
CHAPTER 1

“Social Catholics” and *Rerum Novarum*

Part I.

Social Catholics in Europe

1848 was a year of revolutions in Europe.

- In January a rebellion broke out in Sicily;
- In Paris the February Revolution broke out and then spread throughout the rest of France.
- A series of revolutions erupted across Europe, especially in Berlin and Vienna.¹
- as the year unfolded, Karl Marx was about to issue his revolutionary call to workers to throw off their chains in his *Manifesto of the Communist Party*.

In 1848 Father Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler of Mainz, Germany was about to initiate a moral and religious revolution as well. Ketteler's ministry was the beginning of a new way of analyzing and addressing the social and economic devastation caused by the Industrial Revolution. The movement he started is known as “social Catholicism.”

As pastor of the main Catholic church in Berlin he had witnessed the ravages of poverty and the violence it had spawned. He began to pay attention to the social ills around him, especially the subsistence wages of factory workers. "...From 1848 on, it was already clear to him, on the one hand that here lay a great need of the time, an evil to be remedied; and on the other, that the Roman Catholic Church was called upon to make a determined effort in response."²

As a parish priest he spoke out on these social ills at the first general assembly of Catholics from all over Germany. This Catholic Assembly (*Katholikentag*), held in Frankfurt, was made up primarily of the lay Catholic clubs and organizations that were being established everywhere. As a delegate to the assembly Father Ketteler was expected to address one or more of the hot constitutional issues that was on everyone's mind. Instead Father Ketteler directed the attention of the Catholic Assembly to "the social question," by which he meant the gross inequalities of wealth and poverty in Germany and the immense growth of poverty. He believed the church had to address this urgent problem of the age.³

Later in that same year Father Ketteler was invited to give the Advent sermons in the cathedral in Mainz. He delivered six powerful sermons that would awaken the social conscience of German Catholics.

In 1850 Father Ketteler became the archbishop of Mainz. He went on to dialogue with proponents of socialism and laissez faire capitalism in developing a Christian response to the social ills of the day, which he based on Thomas Aquinas. Although his major work, *Die Arbeiterfrage und das Christentum* (The Question of the Worker and Christendom), has yet to be translated into English, he has had an undeniable influence on the shape of Catholic social thought. Later Catholic thinkers in the "Fribourg Union" (see p. 00) would consider Ketteler their spiritual father.

Ketteler, like other Catholic thinkers of the day, condemned the ruthless competition and harsh individualism that typified early capitalism. Building on Aquinas, Ketteler defended private property as a limited right. On the one hand, his position challenged Karl Marx, who had rejected private property, and on the other hand, he challenged the "liberals" of his day who claimed that private property was an absolute right:

Separated from God, men regard themselves as the exclusive masters of their possessions and look upon them only as a means of satisfying their ever-increasing love of pleasure; separated from God they set up sensual pleasures as the enjoyments of life as the means of attaining this end; and so of necessity a gulf was formed between the rich and the poor.⁴

Archbishop Ketteler not only challenged the socialist and capitalist mindsets of his day, but also offered *specific remedies*. At an assembly of German bishops on September 5, 1869, he listed the following, which, he maintained, "eliminate or at any rate diminish the evils of our present industrial system":

- 1) the prohibition of child labor in factories;
- 2) the limitation of working hours for factory workers;
- 3) the separation of the sexes in the workshops;
- 4) the closing of unsanitary workshops;
- 5) Sunday rest;
- 6) the obligation to care for workers who are temporarily or permanently disabled;
- 7) the appointment by the state of factory inspectors.⁵

Ketteler was the forerunner and inspiration of the German Catholic social movement. His influence was "practically dominant in the world of German-speaking social Catholicism; and German-speaking social Catholicism was ahead of social Catholicism elsewhere, in keeping with Germany's industrial development in the latter part of the 19th century."⁶ His legacy is that of a persistent campaign to awaken church and society to the real character of "the social question" in the last half of the nineteenth century.

The roots of *Rerum Novarum* are found in sermons and writings of this parish priest who spoke out and analyzed the poverty and subsistence wages of his community. Forty-three years later, Pope Leo XIII, who studied Ketteler's writing, named Archbishop Ketteler "our great predecessor" in addressing the social question.

LAITY AND CLERGY EXERT LEADERSHIP

A year after Archbishop Ketteler's speech to the German bishops, another series of violent outbreaks in Europe catalyzed Catholic clergy and laity to respond. In 1870 and 1871 Europe witnessed the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war and the worker insurrection known as the Commune de Paris. According to theologian and historian Normand Paulhus, "both events threatened the stability of Europe and underlined the urgency of rethinking the whole basis of society and of presenting new ways of dealing with the deteriorating condition of a working class rapidly being won over to socialism."⁷

In these worsening conditions, ordained and lay leadership emerged to give direction and focus to the church's social ministry. In France two military officers, Albert de Mun and Rene de La Tour du Pin, who met in a German prisoner of war camp at Aachen (Aix-la-Chapelle) in 1870, were determined to respond to the plight of the working class when they got out of prison. The following year they organized a Catholic Workers' club in Paris, under the name "L'Oeuvre des Cercles Catholiques d'Ouvriers" (Society of Catholic Worker circles). The clubs spread quickly throughout France—by 1884 there were 400 such clubs with 50,000 members.⁸ These "circles" or clubs brought together the wealthy and the workers from a given locale for prayer, socializing, and hearing lectures by members of the aristocracy.

