islands; gathering cotton in Georgia or weaving it in Manchester or Lowell; making quaint wooden toys for his children in the Hartz Mountains; or plucking amid the green and gold of Los Angeles orchards the oranges which, when his shift is relieved, he will take home to his sick wife. The wages which he receives on Saturday night at the mouth of the shaft, what are they but the certificate to all the world that he has done these things —the primary exchange in the long series which transmutes his labor into the things he has really been laboring for?"

This is the co-operation that makes civilization possible—that which Adam Smith calls "the natural course of things," but which Bastiat calls a miracle. Thus there is much to admire in human society. We must admire the perfect efficiency with which men work for each other, yet without any man taking thought. The machine works without visible direction because, as Adam Smith puts it, every man in working for himself is "led by an invisible hand" to work for others. "Well roars the storm," says Tennyson, "for those who hear a deeper voice beyond the storm," and we have only to

contemplate the matchless mystery of civilized society to see the supernatural!

But if all this be true, what is wrong with the world? If there be no struggle for existence as between man and man, how can we explain the facts of everyday life? How are we to account for the fact, so vividly depicted in the May, 1941, number of *The Catholic World* in the article, "The Arabs of the Asphalt," that "tens of thousands of families are wont to pilot tens of thousands of heartbroken jallopies over California's super-highways in search of work?" George supplied the answer more than sixty years ago in *Progress and Poverty*. People are workless because they are disinherited. A few grow richer while the masses grow poorer, because the community-value of land—"the common fund whence common want should be met"—is misappropriated by a few. It is this great primary wrong which leaves strong men starving and powerless in the midst of abundance; it is this which crowds human beings into hideous slums; it is this which makes the masses poorer as the community grows richer; it is this which constitutes the social problems pressing everywhere for solution, whether in California, in Mexico, in Chile, Australia, or elsewhere, for, as George puts it, "at the bottom of every social problem we shall find a social wrong." Assuredly there is no greater wrong than to deny men their natural and inalienable right to the land of their country. Place the unemployed in any community on some unoccupied territory, Crusoe's Island, for example, and, although they would be stripped of many of the conveniences of civilized life—electric light, paved streets, cheap tram service, etc., they would make a living. As a matter of fact I have in mind a case of shipwreck near at hand. In 1907, the

ship, *Dundonald,* was wrecked on the uninhabited Auckland Islands south of New Zealand, in the Antarctic Ocean in fact. Cold and hungry the survivors struggled ashore on the bleakest island of the group, well-named Disappointment Island. A year later they were rescued and brought to New Zealand all well. They had to construct mud huts, to catch sea-birds, seals and fish. They had a hard struggle, but they survived because they had free access to nature. They had no unemployment relief, no social insurance, but they paid no rent, and by applying their labor to the wild forbidding earth they produced food. In a modern city they would have starved unless they had been relieved by charity.

The remedy prescribed by George is clear, practicable, and efficacious: By the lawful use of taxing power we would divert the rent of land into the public Treasury, at the same time cancelling other taxes falling on the produce of labor. Incidentally some of the rent of land is taken in taxation already, but we propose to take it all. This is what George called a policy of true conservatism, the effect of which would be to save the masses, "the repository of ultimate political power," from becoming the prey of demagogues. Since George wrote the demagogues have been in evidence everywhere, and well have they succeeded in "making confusion worse confounded." Father Fichter encourages the hope that George is at last coming into his own. Since his teaching is a magnificent vindication of the natural law, I have no doubt that men will soon arise in the Church who will proclaim that we have only to conform to that law and involuntary poverty and unemployment with all their attendant evils will disappear for all time.

