

## Rerum Novarum and Protestant Social Teachings

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### Introduction

I am very grateful that the leadership of the Fondazione has added a segment to the annual meeting on Rerum Novarum. I consider that new things are happening every day. New things are thus part of God's order for our world.

His creation is intentionally not static; his creation moves forward in time and its components therefore ceaselessly both move and rest. Each has its own virtues, its own being, which seeks to be and to move.

As Heraclitus said, change is constant as we cannot step into the same stream twice. Change is fixed like a mathematical principle. Such constants are part of God's unchanging will.

If we are to consider the part we are to play in the created world, we must consider what change is doing, what is the *rerum novarum* of our times. We must reflect on what is constant and on what is changing, keeping the dynamic tension between them always in our minds.

For much of what is new is actually only the unfolding of a constant. God's purposes have many forms of expression – some old; some new. God works his wonders in, to us, mysterious ways.

In one sense our times are new – social media, space exploration; wireless communications, container ships for international cargoes. But in another sense they are the same.

What Pope Leo XIII said in his 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum* about his times may also be said about ours:

“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 cognate sphere of practical economics is not surprising. The elements of the conflict now raging are unmistakable, in the vast expansion of industrial pursuits and the marvellous discoveries of science; in the changed relations between masters and workmen; in the enormous fortunes of some few individuals, and the utter poverty of the masses; the increased self-reliance and closer mutual combination of the working classes; as also, finally, in the prevailing moral degeneracy. The momentous gravity of the state of things now obtaining fills every mind with painful apprehension; wise men

are discussing it; practical men are proposing schemes; popular meetings, legislatures, and rulers of nations are all busied with it - actually there is no question which has taken deeper hold on the public mind.”

In that Encyclical, Pope Leo affirmed that what is new in the world is also worthy of our study and solicitude: “Neither must it be supposed that the solicitude of the Church is so preoccupied with the spiritual concerns of her children as to neglect their temporal and earthly interests.”

Pope Leo in *Rerum Novarum* expressed his conviction that search for moral clarity in the midst of change and “new things” is human dignity at its best, saying “It is more easy to understand that the true worth and nobility of man lie in his moral qualities, that is, in virtue; that virtue is, moreover, the common inheritance of men, equally within the reach of high and low, rich and poor; and that virtue, and virtue alone, wherever found, will be followed by the rewards of everlasting happiness.”

How then may we, when considering the new possibilities of our times, estimate the “true worth and nobility of each person” and encourage all to seek out their best moral qualities that our times may be structured by virtue rather than by greed, narcissistic negligence, anger, fear, hatred or other malevolent intent?

Granted, our world is not divine. It is not the Kingdom of Heaven. Nevertheless, our world is God’s work, infused with his creative genius and reflecting his good intentions that life as we know it can be a blessing and an opportunity for redemption of wrongs and injustices. Therefore, our world is, in part, a realm of Common Grace, a gift of the Creator for us to treasure and keep. The “new things” which occur in the realm of Common Grace are intended no doubt for us to note and reflect upon as we seek to understand our destinies.

First, God concluded that his creation of the world was good. (Genesis 1:25) He made us in his image as a reflection of his worth. (Genesis 1:27) After the great flood, God blessed Noah and his sons and found them worthy of receiving his covenant that they could peacefully be fruitful in the world and multiply therein. (Genesis 9:1,9)

Psalms 145 sings praises of the Lord God: “The Lord upholds all who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down. The eyes of all look to you. And you give them their food in proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing.” (14-16)

The word of the Lord to Ezekiel (*Ezekiel* 34) was for the care of his flock. The grace of the Lord was that the flock not be scattered, not be left as meat to all the wild beasts, not left weak and diseased. Those who had failed to care for the flock were to be discharged from their duties so that the Lord himself would lead the flock to good pasture, bind up that which was broken and strengthen that which was sick. Thus would the Lord God care for his flock in this temporal world of strife and woe.

We find in *Micah* a vision of Common Grace experienced: “But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid.” (Micah 4:4)

The books of *Proverbs* and *Ecclesiastes* can well be considered as providing thoughtful reflections to help us intentionally set our courses constructively within the realm of Common Grace as it is given us by the Creator of all things.

*Ecclesiastes* pointedly reminds us that the realm of Common Grace has its limitations and its finitudes as, within that realm, there is both a time for giving birth and a time for dying; both a time for knocking down and a time for building; both a time for tears and a time for laughter; both a time for war and a time for peace.

I find the Book of Job, to me the most difficult of all the books in the Bible to really understand, to be a commentary on the realm of Common Grace. It can be a realm of prosperous grace given by God symbolized by Job's good fortune in the beginning and again, after his tribulations, at the end, but it is at the same time also a realm ruled over by God alone who can giveth and taketh away at his pleasure.

