

## Editorial *The Pope, the Professor, and the Poor*

This year marks the 125th anniversary of two foundational texts for the formation of modern Christian social thought. In the spring of 1891, Pope Leo XIII promulgated the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, on the “new things” of the modern world, particularly the relationship between capital and labor, following revolutions in politics, economics, and society. And in the fall of that year, the professor Abraham Kuyper, who was also a newspaper editor, politician, and would later become prime minister of the Netherlands, opened the first Christian Social Congress in Amsterdam with a speech: “The Social Question and the Christian Religion.” These two figures, one Roman Catholic and one Reformed, helped provide substantive conceptual and animating frameworks for Christian social engagement and study for the next century and beyond.

This anniversary is the occasion for the publication of these two works in a new volume, *Makers of Modern Christian Social Thought: Leo XIII and Abraham Kuyper on the Social Question*.<sup>1</sup> In the introduction to that volume, I focus on describing some of the major themes that arise out of these remarkable texts, including the ideas of subsidiarity, sphere sovereignty, solidarity, and sphere universality. Perhaps the most significant motivating factor for both Leo and Kuyper in producing these statements, however, was their shared concern for the poor.

In these two works we find, in fact, something approximating a predecessor to what would later be called the “preferential option for the poor.” This idea would later be defined as a “*special form* of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity.”<sup>2</sup> Both Kuyper and Leo articulate the need for a special concern for the poor in the development of Christian social thought, even as they likewise

emphasize the need for formal equality and justice before the law. In this they attempt to do justice to the truths behind the biblical injunctions that teach that we should “do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor” (Lev. 19:15 ESV). But we are also told to “open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Prov. 31:8–9 ESV).

Thus, writes Leo, “Civil society exists for the common good, and hence is concerned with the interests of all in general, albeit with individual interests also in their due place and degree.”<sup>3</sup> Concerning these individual interests, and while doing justice to formal justice, Leo writes, “when there is question of defending the rights of individuals, the poor and badly off have a claim to especial consideration.” The reason for this preference is because “the richer class have many ways of shielding themselves, and stand less in need of help from the State; whereas the mass of the poor have no resources of their own to fall back upon, and must chiefly depend upon the assistance of the State.”<sup>4</sup>

Kuyper likewise recognizes both the formal demands of justice that require equal standing before the law and the privileges that the rich enjoy in any political regime. But Leo and Kuyper also recognize a natural inequality among human beings, an inequality that in itself is not evil but on account of sin is exaggerated and becomes the occasion for strife rather than mutual betterment. Thus, writes Kuyper, “The inequality among men, which cannot be undone, gave the stronger an ascendancy over the weaker, as though we were not a human society but a herd of animals where the rule holds that the stronger animals devour the weaker ones.”<sup>5</sup> The fact is, says Kuyper, “the stronger almost always managed to bend every custom and government ordinance in such a way that they stood to gain and the weaker lost out.”<sup>6</sup> And even in cases “where governments as servants of God still protected the weak, the more powerful class of society soon learned how to exert such a preponderant influence on politics that governmental authority, which should have protected the weak, became a weapon against them.”<sup>7</sup> Kuyper’s observations here apply throughout history, to his own time and to ours as well.

The preferential concern for the poor, in Scripture as in the writings of Kuyper and Leo, should not be understood as pitting rich against poor in a kind of zero-sum game of righteousness. Where worldly and materialistic philosophies preach conflict between classes and groups, the gospel proclaims reconciliation. As Leo puts it: “The great mistake made in regard to the matter now under consideration is to take up with the notion that class is naturally hostile to class, and that the wealthy and the working men are intended by nature to live in mutual conflict.”<sup>8</sup> It is not, moreover, as if the poor are simply righteous while the rich are simply

evil. The history and legacy of revolutions teach us that. As Kuyper observes, the corruption of the government came about “not because the stronger man was more evil in his heart than the weaker man.” Rather, “no sooner did a member of the lower class rise to the top than he in turn took part just as harshly—if not more harshly—in the wicked oppression of members of his former class.”<sup>9</sup> Even a reversal of fortunes between entire classes would not solve the problem, for today’s victims often become tomorrow’s oppressors, and the cycle of violence continues.

Together Leo and Kuyper give us insight into the only way out of this sinful paradigm: the identification of the dignity of the human person in eternal and spiritual perspective, as created in God’s image, fallen into sin, called to redemption, and intended for glorification. The root error, says Kuyper, is “that man was cut off from his eternal destiny and not honored as created in the image of God. Nor did men reckon with the majesty of the Lord, who alone by his grace is mighty to bridle a generation sunk in sin.”<sup>10</sup> Unbelief has social consequences.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Western societies were undergoing massive changes from largely agricultural to increasingly industrial economies. Today the developed world is shifting from traditional manufacturing sectors to information, technology, and service industries. Huge social and political changes accompany such massive transitions. There is now, as there was then, widespread anxiety and disquiet. There is a sense that the old order of things no longer suffices for today’s, and especially for tomorrow’s, problems.

Leo and Kuyper provide us with enduring insights into the dynamics of these challenges, and they have inspired important developments in the articulation of modern Christian social thought. Leo and Kuyper help us in particular to understand how and why we should keep a special concern for the poor and the marginalized in our theological reflection and our social policy. They likewise aid us in understanding that all efforts at social reformation are ultimately futile if pursued without recourse to an authentic and comprehensive vision of the human person, or as Leo puts it, “by a return to Christian life and Christian institutions.”<sup>11</sup>

—Jordan J. Ballor, Dr. theol., PhD

## Notes

1. Jordan J. Ballor, ed., *Makers of Modern Christian Social Thought: Leo XIII and Abraham Kuyper on the Social Question* (Grand Rapids: Acton Institute, 2016). With respect to Catholic social teaching in particular, see the contributions to the symposium in this issue of the journal on the legacy of *Rerum Novarum*.
2. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004), §182.
3. Leo XIII, encyclical letter *Rerum Novarum* (May 15, 1891), §51.
4. Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, §37. As Manfred Spieker observes in his contribution to the symposium on the legacy of *Rerum Novarum* in this issue of the journal, “*Rerum Novarum* establishes the preferential option for the poor.” See Manfred Spieker, “Freedom and Its Limits, 1891–2015: How Does Catholic Social Doctrine React to New Challenges?” *Journal of Markets & Morality* 19, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 422.
5. Abraham Kuyper, “The Social Question and the Christian Religion,” in *Makers of Modern Christian Social Thought*, 53.
6. Kuyper, “The Social Question and the Christian Religion,” 53.
7. Kuyper, “The Social Question and the Christian Religion,” 53–54.
8. Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, §19.
9. Kuyper, “The Social Question and the Christian Religion,” 54.
10. Kuyper, “The Social Question and the Christian Religion,” 54.
11. Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, §27.