

## The Pontificate of Leo XIII (1878–1903) and the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum*\*

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Beginning with Leo XIII, a growing body of “social doctrine” was developed in keeping with world events in those fields, always faithful to the values of freedom, truth, justice, love, and peace. This explains why from *Rerum Novarum* onward the Church’s opposition to utopian socialism has always been at the fore, aiming at the core of socialism as being contrary to human nature and Judeo-Christian revelation. At the same time, the Church’s criticism of liberal capitalism has been directed not to the system of free enterprise, free markets, and private property as such but to the injustices and immoralities spawned by an unprincipled liberalism that can easily creep into such a system unless it is imbued with objective ethical and religious values, which alone can make liberty and democracy workable.

Giochino Pecci, Archbishop of Perugia, afterward Camarlengo (Chamberlain) of the Holy Roman Church, and Cardinal after 1853, was elected pope on February 20, 1878, at the age of sixty-eight. He died on July 20, 1903, after one of the longest and most productive pontificates on record. His prophetic mission was supported by both a deep spirituality and piety, manifested in the revival of the devotion to the Rosary, the Blessed Virgin and Saint Joseph, the institution of the feast of the Holy Family, his encyclical on the Holy Spirit, and a rigorous and profound grasp of the Augustinian and Thomistic *faith seeking understanding*. He believed in the power of Christian revelation to enlighten the human mind and uplifting the human person while healing his wounded nature, thus prompting the human will and creativity to achieve greatness, both ethical and technological: civilizing man and creating human culture.

Etienne Gilson reported in his introduction to the Leonine encyclicals that toward the end of his pontificate Leo XIII reviewed the body of his teaching and singled out his encyclical *Aeterni Patris* of 1879, one of his first pontifical acts, as the most important and basic of all his documents.<sup>1</sup> In this encyclical, he surveyed the critical situation of the world in an age of revolutions and upheavals: social, economic, and political. He then traced all these external symptoms, so disturbing for human progress, to the influence of ideas; to the “schools of philosophy” of man and society.

He lays the emphasis on the term *philosophy* and does not call it “Christian theology.” Because of theology’s inseparable link to Christian philosophy, the philosophy of rational thinking, elaborated by spontaneous or unprejudiced human reason, is what has always been called, at least in part, *natural law* or moral law that has been recognized by all men regardless of culture or religion. Christian philosophy is indeed equipped with terms and concepts with which it can dialogue with all cultures and religions, just as Saint Thomas Aquinas did in his *Summa Contra Gentiles* (as distinct from his *Summa Theologiae* in which the dialogue is with fellow Christians).<sup>2</sup>

Thus Leo XIII in *Aeterni Patris* was, even more explicitly than the Constitution *Dei Filius* of Vatican I (1870) (also attended by the Cardinal Archbishop of Perugia), taking up again the harmonious blend of reason and revelation inaugurated by Justin, Clement, and Irenaeus, brought to outstanding heights by Augustine’s faith seeking understanding, and finding its climax in the Angelic Doctor. The “restoration of Christian Philosophy” by means of the systematic study of the original texts of Saint Thomas Aquinas, in preference to his commentators, would lead, according to the pope, to the articulation of a body of social, economic, and political teaching of an ethical or moral nature rather than technical or temporal, because this is not the Church’s mission. This body of ethical doctrine is what has come to be known as the social teaching of the Church. Its first important milestone is *Rerum Novarum*, which Leo XIII issued in 1891, twelve years after *Aeterni Patris*. *Rerum Novarum* was the crowning of an extensive and far-reaching exposition of the basic concepts on man and society in successive encyclicals.<sup>3</sup>

To get a good perspective of *Rerum Novarum*, and so to understand it properly, it is very important to see it in its historical context, both leading to it and following from it. Before the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1989, we used to associate the term *capitalism* with the so-called First World and the term *socialism* with the so-called Second World. These two worlds constituted the two major blocs vying with each other for economic and thereby political supremacy. The so-called Third World, sometimes referred to as the South, while the First

and Second constituted the North, was the field of competition between these two, in a relentless and growing propaganda war that often erupted into actual violence, with the play and manipulation of religious, racial, cultural, historical, and nationalistic factors.<sup>4</sup>

The capitalist world was called *first* for chronological reasons because socialism, as a socioeconomic and political movement, arose historically as a challenge to the social injustices purportedly spawned by the capitalist inspired Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth century. The year 1776 is a convenient date for discerning the start of the Industrial Revolution, though of course there was a period of incubation for several centuries. It was the year of both the outbreak of the American Revolution and the publication of Adam Smith's classic capitalist work commonly known as *The Wealth of Nations*. This work maintains that "industry, that is, work or labor, is the main source of wealth," rather than land, with the consequent transfer of sociopolitical leadership from landowners to capitalists, namely owners of means of production.<sup>5</sup> The work appeared following his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which explains the benevolent role of enlightened self-interest that was also explained by Turgot.

