

Rerum Novarum in the Light of *Libertas*

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As I agreed to review Pope Leo XIII's famous social encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of 1891 in the light of his earlier 1888 encyclical *Libertas*,¹ my immediate expectation was that I would find the social teaching to be dated, whereas the teaching on liberty to be pertinent. It is obvious that with social, economic, and scientific development new challenges are constantly being born. Thus, practical ethical reflection has to be continuously renewed, furthered, and expanded, applying the same moral principles to evermore complex situations, and the greater the velocity of cultural and social changes, the more urgent is the need for an applied, adapted, and relevant social ethics. Moral rules, on the contrary, do not age because human nature in its essence is always the same, and so I imagined that Leo XIII's defense of liberty would not raise eyebrows. To my surprise, it immediately became clear that it is this teaching that needs to be purified and corrected. This is because changes have come about in the understanding of the classic Catholic tradition as it is best exemplified in the works of St. Thomas Aquinas. The specialized study of his major works and a new historical distance that notices hitherto unobserved distortions and raises questions in the light of present-day contexts permits a more faithful articulation of perennial ethical truths. The nineteenth-century neo-Thomist understanding of liberty that Leo XIII had presented is in a number of points unfaithful to the great doctor of the church. Furthermore, it was tied instinctively with standard premises that differ from our contemporary presuppositions. A recuperation of the medieval presentation, formulated before the alterations of fourteenth-century nominalism and its repercussions,² offers a more balanced view of freedom that corresponds

better with reality, with modern expectations, and with the treasures offered by the gospel. Thus, in the papal explanation of the nature of liberty, and even more so than in his practical ethical teaching applied to social problems, there is room for refinement and greater precision.

Leo XIII was correct in avoiding the common modern expression “free-will” that is often used in describing the will and liberty. Following Aquinas, the pope used the term *liberum arbitrium*—“free choice,” knowing that choice is not uniquely a function of the will, because it engages also the reason, which by nature is focused on truth. Thus, the pope insisted on the importance of truth in the formation and development of personal liberty. Liberty is not a given; it is a process, and the individual acquires liberty as he consciously grows in the capacity to adhere to the true good. From here, in the light of Revelation and taking into account the Church’s divine and human nature and mission, the pope moved on to stress the irrevocable truths that the Church transmits and that decisively qualify individual liberty.

This is all well and good, but it needs to be noted that the relationship of the reason and the will within liberty has been the subject of an intense and profound study in medieval scholasticism. This does not mean that the intricacies of speculative distinctions have been understood well. The long and drawn-out study of the *liberum arbitrium* that is the fruit of intensive debate and research, which we find in Aquinas’s *Quaestiones disputatae—De veritate*,³ is probably the richest analysis of personal liberty that was ever presented in Western culture. In his time, Aquinas was misunderstood by his Franciscan adversaries who imagined that he was saying that the reason alone is supposedly decisive in liberty. It is enough to know the truth, and good action will ensue automatically. This view is obviously contrary to human experience, so it is not surprising that this interpretation was rejected. In modern times, Aquinas was understood to have said that the reason and the will function together but in sequential fashion. The reason was said to perceive the truth and then the will was to follow, either obediently or disobediently. Thus the core of liberty and of morality was said to consist in the obedience of the will. The conscience, being an act of reason, recognizes the truth. In doing so, it is conditioned by the moral law that manifests the divine will, and then the will that was said to be intrinsically free responds to the light or the voice of conscience, bearing thus the full moral responsibility for action. In this way, the sequential understanding of the relationship of the reason and the will led to practical voluntarism, with the prime role being attributed to the will or even to the assertive emotions, such as ambition, courage, and anger, which boost from without the power of the will. In reality, this, too, is not Aquinas’ position because he had said that the reason and the will combine together in the

liberum arbitrium, the free choice that is the fruit of the joint action of these two spiritual faculties, in which they mutually influence one another.⁴ This precision may be ridiculed as a fine point of speculative analysis, but the way in which the cooperation of the cognitive and appetitive spiritual faculties is interpreted conditions the understanding of liberty and therefore also of morality and all its spiritual, personal, and social consequences.⁵