De Mun went on to establish the Catholic Association of French Youth in 1886 as a feeder institution for the workers' clubs. The Youth organization eventually attracted over 140,000 members.⁹ "Despite its obvious paternalism and its failure to prepare working-class leaders, this movement contributed immensely to the growing social awareness of the aristocracy and the middle class."¹⁰ The "circles" led to a desire for greater understanding and discussion of the issues. Eventually a journal was published, *L'Association Catholique*, which became the primary source of information about the Catholic response to "the social question."

Study groups of "Social Catholics" were started in Italy and Austria as well. Pope Leo XIII established a "Circle of Social and Economic Studies" in Rome. In Austria, Karl von Vogelsang, a convert of Bishop Ketteler, led the German and Austrian study group known as the "Freie Vereinigung

katholische Sozialpolitiker" (Catholic Social-Political Free Union). Vogelsang called for the reorganization of society according to professions rather than by classes. These professional associations would be represented in the governing branches of the state, thereby linking together social and political realism. In this way he hoped to overcome both the excessive individualism of capitalism and the collectivism of socialism. "Vogelsang hoped to realize the social ideals of the Middle Ages, not restore its social order."¹¹

THE FRIBOURG UNION

One such study group was organized on October 18, 1884 by Prince Karl von Lowenstein and Count Franz Kuefstein of Austria, along with the Marquis Rene de la Tour du Pin and Louis Milcent of France. These four laymen met with the bishop of Lausanne, Gaspard Mermillod, in his residence in Fribourg, Switzerland, and invited other leaders to gather with them forming the "L'Union catholique d'etudes sociales et economiques," or simply the "Fribourg Union."¹²

While Archbishop Ketteler was seen as the spiritual father of these lay and ordained leaders, it was Bishop Mermillod who was their guiding force.

In 1886 Bishop Mermillod challenged the conscience of his people in a speech to the Parisian upper classes. His concern about individualism and poverty caused by unjust social conditions echoes through the century to our times: "The independence of the individual is proclaimed and his solidarity destroyed, man is free, but he is alone...." Having given up nocturnal sleep and Sunday rest to provide the rich with their wealth, he receives in exchange "but a miserable hovel for lodgings and a rare and bitter bread for nourishment."¹³

The "Fribourg Union" met each October from 1885 to 1891. Their intensive days of analysis and discussion began at 9:30 a.m. and concluded at 6:30 p.m. They worked out their ideas in small working groups. After coming to agreement in the small groups they presented their findings to the full body. Attendance at these yearly meetings varied from 20 to 32. Their number included theologians, political leaders, and aristocracy.

The Fribourg Union was predominantly a lay group. This is an impor-

tant detail, for it shows how clergy and laity can cooperate to shape Catholic social thinking.

These men—unfortunately no women were part of the assembly—came with their own national temperaments and political preferences. Some were more traditional, others were more receptive to the democratic trends of the time—which made for some lively meetings. Despite these differences they shared a common goal of addressing the social crisis of their day out of their faith, in loyalty to the pope, and using the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas. They were committed not only to study and to presenting papers but also to advocating for changes in international law that would embody their concern for the worker.

The Fribourg Union was a theological and moral “think tank” of concerned laity and clergy who were committed to shaping attitudes and public opinion in tumultuous times. In these gatherings Catholics from different walks of life came together to wrestle with the meaning of their faith tradition in light of the pressing social and economic problems of their day. While they did not agree on all issues, they shared common assumptions that put them at odds with those who wanted capitalism to remain unfettered.

In the 1880s the thinkers who argued for maximum freedom for business with minimal restraint from the state were known as “economic liberals.” The economic liberals favored “laissez faire capitalism,” which means, literally, “let do,” that is, “let people do as they please.” The Fribourg Union argued against laissez faire capitalism.

Because of conflict with the economic liberal school, Bishop Mermillod suggested that the members of the Fribourg Union work secretly until a well-formed body of doctrine could be presented to Leo XIII.

ADDRESSING THE “SOCIAL QUESTION”

In their meetings the Fribourg Union wrestled with “the social question” of their day. By this term they referred to the tensions between groups in the industrialized societies. “The social question” referred to the difficulty of reconciling the interests of the new classes of industrial bourgeoisie with those of industrial workers. It was not just a matter of the tension between the rich and the poor, but also the question of *the new mode*

of production which, while highly efficient, resulted in a benefit for the few and the social and economic decline or exploitation of the many.

The Fribourg Union and other "Social Catholics" addressed the *structural and institutional question* of the *morality of the new mode of production, known as capitalism*. "Social Catholicism" was a unique combination of progressive and traditional thinking. In general they sought a plan for a Christian society that avoided the two conflicting ideologies of capitalism and socialism. They rejected the spirit of the French Revolution and had an unswerving loyalty to the Catholic Church and a firm belief in the "corporative" vision of society.