Capitalism arose then as an economic system, that is, a mechanism of production, distribution, and exchange based on both the minimizing of government controls and the maximizing of the exercise of the right of private property and of freedom of enterprise, market, and competition. As such it has positive value because it encourages the use of practical intelligence, resourcefulness, and creativity.<sup>6</sup> It was soon to be animated and engulfed, however, by a philosophy or ideology at variance with genuine humanity, that is, with the correct vision of man in both his personal and social dimensions. This ideology of self-interest, easily leading to injustice, however sugarcoated by its proponents, came to be styled bourgeois *liberalism* or individualism.<sup>7</sup>

This liberal ideology had been elaborated on in the eighteenth century by Locke, Hume, Montesquieu, and Rousseau, in opposition to the royal absolutism of the divine right of kings, which had been on the ascendancy since Henry VIII of England and Francis I of France, and supported by the philosophies of Machiavelli, Spinoza, and Hobbes. This royal absolutism had also been vigorously opposed by the Catholic Church and its leading theologians such as Bellarmine, Suarez, and Vitoria, whose books were burned publicly in London by James I. The liberal ideology also rose in support of freedom, equality, and fraternity, and Adam Smith applied it to the field of economics, thus resulting in an unprecedented growth in material wealth. It was developed in the nineteenth century by Bentham, Malthus, Mill, Spencer, and Darwin and was based on the earlier philosophies of Locke, with his three "absolute" rights—property,

liberty, and life—and by Rousseau’s belief in the natural goodness of man. It was this new absolutism of individual human freedom, not the defense of human freedom as such, that led Pope Pius IX to denounce this type of liberalism in the controversial *Syllabus* of 1864.<sup>8</sup>

As the Industrial Revolution forged ahead, animated by this liberal ideology, it produced, along with a spectacular increase of wealth, an appalling assortment of social inequalities and consequent political unrest. Indeed, many capitalists gave empirical proof, if there was need of one, that man is anything but “naturally good” and has an uncanny proneness to fall into greed and to exploit his fellowmen. At the same time, there was no lack of liberal thinkers trying to justify the economic and even moral advantage of keeping the poor in their misery.<sup>9</sup> The trouble with this economic liberalism is that it drew its inspiration not so much from religion or morals as from Newtonian mathematical physics, the worship of which was then fashionable and that threatened to replace the traditional supremacy of the humanities. Be that as it may, this eclipse of religion by mechanistic materialism and its consequent hedonism is what Leo XIII had in mind when criticizing liberalism in *Rerum Novarum*, and the same applies to all subsequent Catholic teaching on capitalism.<sup>10</sup>

It was this same mechanistic materialism, however, that provoked a new wave of social reformers and revolutionaries, with Gracchus Babeuf as their forerunner in the French Revolution, and now led by Condorcet, Turgot, Comte, Saint-Simon, and Fourier who called themselves the “prophets of Paris.”<sup>11</sup>

Marxism then developed into a war, whether physical or ideological, with those three likewise totalitarian philosophies of liberal capitalism (when unchecked by true democracy and a government truly committed to the common good), socialism, and anarchism, as happened, for example, in the Russian Revolution and civil war of 1917–1920, as well as in the Spanish Civil War of 1936–1939.<sup>12</sup>

While the West was called the First World, there was a tense and uneasy symbiosis of liberalism and socialism, with a lunatic fringe of anarchism that contributed to the eruptions of rashes of terrorism. Marxism established itself in the inaccurately called socialist bloc (they used the term in the Marxist sense of “transition towards communism”) with its center in Moscow, trying as it might to lead the international communist movement but riddled with defections and nationalistic centrifugal forces and ideological rows within the bloc that culminated in the eventual dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1989.

What has been the Church’s stand *vis-à-vis* those materialistic ideologies?

With some initial precedents in Gregory XVI and Pius IX in the first half of the nineteenth century, the first major official stand was taken precisely in Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum*, even though it should be stressed that the Church

believes its social teaching issues from the Gospel itself. It only needed an updated statement. That is why it cannot be said, as some critics have said, that *Rerum Novarum* “arrived too late,” and that we owe it to Marxism to have made a prophetic denunciation of the injustices and oppression of capitalism.<sup>13</sup> The Church had always been making prophetic denunciations simply by preaching its moral and religious doctrine and thus promoting the values inherent in the dignity of the human person and generating cultures and civilizations. That its voice would not always be heeded or listened to is another matter.

Along with the further development of the similar works of Leo XIII on the social teaching of the Church, we can mention the works of the subsequent popes, namely: St. Pius X, Benedict XV, Pius XI, Blessed John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul I, Blessed John Paul II, and especially Benedict XVI.

