

JOHN PAUL II
HOLY FATHER
« CENTESIMUS ANNUS »
ENCYCLICAL LETTER

ON THE HUNDRETH ANNIVERSARY OF
RERUM NOVARUM

I. CHARACTERISTICS OF "RERUM NOVARUM"

4. Towards the end of the last century the Church found herself facing a historical process which had already been taking place for some time, but which was by then reaching a critical point. The determining factor in this process was a combination of radical changes which had taken place in the political, economic and social fields, and in the areas of science and technology, to say nothing of the wide influence of the prevailing ideologies. In the sphere of politics, the result of these changes was a *new conception of society and of the State*, and consequently *of authority* itself. A traditional society was passing away and another was beginning to be formed — one which brought the hope of new freedoms but also the threat of new forms of injustice and servitude.

In the sphere of economics, in which scientific discoveries and their practical application come together, new structures for the production of consumer goods had progressively taken shape. A new form of *property* had appeared — capital; and a *new form of labour* — labour for wages, characterized by high rates of production which lacked due regard for sex, age or family situation, and were determined solely by efficiency, with a view to increasing profits.

In this way labour became a commodity to be freely bought and sold on the market, its price determined by the law of supply and demand, without taking into account the bare minimum required for the support of the individual and his family. Moreover, the worker was not even sure of being able to sell "his own commodity", continually threatened as he was by unemployment, which, in the absence of any kind of social security, meant the spectre of death by starvation.

The result of this transformation was a society "divided into two classes, separated by a deep chasm".⁶ This situation was linked to the marked change taking place in the political order already mentioned. Thus the prevailing political theory of the time sought to promote total economic freedom by appropriate laws, or, conversely, by a deliberate lack of any intervention. At the same time, another conception of property and economic life was beginning to appear in an organized and often violent form, one which implied a new political and social structure.

At the height of this clash, when people finally began to realize fully the very grave injustice of social realities in many places and the danger of a revolution fanned by ideals which were then called "socialist", Pope Leo XIII intervened with a document which dealt in a systematic way with the "condition of the workers". The Encyclical had been preceded by others devoted to teachings of a political character; still others would appear later.⁷ Here, particular mention must be made of the Encyclical *Libertas praestantissimum*, which called attention to the essential bond between human freedom and truth, so that freedom which refused to be

bound to the truth would fall into arbitrariness and end up submitting itself to the vilest of passions, to the point of self-destruction. Indeed, what is the origin of all the evils to which *Rerum novarum* wished to respond, if not a kind of freedom which, in the area of economic and social activity, cuts itself off from the truth about man?

The Pope also drew inspiration from the teaching of his Predecessors, as well as from the many documents issued by Bishops, from scientific studies promoted by members of the laity, from the work of Catholic movements and associations, and from the Church's practical achievements in the social field during the second half of the nineteenth century.

5. The "new things" to which the Pope devoted his attention were anything but positive. The first paragraph of the Encyclical describes in strong terms the "new things" (*rerum novarum*) which gave it its name: "That *the spirit of revolutionary change* which has long been disturbing the nations of the world should have passed beyond the sphere of politics and made its influence felt in the related sphere of practical economics is not surprising. Progress in industry, the development of new trades, the changing relationship between employers and workers, the enormous wealth of a few as opposed to the poverty of the many, the increasing self-reliance of the workers and their closer association with each other, as well as a notable decline in morality: all these elements have led to the conflict now taking place".⁸

The Pope and the Church with him were confronted, as was the civil community, by a society which was torn by a conflict all the more harsh and inhumane because it knew no rule or regulation. It was *the conflict between capital and labour*, or — as the Encyclical puts it — the worker question. It is precisely about this conflict, in the very pointed terms in which it then appeared, that the Pope did not hesitate to speak.