Leo XIII, like most moderns, interpreted the relationship between the reason and the will as being sequential. He saw, however, the importance of reason's perception of the truth. Thus the main emphasis in his encyclical on liberty was on law, both moral and human, because law focuses the reason onto truth and therefore it decisively conditions liberty. But the pope's understanding of law was basically voluntaristic, seeing in it above all an expression of the divine will that imposes on the human will its divine demands. God also, of course, supports the believer with his gracious aid, but the role of an externally imposed law seemed to be primary. From this basic premise, the interpretation of social morality and the Church's responsibility in ordaining and sanctioning moral laws ensued. Leo XIII was acutely aware that the rejection of divine and ecclesial teaching leaves liberty blind and subject to passions and manipulations that all end in various forms of slavery: first, that of sin and then that of other pernicious social and political influences. Thus the entire moral vision was centered on law, on conscience that receives that law, on obedience, and on sin, personal and social, which presents a danger. Grace was not denied. Its role was appreciated as a supernatural support that permits the fulfillment of the requirements of law, but the movement of grace and the stimulus of charity did not have a prime role in this perspective. It is only within such a context that liberty was seen to flourish.

This view cannot be truly called Thomistic, even though Aquinas was quoted here and there in *Libertas*. The medieval Dominican theologian perceived in the mutual collaboration of reason and the will a capacity for adherence to the true good that has an inherent attractiveness of its own that precedes its being illuminated by the law. Because the two spiritual faculties work together, mutually influencing one another, their adherence to the true good in free choice is creative. Therefore in the center of Aquinas's moral teaching was not the law, but virtue, that personal psychic and moral quality that enables one to choose the good in truth with speed, facility, pleasure, and creativity. Moral law is not denied by Aquinas, but its function is pedagogical. It is more a manifestation of the divine wisdom than of the divine will. It serves in showing the good and warning about erroneous avenues, but the mature individual is moved primarily from within in his personal perception of the true good. With his lucid precision, Aquinas declared that he who avoids evil, not because it is evil but due to the

divine precept, is not free, whereas he who avoids evil because it is evil is free.⁶ The reverse could also be said: He who does good because he is told to do so is not free. He who does good because it is good is truly free. The spiritual faculties have an inherent capacity to perceive true good and react to it in a personal, creative way, and this capacity may increase in the individual, generating greater internal maturity and therefore greater personal liberty.

It is precisely due to this understanding of the psychology of moral action that Aquinas has little to say on the conscience. In modern moral reflection, the moral law and conscience were the major themes. Prudence was dismissed as being less significant and was reduced to the role of some external caution. Aquinas defined conscience as an act of the practical reason, which perceives the moral truth before and after the act, and thus it can be identified with reason. What is more important, however, is the cardinal virtue of creative ingeniousness, called prudence, which coordinates the reason and the will within action, ensuring that in fact action is done, and done well, creatively and in truth. Prudence is the basic virtue of human maturity and liberty and thus it stimulates all the other moral virtues. It retains its directive function also on the supernatural level when infused charity takes over command and invites to action resulting from our befriending God and also God's friends. At issue, therefore, is not the question of whether the will is functioning obediently or not to the conscience and to the law that has decisively conditioned it. Within the free choice, the *liberum arbitrium*, there is a second input of reason after the initial judgment of conscience when the true good is not only recognized but also is creatively chosen and executed by the reason and the will as they work together, as they influence one another, and as they embrace the sensate input of the emotions. As a result, it may happen that someone will not err on the level of conscience and yet may err on the level of free choice when an action that is contrary to the true good is freely chosen.⁷ Additionally, someone may correctly perceive the challenge that had been signaled by the conscience. Then on the level of free choice someone may react to it obediently but feebly, or someone may react to it in truth and with full initiative, inventiveness, and profound generosity. Furthermore, the truly believing Christian will count on the support of grace in the act of free choice; undertaking acts that, humanly speaking, seem impossible, yet become possible when the power of grace is introduced by "faith working through love" (Gal. 5:6 ESV).

Aquinas's understanding of liberty therefore requires something more than obedience to the moral law; it requires an authentic cultivation of virtues. The individual who perceives challenges and reacts to them creatively and generously matures as a free person. Freedom is not an innate, unchangeable given but a

program of growth. It is not in permanent conflict with the moral law. It is not obsessed with moral obligation, imposed by some external, superior, or voluntarist authority. Liberty is a responsible reaction toward one's own perception of the true good that in itself is enticing and challenging. Furthermore, within the life of faith and charity, personal liberty is primarily concerned about God and about those who are the friends of God, either actually or potentially. When one trusts in the power of grace, acceded through a living faith, the capacity for the personal gift of self is augmented, and as the virtues are creatively exercised, personal liberty flourishes.