CENTRAL THEMES OF THE "SOCIAL CATHOLICS"

The following five themes were central to the discussions and writings of the Fribourg Union.

1. *Charity is not enough*

Members of the Fribourg Union realized that the social problems of their society could not be resolved by charity alone. On this and other points they collided with the thinking of a group of Catholic economic liberals, headed by Charles Perin. Some of Perin's followers held that the poverty of the masses was necessary so that the rich could have the opportunity to practice the duty of charity.¹⁴ Bishop Mermillod chided this liberal school of thought, which thought the solution of the day was to be found in "an individual return to the virtues of Christianity and the foundation of philanthropic enterprises." Mermillod could be addressing us today when he said, "You have discovered in your theological sources that it is not enough to alleviate the misery of the poor by your gifts, but that you must go beyond charity to justice."¹⁵

2. *The just wage*

A second area of disagreement with the liberal school was on the crucial question of wages. The economic liberals saw work as a contract in which the worker rented out his or her time and was paid accordingly. The just wage was determined simply by the "freely-accepted" terms of

the contract. Nothing else was owed to the worker; other obligations of the owners toward the worker, such as security, coverage for work-related injuries, and pensions, flowed from the virtue of charity alone.

The Fribourg Union, through the writings of August Lehmkuhl, set forth basic principles on “work” and wages that shaped Catholic social thought on this question. First, work must not be seen only as a commodity, but as a personal act of the worker. Second, a just wage is determined by a double criteria, namely, a) the value of human work must prevail over discussions of wage contracts, and, b) the just wage is determined by the minimum necessary to maintain a family in ordinary circumstances.

3. State intervention

The Social Catholics believed that the intervention of the state was necessary only when the free contracts on wages were oppressive to the worker. In these circumstances public authorities must intervene to assure that the workers receive what is necessary for their subsistence. The state’s duties are to correct abuses and “to harmonize the activities of private enterprises with the common good while leaving the greatest possible freedom to private initiative.”¹⁶ The position of the Social Catholics allowed for greater state intervention than did the position of the economic liberals, but clearly less state intervention than socialists wanted. Pope Leo XIII accepted the Social Catholics’ position in its entirety.

4. Private property

On the question of private property the Fribourg Union again walked between the prevailing ideologies of the day, liberal capitalism and socialism. While they defended the right to own private property—against the socialists—they held that the right of private property was a limited right—which the liberals did not accept. The Social Catholics emphasized a prior right (“primordial right”), namely, the right of each person to subsist. This right to subsist limits and tempers the right of private property.

5. *"Corporatively organized society"*

As the Social Catholics analyzed the situation of their countries they saw a society that was no longer a living organism composed of social cells, each with its own specific role and responsibilities and guided by a distinct authority. They saw a lifeless mechanism, disorganized, lacking an inner harmony and held together solely by a coercive external power. Anonymity and impersonality had become the hallmarks of the economic domain.

Some of the "Social Catholics" wished to return to structures and institutions of precapitalist Europe, but most of them grudgingly accepted that the modern economic system was here to stay. They wished to restore the medieval spirit by proposing a corporative model, not the medieval structures.¹⁷

The corporative vision of the economy was an "organic" model in which people were to be organized according to their common interests and common social function. For example, in the domain of the arts and crafts workers would move through the three levels of apprentice, journeyman, and master with all three groups working in harmony at a common task. Together they formed a natural grouping, the local corporation. The corporation in this corporative view would try to

- promote a greater "esprit de corps" among its members,
- protect their professional honor,
- increase their material prosperity,
- guarantee the quality of their work,
- oversee the training of apprentices,
- confer certification on those who completed their training successfully,
- buy raw materials,
- establish steam or electric motors the workshops, and
- establish stores to sell its products.¹⁸

The corporative model was also applied to the factory setting. Here they used the metaphor of “family” to describe the relationships between workers and owners. A factory was a professional family focused on a common task in the same place, grouped around its leaders and having common interests. Here we see the desire to restore natural ties and relationships among those working at a common task. The thinkers of the Fribourg Union realized that separate groupings of owners and workers might be necessary in the current situation of antagonism, but this was to be an interim step on the way to a true corporation of uniting both parties into an organic whole.

Building on the “natural relationships and ties” within the factory, the local factory or “professional family” would then be linked with similar factories in the region through a regional council. Membership on this regional council would include representatives of owners and workers. The owners would preside over the council. One of the primary tasks of the council would be to establish, without state interference and with the workers’ full participation, the rules governing the profession. The regional council would also establish an endowment to provide for the needs of its members. This endowment would cover such areas as retirement, insurance, loans, schools, workers’ homes, and nursing homes. The endowment would come from membership dues, gifts, and a percentage of the profits. The assumption was that workers, and not just owners, should benefit from the profits of the industry. The Social Catholics created an attractive vision for industry, with collaboration between workers and owners. Unfortunately, it did not mesh well with the economic realities of the day.

