

THE CONDITION OF LABOR
Excerpts from the Encyclical by
Pope Leo XIII
May 15, 1891

Following Our custom on other occasions when We issued Encyclicals on Political Power, Human Liberty, Christian Constitution of States and others we now wish to refute erroneous opinions on the Condition of Workers. We have touched on this before, however, the consciousness of our Apostolic office admonishes Us to treat the entire question thoroughly. It is hard indeed to fix the rights and duties of the rich and poor, those who furnish things and those who furnish work.

The old guilds were destroyed in the last century and no protection was substituted. Public institutions and legislation cast off traditional religious teaching and handed workers, alone and defenseless, to inhuman employers, unbridled greed, usury, avaricious and grasping men. Trade of every kind of goods are entirely under the power of a few very rich men who have laid a yoke almost like slavery on their workers.

A Worker places his energy and labor at the disposal of another. In return for his work he has a full right to demand a just wage but also to dispose of it as he sees fit. By restricting his expenditures and investing his savings in a piece of land, this land which he thus purchases is under his control as much as are his wages. The Socialists would transfer the goods of private persons, rich and poor, to the community at large to be administered by the State. This would abolish the wage earner's freedom to dispose of his wages for his own advantage. The Socialist proposal to cure this evil is in open conflict with justice because nature confers on man the right to possess things privately as his own.

There is a wide difference between man and other living things: beasts are ruled and governed by two instincts of self-protection and the preservation of the species. Only man has reason and by his reason understands many things linking and combining the future with the present. He is master of his own actions and rules himself by the foresight of his own counsel. Man has the power to choose things to benefit himself in the present and the future. His dominion is not only over the fruits of the earth but the earth itself.

There is no reason to interpose provisions by the State, for man is older than the State. He had to possess by nature his own right to protect his life and body before the formation of any State.

The earth being apportioned among private owners does not cease to serve the common interest of all. All living beings are sustained by what the earth brings forth. The earth produces great abundance but of itself it could not produce them without human cultivation. Limits of private ownership are to be fixed by man's industry and institutions of the people. Those who lack resources supply labor. The scheme of livelihood consists in labor on one's

own land or by some working occupation, the compensation for which is ultimately from the varied products of the earth or is exchanged for them. The fruits of labor belong to those who have labored.

Civil law, when just, derives its power from natural law. The same rights have been sanctioned by divine law: "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his house, nor his field nor his maid-servant, nor his ox, nor his ass nor anything that is his" (Deut. 5:21). The natural and primeval right of marriage cannot be abolished by any law of man. The society of the household is older than any state and has its own rights and duties independent of the State. The right of ownership the individual person has by nature must be assigned to man in his capacity as head of a family.

No satisfactory solution will be found unless religion and the church are called upon to aid. The attention of others are required, namely, heads of State, employers, the rich and the workers. First, human existence must be borne with. In civil society the lowest cannot be made equal with the highest and struggling against human nature is vain.

Before the Fall, man was not destined to be idle but to freely embrace labor to his soul's delight. After the Fall he was forced to accept labor with a feeling of irksomeness and for the expiation of his guilt. To suffer and endure is human. One class is not by nature hostile to others as if nature has set rich and poor at war against each other. The different members of the human body are in harmony with each other. The disposition of part and proportion in the body is called symmetry. Capital cannot do without labor nor labor do without capital.

The Church brings together the rich and poor by recalling their mutual duties; duties derived from justice. The church reminds us that however good and desirable mortal life may be it is not the ultimate goal for which we are born. All men are equal and there is no difference between rich and poor, master and servant, ruler or subject: "For there is the same Lord of all" (Rom 10:12). No one may outrage that human dignity without impunity which God Himself treats with great reverence, nor stand in the way of that higher life which is the eternal life in Heaven.

It is the duty of the public authority to prevent and punish injury and to protect each one's possessions. When the question of protecting the rights of individuals, the poor and helpless have a claim to special consideration. The richer population have many ways of protecting themselves and have less need for help from the state. The chief safeguarding, by legal enactment and policy, is that of private property, the property of both rich and poor.

Associations of workers and employers or workers are to be encouraged. They are to increase prosperity of both families and individual and the just regulation of the mutual obligations of workers and employers. They should also encourage the duty and observance of the Gospel precepts. These associations in whatever form they take are to encourage just wages, working conditions, care of widows, orphans, hours of work relative to difficulties of weather, strength of workers, women or children, based on principles of Christian living as found in the Gospels.

For Discussion

Where do you find violations of human dignity in your town or city today?

What can I do to right this wrong?

PAX ET BONUM

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