Changes came to Job, harsh changes, and he must reflect upon them and reconsider his course.

We can be tested in the realm of Common Grace. At one point in his cruel adversity, Job asks of God "What are human beings that you should take them so seriously, subjecting them to your scrutiny, that morning after morning you should examine them and at every instance test them?" (Job 7:17,18)

Jesus noted that God would give sunlight to the evil and the good and would send rain on the just and the unjust. (*Matthew* 5:45). Moreover, Jesus reminded us that God provides succor for the fowls of the air and gives beauty to the lilies and provides for the grass in the field, so he would provide for us with food and raiment knowing that we have legitimate need of sustenance. (*Matthew* 6: 25-34).

In this understanding of God's Common Grace, I think Jesus spoke optimistically that simply "ask and it shall be given you; seek and ye shall find; knock and it shall be opened to you." (*Luke* 11:9)

In the Nag Hammadi text the Gospel of Thomas, we are told Jesus said: "*Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there.*" This presumes that holiness is in the world around us and not only in some far off place like Heaven.

John Calvin in his *Institutes* wrote that: "Paul, accordingly, after reminding the Athenians that they "might feel after God and find him," immediately adds, that "he is not far from every one of us," (*Acts* 17:27); every man having within himself undoubted evidence of the heavenly grace by which he lives, and moves, and has his being." - (Book 1, Chapter 5:3).

So, notwithstanding the grace which has been infused into the realm of Common Grace, no perfection for our kind can be found there. The realm of Common Grace is also the realm of inevitable death, of disease and broken bones, of loneliness and heartbreak.

Nonetheless, for all of God's concern in providing a common home, Jesus advised that we are first to seek his kingdom. But that search too is not made arduous for in his parables Jesus confirms that the Kingdom of Heaven rests in part in the realm of Common Grace around us. The Kingdom of Heaven is analogized to a seed of the

mustard plant and to leaven which is kneaded into bread. (*Matthew* 13:31, 33) Part of God's grace is to give us capacity to reach out to him and his righteousness easily. The Lord's Prayer confirms that we may ask God for our daily bread and for his forgiveness. These proceeds of his grace are thus not at all far from us.

Living well and rightly in the Realm of Common Grace does not happen by accident or through spiteful arrogance, the hubris of anthropocentrism. As Jesus taught, we live not by bread alone but "by every word of God". We are called to live in the Realm of Common Grace by standards of fidelity to God's goodness and his teleology for sustainability of such goodness in the world.

These are social teachings which, though they are insufficient for our salvation, guide us towards happiness in this life and having honor in the eyes of God. Social teachings make us worthy and open our lives to better prospects for eternal salvation in keeping with the ministry of Jesus Christ.

The ministry of Jesus Christ has evolved in human hands into three modes of practice: Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant.

Though different in liturgy, institutional arrangements of ecclesiastical authority, and some important beliefs, the three expressions of Jesus's ministry can be dynamically complementary, synergistic, each part of a greater whole in the eyes of God, each extending and qualifying the human tendencies of the others, each contributing its own insights and modalities.

This is especially true in providing social teachings for the worldly realm of Common Grace.

Orthodox recommendations propose an engagement with Theosis – the seeking of God in this world.

Roman Catholic encyclicals focus on the common good, on constructive habits and duties which will contribute to perfecting God's creation in alignment with his purposes.

Protestant teachings highlight the individual's autonomous capacity for ministry and his or her ethical obligations in stewardship of God's creation.

## **Protestant Social Teachings**

### **A statement of Reformation Principles applicable to the 21st Century**

#### **Background**

The governments of the world have adopted 17 sustainable development goals and targets for the reduction of greenhouse gases creating a new economic growth model for the 21st century.

The Catholic Church has evolved articulate social teachings which provide guidance for ethical decision-making under this new approach to human progress.

Upon the 500th anniversary of Luther's initiation of reformed thinking for Christians, those in the Reformation Tradition need similarly to articulate and to contribute their ethical insights for use in this new era.

The Reformation provided cultural and intellectual space for the rise of faith in natural law and its use in modern science. Natural law and science, in turn, flowered in the Enlightenment leading to modernity through institutionalized rationality in the economy, culture and politics. But Enlightenment faith in reason created space for the rise of a post-modern culture of narcissism where self-actualization without respect for values and virtue became the common wisdom for educated elites.

Post-modern cultures have severed power from justice, individual rights from responsibilities.

Reformation emphasis on the responsibility of individuals before God and humanity can be a constructive counter-balance to the meanness and nihilism of post-modern selfishness.