The growth of the modern corporation in the nineteenth century was antithetical to the designs and vision of the corporative model. Through the selling of stocks, the modern corporation invests power in owners who are essentially unfamiliar with the industry. The anonymity of the stockholders destroys the personal dimension required in the corporative model. Louis Milcent, a member of the Fribourg Union from France, described the evil of the modern corporation: “...man falls under the yoke of an association which is irresponsible, soulless, without conscience, and without duties; he becomes the instrument of a fictitious

being formed by an accumulation of gold and silver, and which is consequently purely material."¹⁹

The natural ties of a "professional family" were impossible in such a power arrangement. The structure of ownership invested power in the anonymous stockholders. Ownership of the factory by distant stockholders made the relational ties of the "professional family" almost impossible. The corporative model of the Social Catholics was undercut before it could be tested.

SOCIAL CATHOLICS IN RETROSPECT

The Social Catholics believed that the free enterprise system, based on the notion of competition and strife, had transformed the natural human need to associate for the sake of the common good into a selfish search for power for the sake of individual gain. On this point they were generally on target. They traced the economic theory of self-interest to other powerful currents of thought including

- rationalistic philosophies that had eradicated God from society;
- Protestantism, which uprooted the traditional value of authority and had introduced individualism based on excessive freedom; and,
- political philosophies, such as the contract theory of society, which destroyed the basic unity of the medieval world.

As a result of these forces their society had lost its organic unity and was disorganized, anonymous, and impersonal. In their critique of European society they identified many of the forces pulling apart the medieval world. From their vantage point they saw primarily the harm that was being done to society by the forces of individualism and secularization. They did not emphasize the positive contributions of modern thinking, which included granting freedom and dignity to the individual, according respect for dissenting and minority views, and lessening church control over political and social life.

IMPACT OF THE FRIBOURG UNION

These Social Catholics and their Fribourg Union had a clear influence on Pope Leo XIII. As we have already noted above, a number of their

positions were adopted by the pope in his encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. In fact, Pope Leo was regularly briefed on the results of the yearly meetings. Bishop Mermillod and several members of the Union met with the pope in 1888, at which time he asked for a copy of all of their work. One of the reasons for the demise of the Fribourg Union was the publication of *Rerum Novarum*, which was seen as a basic confirmation of their positions. Their mission had been accomplished.

The Social Catholics also left a living heritage in the various countries where they were active. This was an emerging tradition of lay and ordained leaders, academic and practical types, that was to continue into the next generation.

Normand Paulhus concludes that “the legacy of the Fribourg Union remains a mixed one.” He notes three limitations of its legacy.

- First, their “concrete proposals proved inadequate in the face of the vast changes taking place in industrial society.”
- Second, “fascism’s use of the organic metaphor to defend totalitarianism further discredited the Social Catholics’ efforts to erect a “corporative system.”” and;
- Third, “at times elements of modern liberalism clouded their understanding of Thomas’ political theory.”²⁰

These limitations are understandable. Like all human beings, the Social Catholics were biased and limited in their understanding. We certainly cannot hold them responsible for how their organic thinking was distorted into supporting fascism forty years later. Despite these limitations, the Fribourg Union has “preserved vital elements of the traditional Christian vision of a good society:

- the social purpose of property;
- the positive but limited role of the state;
- the centrality of justice;
- the primacy of duties over rights,
- the principle of subsidiarity, and most importantly;

- the crucial role of the common good as the unifying force of the political community."²¹

In looking at the Social Catholics, we should also remember that the church was not the first institution to respond to the situation of the workers. The first formal movements for social reform came not from the church but from secular sources that often had an irreligious and even anti-religious character. Both Catholic and Protestant churches had been slow in responding. For decades the Catholic and Protestant churches remained inactive, with near-disastrous consequences.

We also need to remember that the "Social Catholics" were not necessarily representative of the Catholic Church in Europe as a whole. According to the French historian R. Aubert, "The majority of Catholics and the ecclesiastical authorities, till the end of the century, refused to recognize the necessity of the 'reforms of the structure' and considered it very dangerous that the revolutionary forces tried to institutionally modify the workers' conditions."²² The Catholic Church in the nineteenth century resisted the advances of the French Revolution of 1789 and its Declaration of the Rights of Man. The popes viewed with disapproval the struggles for independence in Latin America. "Certain Catholic circles were haunted by nostalgia for the past.... They believed monarchy to be divinely ordained and continued to proclaim the alliance of throne and altar down to the end of the 19th century."²³

Social Catholics and economic liberal Catholics in Europe did not agree on how the church's social ethic should be developed in the face of vast social problems and economic unrest. For the conservative Catholics the pope's encyclical was a shock, in that Pope Leo accepted most of the Social Catholics' perspectives.

