



Catholicism's Developing Social Teaching

Robert A. Sirico

ACTON
INSTITUTE

Preface

Leo XIII was one of the great popes of the modern era. He won for the papacy renewed international authority after a long period of declining prestige. Like his predecessors, he attacked socialism, communism, nihilism, and freemasonry, but not simply in a manner that was intellectually and politically reactive. Rather, Leo's opposition to these forces led him to develop a program of qualified accommodation with the modern world. This program defined the different spheres of temporal and spiritual power, gave qualified approval to democracy, and put forward the claim that the Church is not an opponent but, rather, the true custodian of liberty, properly understood.

A centerpiece in this program is the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, published in May 1891. It was only one of eighty-six encyclicals—and one of twelve on social questions—that Leo wrote over the course of his unexpectedly long pontificate (1878–1903), and he did not commence work on it until he was eighty years old. It is an indication of just how important and influential *Rerum Novarum* has been that, on rereading it today, one is struck by how much of it is so mellow, reasonable, and eminently acceptable. Its arguments for a just wage, appropriate State intervention to ensure humane working conditions, widespread private ownership of property and productive means, the legitimacy of unions and the importance of the rights of the individual and the family, appear almost as commonplaces, indicating that Leo's thinking has now become foundational in Catholic social thought.

As Father Sirico points out, in all of this Leo was not offering specific public policy prescriptions but setting out “some guiding moral principles from which to develop a humane society.” In particular, Leo was concerned to provide a deeper concept of the common good than either socialism or capitalism was able to offer, one based on a sound anthropological understanding of the nature of man, the conditions of human flourishing, and the intersection of our eternal destiny with our daily lives.

This is typical of Catholic social teaching as a whole. The social doctrine of the Church appeals fundamentally to individual responsibility and conscience rather than to any recipe for social engineering. It regards the problem as one of principles from which might follow a plurality of prudential applications. This is a theory centered on human beings and their dignity rather than on schemes and institutions. Church leaders should work for an acceptance of the basic Christian moral principles, urge serious consideration of the Catholic tradition of social morality, and encourage Catholic lay people, whose special province is the world, to work toward improving the human situation. This makes a political and economic pluralism among Catholics as desirable as it is inevitable.

The social teaching of the Church does not impose an economic or political straitjacket on its members, nor, as Pope John Paul II made clear in the encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), does it constitute an alternative ideology to liberal capitalism and Marxist collectivism: “a third way.” It is an aspect of moral theology, which, as John Paul II explained in the *Motu Proprio* establishing the Pontifical Academy of the Social Sciences in 1994, respects “the legitimate autonomy” of the “earthly realities” (cf. *Gaudium et Spes* §36) encompassed by economics and the social sciences, while bringing to bear upon them the light of faith and the Church's tradition.

Constants at the heart of this theological reflection on autonomous earthly realities will always be Christ's teaching on the dangers of riches, our special obligation to the poor, and the eternal consequences of closing our hearts and purses to those who are hungry, naked, and imprisoned.

Rerum Novarum was written when the Church was retreating politically and intellectually. On the one hundredth anniversary of its appearance, the Church was in a very different situation. European communism had collapsed and the Soviet empire, which was originally committed to ridding the world of religion, had disintegrated. A pivotal role in this was played by the Polish workers' rebellion, led by the Solidarity movement. Solidarity represents one of the spectacular results of Leo XIII's sanctioning of trade unions and of the efforts of individual churchmen on the European continent to bring together once again the Church and the workers. This point was not lost on Pope John Paul II in the encyclical he wrote to mark *Rerum Novarum*'s centenary.

Centesimus Annus, in its response to new social realities, represents an important development in the social doctrine of the Church. It acknowledges that a fair distribution of wealth requires us to pay attention also to the means of wealth creation. It emphasizes with Leo XIII the importance of basing effective approaches to social problems on sound anthropology and makes it very clear that while Catholics may legitimately differ in these approaches, none should regard the social teaching of the Church as something to be rejected or ignored completely.

John Paul II's analysis of why socialism failed is telling, but in the present context it is important to keep in mind that the support given in *Centesimus Annus* to market capitalism is not without qualification. The pope notes that, in the aftermath of the second world war, democratic societies avoided making "market mechanisms the only point of reference for social life" and attempted to subject them to public control as a means of depriving communism of a base among the population (§19). With the demise of communism, modern societies are in danger of forgetting that "there are many human needs that find no place in the market," and that prior to the market "there exists something which is due to man because he is man" (§34).

The market is not to blame for this danger: There are other factors involved such as secularization, radical individualism, and consumerism. Taken together, they represent a fundamental anthropological error no less serious than that which drove socialism to its inevitable catastrophe. For this reason, whether or not the Church supports capitalism depends very much on the sort of capitalism we are talking about (§§40–42).

Rerum Novarum and *Centesimus Annus* are two great markers in the development of Catholic social teaching. From seeking an accommodation with the modern world, the Church now seeks its radical transformation. What the social teaching of the Church demands today is a *range* of concepts of democracy and economics, grounded in human nature understood in all its fullness, and working in the service of a culture of life and a civilization of love. Father Sirico explores an important part of the story of how this came to be, and shows how *Rerum Novarum* provided "a lasting paradigm for the Church" that we will continue to draw on for many decades to come.

+George Pell
Archbishop of Sydney

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