

BOOKS WORTH READING

There is an excellent book which Henry George would have quoted from if it had been written in his time: *Ownership: Early Christian Teaching* by Charles Avila.

While training in a seminary Charles Avila began looking through the collections of writings of the Church Fathers in search of their teachings on ownership and poverty. He discovered a rich and powerful teaching and a concern for the poor which the Church had forgotten. For example, he quotes from Basil the Great:

Things of this kind are from God: the fertile land, moderate winds, abundance of seeds, the work of the oxen, and other things by which a farm is brought to productivity and abundance. . . But the avaricious one has not remembered our common nature, has not thought of distribution.

There are many strong arguments against the private ownership of land, or even of private ownership in general. The word 'private' means 'diminishment' of the possessor, thus 'privation'. It signifies losing participation in the common good. Ownership itself is seriously questioned. For example John Chrysostom writes, 'When one attempts to possess himself of anything, to make it his own, then contention is introduced, as if nature herself were indignant'. Or Ambrose writes, 'We lose things that are common when we claim things as our own'. Avila argues that the greatest evil of private ownership is land ownership, and he observes how the history of land ownership of Henry George, which he later discovered, confirms the teachings of the early Church.

The radical ideas of the Fathers were not entirely forgotten in the middle ages. They are revived in the natural law teaching of Thomas Aquinas. Christopher Franks has written a very accessible book on this entitled *He Became Poor: The Poverty of Christ and Aquinas's Economic Teachings*. As with the previous book, Franks questions the modern notion of ownership and what he calls the tendency towards the 'proprietary self'. Since Locke society has understood property as an extension of self-ownership, a profoundly unchristian notion of self as made in the image of God.

From this distortion come a host of false relationships with society and with nature, effecting economic exchange, the theory of just price and usury. But perhaps the most interesting aspect of this book is its recovery of the place of exchange within the natural order, where production is not for the sake of competition or profit, but for the welfare of all according to the design of nature.

These two books show us that there is much to be learned, in harmony with the insights of Henry George, from the pre-Enlightenment visions of social justice.

The Church would do well, also, to remind itself of its early social teaching. 📖