A number of the Social Catholics' attitudes are not attractive to us today. They were clearly aristocratic and paternalistic as they sought to assist the workers of their time. They also were suspicious of Protestant traditions. They believed that Protestantism uprooted the traditional value of authority and had introduced a rampant individualism based on excessive freedom. This overly individualistic concept of humanity was one of the sources of the society's social ills. Today many social thinkers would agree with the Social Catholics' analysis of the dangers of indi-

vidualism as a force eroding our social ethic.²⁴ The responsibility for excessive individualism, however, can no longer be identified with Protestant thinking, because individualism has become a cultural hallmark for Euro-American cultures.

While recognizing that the Social Catholics' paternalism and unecumenical attitudes do not speak to American Catholics today, there is still much in their vision of society that can challenge and awaken us. Many of the questions they wrestled with and resolved in their day are still pertinent for us. Their debates with the economic liberals on questions of private property, the role of the state in the economy, the nature of human work, the necessity of going beyond charity and calling for structural reform—these are all lively issues for our times as well. We can gain insight and perhaps fortitude from dipping into this part of our tradition. They confronted the social issues of their day with the resources of their faith, hard work and long meetings, creativity and dialogue. Those are timeless qualities that would serve us well as we face enormously complex social, political, and economic issues.

AMERICAN CALLS FOR AN ENCYCLICAL

The impact of the Fribourg Union on the writing of *Rerum Novarum* is well established. But the American church also played an important role in shaping the focus and tone of the encyclical. As we shall see in the next chapter, Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore was very influential in urging the pope to speak out on behalf of workers. In 1887 he traveled to Rome to urge the pope not to condemn the Knights of Labor, the first American labor union. Gibbons also urged the pope not to condemn the works of Henry George of New York, who as a mayoral candidate urged a single tax on the unearned increment of the value of property as a solution to the nation's social problems. Gibbons argued that, instead of condemnations, the pope should issue an encyclical to address the respective rights and obligations of both capital and labor.²⁵

While workers in the United States were experiencing the same harsh social conditions caused by the Industrial Revolution as were the workers in Western Europe, there was one major difference: the workers in the United States generally remained loyal to the church. The success of the

Catholic church in the United States in maintaining the loyalty of the working class was "the major influence on Leo's decision to issue an encyclical."²⁶ While the Europeans were a powerful theoretical influence in shaping the letter, the Americans' practical success was a very important, practical, and positive influence.

From 1887 to 1891, the historian Aaron Abell notes, Leo was

constantly importuned to elaborate an authoritative statement of principles underlying social thought and action. Beset with controversy involving labor and land issues, American bishops called upon the Holy See for theoretical guidance.É In the hope of putting an end to rifts among American as well as European Catholics, the Pope carefully formulated a social justice program, giving to the world in May 1891 the *Rerum novarum*, a masterly encyclical on the condition of labor.²⁷

Part II.

Rerum Novarum

The future Pope Leo XIII, Vincenzo Gioacchino (Vincent Joachim) Pecci, was born on March 2, 1810, in Carpineto, a small town south of Rome. After his studies at the Roman College (later known as the Gregorian University) he joined the papal service. At this time the Papal States were still under papal control. Father Pecci served as the governor of two Italian regions, Benevento and Perugia, before he was sent as the papal nuncio to Belgium in 1843. During his work as nuncio he made trips to London, Cologne, and Paris, where he came into contact with a more advanced industrialization than in Italy. He also encountered constitutional government. These experiences helped him to be less defensive to modern constitutional democracy than his predecessor, Pius IX. On February 20, 1878, ten days before his 68th birthday, he was elected pope.²⁸

FACTORS LEADING TO WRITING *RERUM NOVARUM*

As papal nuncio in Brussels and then as archbishop of Perugia, the

future Pope Leo was confronted with the impact of industrial capitalism on the working class. Before his election to the papacy he was familiar with the writings of Archbishop Ketteler. Pope Leo also met with representatives of the Fribourg Union and reviewed their deliberations. Cardinal Gibbons and other American bishops requested his help in addressing the morality of land and labor issues. Other events also played a role in his decision to address the "social question," including:

- contact with the workers on pilgrimage led by the reforming industrialist, Leon Harmel, who brought ten thousand workers to Rome in 1888;
- the public support of Cardinal Manning of London for the striking dockworkers in 1889; and
- the increasingly bitter disagreements between those who argued for some degree of state intervention in economic matters, as espoused by the Fribourg Union, and those who argued to let the market forces be free of government intervention.²⁹

The pope had a mixture of motivations that led him to promulgate this letter. His first motivation was theological and moral, namely, that the church as the institution of moral guidance must be part of the solution. The second motivation was a pastoral one. He feared that the church would continue to "lose" the working class to atheistic socialist movements. This, he believed, would put in peril the very salvation of their souls. His third motivation was ecclesial, in that he did not want to see the position of the Catholic church in society weakened any further. Pope Leo did not want the church to be isolated from the lives of the working class, so he confronted the political movements that were eroding the workers' loyalty to the church.

THE MESSAGE OF *RERUM NOVARUM*

Encouraged by the Fribourg Union, Cardinal Gibbons, and the other factors mentioned above, Pope Leo XIII initiated the process of writing an encyclical on "the condition of the worker." The encyclical went through three drafts. The first draft was written by a member of the Roman Curia, Cardinal Tommasso Zigliara, O.P.³⁰ The final draft was the

work of Cardinal Camillo Mazzella, the former dean of Woodstock College in Maryland.

