

Revisiting Rerum Novarum in its 120th Year

Joseph Zen Ze-Kiun, SDB
Translated by Purple Kwong

Perpetually New

In his recent encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, our present Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, stated that the Church has the truth passed down to it from Christ through His apostles. This truth complements the inadequacy of rationality, and these two things together produce wisdom. They provide a direction, content, and principles for actions of love in establishing “human” society. In fact, the teachings of the prophets are full of this wisdom. Pope Benedict emphasized that since this wisdom comes from God, it is perpetually true, and can adapt to changes in history.

Among the rich tradition of the teachings of the Church, *Rerum Novarum* by Pope Leo XIII is certainly epoch-making. It was the first time that a Pope authoritatively and systematically indicated to the faithful a method to solve social problems. At that time, social problems referred specifically to labor problems — the conditions the workers faced. Pope Leo XIII cared very much about social problems, and he mentioned this at the very beginning of his encyclical. He issued teachings on social matters on many occasions. (Pope Pius XI had listed Leo’s documents in the Foreword of his own social encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*.) But facing the labor problems of those years, Pope Leo “got a bit anxious”. The first two words *Rerum Novarum* were translated as “New Things”, and the first five words are “*Rerum Novarum semel excitata cupidine.*” *Rerum Novarum cupidine* refer to “a spirit of

revolutionary change”. In face of the revolutionary forces of his time, how could Holy Father not be worried?

New Challenges

The Industrial Revolution brought a new work situation into people’s lives. People were no longer confined to their own small area to work for a living. Science had brought about the invention of machines. The machines were placed in factories, and a small number of rich people invested in the factories. The proletariat worked for the investors. The new arrangement in itself could still be considered fair — the investors planned the production of the factory and bore all the risks, while the workers would go to work punctually, and earn their income. However, in this new situation, society was unable to provide checks and balances to its development. Wealthy and powerful people made use of their advantages to exploit the laborers, with profit as their sole aim. They accumulated for themselves enormous wealth, and took further steps to control the market. This terrible cycle went on until it reached an extreme level, which eventually led to an extreme reaction. Socialism arose to combat capitalism, and Marxism advocated that the only way to resolve the situation was through class struggle and the use of force.

Rerum Novarum began with an account of the plight of the workers. Pope Leo XIII pointed out that a small number of very rich people exploited the masses of workers, and the situation of workers was not much better than that of slaves. Misfortune and suffering weighed heavily on the great majority of poor people. Workmen’s guilds (formed together by the master and workers of the same trade) were abolished; and before the government and the law, religion did not enjoy the same status it had in the past. In this situation workers did not know to whom to turn for assistance. Socialism took advantage of this situation, and fueled the hatred of the workers towards the rich. Socialists incited the proletariat to revolt. They overthrew the system of private ownership, and handed

it over to a proletariat government. However, this arrangement only made the situation worse.

Wrong Method

The first part of the encyclical reprimanded socialism, and said that the abolition of private ownership was wrong (nos. 4-20). Then based on Church principles, the Pope showed the way towards a solution: he suggested that the Church, the government, the workers and the employers all work together to solve the problems.

Today when we read *Rerum Novarum*, we get the impression that the opponent of Leo XIII was socialism, and that the reason for this was the abolition of private ownership. We might ask: shouldn't the Holy Father criticize capitalism even more? After all, it is they who are exploiting the working class. Of course we should safeguard private property, but shouldn't we first of all emphasize that all property comes from God for the benefit of all?

When this encyclical was promulgated, people already asked these questions. Without a doubt Pope Leo XIII had severely rebuked socialism, looking upon it as a scourge. Today, 120 years later, shouldn't we admire the prophetic words of our Holy Father? History has proven that the worry and anxiety of Leo XIII were not without reason. Marxism has brought great catastrophe to the world and to humankind.

Moreover, in the encyclical, the Pope seriously reprimanded the injustice of capitalism more than once. If we read *Rerum Novarum* carefully, we certainly would not get the feeling that the Pope was defending capitalism.

The Holy Father definitely defended the right of private ownership, but he also distinguished between private ownership and its usage. Defending private ownership was a defense of the private ownership of every person. However, the guilt of the rich was that they selfishly enjoyed the wealth that God had placed in their hands, and did not use it to help those in need in accordance with God's will.

Although the Holy Father did not use the phrase “the universal destination of goods,” in paragraph no. 8, he clearly confirmed, “God has given the earth for the use and enjoyment of the whole human race,” and in no. 22 he quoted the words of St. Thomas Aquinas: “Man should not consider his material possessions as his own, but as common to all, so as to share them without hesitation when others are in need.” Thus, the Holy Father did not consider private ownership as an absolute right.