Leo XIII may have intuitively agreed with all of this, but his neo-Thomist formation, in which Aquinas was read through nominalist eyes, did not allow for such an optimistic exposition. His encyclical on liberty therefore devotes much more attention to the moral law than to true liberty, strongly warning against multiple dangers that were tearing away minds and hearts from God and his saving truth. In reading Leo XIII's encyclicals, we need, however, to remember that at that time the masses of the faithful in Catholic countries were uncultured, if not illiterate, and so the pope's exposition of the ethics of social life was addressed primarily to kings, politicians, and owners of capital rather than to simple Christians and their spiritual directors. We thus find in the encyclical dire admonitions against such dangers as foolish license (*LP*, 14), the building of civil society on the free will of individuals (*LP*, 15), socialism (*LP*, 16), liberalism (*LP*, 17, 36), the liberty of worship (*LP*, 19), the view that the state has no duties toward God and should not pay homage to him (*LP*, 21), liberty of speech, liberty of the press (*LP*, 23), liberty of teaching (*LP*, 24), liberty of conscience (*LP*, 30), and the separation of Church and state (*LP*, 38). A due interpretation of all these surprising papal warnings requires an exact understanding of what was meant by them in the nineteenth century and what their location was within the general view, which as we have seen, had its limitations.

Leo XIII was not blind to the fact that his program was politically unacceptable in most countries of the Western world. He followed, therefore, a distinction that had been introduced by the French bishop Félix Dupanloup after the publication of the *Syllabus of Errors* by Blessed Pope Pius IX.⁸ Following this explanation, the full expression of the Catholic social order was termed "Thesis," whereas an adapted, politically possible social order was called a "Hypothesis." Thus the teaching of Leo XIII expounded the "Thesis," insisting that because error and truth cannot have equal rights (*LP*, 34), any liberty except that which consists in submission to God and subjection to his will is an abuse of liberty (*LP*, 36). But the pope also taught that where it is politically impossible to impose everything entailed in the Thesis, the Hypothesis may be followed, because the Church

does not forbid public authority to tolerate what is at variance with truth and justice so as to avoid some greater evil (*LP*, 33). Given that God tolerates evil and does not immediately send thunderbolts from heaven, likewise states may tolerate evil, although they cannot approve of it. Thus the papal social teaching was known from the start to be purely theoretical, which then had to be worked out practically according to political prudence and factual possibilities.

As we read this nineteenth-century teaching, we immediately perceive how important the Second Vatican Council was as it reversed the perspective. The Council taught that the Church is not only present in the contemporary world not only through religious symbols venerated by kings; liturgies attended by presidents and parliaments; and the constitutions of states and their legal, penal order that punish sinful acts; but the Church is present in the world primarily through the conscience and even more so through the creative, generous virtues of individual Christians.⁹ The practical grassroots living out of true charity by authentic saints coming from all social classes in all parts of the world make the face of the risen Lord visible in the world of today, much more so than the presence of crucifixes in public spaces.¹⁰ Because religious liberty is now understood to be an act of the will that must be free from external manipulative pressure and not (as was the case in the nineteenth century) as an act of the reason that can invent its own subjective truth as it goes along, the Church now defends religious liberty, still stressing, however, that objective truth is binding because it is true, while its perception, of course, has to be first of all personal.¹¹

Having said all this, I may now turn to *Rerum Novarum*, the social encyclical that was sparked by the dramatic condition of the working classes in nineteenth century Europe. This papal teaching also has to be located within a wider context. It is not true that the social doctrine of the Church was produced by Leo XIII as a *Deus ex machina* novelty. The Church has always had a social teaching, even in apostolic times. We may therefore read a historically dated document and at the same time recognize its underlying moral principles that were known centuries before and continue to be illuminating in the face of the social and political needs of our contemporary times.

The first and fundamental principle of Catholic social ethics is the conviction that morality is binding in all fields of life. The essence of Catholicity is that it is universal, meaning that salvation in Christ has an impact on all walks of life. The Church cannot, therefore, accept a restriction of morality to the private sphere; moral responsibility also encompasses family, cultural, social, political, and economic life. The same high moral standards that are expected of private individuals, who are carriers of divine charity, are expected of public officials within their service. Economic policy, foreign policy, justified defense, and the

ways of organizing social and political life are all realms from which morality is not to be excluded (*RN*, 36, 62, 63). The true worth of a man is his virtue (*RN*, 24) and so it has to be said that society and the state also prosper when moral values are upheld—when there is good family life, respect for religion, and justice (*RN*, 32).

