

**Prophet of the Christian Social Manifesto:
Joseph Husslein, S.J., His Life, Work,
and Social Thought**

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Most American Catholics nowadays who devote themselves to “social concerns” have shrunk the magisterial social teaching to a few choice texts from *Rerum Novarum*, *Mater et Magistra*, and the writings of Pope John Paul II that happen to serve their favorite cause. The attention, for example, that John Paul II gives to the natural law, the problem of secularism, and the defense of the traditional family, just to name a few, are largely filtered out of contemporary discourse. The American “social concerns” crowd feels much more comfortable when the pope talks about global warming or capital punishment.

The example of Jesuit social thinker Father Joseph Husslein (1873–1952) offers a refreshing contrast to this contemporary intellectual fashion. Steven Werner shows him as a scholar who formed his thought by the teachings of Leo XIII, especially *Rerum Novarum*. Indeed, Husslein had done this so completely that his writings anticipated many developments that later appeared in Pius XI’s *Quadragesimo Anno*. From 1909 to 1931, Father Husslein published numerous books and articles, applying Catholic social teachings to the problems of the day. His crowning work, *The Christian Social Manifesto: An Interpretive Study of Encyclicals Rerum Novarum and Quadragesimo Anno of Pope Leo XIII and Pope Pius XI*, published in 1931, received the praise of Pius XI in a letter written by Cardinal Pacelli, who would later become Pope Pius XII.

Werner admits in his introduction that Father Husslein is a largely forgotten figure. The challenge for Werner is to show that his subject is not best left forgotten. He succeeds in part. Certainly, his book fills a gap in historical scholarship for, in his words, “The lack of a detailed study of Husslein leaves the picture of American Catholicism, and in particular American Catholic social ethics, incomplete” (9). But, in a more important way, the book fails to emphasize Father Husslein’s life and thought as a genuine alternative to contemporary Catholic social thinking. This is the best reason for studying Father Husslein and, more important, the papal encyclicals to which Husslein devoted his scholarly and popular writings.

Werner seems to say that we have nothing to learn from Husslein’s docility. Husslein’s agreement with Leo XIII on the “fundamental premise that the Church could solve social problems” is dismissed as a “triumphant ecclesiology” (74). Hence, Werner must fault “Husslein’s adherence to the concept that the Catholic Church could solve the social crisis,” which “kept him from dialogue with Christian Socialists.” Werner continues his criticism by saying, “Even more unfortunate, Husslein failed to understand the Social Gospel movement.” And what would Husslein have learned from Christian Socialists and the Social Gospel movement? We are not told. Werner

does not consider the possibility that Husslein knew in advance that such a dialogue would be fruitless, that Catholic social teaching rejected the fundamental premises of both socialism and liberal Protestantism, and that all such dialogue could achieve was the confusion of the faithful.

Along similar lines, Werner must also fault Husslein for resisting the American model of organized labor. Following Leo XIII, Husslein promoted distinctively Catholic labor unions, which would not only improve wages and working conditions but also satisfy moral and spiritual needs. Werner laments “Rather than an American solution, Husslein turned to a European model, the medieval guild, as the solution to social problems” (49). As it turns out, the “American solution” was for Catholics to swell the ranks of secular labor unions and ignore Pius X’s requirement that this be supplemented by joining “religious associations” (113).

At no point in the book does Werner take seriously Father Husslein’s most basic principle, namely, “the message of Roman Catholicism as the only antidote to the world’s injustice.” Werner disagrees with Husslein’s principle because he thinks that the Catholic Church inadequately addressed social concerns before the pontificate of Leo XIII: “Prior to *Rerum Novarum*, social justice had been a peripheral issue for the Church” (7).

What evidence does Werner provide for this incredible claim? While commenting on Husslein’s articles on slavery, Werner tells us “The Catholic Church was extremely late in condemning slavery. In 1888, Leo XIII promulgated *In plurimis*—the first major papal document to condemn slavery—two decades after the American Civil War” (50). On the contrary, slavery was condemned by Pius II in 1462, by Paul III in 1537 (*Sublimis Deus*), and by Urban VIII in 1639. Urban VIII went so far as to excommunicate all slave owners in Paraguay, Brazil, and the West Indies. These facts, and indeed the whole history of the Church’s efforts against slavery, are laid out in *In plurimis*, to which Werner refers but appears not to have read carefully, if at all.

Werner’s ignorance on this matter is significant, because it is the one great injustice to which Pius XI refers when responding to the Communist critics of the Church, who claim that she failed in her social mission. Pius XI points out “It was Christianity that first affirmed the real and universal brotherhood of all men of whatever race and condition. This doctrine she proclaimed by a method, and with an amplitude and conviction, unknown to preceding centuries; and with it, she potently contributed to the abolition of slavery” (*Divini Redemptoris*, no. 36).

Husslein fits into Werner’s caricature of Catholic history as an American version of Leo XIII, a social thinker pointed in the right direction but still burdened with a “triumphant” Catholicism that exaggerates the Church’s virtues and ignores her sins. We meet here that familiar standby of progressive Catholics, the story of “old Church/bad Church.” The “new Church/good Church” does not distinguish itself from socialism or liberal Protestantism but joins forces with them to work for a better world in this life with no discussion of the hereafter.

Werner's biography thus provides a template for the way that progressive Catholics read *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno*; that is, not as authoritative texts that should form the minds of those who read them but, rather, as flawed but admirable attempts to articulate a secularized vision of labor unions and bigger government. All of the passages that emphasize man's eternal destiny, or that place economic development secondary to the moral and spiritual development of workers, disappear.

On this point, it is worth remarking that after the publication of *The Christian Social Manifesto* in 1931 until his death in 1951, "The bulk of Husslein's writings was devotional" (148). Among the topics of his ten books and fifty articles were the Eucharist, the Holy Family, and the social reign of Christ the King. After presenting some possibilities for this change, Werner speculates that "Husslein went deep to the core assumptions underlying his social writing: that social change would only come about with a change in the hearts of human beings and only true religion could accomplish such change" (129). If this is true, Husslein fully merits the status that Werner gives him in the book's title, namely that of prophet. A prophet sees that what appear to be social or political problems are truly spiritual problems.

Here is the great dividing line between Werner and his subject, indeed, the great dividing line between Catholic social teaching as articulated in *Rerum Novarum*, and as articulated by the progressive Catholics who now control the institutional Church in America. Husslein, following the popes, put man's spiritual good first and articulated his vision for social justice in light of man's eternal destiny. In the words of Leo XIII, "What would it profit a worker to secure through association an abundance of goods if his soul, through lack of its proper food, should run the risk of perishing?" (*RN*, no. 42). By contrast, Werner's book offers us a social agenda based on nothing higher than economic advancement. Indeed, the book concludes with a loving paean to the onset of "child labor laws, minimum wage laws, basic safety standards, effective unions, rising wages" (157).

Werner gives several reasons for the contributions of Husslein to have been forgotten, but one stands out among the rest: "Husslein's style and method of calling for a return to Christian principles seemed naïve in later years" (157). What Husslein's successors would consider naïvete might be alternatively described as faithful simplicity. Husslein submitted himself to the whole teaching of Leo XIII and Pius XI, even where that teaching went contrary to the American Catholic desire to "belong" and to be accepted. Father Husslein's lack of permanent influence in this country may speak more to the conformity of American Catholics to the spirit of the age than to the limitations of his method or, more important, his message.

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