Mazzella inserted passages more strongly emphasizing the right to private property than earlier versions, probably at the bidding of Archbishop Michael A. Corrigan of New York, who wanted his own position strengthened against the suspected socialism of one of his priests, Edward McGlynn, who had been excommunicated in 1887, in part for his support of Henry George and who, incidentally, was reconciled to the church by [the apostolic delegate Francesco] Satolli on the basis of *Rerum novarum*.³¹

Amid all the controversy on the role of labor unions, the popularity of the socialist movement, and the question of whether capitalism was inherently evil, Pope Leo offered his statement on the condition of the worker. He presupposed two realities.

The first reality was that capitalism was here to stay and must be dealt with. There is no turning the clock back to the "good old days," as some romantic Europeans, like Karl von Vogelsang and his followers, hoped for. Historian David O'Brien and theologian Thomas Shannon capture his point succinctly:

Leo attempted to divert Catholics from a catastrophic stance of an almost utopian vision, which held out for the restoration of medieval guilds and associations at a time when the power and success of capitalism were at their height. Rather, he attempted to nudge Catholics throughout Europe to join with the workers in seeking to alleviate their plight through organized action and social legislation, reforms which required some temporary accommodation to modern society.³²

Second, Pope Leo assumed that for the majority of people, especially the poor, life was a hard, arduous struggle. Even with the most strenuous efforts one cannot wring from nature much more than the barest necessities of life. For Leo, "a hard and even oppressive way of life for the laborer seemed irremovable. The question, therefore, can only be how to

avoid unnecessary hardships...[and] violations of the laborer's human dignity and rights....³³

CENTRAL THEMES

1. *Suffering of workers*

Pope Leo calls attention to the misery and poverty suffered by the workers. While the socialists had been condemning the suffering of the working class for years, the pope finally confronted the church with the reality of the suffering of the masses while others accumulated wealth. By speaking out for the workers he continued the ministry of Bishops Von Ketteler and Mermillod, who had decried these abuses of the workers forty years earlier.

2. *Property for workers*

Leo condemns the socialist solution to the poverty of the workers, which included the denial of the natural right of private property. He maintains that the solution to the misery of the workers is to enable each person to procure the necessary property to provide for one's needs and dignity so that one would not have to be "wage-dependent."

3. *Role of the state*

Whenever the general interest or any particular class suffers or is threatened with a harm that can in no other way be met or prevented, the public authority must step in to deal with it. Here, the pope walked between the capitalist and socialist theories of state intervention, the former having a minimalist, the latter a maximalist approach. He also sided with those who believed that the social problem could not be solved by Christian charity but needed state intervention and reform of institutions.

4. *Living wage*

In justice the worker who contributes to the wealth of the society by his or her labor is entitled to receive a wage that "will enable him, housed, clothed, and secure, to live a life without hardship." While later docu-

ments would take up this question in more detail, the basic right is established in this encyclical: the wage is seen as the only way the worker can preserve his or her life, which is a "duty common to all individuals."³⁴

5. Right to organize

Leo teaches that workers have a natural right to organize into associations to advance their interests, and that the state must protect that right.³⁵ Because Leo is addressing a Catholic audience and his political theory insinuates that all citizens are Catholic, some controversy emerged as to whether Catholics could join secular unions. These issues were cleared up later, because of the "regrettable lack" of *Rerum Novarum* on this point.³⁶

6. Collaboration rather than class struggle

The pope uses notions of "mutual dependence," friendliness, and neighborliness rather than class struggle. This is in keeping with his organic and harmonious social theory.

7. Role of the church

In that anticlerical era, the pope defends the right of the church to speak on social issues. At times, he exaggerates the church's role. The constructive role of the church is to both educate citizens to act justly and promote social reconciliation.

These seven themes identify the major contributions and strengths of the encyclical. In general the pope brought the church into constructive engagement with the "condition of the worker" of his day. With the benefit of historical perspective we can also identify a few areas that were not adequately addressed in the letter.

CRITICAL REMARKS

This papal letter, like any letter, is addressed to specific communities at a specific time in history. *Rerum Novarum* is very much a product of its times. It reflects the debates and controversies, the strengths and limitations of its times and of the people who wrote it. From the vantage point of history we see some of its limitations. We need to see these limita-

tions, not to be negative about Pope Leo's contribution but to show that the church's social teaching is a dynamic, living tradition that is constantly developing in areas that were ignored or inadequately handled in the past.

1. *No positive statement on the meaning of work*

Because Leo was confronting the socialists and their theory of social change, the encyclical took on a reactionary tone. Rather than presenting a positive statement about the meaning of human labor, its dignity and value for the individual and for society—all of which were being violated in the abuses of laissez-faire capitalism—the encyclical took on a defensive tone against socialism and its proposed remedy for society. A positive treatment of the meaning of labor was addressed in later papal teachings, especially Pope John Paul II's *Laborem Exercens*.