Rerum Novarum devoted lots of space (nos. 4-15) to prove that private ownership is fitting according to natural law ethics. This means that it is suitable to human nature. Human beings endowed with reason would not be satisfied with only having their daily needs met (only for the individual and for that day), but would also hope to possess some wealth to provide for the needs of themselves and their family, and to provide for the future of their children. Leo XIII especially pointed out that socialism overturned the right private ownership of property, which also shattered the hopes of the workers. Their hope was that by working hard they could earn more money, and eventually have the free usage of their own wealth to provide for their future needs. All in all, the right to private ownership of property should not be violated. Without private ownership, the political authorities would control everyone, and everyone would lose their freedom. This would lead to the loss of the incentive to make progress.

Socialism puts capitalists and workers in a state of mutual conflict. But in fact, as the Holy Father said, “Capital cannot do without labor, nor labor without capital.” (no. 19). They should cooperate in a just manner.

Every person should be respected, and based on human dignity, all persons should be equal. However, it is impossible that every person is the same. People are different in various ways: in their talents, ability, health, and physical strength. Thus their financial situations would also be different.

Good Method

After saying that socialism is not a good method to solve social problems, the Holy Father pointed out that to solve social problems, the cooperation of three parties are needed, namely, the Church, the government, and the capitalists cum workers.

The Church

In the draft of the encyclical, the sequence was government, workers, and the Church, but in the encyclical the Church came first. This did not happen by chance. Leo XIII confidently said that (no. 16) to solve social problems, we must admit that religion and the Church should have their say. If religion is left out, then all efforts would be futile. What would the role of the Church be? The most important responsibility of the Church is, based on the gospel, to teach about humankind, society, the economy, and eternal life. This would reduce the conflicts between the capitalists and the working class, and enhance understanding between them. In this way they could co-exist peacefully, cooperate with each other, and even come to love one another as brothers and sisters.

On the one hand, the Church preaches the good news of the heavenly kingdom, and reminds us that: we all are children of God, and that our real home is in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus became man, He labored, He preached, He suffered and died, and rose from the dead. We should follow Christ by bearing our crosses and cultivating virtues. On the other hand the Church has also taken action — it has also established institutions to help those who are suffering, especially the poor workers.

All this is not the responsibility of church leaders only, but all the faithful also have the responsibility to show concern for society, and contribute to its betterment according to their ability.

No doubt Pope Leo XIII was addressing Catholics when he wrote the encyclical, but he knew that people of different religious beliefs also appreciated the teachings of the Catholic Church.

The Government

The pope pointed out the responsibility of governments in paragraph nos. 31-47 of the encyclical. The government of course has a great responsibility to solve social problems. Social problems are also concerned with the common good. The government should show its concern for the citizens according to “distributive justice,” especially in regard to poorer workers. Every person is equal before the law, but poor and marginalized citizens are in greater need of help from the government. The government should also help to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor. The wage of the workers should not be decided by market mechanisms alone. The government should also monitor the situation to see that workers have a fair salary and have a healthy work environment. This would include the number of working hours and sufficient time for rest. (Of course the Holy Father was concerned that the faithful have a Sabbath day on which they can perform their religious duties.)

The government should safeguard the rights of its citizens, especially the right of private ownership. The government should intervene when human rights are not respected. But in its actions, the government should also respect individuals, families, and institutions. Obviously this refers to the “principle of subsidiarity,” although the Pope did not use this term.

The government relies on public security to safeguard the stability of society. Socialism advocates violent revolution. *Rerum Novarum* was particularly concerned about this. The state should make every effort to prevent robbery, destruction, violence, and turmoil. “Strikes” also affect the stability and prosperity of society. The government should help to settle the conflicts between employers and employees, and avoid strikes. (no.39) (The Pope also mentioned that in most of the cases injustice has led to strikes.)

Employers and Employees

Finally, in paragraph no. 48, the Holy Father said that employers and employees could also help to settle labor problems.

The employers and the employees could organize some institutions that both sides take part in, for example, cooperatives. Leo XIII was nostalgic of the artificers' guilds of the Middle Ages. However, history belongs to the past. Today "labor" unions" are mostly set up to fight for the rights of workers and to establish cooperation among the workers. In places where there is a huge Catholic population, the Church hoped to have Catholic workers' unions, not only for the sake of struggling for workers' rights, but also to help the workers in their religious faith and in morality.

In fact in explaining the contribution of the Church on social matters, Leo XIII told both the employers and the employees how they should treat one another. In nos. 20 and 22 he talked about the responsibility of the employers and the rich, and in no. 23 he taught the workers and the poor the attitude they should have towards life. It may seem naïve to use the amount of space on these two aspects to make any judgment, but it is obvious that the Holy Father is standing on the side of the workers and the poor.

Conclusion

When we read *Rerum Novarum* today, we may have the first impression that it belonged to another era, but when we read it carefully, we would discover that it has already included the social teachings of the Church that we take for granted today. Leo XIII was not only a prophet and a pioneer 120 years ago, but his teachings of 120 years ago are still relevant today. Thus we not only *commemorate* that epoch-making encyclical written 120 years ago, but we also *thank* him for giving us "precious" and perpetually new teachings.