The core Reformation Principles for living a worthy life in the realm of common grace are:

- 1) Individuals are chosen of God to be responsible stewards in the use of earthly powers. Each individual is called to be a minister of God. As we receive grace from God, so we must reciprocate by giving grace back to his creation.
- 2) Each individual is to use their ministry in service of God's providence by finding their own unique vocation and giving their full loyalty to that work taking due care in the execution of their trusts.
- 3) In this service, each individual must respect every aspect of God's creation from their neighbors to the environment.

One of the most important aspects of Luther's thinking – if not the most important one – was the decisive importance of every individual human person: When making a judgment about the right thing to do, it comes to one acting in accord with what one thinks is the right thing to do and also with regard to accountability before God and any "neighbor", it is the individual person who is called upon.

A key idea behind the reformation and the "theory of change" driving it is the role and importance of individuals and their personal relation to God – whatever is important, it is individuals who must make it or break it. Mutual respect and trust in each other's integrity is the single most important basis for sustainable societal cooperation – changes in the personal mindset brings about change (reforms) in the collective mindset.

Two basic challenges (then and today): (a) Individuals must take the time effort to reflect on their nonnegotiable, fundamental values and let these determine the quality of their actions in every-day situations; b) they must also weave these values into the

fabric of their surroundings. That artistry is their calling, their vocation in each and every station they may occupy from time to time. Their callings apply to family, community, business, politics and government, and art and culture.

Connecting these Lutheran ideas with efforts to achieve sustainable development goals would refresh the notion that – with all due respect for the importance of structures and institutions – it is always human beings who do or do not do the right thing.

As a consequence: we must focus on the importance of leaders' personalities: we must choose holistic thinkers, not narrowly skilled technocratic experts, in finance, marketing, etc. While experts are irreplaceable because of the depths of their expertise, different forms of expertise are thought-silos in which one is not able to grasp what is important from an overall perspective. What does that mean for management development? What does that mean for incentive systems, performance appraisals, promotions? What does that mean for selection processes? - Etc.

The hopeful conclusion would be that – in the light of sustainability values – different kinds of capital have to be managed and taken care of. Human responsibility in a holistic sense is human responsibility with an intergenerational dimension embracing the core values that we need to pass down through time. How can we shape law and regulation (rules) in such a way that they foster processes consistent with what we know about sustainability and mitigate the short-term pressures of the financial markets?

The macro- level subject matter is moral capitalism (multi-cultural social teachings). The meso-level subject matter is corporate accountability for different kinds of capital (Catholic Social Teachings). And the micro-level subject matter is individual ethics grounded in a transcendental vocation (Protestant Social Teachings).

## **Four Protestant Social Teachings**

### **1) Common Grace**

The Kingdom of Heaven is all around us. We are privileged to live in a realm into which we are born which can nourish and sustain us all our lives. The Kingdom of Heaven is like leaven in bread – it permeates the loaf. There is no place where it cannot be. Common Grace embraces all under God who “maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.” (Matthew 5:45)

Common Grace is God's care for the created world: “consider the ravens: for they neither sow nor reap; which neither have storehouse nor barn; and God feedeth them: how much more are ye better than the fowls?” (Luke 12:24)

In the Gospel of Thomas text we find Jesus saying that the Kingdom of Heaven “will not come by waiting for it. It will not be a matter of saying 'Here it is' or 'There it is.' Rather, the Kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the earth, and men do not see it.” (113)

The Gospel of Thomas also quotes Jesus affirming that “Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find Me there.” (77)

As we live in the realm of Common Grace, we should be mindful of our heritage and our earthly opportunities as gifts for which humble gratitude is due.

*[The realm of Common Grace determines fundamental meritorious goods promoting human flourishing. The UN Sustainable Development Goals seek to protect the realm of Common Grace and help it flourish. International law of Human Rights prevents degradation of human flourishing in the realm of Common Grace.]*

*[Common Grace intersects with Catholic Social Teachings with concern for the Universal Destination of Goods and the Common Good.]*

## **2) Justified Personhood**

By fate we are born into the realm of Common Grace and its constraints; through passion we are made willful; through faith and grace we become better. The quality of our being within the realm of common grace becomes an immediate pursuit for us of excellence separate from our hopes to have and hold that grace which is eternal.

Just as a mustard seed grows to great size, so too we are to grow and become. (Matthew 13:32)

Jesus suggested that we are to be in the realm of Common Grace as salt – to fit our purpose, to do our proper work, we must not lose flavor. That means we are to “Live not by bread but by every word of God” (Matthew 4:9)

The rightful human person has virtues inspiring conduct with constructive idealism, empowering the self to act out of wisdom, and purposing the will to do justice.

