

Everlasting Revelation

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The first Church document I studied when I took the course “Catholic Social Doctrines” for my Master of Arts in Catholic Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong was *Rerum Novarum*. I had been working on Chinese human rights issues, and as a committee member of the Justice and Peace Commission of the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese, I had also been following various problems facing grassroots people in Hong Kong. I feel that *Rerum Novarum* is a very prophetic encyclical. Many issues discussed in this Church document still exist today, although it was released 120 years ago. In this article I would like to cite examples from both Hong Kong and mainland China to demonstrate how this document is still very much applicable to situations in our world today.

The historical background of the release of *Rerum Novarum* was after the Industrial Revolution in Europe, when conflicts between the capitalist class and the proletarian class became more aggravated, resulting in the emergence of Communism advocated by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Communism promotes class struggle which was very popular in many parts of Europe. In view of this, Pope Leo XIII issued *Rerum Novarum* — the first Church document on social issues — in 1891 to draw attention to labor relations, civil rights and state responsibilities regarding these from the Church’s point of view. It also treated of reactions to social justice issues in a less confrontational way. It is valuable for us to reflect on how to apply the thoughts of this document to the social problems of Hong Kong and China today.

Over the past 30 years of economic reform in China, there is no doubt that economic development and GDP have been surging upwards. However, we have to realize how China's economic myth was realized. As the vast market with a population of 1.3 billion became more open, foreign investments flooded into China. This changed China from an "internationally isolated island" to "the world's factory." Economic growth has no doubt helped to relieve people's basic needs, but unrestrained economic growth inevitably has created various livelihood problems.

Labor Rights

Many farmers flocked to the more prosperous coastal cities (and still do so) to find jobs in factories in order to make a living. They are called "rural migrant workers" (*mingong* 民工). Their salaries are usually lower than local workers. In many places, employers collude with local government officials to gain more advantages in running their businesses. In order to make their GDP look good, many local officials turn a blind eye to some malpractices of these enterprises, which violate the Labor Law, the Labor Contract Law and regulations on occupational safety and illness. As a result, many rural migrant workers have to work in a very poor working environment. In recent years, a number of workers in gemstone factories and battery factories in Guangdong were found to have contracted silicosis and cadmium poisoning due to the excessive cadmium levels in those factories. An even more alarming case was that of the 10 workers in the famous Taiwanese-invested electronics firm Foxconn, who between January and May 2010, jumped to their deaths because they could not bear the military-like working conditions there. According to media reports, those rural migrant workers were born in the 1980s. Although they were born and grew up during the era of China's economic surge, they could not escape the fate of leaving their home villages to find jobs in factories in the cities. Life in factories is largely unknown outside that particular environment. These workers spend their

whole lives contributing to China's economic development, which the country is very proud of. However, their monthly salary is only about 1000 RMB. They simply do not enjoy the economic success of the country as a whole. The Foxconn incident shows that the younger generation of rural migrant workers can no longer endure the "sweatshop" working model. They sacrificed their lives to voice out their appeal for a better life. We must ask: Is this the necessary price that must be paid for economic development? Many parts of *Rerum Novarum* point out that employers should respect workers' dignity: "not to look upon their work people as their bondsmen, but to respect in every man his dignity as a person, often blessed with a Christian character." (RN20) Within the span of only a few months, a number of workers committed suicide. The enterprise should reflect whether there is any serious problem with its management model. If the workers are not insulted, or they do not feel that their lives and work are worthless, why would young workers feel so desperate as to end their lives like that? The Foxconn tragedy has sounded the alarm regarding the real problem of an overheated economic development from which rural migrant workers can find no escape. Although the Chinese government proudly announces that its GDP grows at a rate of more than 8 percent every year, rural migrant workers' wages are still only about 1000 RMB a month. It is clear that they do not participate in the country's economic success. Their offspring very likely can only follow in their footsteps, and become themselves rural migrant workers in the future. With the current serious wealth gap in China, this situation looks like it will sadly continue. China has been under Communist rule for more than 60 years. Communism was originally an ideology to encourage workers to confront capitalists. However, ironically, workers in China are currently enduring the exploitation of the capitalists.

On the other hand, capitalists in Hong Kong have always been enjoying the advantages of a free economy. A few years ago when labor organizations proposed passing a law to set a minimum wage, members of the Legislative Council, who for the most part

were on the side of the capitalists, immediately opposed it. Big business advocates loudly warned that the minimum wage law would affect the competitiveness of Hong Kong enterprises. They also said that it would compel small to medium-size enterprises to close down. Nevertheless public opinion in society finally forced the government to pass a minimum wage law, which can safeguard the low-income workers in our society, such as cleaners, workers in the catering industry, and security guards. However, Café de Carol, a fast food chain in Hong Kong, unscrupulously began in October 2010 the practice of not paying their employees for their lunchtime. This was done in the name of implementing the minimum wage regulation. It aroused strong criticism from all sides. Due to public pressure, Café de Carol finally gave in and withdrew the policy. Café de Carol makes a profit of billions of dollars every year, and payment to the staff for their lunchtime is only a matter of HK\$3.6 million. