

phrase "unheard of before now", he seems to see a difference between this new form of slavery (i.e. racial slavery) and the ancient forms of just-title slavery. A few days before, he also issued a Brief, entitled *Pastorale Officium* to Cardinal Juan de Tavera of Toledo, which warned the Catholic faithful of excommunication for participating in slavery. Unfortunately Pope Paul made reference to the King of Castile and Aragon in this Brief. Under political pressure, the Pope later retracted this Brief but did not annul the Bull. It is interesting to note that even though he retracted his Brief, Popes Gregory XIV, Urban VIII and Benedict XIV still recognized and confirmed its authority against slavery and the slave trade.

Popes Gregory XIV (Cum Sicuti, 1591), Urban VIII (Commissum Nobis, 1639) and Benedict XIV (Immensa Pastorum, 1741) also condemned slavery and the slave trade. Unlike the earlier papal letters, these excommunications were more directed towards the clergy than the laity. In 1839, Pope Gregory XVI issued a Bull, entitled *In Supremo*. Its main focus was against slave trading, but it also clearly condemned racial slavery:

We, by apostolic authority, warn and strongly exhort in the Lord faithful Christians of every condition that no one in the future dare bother unjustly, despoil of their possessions, or reduce to slavery Indians, Blacks or other such peoples. [Ibid., pp.101]

Unfortunately a few American bishops misinterpreted this Bull as condemning only the slave trade and not slavery itself. Bishop John England of Charleston actually wrote several letters to the Secretary of State under President Van Buren explaining that the Pope, in *In Supremo*, did not condemn slavery but only the slave trade (Ibid., pp. 67-68).

With all these formal condemnations, it is a shame that the Popes were largely ignored by the Catholic laity and clergy. Two Catholic nations were largely involved with slave trafficking. Many Catholics at that time owned or sold slaves. Even some Catholic bishops during the 19th-century appeared to support slavery. The Popes were so ignored that some people today claim that they were silent. These sins brought great scandal to Christ's Church. Unfortunately history does repeat itself. Today the majority of Catholics admit to using artificial contraceptives, even though the Popes have condemned contraception (e.g. Humane vitae, Catechism of the Catholic Church 2370, 2399).

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Pamphlet 239

Slavery and the Catholic Church

Phillip B. Liescheski

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, deluded, slaves to various desires and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful ourselves and hating one another. But when the kindness and generous love of God our Savior appeared, not because of any righteous deeds we had done but because of His mercy, He saved us through the bath of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit...

Titus 3:3-5

Once again the Catholic Church is being accused of another grave scandal. Some people claim that the Church before 1890 was either silent or approved of slavery. It is claimed that no Pope condemned slavery until then. According to one modern theologian: "...one can search in vain through the interventions of the Holy See - those of Pius V, Urban VIII and Benedict XIV - for any condemnation of the actual principle of slavery." [Panzer, p. 2] Other people further claim that the Church changed Her teaching on slavery, so the Church can change Her teachings on other issues too. A recent book, entitled *The Popes and Slavery* written by Fr. Joel S. Panzer (Alba House, 1996), shows that the Popes did condemn racial slavery as early as 1435. Most of the information below is found in this book.

The issue and history of slavery are quite complex. Throughout history, the Church found Herself among cultures practicing slavery and

had to deal with it. An early example is St. Paul's Epistle to Philemon. St. Paul appears to tolerate slavery, but he also warned slave masters that they too have a Master in Heaven who would judge them (Col. 4:1). Due to Her weakness in political affairs, the Church could not stop every evil practice. However, political weakness is quite different than approval. There are many examples of saints buying slaves and then setting them free (e.g. St. Nicholas, Trinitarian Fathers & White Fathers). Unfortunately there were also Catholics and even clergy, who participated in slavery, and their sins caused scandal to the Church.

To further complicate this issue, there are different forms of slavery. Even though repugnant to our modern sensitivity, servitude is not always unjust, such as penal servitude for convicted criminals or servitude freely chosen for personal financial reasons. These forms are called just-title servitude. The Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which brought an end to racial slavery in the U.S., does allow for just-title servitude to punish criminals: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction." Even today we can see prisoners picking up litter along interstates and highways accompanied by armed guards. Also the 1949 Geneva Conventions allow for detaining power to use the labor of war prisoners under very limiting circumstances (Panzer, p. 3). However, such circumstances are very rare today. During biblical times, a man could voluntarily sell himself into slavery in order to pay off his debts (Deut. 15:12-18). But such slaves were to be freed on the seventh year or the Jubilee year (Lev. 25:54). The Church tolerated just-title servitude for a time because it

is not wrong in itself, though it can be seriously abused. The Popes did, however, consistently oppose racial slavery which completely lacks any moral justification.

Now we usually think of slavery in terms of innocent people who were unjustly captured and reduced to "beasts of burden" due solely to their race. This was the most common form in the U.S. before the Thirteenth Amendment. This form of slavery, known as racial slavery, began in large-scale during the 15th century and was formally condemned by the Popes as early as 1435, fifty-seven years before Columbus discovered America. In 1404, the Spanish discovered the Canary Islands. They began to colonize the island and enslave its people. Pope Eugene IV in 1435 wrote to Bishop Ferdinand of Lanzarote in his Bull, *Sicut Dudum*:

...They have deprived the natives of their property or turned it to their own use, and have subjected some of the inhabitants of said islands to perpetual slavery, sold them to other persons and committed other various illicit and evil deeds against them... We order and command all and each of the faithful of each sex that, within the space of fifteen days of the publication of these letters in the place where they live, that they restore to their earlier liberty all and each person of either sex who were once residents of said Canary Islands...who have been made subject to slavery. These people are to be totally and perpetually free and are to be let go without the exaction or reception of any money... [Panzer, p. 8; also pp. 75-78 with original critical Latin text]

Those faithful, who did not obey, were excommunicated *ipso facto*. This is the same punishment imposed today on Catholics who participate in abortion. Some people may claim

that Pope Eugene only condemned the practice in the Canary Island and not slavery in general. This claim is hard to accept since he does condemn together this particular case of slavery along with "*other various illicit and evil deeds.*"

A century later, the Spanish and Portuguese were colonizing South America. Unfortunately the practice of slavery did not end. Even though far from being a saint, Pope Paul III in 1537 issued a Bull against slavery, entitled *Sublimis Deus*, to the universal Church. He wrote:

...The exalted God loved the human race so much that He created man in such a condition that he was not only a sharer in good as are other creatures, but also that he would be able to reach and see face to face the inaccessible and invisible Supreme Good... Seeing this and envying it, the enemy of the human race, who always opposes all good men so that the race may perish, has thought up a way, unheard of before now, by which he might impede the saving word of God from being preached to the nations. He (Satan) has stirred up some of his allies who, desiring to satisfy their own avarice, are presuming to assert far and wide that the Indians...be reduced to our service like brute animals, under the pretext that they are lacking the Catholic faith. And they reduce them to slavery, treating them with afflictions they would scarcely use with brute animals... by our Apostolic Authority decree and declare by these present letters that the same Indians and all other peoples - even though they are outside the faith - ...should not be deprived of their liberty... Rather they are to be able to use and enjoy this liberty and this ownership of property freely and licitly, and are not to be reduced to slavery... [Ibid., pp.79-81 with original critical Latin text]

Pope Paul not only condemned the slavery of Indians but also "*all other peoples.*" In his