Catholic social ethics can never accept the class struggle (*RN*, 19), which is built upon social jealousy and the myth that equality of talents, wealth, education, social status, health, and virtue can at some stage be attained. Justice is not the same as equality. There are differences among people, and there always will be. This difference is conducive to the emulation of the more dynamic and responsible individuals by others and to the generosity of charity. Every man has some needs, and so he has to ask others for some help; every man, even the poorest, may give something freely. The false myth of equality hopes that at some stage charity will become redundant, but Jesus told us that the poor will always be among us (John 12:8). The Marxist claim that the class struggle is the motor of history is erroneous. It is not violent conflict that brings about positive change. With greater truth it has to be said that morality is the motor of history. But societies have varying understandings of morality, and these views as to what is morally appropriate are the ultimate origin of historical events. The Catholic view that does not exclude any dimension of life from morality is the most demanding, and so it is not surprising that we cannot easily point to historical incarnations of this Catholic ideal. The kingdom of God is constantly ahead of us, and as new moral challenges appear, they are perceived and addressed well or less well. Every generation has its own moral responsibility in this and thus change by no means is always a line of ascending moral progress. There have also been periods of moral degeneration. Nevertheless, over the centuries, the gospel has born social fruit. The so-called Western world has Christian roots, and we are not ashamed of this. We are proud of this legacy. Pope Leo XIII noted that savage customs are no longer possible in a land where the Church has set foot (*LP*, 12).

Catholic social doctrine defends the principle of subsidiarity. This means that what can be done on a lower level must not be transferred to a higher entity. Leo XIII insisted that the state should not destroy individual economic initiatives (*RN*, 9) and private societies (*RN*, 51, 53). Various benevolent associations (*RN*, 48) should be allowed to function without government control (*RN*, 56). The Church supports grassroots associations and charitable organizations animated by the moral responsibility and virtue of individuals. These function much better and at a lesser expense than government offices administered by bureaucracies (*RN*, 29, 30). Thus, the state should not absorb the individual or the family (*RN*, 25)

by taking over the responsibilities of creative persons and independent bodies that they set up. Such social institutions have the full right to specify their own finality and mode of functioning without government interference. Private social entities must not be prohibited and restricted by public authority, because their creation and participation in these entities is a natural human right, deriving from the fact that man is a responsible social being. The state, therefore, should protect the rights of lower entities and not abolish them (*RN*, 51), appreciating the fact that, amongst others, they serve as a school of generous virtue and as a humanizing buffer between the distant state and the individual, who thereby is not left alone. To be truly useful, social solidarity needs subsidiarity.

All this of course is not a novel teaching invented by Pope Leo XIII, but merely a reminder of perennial Catholic social ethics. At this point, I would like to elaborate on this connection, quoting the views of an early twentieth-century Polish historian, Feliks Koneczny (1862–1949), who studied European history through the prism of underlying ethical principles that were applied to social life. He noted that civilizations are distinguished by their specific social ethos, which is sometimes in direct opposition to what is held elsewhere. Thus the observation of the interplay of differing ethical views as to how social life is to be organized can be the subject of interest of a historian. He described what is now termed as the principle of subsidiarity as the distinction between the private and the public law. It is a constant feature of Catholic social ethics that this distinction is maintained, respected and defended. In medieval Catholic societies, the power of the kings was limited. They had to recognize and protect the acquired rights, liberties and private laws of multiple social groups, classes, cities, corporations, associations of craftsmen, religious communities, universities and ethnic minorities. The public law could not encroach upon the rights of such private groups, which had the liberty to function according to their own private law. Hence, the public law of the state had to respect and protect the private law of such various and diverse local entities.

Since antiquity, however, Europe has also known another social model—Byzantium.¹² In the Byzantine state, throughout the long centuries of its existence, the public law constantly restricted all vestiges of private law. The Byzantine Empire functioned as a bureaucratic police state with a totally subservient Church. Whenever the Empire was going through some crisis, it always responded with greater centralization; higher taxation; the transfer of wealth to Constantinople; more imposed uniformity in all dimensions of life, including even art and religious life; and with the penalization and impoverishment of the peripheries. As a result, the Empire was constantly shrinking. This political system, which profited from its noble ancestry and bewitched with the dazzling richness of

its capital, was jealously observed by some in Europe. It became the hopeful model of the European Holy Roman Empire that was constantly at odds with the papacy, with local social entities, and in time with the national states. Thus within the heart of Europe, as Constantinople was eyed, there were always those who aspired for the increased power of the monarchs at the expense of local entities. Particularly in the Germanic world, there was the dream of a united European empire, governed from the center through a heavy Byzantine-type, bureaucratic power, built not upon some national identity cherished by a local ethnic group but upon the forces of centralization. The increase of the public law at the detriment of private law that is contrary to the medieval Catholic social ethos was approved by Richelieu, the Habsburgs, the Bourbons, and basically all the absolute monarchies of modernity. In England, the Stuarts, in spite of their Catholic sympathies, were following the same model, stressing the divine rights of the monarchs. They were opposed by the Puritans, who defended the rights of local governments against the centralized state. Even though the Puritans were distant from Catholic dogma and ecclesiology, they have to be credited with the merit of transporting the medieval Catholic social ethos to the other shores of the Atlantic, and this ethos has made America great.

Today, even with the socialist moves of some politicians, there is great scope for private, autonomous entities that are self-governing and free from the restrictions of the public law in the United States—much more so than in Europe. In the United States, it is possible to homeschool children without government interference; it is possible to set up private schools, colleges, and universities, working out their programs locally in subsidiary fashion; it is possible to set up hospitals, health-care institutions, and pension systems that are not controlled by the state. In Europe, all this is extremely difficult, because the state, and now the supra-state, attributes to itself a monopoly in all of these fields. Religious liberty has been reduced to the liberty of cult, but the right to live according to the ethics one upholds, both in private and in public life, is questioned. As taxation is high, the wealthy are not inclined to support private initiatives. Instead, it is possible to accede to state and supra-state funds, but this involves accepting all the ideological and administrative strings that are attached to them.

As we ponder the challenges that Europe, both West and East, is facing, another social ethos that has long historic roots has to be mentioned. While Balkan and German Byzantinism favor the total predominance of the public law over private law, Eastern Europe has been subject to a different political model that has come from Central Asia and Mongolia. In the empire of Genghis Khan; in Muscovy and its subsequent states; and to some extent in the territories of today's Belarus, Ukraine, and Ottoman Turkey, the tradition of the political ethos is such that basically

there is no public law—only the private law of one individual—the khan, the tsar, the sultan, the first secretary of the ruling party, or the dictator—each of whom views the entire state and all its people and their wealth as his own private property that he can dispose of and rule at will, following his arbitrary whim. In such a political system, fear, servile obedience, and the absence of any public law that would be a point of reference and defense is the norm. All officials are therefore excessively submissive toward those who on the social scale are above them and they are brutal toward those who are below. The only way this system can be opposed is through the victories of the conscience and the fortitude of individuals who in the generosity and creativity of their virtuous response to perceived challenges step by step defend and extend the realm of personalism. For this to happen in the hearts of individuals, they have to be moved by the typically Catholic, encouraging cry: “Do not be afraid! Open the gates to Christ!”

In *Rerum Novarum* Pope Leo XIII insisted that man, by nature, precedes the state and has the right to provide for his own needs independently of it (*RN*, 7). The family also comes before the state. It has its own duties and rights (*RN*, 12) equal to that of the state (*RN*, 13). Paternal authority and responsibility cannot be abolished by the state (*RN*, 14). If the state is involved in the education of children, this is always done vicariously in the name of the parents, who have the right to disapprove and reject what is being imposed on their children.

In the logic of the Catholic teaching reaffirmed by Leo XIII, it has to be said that the state is to be an organism, based on a society that has its own independent net of relationships, intermediate bodies, responsibilities, and rights. When the state ceases to be organic and becomes a mechanism, it stifles human initiatives and liberties. A mechanical state is intrinsically weaker than an organic one because whenever a mechanism meets contrary forces and breaks down, it has no internal capacity to repair itself, whereas organisms spontaneously find ways of renewal and new sources of vitality. When individual creativity and responsibility are denied and stifled, the state bureaucracy attributes to itself unique competence in all possible fields. Bureaucrats are then endowed with two charisms: irrevocability and infallibility. Extensive governmental and suprastate interference in everything, that is, the essential canon of socialism, leads to the soteriology of the state. The state is then seen to be the source of secular salvation that guarantees satiation and happiness in all dimensions of life. This produces in the general public a sense of entitlement, an attribution to self of all possible rights without distinguishing between innate and acquired rights. This is an egoist attitude, animated by jealousy that can then be used as a tool for political struggle. Instead of promoting creative individuals, moved by a personal liberty and an active responsibility in the face of perceived challenges, it generates social passivism

