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Ownership, by Avila

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OWNERSHIP: EARLY CHRISTIAN TEACHING. By Charles Avila. New York: Orbis Books, 1983. 214 pages.

In the ideological debate between capitalistic and Marxist thought, a perennial bone of contention is the right to own private property. The facile communist answer to today's problem of inequality and injustice is the abolition of the right to private ownership. The social teaching of the Church has always defended the natural human right to use and own the material resources of the earth, but what is significant is the shift of emphasis in the Church's social doctrine on wealth and property corresponding to the actual historical situation of the times. For example, Leo XIII in *Rerum Novarum* (1891) defended the right to private property against communism (n. 651). But because of the abuses of private ownership under capitalism, Pope Paul VI in *Populorum Progressio* warned that private property is not an absolute or unlimited right and must never be exercised against the common good (n. 23).

Within the Philippine context, one of the strengths of the 1986 Philippine Constitution are its provisions for social justice. "To this end," Article XIII states, "the State shall regulate the acquisition, ownership, and disposition of property and its increments." Although the right to private property is protected by the Philippine Constitution (Article III, Sec. 1. 9), the norms of social justice regulate its use and prevent its abuse. The right to private ownership would surely surface sooner or later as a direct or indirect issue between the National Democratic Front and government peace negotiators.

How far we twentieth-century Christians are from the moral thinking on private property of the fourth century Fathers of the Church is the discovery of Charles Avila's book. In the first two chapters, Avila contrasts the juridical and legalistic Roman concept of exclusive and unlimited use of private ownership according to Roman law theory and practice and the philosophical and ethical concept of Christian stewardship according to the Latin and Greek Fathers of the Church. In a Christian country like the Philippines where the increasing gap between the few rich and the vast majority who are poor is alarming and scandalous, the prophetic, undiluted, revolutionary patristic thought on wealth and property — a well-kept secret until now — speaks bitingly to the rich and powerful in behalf of the millions of landless, propertyless victims of injustice.

In the following chapters (3-7), Avila presents a brief bio-data, selected main texts, and a summary of the teaching on ownership of Clement of Alexandria, Basil the Great, Ambrose, John Chrysostom, and Augustine. For Clement of Alexandria, the twin goals of Christian ownership are *autarkeia* (self-sufficiency) and *koinonia* (community). For Basil, there is a causal connection between the luxury of the rich and the poverty of the poor. In the theistic view of Ambrose, God is the absolute Owner of earth which is

common to all. John Chrysostom thundered against the accumulation of wealth as robbery and murder. God has sole Ownership; there is solidarity of humankind; ownership should respect a person-to-person relationship. Augustine rejected the absolutist and exclusivist Roman concept of private ownership and taught the Christian doctrine of the sharing of God's created goods.

Chapter 8 is Avila's neat synthesis of the social teaching of the five Fathers on private ownership. It is a patristic attack on the ideology of unjust ownership and wealth as robbery and idolatry, and the Christian alternative program of self-sufficiency and community. The concluding ninth chapter is the author's own retrieval of the fourth-century Christian thought on property, which has remained a secret for so long and yet has something to say to our modern First, Second, and Third Worlds.

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NEW COMMUNITIES, NEW MINISTRIES. By Michel Bavarel. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1983..

Michel Bavarel is a Swiss Catholic journalist who has travelled widely through Africa, Asia and Latin America. In this book he describes Catholic communities, forms of evangelization, and the problems faced. The strengths of this book include the author's descriptive style, which brings the reader with him to the scene, plus an approach free from religious or ideological bias, and a warm sympathy for the people he meets on the way. From his interviews he elicits valuable insights into the religious life of the people in the area. Hence this small book is a valuable introduction to Third World religious life, which like an appetizer leaves the reader wanting more and often reluctant to move on with the author to the next stop on his journey.

The author deals with four main themes in four parts of the book, by vividly describing a religious situation in a particular country and then moving on to another example. The four themes are cultural indigenization, lay leadership in Christian communities, Third World poverty and the Christian response, and finally political and economic repression and liberation.

In dealing with indigenization, the author takes us to an animistic ritual in honor of deceased ancestors in Madagascar. Here the ritual has been accepted by Christians and integrated into the Christian religious world view as a kind of symbolic representation of the communion of saints. Dealing with the same theme, there is a visit to a typical Spanish Catholic village fiesta in honor of the patron saint. The village is high up in the Andes among the Peruvian Indians. In this case, two religious traditions exist side by side: