

Catholic Social Teaching:

From the Beginnings Through Leo XIII

SECOND OF A SERIES

by Thomas Storck

The social apostolate of Christ's one Church began while that Church's Founder was still on this earth. In fact, even before the Incarnation, during the Old Testament dispensation, the law of God and His prophets insisted continually on justice and charity toward the poor. For example, the law of Moses proclaims that every seventh year "every creditor shall release what he has lent to his neighbor" (Deuteronomy 15:2) and nearly every prophet denounces those "who oppress the poor, who crush the needy" (Amos 4:2). In fact, social justice was linked with faithfulness to the God of Israel and the keeping of His covenant.

This continues in the New Testament. During our Lord's ministry, He made it clear on more than one occasion that if those who were to become members of His Mystical Body did not fulfill their duties, both of justice and charity, toward their neighbor, then their faith was in vain and they could not expect an eternal reward. The parable of the sheep and the goats, for example, in Matthew 25:31-46, presents the issue of salvation or damnation as resting solely on how we treat the poor: the hungry and thirsty, strangers, the naked, the sick, prisoners. The Apostle Paul tells us that "those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction" (2 Timothy 5:9). And St. James warns

the rich, "Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you" (James 5:1). Altogether the witness of both Old and New Testament insists on the duties of both individuals and of the community toward the poor.

After the Apostolic age, this tradition of teaching on social justice was carried on by the Fathers of the Church, those great theologians and saints of the early centuries of the Church, who shaped so much of the doctrine, liturgy and ascetical practice of Catholicism. Many of them — as in St. John Chrysostom's statement, "Not to enable the poor to share in our goods is to steal from them and deprive them of life. The goods we possess are not ours, but theirs" — used quite striking language to insist on



LEO XIII. SEF/Art Resource, NY.

our duties to our neighbor.

In the Middle Ages, as a well-developed Christian society came into being, the scholastic doctors, such as St. Thomas Aquinas, had the leisure to survey the entire field of the virtues, including justice and charity, and to comment on the duties of rulers and subjects and the right organization of the state and society. As a result, building on both reason and revelation, they brought out the implications of the Fathers' teaching in such concepts as the just price, the prohibition of usury, and, in general, the idea that economic affairs were definitely subject to the moral law, and that the plea of economic utility or necessity could not override the commandments of God.

After the end of the Middle Ages, economic life in Europe changed rapidly. Capitalism became firmly established, the almost wholly agricultural life of previous centuries declined, and commercial and even industrial ventures became more common and more economically important. In the face of this, Catholic theologians and moralists carefully examined these new phenomena, seeking where possible to harmonize them with the moral law. There was considerable difference of opinion about some points, and, in general, the Church did not issue a clarion call to reconstruct the economic life of society according to the Gospel. In part this was because, by the eigh-

teenth century, most of the ruling elites of Catholic countries were Catholic in name only, and not much interested in Christian living, either on a personal or societal level.

Beginning with the French revolution of 1789, and the quarter century of wars that followed, the entire public basis of society changed. No longer did most governments pretend that the public life of their nations was entirely Catholic. Now a fierce clash of ideologies became the rule for Western civilization. In the social field, each of these various ideologies, from Marxism to laissez-faire capitalism, held itself out as the final answer. And in the midst of this clash of ideologies, came Pope Leo XIII, determined to revive the best of Christian civilization, so that a distinctively Catholic voice would be heard, both to rally the faithful and attract men of good will to the Church.

When Leo XIII came to the throne of Peter in 1878, he found the Church in a discouraged state. Despite the real successes of the First Vatican Council in 1870, the Italians had shortly after overrun what remained of the Papal States, ending the Council prematurely and depriving Pope Pius IX of his civil sovereignty. Everywhere in Europe Catholic political causes seemed to be losing and what remained of the old Christian order passing away. Leo XIII restored the confidence of the Catholic world and began to reinvigorate the Church with an energy that lasted up into the 1960s. He did this chiefly by showing how the crisis of modern times could be met by drawing on Catholic faith and tradition.

Leo and his successors were very successful in creating a distinctively Catholic response to the modern world. The Catholic intellectual revival, that had begun earlier in the century before Leo's pontificate, grew stronger, attracting many converts to the Church, and gave Catholics a confidence that the Faith really contained the solution for all the modern problems of individual, family and society. Leo realized that the challenges presented by the new philosophies had to be met by a thorough intellectual analysis not only of the nature of man and of society, but of human thought itself. In one of his earliest encyclicals he called for the renewed study of scholastic philosophy and theology, especially that of St. Thomas Aquinas, so that the Church would be equipped to address the questions raised by the new thinkers on their own level. In addition, his achievements in the intellectual field included the publication of a series of encyclicals addressing the political and social problems raised by the new society that had come into being since 1789, a society largely without any religious basis. Leo did not compromise with what was anti-Christian in the new order. Instead he showed how what was perennial in the Church's teaching could be made the foundation for a renewed modern society.

In the past, although the rich often exploited the poor, every Christian society was officially committed to justice and a sufficiency for each person. How little it may have lived up to it, Christendom upheld the ideal of society as a family and of all men as brothers. But this was no longer the case in the nineteenth century. Some thinkers, such as Marx, openly advocated class warfare; others, such as the Manchester school of economists in England, taught that the problems of the poor were of no concern to anyone else and that it was wrong for the state or anyone to intervene on behalf of workers, who, by a dictate of nature, were forever doomed to poverty at starvation wages. Meanwhile, industrialization had reduced the poor to a state worse than ever. "little better than slavery," as Leo XIII wrote. Into this welter of opinions Pope Leo introduced the sound teaching of the Church with the first social encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* of 1891. He himself, in the opening section of the encyclical, speaks of the changes that have overcome the economic order, "the growth of industry, and the surprising discoveries of science; the changed relations of masters and workmen; the enormous fortunes of individuals and the poverty of the masses..." (no. 1).¹ Leo then gives his analysis of the root causes of the situation of his day.

But all agree, and there can be no question whatever, that some remedy must be found, and found quickly, for the misery and wretchedness which press so heavily at this moment on the large majority of the very poor. The ancient workmen's Guilds were destroyed in the last century, and no other organization took their place. Public institutions and the laws have repudiated the ancient religion. Hence by degrees it has come to pass that Working Men have been given over, isolated and defenseless, to the callousness of employers and the greed of unrestrained competition (no. 2).

Here is a statement of the economic situation as it existed in the late nineteenth century. What was the Pontiff's response? What could the Church recommend as an aid to the poor?

The first point Leo makes is that the institution of private property, then under fierce attack from the socialists, could not rightly be abolished, and that private property, far from hurting the poor, in fact helped them, at least potentially. Since this point is so important, it deserves some attention.

Leo is not shy from admitting that in his day property was not well distributed. As a result of this, the rich are able to oppress the poor with impunity.

On the one side there is the party which holds the power because it holds the wealth; which has

in its grasp all labor and all trade; which manipulates for its own benefit and its own purposes all the sources of supply, and which is powerfully represented in the councils of the State itself. On the other side there is the needy and powerless multitude, sore and suffering, always ready for disturbance (no. 35).

Faced with these facts, the socialists indicted the very system of private property. If only the state controlled the goods of the world, they argued, "each citizen will then have his equal share of whatever there is to enjoy" (no. 3). But Leo showed how foolish that doctrine was, and that, were it instituted, "the working man himself would be among the first to suffer" (*ibid.*). But in saying this he was by no means upholding every aspect of the present system. Instead, like the philosopher he was, Leo grounds the institution of private property in human nature itself, not in mere human custom or convention.

Pope Leo shows from reason that, since man is endowed with an intellect and is able to foresee his future needs, he must be able to provide against those future needs by his own industry. And for this he obviously requires things "in stable and permanent possession; he must have not only things which perish in the using, but also those which, though used, remain for use in the future" (no. 5). For example, a man can more easily provide for his food by having his own land on which to grow it, than by wandering through the uncultivated forest looking out for wild edible plants.

Most importantly, among the various points in favor of the private ownership of property that Leo XIII brings forward, he points out the benefits of private property for the head of each family.

That right of property, therefore, which has been proved to belong naturally to individual persons must also belong to a man in his capacity of head of a family; nay, such a person must possess this right so much the more clearly in proportion as his position multiplies his duties (no. 9).

If this is the case, and if property is to sustain the poor as much as the rich, how are the poor to acquire property? How can a more just distribution of property be effected? A working man has only one source of income — the wages of his labor. And therefore Leo XIII is quite explicit that a working man's wages ought to be sufficient for him and his family not only to live "in reasonable comfort," but also "by cutting down expenses, to put by a little property" (no. 35). But if he is to purchase property, obviously his wages must be sufficient to permit a workman to save. Thus we must look at another major theme of this encyclical, the question of wages and their justice.

Pope Leo is quite forthright about Catholic teaching on this issue. He mentions the prevailing secular notion that wages

are fixed by free consent; and, therefore, the employer when he pays what was agreed upon, has done his part, and is not called upon for anything further. The only way, it is said, in which injustice could happen, would be if the master refused to pay the whole of the wages, or the workman would not complete the work undertaken; when this happens the State should intervene, to see that each obtains his own, but not under any other circumstances (no. 34).

Leo's answer to this is clear. "This mode of reasoning is by no means convincing to a fair-minded man, for there are important considerations which it leaves out of view altogether" (*ibid.*). Because a man without property *must* work, "It follows that each one has a right to procure what is required in order to live; and the poor can procure it in no other way than by work and wages" (*ibid.*). In other words, if a man's wages are fixed too low to support himself or his family by his day's work, what is he supposed to do? Work all night too? Send his wife and children to work? Any worker who is forced to accept too low wages "because an employer or contractor will give him no better ... is the victim of force and injustice" (*ibid.*). Although *Rerum Novarum* was written over a century ago, these words should still have a bite for us today. We can by no means absolve our own society from the charge that workers are often victims in this way "of force and injustice."