Here we find the first reflection for our times as suggested by the Encyclical. In the face of a conflict which set man against man, almost as if they were "wolves", a conflict between the extremes of mere physical survival on the one side and opulence on the other, the Pope did not hesitate to intervene by virtue of his "apostolic office",⁹ that is, on the basis of the mission received from Jesus Christ himself to "feed his lambs and tend his sheep" (cf. Jn 21:15-17), and to "bind and loose" on earth for the Kingdom of Heaven (cf. Mt 16:19). The Pope's intention was certainly to restore peace, and the present-day reader cannot fail to note his severe condemnation, in no uncertain terms, of the class struggle.¹⁰ However, the Pope was very much aware that *peace is built on the foundation of justice*: what was essential to the Encyclical was precisely its proclamation of the fundamental conditions for justice in the economic and social situation of the time.¹¹

In this way, Pope Leo XIII, in the footsteps of his Predecessors, created a lasting paradigm for the Church. The Church, in fact, has something to say about specific human situations, both individual and communal, national and international. She formulates a genuine doctrine for these situations, a *corpus* which enables her to analyze social realities, to make judgments about them and to indicate directions to be taken for the just resolution of the problems involved.

In Pope Leo XIII's time such a concept of the Church's right and duty was far from being commonly admitted. Indeed, a two-fold approach prevailed: one directed to this world and this life, to which faith ought to remain extraneous; the other directed towards a purely other-worldly salvation, which neither enlightens nor directs existence on earth. The Pope's approach in publishing *Rerum novarum* gave the Church "citizenship status" as it were, amid

the changing realities of public life, and this standing would be more fully confirmed later on. In effect, to teach and to spread her social doctrine pertains to the Church's evangelizing mission and is an essential part of the Christian message, since this doctrine points out the direct consequences of that message in the life of society and situates daily work and struggles for justice in the context of bearing witness to Christ the Saviour. This doctrine is likewise a source of unity and peace in dealing with the conflicts which inevitably arise in social and economic life. Thus it is possible to meet these new situations without degrading the human person's transcendent dignity, either in oneself or in one's adversaries, and to direct those situations towards just solutions.

Today, at a distance of a hundred years, the validity of this approach affords me the opportunity to contribute to the development of Christian social doctrine. The "new evangelization", which the modern world urgently needs and which I have emphasized many times, must include among its essential elements a proclamation of the Church's social doctrine. As in the days of Pope Leo XIII, this doctrine is still suitable for indicating the right way to respond to the great challenges of today, when ideologies are being increasingly discredited. Now, as then, we need to repeat that there can be *no genuine solution of the "social question" apart from the Gospel*, and that the "new things" can find in the Gospel the context for their correct understanding and the proper moral perspective for judgment on them.

6. With the intention of shedding light on the *conflict* which had arisen between capital and labour, Pope Leo XIII affirmed the fundamental rights of workers. Indeed, the key to reading the Encyclical is the *dignity of the worker* as such, and, for the same reason, the *dignity of work*, which is defined as follows: "to exert oneself for the sake of procuring what is necessary for the various purposes of life, and first of all for self-preservation".¹² The Pope describes work as "personal, inasmuch as the energy expended is bound up with the personality and is the exclusive property of him who acts, and, furthermore, was given to him for his advantage".¹³ Work thus belongs to the vocation of every person; indeed, man expresses and fulfils himself by working. At the same time, work has a "social" dimension through its intimate relationship not only to the family, but also to the common good, since "it may truly be said that it is only by the labour of working-men that States grow rich".¹⁴ These are themes that I have taken up and developed in my Encyclical *Laborem exercens*.¹⁵

Another important principle is undoubtedly that of the *right to "private property"*.¹⁶ The amount of space devoted to this subject in the Encyclical shows the importance attached to it. The Pope is well aware that private property is not an absolute value, nor does he fail to proclaim the necessary complementary principles, such as the *universal destination of the earth's goods*.¹⁷

On the other hand, it is certainly true that the type of private property which Leo XIII mainly considers is land ownership.¹⁸ But this does not mean that the reasons adduced to safeguard private property or to affirm the right to possess the things necessary for one's personal development and the development of one's family, whatever the concrete form which that right may assume, are not still valid today. This is something which must be affirmed once more in the face of the changes we are witnessing in systems formerly dominated by collective ownership of the means of production, as well as in the face of the increasing instances of poverty or, more precisely, of hindrances to private ownership in many parts of the world, including those where systems predominate which are based on an affirmation of the right to private property. As a result of these changes and of the persistence of poverty, a

deeper analysis of the problem is called for, an analysis which will be developed later in this document.