From the outset George has had strong Catholic de-

fenders. We learn from *The Life of Henry George,* by his son, that soon after the publication of *Progress and Poverty,* but before it had caught the attention of the world, a Passionist, Father Dawson, wrote him stating that, though he did not know the author's religion, George had written a Catholic work. Father Dawson, who died in Dublin a few years ago, was a life-long defender of the theory of land value taxation. More remarkable still is the Letter to the Clergy and Laity of the Diocese of Meath, written by Dr. Nulty in 1881, after the publication of George's famous book certainly, but before the Bishop had heard of it or of the author. "The land of every country," writes the Bishop, "is the common property of the people of that country, because its real owner, the Creator, has transferred it as a voluntary gift to them. . . . Now, as every man in that country is a creature and a child of God, and as all his creatures are equal in his sight, any settlement of the land of a country that would exclude the humblest man from his share in the common inheritance not only would be an injustice and a wrong to that man, but would be an impious resistance to the benevolent intentions of his Creator." It is surely significant that Dr. Nulty's Letter is an epitome of *Progress and Poverty*. The fact that the community-value of land increases as population increases, Dr. Nulty regards as a beautiful illustration of the goodness of Divine Providence. Revenue is necessary for civilized society. As population increases more revenue is required, but the ever-increasing value of land will provide an unfailing and ample fund to meet the public needs. Then there was the great and good Father McGlynn, punished by his superiors, but finally vindicated and restored to his priestly status. The way of the Prophet has ever been hard. Joan of Arc and Savonarola

were judicially murdered; Las Casas, when he proclaimed that the right of the colored man to be free was equally valid with that of the white, found theologians who opposed him; and Cardinal Newman, the author of that masterpiece, *The Development of Christian Doctrine,* repeatedly found his orthodoxy suspect after he had submitted to Rome. There is already a bronze monument to McGlynn, but he has in fact wrought out for himself a monument more lasting than bronze.

Not the least benefit arising from the application of George's theory would be the simplification of government. Here in New Zealand, for example, we have in operation a statute providing for the separate valuation of land and improvements, and we have also a national tax on the value of land minus improvements, as well as a statute enabling the citizens of any county or municipality to place all the local taxation (we call it rating) on the unimproved value of land. The majority of local bodies have in fact adopted the system already. The periodical valuation of land necessarily involves a certain expense, but that expense would remain constant if all other taxes were abolished and George's theory of the single tax actually realized! "Land lies out of doors," as George once wrote, and so no tax could be collected with such ease and cheapness as the land-tax. Thus no one would think of tax evasion because it would be impossible. More important, however, than the simplicity and cheapness of government would be the immense social improvement that would follow the complete and constant utilization of land, the disappearance of slums, and the unshackling of commerce. Under the new order of social justice men would do for themselves efficiently what so-called humanitarian legislation does very inefficiently. Accordingly I am tempted

to wonder what danger of State aggression Father Fichter can see in the teachings of Henry George. One form of State aggression, the searching of your trunks by a Customs official under the shadow of the Statue of Liberty when you have returned to New York from a voyage abroad, will disappear for all time, for George's theory means not merely freedom to produce wealth, but freedom to exchange it where you will.

In reality George, in proclaiming the equal right of every man to the land of his country, has stated nothing new. As he has so well shown in the chapter in *Progress and Poverty* headed "Private Property in Land Historically Considered," the first perceptions of justice have everywhere inspired men to recognize the common right to land. While the Israelites were yet in the desert Moses wrote the Law, and the Law included provision for the redistribution of land at the Year of Jubilee. There could be no redistribution in a walled city, but even there the man who had sold his land had one year within which he could repudiate his bargain. Elsewhere no man could sell more than his right of occupancy between the date of sale and the next ensuing Year of Jubilee. No wonder Cardinal Manning declared that Moses had made him a Radical! I remember St. Thomas Aquinas, in the volume of the *Summa* in which he treats of law, tells us that the Laws of Moses were framed to ensure something like equality as between man and man, and again he states that, though the ceremonial precepts of the Old Law are obsolete, the judicial precepts are still valid. Assuredly this can only mean that the land law of the Old Law is still valid. This is not to say that the periodical redistribution of land is practicable or desirable in modern times, for nowadays there are permanent and costly improve-

ments which were not in contemplation in ancient times, and, as George has shown with matchless lucidity, the equal right to land can be asserted and secured easily, permanently, and equitably by collecting the rent thereof in the form of taxation and utilizing it for the common good. The form would be different from that ordained by Moses, but the spirit would be identical.