2. *A distorted view of private property*

Leo felt that the socialists were a menace to the right ordering of society because they attacked the right of private property, which he held was a prerogative sanctioned by the natural law. "...[T]he human race as a whole, moved in no wise by the dissenting opinion of a few [the socialists], and observing nature carefully, has found in the law of nature itself the basis of the distribution of goods, and, by the practice of the ages, has consecrated private possession as something best adapted to man's nature and to the peaceful and tranquil living together." A few paragraphs later we find: "Let it be regarded, therefore, as established that in seeking help for the masses this principle before all is to be considered basic, namely, that *private ownership must be preserved inviolate*" (par. 24).

It is generally agreed by commentators that Leo's treatment of private property was a distortion of the Thomistic tradition. Father Leo de Sousberghe has pointed out that neither Aquinas nor the other medieval theologians viewed private property as a primary right of the natural law; rather private property was a necessity because of imperfect human nature. In the Thomistic tradition private property is a derived right, not a primary right as Leo taught.

The distortion in *Rerum Novarum* can be traced to the Jesuit theologian Taparelli d'Azeglio, who in 1840 incorporated the thinking of John Locke

into the scholastic tradition. Locke had argued that the very act of labor was truly the singular possession of the worker. When a person labored, the fruit of that labor became uniquely his or her own because it came forth from the worker's toil. For another to come and confiscate this "property" was a violation of natural justice, for the laborer was being robbed of the fruits of his or her own labor. In such a case the laborer is being deprived of part of himself or herself.³⁷ Property that had been earned by labor, in Locke's view, was an extension of the worker. To deny the right of property is to deny the rights of the individual worker. In this view property loses the social context and meaning that the Catholic tradition had always maintained.

The distorted teaching was cleared up in 1931 by Pope Pius XI's encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* and other subsequent encyclicals. For example, *Mater et Magistra* of Pope John XXIII teaches that the common good and the needs of people takes priority over any right to private property.

3. "Arrogant" role for the church

Pope Leo, as a teacher of the natural law, maintained that the Roman Catholic Church *alone* could solve social problems. This "alone" had two meanings: 1) that no one else but the church could do it; or 2) that only with the church would a solution be possible; without the contribution of the church no adequate solution would be found.

The first position is "exceedingly arrogant" according to Father Oswald von Nell-Bruening.³⁸ While Leo's tone was not as defensive as that of his predecessor, Pius IX, this attitude does not completely disappear until the Second Vatican Council. Even the second interpretation—that without the Catholic church no solution can be found—is "claiming too much," according to Nell-Bruening.

The Catholic church believed that its role in addressing the "condition of the worker" was essential because it believed that the disorder in society is at root a moral and religious issue. In paragraph 41 we read, "Wherefore, if human society is to be healed, only a return to Christian life and institutions will heal it." Two years later Leo would write in *Graves de Communi*:

For it is the opinion of some, which is caught up by the masses, that the social question, as they call it, is merely economic. The precise opposite is the truth. It is first of all moral and religious, and for that reason *its solution is to be expected mainly from the moral law and the pronouncements of religion.*³⁹

TOO BOLD OR TOO TIMID?

As with most ecclesiastical texts, what you see in *Rerum Novarum* depends on where you are standing. In other words, *Rerum Novarum* is open to a variety of interpretations.⁴⁰ It can be read as pro-labor and anti-laissez-faire capitalism, and it can be read as anti-socialism and pro-private property. To those who longed for the medieval, pre-capitalist social order this encyclical came as a “bolt of lightning” moving the church into dialogue with the reality of the new economic system. Whereas some Catholic thinkers doubted whether the new economic system of capitalism was permissible, Leo accepted capitalism as part of the reality of his day and set about to tame its immoral aspects.

Leo’s acceptance of capitalism can be labeled both “realistic” and implicitly pro-capitalism. This pro-capitalist stance was more the product of being vehemently anti-socialist.

For the conservatives of his day Leo stood out as breaking with the “traditionalist” mentality. Prior to Leo becoming pope in 1878, the official church leadership had been waging a war against the “modern liberties” of the French Revolution. The entire Catholic church had been profoundly shaken by the anticlerical reforms that followed that revolution.⁴¹ The anticlericalism of revolutionary France was temporarily checked during the reign of Napoleon and was almost eliminated in the reaction that followed Napoleon’s downfall in 1815. But the liberal, anti-church party kept alive the ideals of the Revolution and gradually returned to power and influence. In order to establish the “modern liberties” of freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of religion, the liberal party wanted to create a social and political order in which the Christian churches would have no special privileges and no temporal power. Many liberals wanted to eliminate the influence of the Catholic church completely because they believed it to be incompatible

with reason and with social and political progress.⁴²

These anticlerical sentiments were translated into severe restrictions of the Catholic church. In the last half of the nineteenth century the governments of Italy, Spain, Belgium, Austria, France, and Germany closed Catholic schools, dissolved monastic orders, deprived clergy of their privileges, and confiscated church property. Mexico, after its break from Spain, enacted some of the most severe anticlerical measures.