7. In close connection with the right to private property, Pope Leo XIII's Encyclical also affirms *other rights* as inalienable and proper to the human person. Prominent among these, because of the space which the Pope devotes to it and the importance which he attaches to it, is the "natural human right" to form private associations. This means above all *the right to establish professional associations* of employers and workers, or of workers alone.¹⁹ Here we find the reason for the Church's defence and approval of the establishment of what are commonly called trade unions: certainly not because of ideological prejudices or in order to surrender to a class mentality, but because the right of association is a natural right of the human being, which therefore precedes his or her incorporation into political society. Indeed, the formation of unions "cannot ... be prohibited by the State", because "the State is bound to protect natural rights, not to destroy them; and if it forbids its citizens to form associations, it contradicts the very principle of its own existence".²⁰

Together with this right, which — it must be stressed — the Pope explicitly acknowledges as belonging to workers, or, using his own language, to "the working class", the Encyclical affirms just as clearly the right to the "limitation of working hours", the right to legitimate rest and the right of children and women²¹ to be treated differently with regard to the type and duration of work.

If we keep in mind what history tells us about the practices permitted or at least not excluded by law regarding the way in which workers were employed, without any guarantees as to working hours or the hygienic conditions of the work-place, or even regarding the age and sex of apprentices, we can appreciate the Pope's severe statement: "It is neither just nor human so to grind men down with excessive labour as to stupefy their minds and wear out their bodies". And referring to the "contract" aimed at putting into effect "labour relations" of this sort, he affirms with greater precision, that "in all agreements between employers and workers there is always the condition expressed or understood" that proper rest be allowed, proportionate to "the wear and tear of one's strength". He then concludes: "To agree in any other sense would be against what is right and just".²²

8. The Pope immediately adds *another right* which the worker has as a person. This is the right to a "just wage", which cannot be left to the "free consent of the parties, so that the employer, having paid what was agreed upon, has done his part and seemingly is not called upon to do anything beyond".²³ It was said at the time that the State does not have the power to intervene in the terms of these contracts, except to ensure the fulfilment of what had been explicitly agreed upon. This concept of relations between employers and employees, purely pragmatic and inspired by a thorough-going individualism, is severely censured in the Encyclical as contrary to the twofold nature of work as a personal and necessary reality. For if work *as something personal* belongs to the sphere of the individual's free use of his own abilities and energy, *as something necessary* it is governed by the grave obligation of every individual to ensure "the preservation of life". "It necessarily follows", the Pope concludes, "that every individual has a natural right to procure what is required to live; and the poor can procure that in no other way than by what they can earn through their work".²⁴

A workman's wages should be sufficient to enable him to support himself, his wife and his children. "If through necessity or fear of a worse evil the workman accepts harder conditions

because an employer or contractor will afford no better, he is made the victim of force and injustice".²⁵

Would that these words, written at a time when what has been called "unbridled capitalism" was pressing forward, should not have to be repeated today with the same severity. Unfortunately, even today one finds instances of contracts between employers and employees which lack reference to the most elementary justice regarding the employment of children or women, working hours, the hygienic condition of the work-place and fair pay; and this is the case despite the *International Declarations and Conventions* on the subject²⁶ and the *internal laws* of States. The Pope attributed to the "public authority" the "strict duty" of providing properly for the welfare of the workers, because a failure to do so violates justice; indeed, he did not hesitate to speak of "distributive justice".²⁷

9. To these rights Pope Leo XIII adds another right regarding the condition of the working class, one which I wish to mention because of its importance: namely, the right to discharge freely one's religious duties. The Pope wished to proclaim this right within the context of the other rights and duties of workers, notwithstanding the general opinion, even in his day, that such questions pertained exclusively to an individual's private life. He affirms the need for Sunday rest so that people may turn their thoughts to heavenly things and to the worship which they owe to Almighty God.²⁸ No one can take away this human right, which is based on a commandment; in the words of the Pope: "no man may with impunity violate that human dignity which God himself treats with great reverence", and consequently, the State must guarantee to the worker the exercise of this freedom.²⁹

It would not be mistaken to see in this clear statement a springboard for the principle of the right to religious freedom, which was to become the subject of many solemn *International Declarations and Conventions*,³⁰ as well as of the Second Vatican Council's well-known *Declaration* and of my own repeated teaching.³¹ In this regard, one may ask whether existing laws and the practice of industrialized societies effectively ensure in our own day the exercise of this basic right to Sunday rest.