When George wrote *Our Land Policy*, his first considered statement of his views, in 1871, he was unaware that a pre-Revolutionary school of thinkers in France, the Physiocrats, had held the same views. Their founder was Quesnay, a physician at the Court of Louis XVI., and they included Turgot, the last Finance Minister under the monarchy. They proposed the abolition of all taxation, save the *impot unique* or single-tax on the unimproved value of land, and no less a man than Mirabeau described their proposal as equivalent in utility to the invention of printing or the substitution of money for barter. Turgot attempted to apply the principle, but the ignorant beneficiaries of untaxed privilege secured his dismissal from office. Then came the Revolution with its era of destruction and bloodshed until, in sheer desperation, the nation sought safety in the despotism of Napoleon.

It is the fashion in these days of alleged enlightenment to refer to the pre-Reformation centuries as comparatively barbarous. There is, however, the testimony of Thorold Rogers among others, in *Six Centuries of Work and Wages*, that the fifteenth century was in England the golden age of the working man. First there were immense areas of common land to which the people had access under rules deeply rooted in Christian tradition. Much land—it was one-third of England in the reign of Henry VIII—was owned by reli-

gious congregations. The monastic lands, however, were really trust property in that the congregations maintained all the aged and indigent, and attached to the monastery, not infrequently, was a hospital. The common right to land was further secured in that the lay lords, and sometimes religious houses, bore the entire cost of war. Thus it was that the Hundred Years' War and the Wars of the Roses were paid for without loans and without indirect taxes. Thorold Rogers assures us further that the religious houses were considerate landlords, and there can be no doubt that their studied regard for the rights of praedial serfs had a steadying influence on the lay lords. No wonder H. M. Hyndman, Socialist and Rationalist, declared that "the Church of our ancestors was not the organized fraud which prejudiced historians would have us believe."

The first step in the disinheriting of the people of England was the Reformation. Monasteries were ruthlessly destroyed and their lands handed over to the pimps and pandars who became the forbears of "our old nobility," many hospitals were closed, and the noble art of nursing was forgotten until Florence Nightingale rediscovered it. As theft and robbery were capital crimes in those far-off days, we are not surprised to learn that 72,000 persons suffered the death penalty in the reign of Henry VIII. The destruction of the monasteries left the poor unprovided for, and so many of them were driven by hunger to the gallows. Poor laws began in the forty-third year of Elizabeth's reign. In Catholic England they were unknown.

The work of expropriation, however, was not accomplished all at once. It proceeded by stages until the Parliament of Cromwell, the alleged vindicator of English liberty, in 1645 carried a series of resolutions for

the abolition of feudal dues on land. These were later embodied in a statute, and by the small majority of two votes, feudal obligations were abolished and indirect taxation substituted. Later, in the reign of the Georges mainly, came innumerable Enclosure Acts by which the common lands were stolen from the people.

Thus it will be seen that, in proposing to abolish land monopoly, George really seeks to restore the state of affairs prevailing in England in pre-Reformation times —to bring us back to our Catholic heritage, in fact. Accordingly I am glad to have Father Fichter's assurance that there is a surprising number of Catholics taking courses through the Henry George School of Social Science. From the outset there have been many Catholic Georgists, and there will be more of us. While the Catholic who embraces Socialism will necessarily lose his faith, the Catholic who embraces Georgism may become more Catholic still. The work of spreading the light of economic truth, however, must not be left to the laity. I refuse to believe that there will not arise bishops and clergy who will proclaim the truth as it was proclaimed by men like Bishop Nulty and Father McGlynn.