In his encyclical, Leo XIII points out the errors, not economic (as technical temporal matters are not the competence or mission of the Church) but ethical or philosophical, of both liberalism and socialism. Liberalism, on the one hand, absolutized the right of private property and ignored the common good. It thus facilitated “the greed or unchecked competition,” the “rapacious usury ... practiced by covetous and grasping men” (not of course the wise investment of capital and the seeking of legitimate profits by a fair-play, truly democratic capitalism) and the exploitation of the many by the few. Socialism, on the other hand, advocated the abolition of that right and thereby the suppression of personal responsibility, initiative, and liberty, “working on the poor man’s envy of the rich.”<sup>14</sup> What is needed for real social progress and the gradual elimination of material poverty with the consequent cultural enrichment is a reevaluation of the dignity of the human person based on his transcendence, freedom, and responsibility, as well as his solidarity with all his fellowmen in the light of the Judeo-Christian tradition.<sup>15</sup>

It should be mentioned, furthermore, that Leo XIII had already laid the groundwork for this doctrine in his classic encyclicals on the nature and purpose of man, the family, and the state following the aforementioned principles of his cherished master-document *Aeterni Patris*: first on the family and the nature of marriage in *Arcanum Divinae Sapientiae* (1880),<sup>16</sup> and then on the progressive teaching on man and society (political philosophy) in *Diuturnum Illud* (1881), *Humanum Genus* (1884), *Immortale Dei* (1885), *Sapientiae Christianae* (1890), and finally *Rerum Novarum* (1891). In 1901, he issued the encyclical *Graves de Communi* on the true meaning of democracy, his last important statement on these matters. It is in this context, both doctrinal and historical, that the significance of *Rerum Novarum* and the whole Leonine teaching, as well as of the subsequent social teaching of the Church, can be fully appreciated.

## Notes

- \* An earlier version of this essay appeared in Joseph M. de Torre, *Politics and the Church: From Rerum Novarum to Liberation Theology* (Manila: Vera-Reyes, 1994), 1–7.
1. Etienne Gilson, “Introduction,” in *The Church Speaks to the Modern World: The Social Teachings of Leo XIII*, ed. Etienne Gilson (New York: Image Books, 1957), 6–7.
  2. See Joseph M. de Torre, *Christian Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (Manila: Sinag-tala Publishers, 1980), chaps. 1, 2, and 3.
  3. Pope Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum* (May 15, 1891); and Encyclical Letter *Aeterni Patris* (August 4, 1879).
  4. See note 3 above and Joseph M. de Torre, *The Church and Temporal Realities* (Manila: SEASFI, 1988), chaps. 1–6.
  5. See Joseph M. de Torre, *Contemporary Philosophical Issues in Historical Perspective* (Pasig City, Philippines: University of Asia and the Pacific, 2001), 7–8, 16, 38, and 162.
  6. For the brilliant exposition of all of these positive values, see Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982). The central thesis of this book, namely that the Church failed to appreciate these values, surprisingly misses the tremendous centrality of the principle of subsidiarity, the strongest point of democratic capitalism in the social teaching of the Church. That which the Church criticizes in liberalism is never its positive values. See also George Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty* (London: Buchan and Enright, 1982).
  7. I treat these developments in relevant passages in my three books cited above.
  8. Joseph M. de Torre, *The Humanism of Modern Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Pasig City, Philippines: University of Asia and the Pacific, 1997).
  9. See the works of Mandeville, Townsend, Colquhoun, and Furniss as cited in R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (New York: Hesperides Press, 1947), 161. See also Joseph M. de Torre, *Humanism of Modern Philosophy*, chaps. 9 and 10.
  10. See Joseph M. de Torre, ed., *Social Morals: The Church Speaks on Society* (Manila: Southeast Asian Science Foundation, 1987), s.v. “capitalism,” 8, 50–51, 103–4, 114, 129, 177, 182.
  11. Cf. F. E. Manuel, *The Prophets of Paris* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962). See Joseph M. de Torre, “So-called Divine Right of Kings and Its

Development in Modern Ideologies from Guy Fawkes to the Spanish Civil War,” *CAS Review*, University of Asia and the Pacific (November 2008); de Torre, “The March of Democracy and Liberty: The Whig Tradition of Francisco de Vitoria,” Occasional Papers, University of Asia and the Pacific, May 2002; and de Torre, “The Identity of Europe as Cradle of Both Imperialism and Democracy: Are They Both Utopias?” Occasional Papers, University of Asia and the Pacific, September 2004.

12. Cf. C. McFadden, *The Philosophy of Communism* (New York: Benzinger, 1963).
13. See Joseph de Torre, *Politics and the Church: From Rerum Novarum to Liberation Theology* (Manila: Vera-Reyes, 1987), pts. 1 and 2.
14. Cf. Joseph M. de Torre, *Marxism, Socialism and Christianity* (Manila: Sinag-tala, 1983), pts. 1 and 3; and Joseph M. de Torre, *The Leaven of the Gospel in Secular Society* (Manila: Vera-Reyes, 1983), chap. 7.
15. “[Owners & employers] are reminded that, according to natural reason and Christian philosophy, working for gain is creditable, not shameful to man, because it enables him to earn an honorable livelihood; but to misuse men as though they were things in the pursuit of gain, or to value them solely for their physical powers—that is truly shameful and inhuman.” See *Rerum Novarum*, 20.
16. Cf. Joseph M. de Torre, *Work, Culture, Liberation* (Manila: Vera-Reyes, 1985), chap. 1.