When Leo's predecessor, Pius IX, died in 1878, "the Church and its leadership in Rome seemed to be at war against almost every feature of the modern era. Many enemies of the Church confidently predicted that the [Catholic] Church would be destroyed in their life-times."⁴³ Pope Leo stepped into this conflictual situation. To many it appeared as though the church was fighting for its very survival. The Roman Catholic church was losing its influence in the social, political, and intellectual realms. The Vatican was also literally "losing ground" as it lost most of the papal states in 1860. By 1870 the church's geo-political territory had been reduced to the tiny Vatican city state.

In this "era of negation" the Catholic church fought back by condemning those within the church, both in Europe and in America, who wanted reconciliation with the liberal movements. Pope Pius IX "seemed especially to fear that the spread of liberalism within the Church might lead to a democratization of Church authority itself."⁴⁴

Pius IX gave repeated encouragement to the reactionaries who wished to reverse the trend of the liberal states. In his 1864 encyclical *Quanta Cura* and the accompanying "Syllabus of Errors," Pius detailed the "errors" of modern civilization including almost all of the basic principles of modern liberal democracies. His "Syllabus of Errors" concluded with the harsh dictum: "If anyone thinks that the Roman Pontiff can and should reconcile himself and come to terms with progress, with liberalism, and with modern civilization, let him be anathema."⁴⁵

Against such a negative and defensive backdrop, Leo appears as a reformer, as one who begins to open the church to modern realities. But, if you stand with the radicals of his day, the socialists, the pope appears very traditional. Whereas Pius IX battled the liberals, Leo's prime enemy was the socialists, who denied the right of private property.⁴⁶

For those who were more radical in their social vision, *Rerum Novarum* was too conservative and paternalistic. John Coleman, a Jesuit social ethicist, notes that most of those who influenced the writing of *Rerum Novarum* were counts, marquis, princes, or members of the aristocracy. He asks, "Was it by chance...that no militant union organizer had any impact on the document?"⁴⁷

I would temper Coleman's remark by suggesting that while activists did not have a direct impact on the document they did have an indirect influence on the tone and content of the encyclical. The controversy over Father McGlynn and the controversy around the Knights of Labor, which are discussed in the next chapter, shaped the thinking of progressive bishops whose intervention in Rome did not go unheeded.

LASTING CONTRIBUTION OF RERUM NOVARUM

Rerum Novarum was and is read from widely divergent perspectives, and while we will see diverse reactions to the letter, all can agree that the publication of this encyclical has had a lasting impact on the church and on the world.

First of all, this letter is the beginning of the official church taking a *less defensive stance* toward modern political thought and the reality of capitalist economies. Leo was not going to continue the reactionary stance of his predecessors. He had seen the negative impact of such attempts to turn back the clock in the mass defection of the French and Italian working classes.

Second, in a very practical way he *legitimated trade unions*. They could no longer be dismissed as revolutionary or socialist. The letter allowed and even encouraged working-class Catholics to join independent trade unions and to work with secular organizations on social reform. The dark cloud hovering over the labor movement was dispersed.

Third, he supported the emerging social conscience of Roman Catholics and offered a fairly coherent *body of moral and social teachings to guide social activism*. These teachings would be developed and adapted by succeeding generations of lay and clerical leaders. A modern legacy of social teachings had begun.

Fourth, with this letter Leo was the first pope to articulate a genuine

recognition of the suffering of the poor and the working class. Under Pope Leo's leadership the papacy began to break away from its allegiance to the aristocracy. This direction would continue until the bishops of Latin America would endorse a "preferential option for the poor" in 1968.

Leo recognized the wisdom of Cardinal Gibbons' words, "To lose the heart of the people would be a misfortune for which the friendship of the few rich and powerful would be no compensation."⁴⁸

Social ethicist Stephen Pope named this shift very effectively:

Social Catholicism had flourished in the 19th century, while the highest echelon of the church was recruited from the aristocracy and identified with the forces of reaction, inherited privilege, and the ancien regime. Leo was the first pope to show some grasp of the intolerable suffering of the urban proletariat and to act on this by making the natural rights of the worker official church doctrine. *Rerum novarum* provided a doctrinal challenge to the apathy and indifference of middle-class and affluent Catholics, including the clergy, in the face of the widespread misery of the working classes. In issuing this document Leo displayed a degree of human sensitivity, courage, and social imagination absent not only in his 19th-century predecessors but unfortunately also in his immediate successor, Pius X (1903-14), as well.⁴⁹

Finally, the legacy of Leo can be seen in his clear conviction that *human labor cannot be treated simply as a commodity*, because to do so would be a denial of the human dignity of the worker. The pope taught that it was shameful and inhuman to treat people as though they were objects. It was shocking for some and inspiring to others when the pope used this teaching to defend underpaid workers.⁵⁰ This message has been repeated again and again in Catholic social thought especially in Pope John Paul II's encyclical on labor, *Laborem Exercens*, and in the U. S. bishops' pastoral letter on the economy, *Economic Justice for All*.