Living by virtues makes the soul happy. As Jesus asked; “For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Matthew 16:26)

Just holding in our hands the powers of the world is not our fit place. We must choose how we are to live. (Matthew 4:9) We cannot live by the works of Mammon and still follow the word of God. (Matthew 6:24) We are rather to so live in the realm of Common Grace that we let our “light so shine before men, that they may see our good works” and so “glorify” the transcendent source of our inspiration. (Matthew 5:16)

*[Justified personhood provides a foundation for trustworthiness and permits the assumption of full citizenship and consumer responsibilities.]*

[In Catholic Social Teachings justified personhood is protected by concern for subsidiarity and solidarity.]

### **3) The Moral Sense**

We are naturally enabled to become justified persons. We have the capacity for faithful acceptance of that which cannot be seen today, of that which is not yet instantiated in the world. We have the capacity to provide grace, to give and receive love. We have the capacity to possess virtues.

Jesus affirmed the constructive use of free will when he said “a good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things;” (Matthew 12:25)

We can always change our ways. Going astray does not preclude us from recovery of a good heart as Jesus suggested in the parable of the prodigal son. (Luke 15:11-32)

Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God is within us and that through love of God and neighbor we can come to a place “not far from the Kingdom of God”. (Mark 13:34)

Jesus took as blessed everyday behaviors within our powers to have in our minds and hearts and to live by: being poor not haughty in spirit; mourning for loss; meekness; hunger and thirst for becoming better in spirit and virtue; being merciful; being pure in heart; making peace. (Matthew 5:3-9)

*[The moral sense provides the ethical foundation for human rights and responsibilities.]*

*[In Catholic Social Teachings, the Moral Sense is honored by concern for human dignity, subsidiarity, and solidarity.]*



#### 4) Vocation

Through service in our work inspired by grace and sustained by faith, we become justified as human persons. Whatever our standing is, we can be ministers of a higher good, a greater glory.

We must in life often render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's. But that is not a rendering unto God of what is due to him in support of his higher lordship. (Mark 12:17; Matthew 22:20)

As Christ came to minister, so therefore does ministry uplift and sanctify a person. (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45) The vocation he assumed was that of a good shepherd. (John 10:11) He advised stewardship as the path to distinction in the realm of Common Grace. (Matthew 20:27) "The greatest among you will be your servant." (Matthew 23:11) Through ministry that which is base and mundane becomes ennobled and spiritual, taking on worth and dignity.

Our earthly powers are to be held in trust as fiduciary duties to the realm of common grace, to ourselves, and to neighbors

Duties to the realm of common grace arise from the virtues of humility, charity, and productivity.

As for humility, Jesus praised those who are least among people as having greatness. (Luke 9:48) "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." (Matthew 23:10-12)

For charity, Jesus spoke of those who gave meat to the hungry and drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, visited the sick and those in prison as having served the lord above by doing so. (Matthew 25:33-46)

The material things provided by Common Grace are useful and are to be used as Jesus proposed in the parable of the talents. (Matthew 25:14-30; Luke 19:12) To be productive, our intentionality, our labor, and our use of property require our faithful attention.

We possess the agency of a co-creator in whatever we do, be our status high or low in wealth, power, or prestige.

Duties to ourselves direct us towards acquisition of moderation, sobriety, and the seeking of wisdom.

To acquire these virtues, we owe ourselves the training and exercise of the Moral Sense until it shines upon our character to empower us without inner resistance or frustration. Thus, an active Moral Sense guides us towards living well just as water naturally flows downwards.

Duties to our neighbors call forth the virtues of love and respect, of doing unto others what we would have them do unto us. (Luke 6:31; Matthew 7:12)

Thus, in all our engagements with others, we have a calling to do right by them, just as they reciprocally are to do right by us. Whether among friends, within the family, in a trade or business or seeking to exercise a public office, we are to think of ourselves as seeking some worthiness greater than our own self-satisfaction. That we might put ourselves at odds with another should give us pause until we have reflected well on the circumstances and the goals of our respective vocations.

*[Vocation in private enterprise, commerce, and finance provides the basis for Moral Capitalism. Vocation in politics and government provides the basis for constitutional democracy under the maxim of salus populi suprema lex.]*

*[Vocation intersects with Catholic Social Teachings in the enabling of subsidiarity and solidarity and making provision for the Universal Destination of Goods.]*

## **Covenant**

While not strictly speaking a social teaching of meaning, the dynamic of covenant in the Protestant tradition stands out as the preferred method of accomplishing our vocations, using our moral sense, making ourselves worthy, and caring for the realm of common grace. With a presumption of individual agency, Protestant social teachings require a mechanism for individuals to collaborate one with another in order to generate social consequences. Willing agreement on agreed upon terms of vision, mission, purpose, goals and objectives through a process of covenanting welds together individuals with each other for small initiatives and with social structures and institutions for larger undertakings.