Whose task is it to see that workers' wages are sufficient? Is it the task of the government, through a central bureaucracy or minimum wage laws? Pope Leo does not entirely rule out such an approach, but his clear preference is for another method. And in doing so, he brings to the fore one of the most interesting, and at the same time both traditional and innovative, proposals in the entire corpus of Catholic social teaching. This is the notion of self-regulation by mutual agreement of workers and employers.

The necessary background to this proposal is found earlier in the encyclical, where Leo points out the following truth.

The great mistake that is made in the matter now under consideration, is to possess oneself of the idea that class is naturally hostile to class; that rich and poor are intended by nature to live at war with one another. So irrational and so false is this view, that the exact contrary is the truth. Just as the symmetry of the human body is the result of the disposition of the members of the body, so in a State it is

ordained by nature that these two classes should exist in harmony and agreement, and should, as it were, fit into one another, so as to maintain the equilibrium of the body politic. Each requires the other; capital cannot do without labor nor labor with capital. Mutual agreement results in pleasantness and good order; perpetual conflict necessarily produces confusion and outrage (no. 15).

This insight of the Church's is opposed to socialism with its notions of inevitable class conflict, but in many respects it is also opposed to our own system. For implicit in our economic arrangements is the idea that owners and employers make money by cutting the wages of employees or moving jobs overseas to cheaper locales. These practices naturally pit one side against the other. But this need not be. Leo adumbrates here, and later on Pius XI will say the same thing with much more detail, that if both sides in the labor conflict will submit themselves to justice, then harmony can indeed result because both sides will be submitting to a higher standard. Neither side will triumph over the other; rather both sides will accept fully their duties as well as their rights.

Having explained that workers and employers are not naturally hostile to each other, Leo then brings forth the notion of "societies or boards" (no. 34) which he suggests would do a better job of addressing the questions of wages, hours of work, and safety and health conditions in the workplace than a state bureaucracy would. What is Pope Leo talking about here? He is setting forth the idea of joint committees or societies of workmen and employers or owners, who will jointly address their common problems. Forty years later, Pope Pius XI will elaborate this idea in detail in the encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*. But here Leo XIII only gives an outline of such a society's workings and functions.

The Pontiff sees the need for organization and joint action on the part of workers, since individually they are helpless before the power of their employers. In this sense, labor unions would fall into this category. So also would mutual insurance societies for workmen and their families. But, as I suggested above, Leo hoped that societies can be formed which will overcome the sharp employer/employee division, in the sense that hostility and confrontation will be replaced by good will and justice. If these groups are successful in improving working conditions and wages and lessening strife between owners and workers, then the need for direct state action would be removed. The Pope notes that many of the existing labor organizations of his time were socialistic in their principles and hostile to the Church. Naturally he wishes that Catholics be formed into *Catholic* organizations, where not only the economic, but also the more

important spiritual needs of the workers could be met.

It is necessary to mention one other major theme of *Rerum Novarum* in order to round out Leo XIII's teaching. This is his insistence on the *duty* of the rich to give liberally of their possessions to the poor. He quotes St. Thomas Aquinas, "Man should not consider his outward possessions as his own, but as common to all, so as to share them without difficulty when others are in need" (no. 19). Although as Leo notes, this duty is not usually enforced in courts of law, it will nevertheless be enforced most strictly by the last Judge whom we shall meet.

Therefore, those whom fortune favors are warned that freedom from sorrow and abundance of earthly riches, are no guarantee of that beatitude that shall never end, but rather of the contrary; that the rich should tremble at the threatenings of Jesus Christ - threatenings so strange in the mouth of our Lord; and that a most strict account must be given to the Supreme Judge for all that we possess (no. 18).

Later on, Pius XI will point out how necessary is this social charity, joined to social justice, to bring about a true Christian social order.

Leo XIII was so successful in *Rerum Novarum* because he drew on the entire existing corpus of Catholic social thought. And therefore, later popes, including John Paul II, in their own social encyclicals, have been able in turn to draw on *Rerum Novarum*, stressing and elaborating certain themes, but showing how that brilliant document is never out of date.

In the next article in this series, I continue this sketch of Catholic social thought from the death of Leo XIII in 1903, through the reign of Pius XI (1922-1939).

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End Note

1 Section references to *Rerum Novarum* are from the Paulist edition, as published in *Seven Great Encyclicals* and elsewhere.

THE EARTH'S SHAME

Name not his deed: in shuddering and in haste
We dragged him darkly o'er the windy fell:
That night there was a gibbet in the waste,
And a new sin in hell.

Be his deed hid from commonwealths and kings,
By all men born be one true tale forgot,
But three things, braver than all earthly things,
Faced him and feared him not.

Above his head and sunken secret face
Nestled the sparrow's young and dropped not dead,
From the red blood and slime of that lost place
Grew daisies white, not red.

And from high heaven looking upon him,
Slowly upon the face of God did come
A smile the cherubim and seraphim
Hid all their faces from.

(ca. 1896-97)¹

THE EARTH'S VIGIL

The old Earth keepeth her watch the same,
Alone in a voiceless void doth stand,
Her orange flowers in her bosom flame,
Her gold ring in her hand,
The surfs of the long gold-crested morns
Break evermore at her great robe's hem,
And evermore come the bleak moon-horns,
But she keepeth not watch for them.

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