and exaggerated expectations. It forgets that happiness does not consist in the gratification of desires but in having more and more problems, always of a higher order—problems to which one responds with personal creativity. Furthermore, we have to note a basic law of history that whenever the competence and interference of the state in the life of society is increased, the moral ethos imposed by the state and appreciated by society is lowered. Thus, excess of public law to the detriment of grassroots social activism, functioning according to its own private law and its own perception of moral values, always leads to a general lowering of moral standards.

A basic principle of Catholic economic ethics that had been followed throughout medieval Western Europe is the concern that there should be the highest possible number of people who are economically independent, standing as it were on their own feet. Some regulations between them are necessary, but they are only there to prevent the more powerful from devouring the weaker. Pope Leo XIII praised the old system of craftsmen's guilds and trading corporations (*RN*, 49) with their negotiated rules that ensured there would be no unfair monopolies and that the quality of produced goods would be maintained. This system was abolished in Europe by the French Revolution and its aftermath, leaving small producers with little protection (*RN*, 3). The result was capitalist greed and the reduction of the lower classes to the state of a passive proletariat. *Rerum Novarum* insisted therefore that the law should favor private ownership (*RN*, 46) because men work harder on what belongs to them (*RN*, 47). People have the right to own property (*RN*, 38) and dispose of it as they please (*RN*, 4, 5) because the ownership of property, including the means of production is natural (*RN*, 9), distinguishing men from animals (*RN*, 6). Furthermore, it is conducive to the cultivation of the virtues of personal responsibility. The pope stressed that working for gain is creditable, not shameful (*RN*, 20). Material profit of course is not the ultimate value and unique criterion in life. It does not dispense from moral honesty and from striving toward sanctity, and consequently those who have achieved material gain have a moral responsibility for what they do with their wealth, but they cannot be condemned for the fact that they have arrived at riches through hard work and honest means. An economic system that does not attribute excessive power to the state assures that wealth is attained primarily through the production of something useful or through the offering of necessary services, and not, as in Byzantium, through corrupt contacts with state officials. Thus inequality resulting from varying achievements is not necessarily disadvantageous (*RN*, 17), even though it has to be remembered that all human beings, including the poor and the sick have an innate human dignity (*RN*, 40) that needs to be respected. The possession of wealth does not permit an arbitrary, immoral use of it, and

it does not dispense from the obligations of charity (*RN*, 22). Where there is a blatantly disproportionate accumulation of wealth, which places the weaker in a fragile position, some regulations in their defense have to be introduced. This is true also on an international level. The present slow-but-sure leveling out of wealth between nations and continents is a positive change, even as the privileged continents are surprised by the outsourcing of industry to poorer regions. Some perennial tenets of Catholic economic ethics deserve to be reminded today. The Church has always been against rapacious usury (*RN*, 3), but there is a moral difference between the imposition of interest on an investment loan and of one destined for consumption. Throughout the centuries, investment loans were rare, and so when the Church spoke out against usury, it was in defense of the poor, who had borrowed money to buy bread. When the bread was consumed, it was considered immoral to demand of them more than was lent.

Saint Paul had formulated a seemingly obvious economic ethical principle that parents are to ensure that their children will grow up in improved material conditions: “Children are not obligated to save up for their parents, but parents for children” (2 Cor. 12:14 ESV). Leo XIII knew that procreation is the reason for marriage (*RN*, 12), and he probably could not have imagined how in the future paternal responsibility would be weakened in men as a result of contraception, thus generating serious social, demographic and economic consequences. Leo XIII took it for granted that fathers would want to provide for their children (*RN*, 13), which we know now is not always the case. The current practice of excessive spending by states by throwing debts on future generations is grossly immoral. It can be explained as a side effect of the denigration of procreation. If killing the unborn is deemed acceptable, their impoverishment seems to be a negligible misdemeanor. It also is the consequence of a bloated sense of entitlement spawned by exaggerated and demoralizing state competence and generosity. It is interesting to note that in the United States, the indebteding of future generations is a subject of public debate, expressed in moral terms, whereas in Europe, politicians, journalists, and bishops hardly ever mention the problem.

