

RECONSTRUCTING THE SOCIAL ORDER
Excerpts from an encyclical by
Pope Pius XI
May, 1931

Reconstructing the Social Order and perfecting it conformably to the Precepts of the Gospel, in commemoration of the Fortieth Anniversary of the Encyclical “Rerum Novarum”, the Catholic world recalls the event and prepares to celebrate it befittingly. We deem it opportune, first, to recall the great benefits which Rerum Novarum brought to the Church and the world at large; second, to vindicate a master against certain doubts which have arisen; last to expose the root of the present social disorder, and to point out the cure, a Christian reform of morals.

I. Under the guidance and light of Pope Leo’s letter there has evolved a truly Christian social science. The doctrine of Rerum Novarum began to penetrate outside Catholic unity and thus Catholic principles of sociology became part of the intellectual heritage of the human race. Thus we find Catholic truths advanced in non-Catholic books, journals, legislative assemblies and courts of law. The letter has encouraged Christian workingmen to form unions, how to form them and help members better themselves in body, soul and property. With non- Christian trade unions there needs to be formed, side by side, associations which aim at giving members thorough religious and moral training. Leo’s Encyclical has proved itself to be the Magna Carta on which all Christian social activities are ultimately based.

II. It is Our right and Our duty to deal authoritatively with social and economic problems. It is not for the Church to lead men to transient and perishable happiness but to that which is eternal. It would be wrong for the Church to interfere without just cause in earthly concerns. The Church has no authority in technical matters where she has neither the equipment or mission. She can never relinquish her God-given task of interposing her authority in all that has a bearing on moral conduct.

Now to details, the right of property. Leo XIII defended the rights of property against the teaching of the Socialists of his time. Also some have accused Leo, unjustly, of upholding the wealthier class against the working class. Also, some controversy has arisen among Catholics as to the true sense of Pope Leo’s teaching. Ownership has a twofold aspect - individual and social; or individual and common good. If the social and public aspect of ownership is denied or minimized the consequence is “individualism”. The rejection or diminution of its private and individual character leads to some form of “collectivism”. To disregard these two dangers would lead to “modernism”. The right of property must be distinguished from its use. To define in detail these duties is the function of government, provided that natural and divine law be observed. The right of ownership is not absolutely rigid; however, the State may not discharge this duty in an arbitrary manner. Pope Leo wrote: “Capital cannot do without Labor, nor Labor without Capital”. It is therefore false to ascribe the results of their combined efforts to either party alone, it is unjust for either to deny the

efficacy of the other and seize all the profits. It is also false that all accumulation of riches belongs to the wealthy.

III. Since the time of Leo XIII, changes have taken place in both economic conditions and in Socialism. Leo XIII stated that Capital needs Labor and Labor needs Capital. This system itself is not to be condemned, it is not vicious by nature but it violates right order whenever capital employs working classes to divert business and economic activity to its own arbitrary will and advantage. The accumulation of immense wealth and power and despotic economic domination concentrated in the hands of a few, who frequently are not the owner, but only the trustees and directors of invested funds and administer them at their good pleasure. There is the struggle for dictatorship in the economic sphere and the battle to acquire control of the state. Free competition is dead; economic dictatorship has taken its place. The State which should be the supreme arbiter, above party contention, has become instead a slave, bound over to the service of human passion and greed. The mutual relations between Capital and Labor must be determined by laws of the strictest justice supported by Christian charity.

Socialism too has undergone changes. At the time of Leo XIII, Socialism could be termed a single system. Now it is divided into two hostile camps, both are still opposed to Christian faith. The more violent camp being Communism which teaches merciless class warfare and abolition of private ownership. The more moderate camp retains the name Socialism but has become less radical. If Socialism really remains Socialism, it conceives human society in a way utterly alien to Christian truth. Like all errors, Socialism contains elements of truth (never denied by the Pontiffs). "Religious Socialism" or "Christian Socialism" are contradictions in terms. "No one can be at the same time a sincere Catholic and a true Socialist". Catholic deserters to Socialism are invited to return.

Men are affected by temporal upheavals, disasters and ruins but what are they in comparison to the ruin of souls? Present day social and economic conditions are such that it is only with great difficulty that men can pay attention to the only thing necessary, that is their eternal salvation. The cause of this defection is the disorderly affection of the soul, a consequence of original sin. Original sin has so deranged us we are easily led astray by low desires and prefer transient goods to the goods of Heaven. Hence the unquenchable thirst for riches and temporal possessions which impel men to break the law of God and trample the rights of neighbors. Present economic conditions lay more snares for human frailty. Where business leaders abandoned the true path, workers sank into the same morass because the workers were treated as mere tools with no concern for the welfare of their soul. Bodily labor decreed by Providence for the good of man's body and soul even after original sin has been changed into instruments of strange perversion; dead matter leaves the factory ennobled and transformed, where men are corrupted and degraded.

The remedy is frank and sincere return to the teaching of the Gospel.

For Discussion

What new forms of economic perversion do you see today?

Are there any new forms of Socialism today?
Are there any new forms of Communism today?

PAX ET BONUM

Terry McCarthy, Sr., SFO