10. Another important aspect, which has many applications to our own day, is the concept of the relationship between the State and its citizens. *Rerum novarum* criticizes two social and economic systems: socialism and liberalism. The opening section, in which the right to private property is reaffirmed, is devoted to socialism. Liberalism is not the subject of a special section, but it is worth noting that criticisms of it are raised in the treatment of the duties of the State.³² The State cannot limit itself to "favouring one portion of the citizens", namely the rich and prosperous, nor can it "neglect the other", which clearly represents the majority of society. Otherwise, there would be a violation of that law of justice which ordains that every person should receive his due. "When there is question of defending the rights of individuals, the defenceless and the poor have a claim to special consideration. The richer class has many ways of shielding itself, and stands less in need of help from the State; whereas the mass of the poor have no resources of their own to fall back on, and must chiefly depend on the assistance of the State. It is for this reason that wage-earners, since they mostly belong to the latter class, should be specially cared for and protected by the Government".³³

These passages are relevant today, especially in the face of the new forms of poverty in the world, and also because they are affirmations which do not depend on a specific notion of the State or on a particular political theory. Leo XIII is repeating an elementary principle of sound political organization, namely, the more that individuals are defenceless within a given

society, the more they require the care and concern of others, and in particular the intervention of governmental authority.

In this way what we nowadays call the principle of solidarity, the validity of which both in the internal order of each nation and in the international order I have discussed in the Encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis*,³⁴ is clearly seen to be one of the fundamental principles of the Christian view of social and political organization. This principle is frequently stated by Pope Leo XIII, who uses the term "friendship", a concept already found in Greek philosophy. Pope Pius XI refers to it with the equally meaningful term "social charity". Pope Paul VI, expanding the concept to cover the many modern aspects of the social question, speaks of a "civilization of love".³⁵

11. Re-reading the Encyclical in the light of contemporary realities enables us to appreciate *the Church's constant concern for and dedication to* categories of people who are especially beloved to the Lord Jesus. The content of the text is an excellent testimony to the continuity within the Church of the so-called "preferential option for the poor", an option which I defined as a "special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity".³⁶ Pope Leo's Encyclical on the "condition of the workers" is thus an Encyclical on the poor and on the terrible conditions to which the new and often violent process of industrialization had reduced great multitudes of people. Today, in many parts of the world, similar processes of economic, social and political transformation are creating the same evils.

If Pope Leo XIII calls upon the State to remedy the condition of the poor in accordance with justice, he does so because of his timely awareness that the State has the duty of watching over the common good and of ensuring that every sector of social life, not excluding the economic one, contributes to achieving that good, while respecting the rightful autonomy of each sector. This should not however lead us to think that Pope Leo expected the State to solve every social problem. On the contrary, he frequently insists on necessary limits to the State's intervention and on its instrumental character, inasmuch as the individual, the family and society are prior to the State, and inasmuch as the State exists in order to protect their rights and not stifle them.³⁷

The relevance of these reflections for our own day is inescapable. It will be useful to return later to this important subject of the limits inherent in the nature of the state. For now, the points which have been emphasized (certainly not the only ones in the Encyclical) are situated in continuity with the Church's social teaching, and in the light of a sound view of private property, work, the economic process, the reality of the State and, above all, of man himself. Other themes will be mentioned later when we examine certain aspects of the contemporary situation. From this point forward it will be necessary to keep in mind that the main thread and, in a certain sense, the guiding principle of Pope Leo's Encyclical, and of all of the Church's social doctrine, is a *correct view of the human person* and of his unique value, inasmuch as "man ... is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself".³⁸ God has imprinted his own image and likeness on man (cf. Gen 1:26), conferring upon him an incomparable dignity, as the Encyclical frequently insists. In effect, beyond the rights which man acquires by his own work, there exist rights which do not correspond to any work he performs, but which flow from his essential dignity as a person.