

**ON THE 105TH ANNIVERSARY OF
RERUM NOVARUM (THE CONDITION OF LABOR)**

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“They should take clear positions whenever human dignity is attacked by any form of oppression or indifference.” (Art. 22.2, SFO Constitutions)

It seems like each one of us at sometime in our life becomes Socially Active. For some it is a flash that just dies away. Then there are others who seem to continue to burn year after year. As for myself, this Social Action has been a continuous action. My life has been interesting enough that it has provided me with opportunities on many levels and in many directions.

Marching with placards has never been my way of doing things. Spending time on a picket line is somewhat different. Over the years my approach has become that of passive resistance or better yet passive dynamics. Others can carry the signs.

My roots go back in many directions and also a number of years but the turning point which set my course has been twofold. First, becoming a Secular Franciscan and second, the social encyclicals. Both date back about 40 years.

A few years ago a priest who wrote a column for Catholic publications visited a seminary with some other priests to talk to seminarians soon to become priests. During the course of the visit some of the priests-to-be stated they wished to become involved in some social action. This prompted the visiting priests to ask if any of them had read any social encyclicals or pastoral letters. The concerned priests-to-be all said no. We can ask how can a priest effectively become involved in social justice without any knowledge of what the church teaches. Indeed how can any of us be effectively involved in social justice if we do not know what the church teaches.

My first encyclical was Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* or *The Condition of Labor* (an encyclical is a letter from the Pope to the Bishops etc.) This letter was written about 105 years ago but is still quite valid today. Pope John Paul II's letter celebrating the "Hundredth Anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*" states that certain objectives of *Rerum Novarum* still remain valid and in some cases are goals yet to be met (no. 34). While John Paul II refers to Third World countries, it would take very little looking to see some of the goals yet to be met here in the U.S.A.

If someone is looking for a copy of *Rerum Novarum*, I would suggest getting one of the older/earlier translations. Some of the "newer" translations are more "politically correct." The older translations present the flavor and temper of the times in which they were written.

Leo XIII's letter was not the first ever written on the idea of social justice. What Leo did in *Rerum Novarum* was to place the church very firmly in the center of the moral issues involved, especially about workers. His was a time of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. The oppression placed on the masses was such that a solution needed to be found. Socialism was becoming a force and communism was about to show itself. Leo XIII stated one of his first concerns was to save workers from grasping speculators who use workers as mere instruments for making money (#33). Also that the masses were treated as chattel (#16); property, tangible moveable property. Socialism, Liberalism, Communism, etc. were looking for solutions. Into this mess Leo XIII stepped, to the very center, and proclaimed the Church to have not only an interest in the problem but also the correct solution. Now that takes intestinal fortitude or was it the Holy Spirit.

The benchmark set up by Leo XIII and the wellspring of subsequent social writings was the "dignity of the human person." Pope John Paul II in his 100th Anniversary letter calls it the "transcendent dignity of the human person." We are all created in the image and likeness of God, that is all people of all times.

How do we read the encyclicals and pastorals? First let's say how not to read them:

1. *they are not an exercise in speed reading*
2. *they are not to be just read*
3. *once is not enough*

Next how to:

1. *have a Bible and a dictionary at hand*
2. *they are to be studied*
3. *they have been written for the universal church*
4. *for the first time reader*
 - a. *use them for spiritual reading*
 - b. *meditate on them*
 - c. *check out the scriptural references*

So it takes three months to cover this letter of Leo XIII. Time is not the important issue here but rather that of having a good understanding of what the Pope is saying on the subject.

The transcendent dignity of the human person should be your Bench Mark and wellspring for your social action. This worked for Francis and it should work for us.