In conclusion, in spite of the surprising expressions found in the encyclical *Libertas* and their obvious limitations, it has to be noted that Leo XIII valued personal moral liberty. His insistence on the moral law was a way of stressing that liberty needs to be formed and focused on the good that is truly in accord with human nature and, furthermore, is perceived with greater clarity thanks to the light of faith. In consequence, the pope’s thoughts on the social question and its underlying ethos sprang from a profoundly Christian understanding of human freedom. It was not just overcoming the poverty of the working classes that the pope had in mind. He was hoping for a social order that would be conducive

toward the furthering of personalism, of individual, creative, virtuous responsibility that encompasses private, family, social, economic, and political life. He saw the dangers that loom when society is reduced to passivism and irresponsibility, while it expects to receive everything from an omnipotent state.

Today post-Christian societies that are still marked to some extent by the heritage of the Christian ethos are directly encountering civilizations that have no tradition of personalism. When the adherence to the good is not formed from within and is not supported by the experience of free social responsibility and numerous subsidiary institutions that are the appropriate locus for social charity, the defense against evil seems to lie only in external pressure and political power. But a free, open, and democratic society cannot be maintained if it ceases to be sustained from within by a personalist ethos. To prevent confusion, delirious, chaotic conflicts, and a further decline of moral standards, a return to the high level of the Catholic social ethos is necessary.

Notes

1. Pope Leo XIII, encyclical letter *Libertas* (June 20, 1888), https://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_20061888_libertas.html; idem, encyclical letter *Rerum Novarum* (May 15, 1891), http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html. Hereinafter *LP* and *RN*.
2. Cf. Servais (Th.) Pinckaers, *Les sources de la moral chrétienne. Sa méthode, son contenu, son histoire* (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires; Paris: Cerf, 1985).
3. See Q. 24.
4. *De Veritate*, q. 24, art. 4: *Et ideo liberum arbitrium habitum non nominat, sed potentiam voluntatis vel rationis, unam siquidem per ordinem ad alteram. Art 6, ad 5: Voluntas quodammodo movet rationem imperando actum ejus, et ratio movet voluntatem proponendo ei objectum suum, quod est finis; et inde est quod utraque potentia potest aliquantulum per aliam informari.*
5. Daniel Westberg, *Right Practical Reason: Aristotle, Action and Prudence in Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).
6. *Super II Cor.*, cap. 3, l. 3, (112): *Ille ergo, qui vitat mala, non quia mala, sed propter mandatum domini, non est liber; sed qui vitat mala, quia mala, est liber. Cf. LP, 7: Isto modo dux homini in agendo lex est, eundemque praemiis poenisque propositis ad recte faciendum allicit, a peccando deterret.*

7. *De Veritate*, q. 17, art. 1, ad 4: *Iudicium conscientiae consistit in pura cognitione, iudicium autem liberi arbitrii in applicatione cognitionis ad affectione: quod quidem iudicium est iudicium electionis. Et ideo contingit quandoque quod iudicium liberi arbitrii pervertitur, non autem conscientiae; sicut cum aliquis examinat aliquid quod imminet faciendum, et iudicat quasi adhuc speculando per principia, hoc esse malum (...) sed quando incipit applicare ad agendum, occurrunt undique multae circumstantiae ad ipsum actum, utpote fornicationis delectatio, ex cuius concupiscentiae ligatur ratio, ne eius dictamen in eius reiectionem prorumpat. Et sic aliquis errat in eligendo, et non in conscientia.*
8. Cf. Dominique Gonnet, *La liberté religieuse à Vatican II. La contribution de John Courtney Murray* (Paris: Cerf, 1994).
9. Pierre d'Ornellas, *Liberté, que dis-tu de toi-même? Une lecture des travaux du Concile Vatican II 15 janvier 1959–8 décembre 1965* (Sainte-Maur: École Cathédrale, Parole et Silence, 1999).
10. Marie-Joseph Le Guillou, *Le visage du Ressuscité* (Paris: Éditions ouvrières, 1968).
11. Brian Mullady, "Religious Freedom: Homogenous or Heterogenous Development?" *The Thomist* 58 (1994): 93–108.
12. Feliks Koneczny, *The Byzantine Civilization*, vols. 1–2 (Komorów: Wydawnictwo Antyk, 2014).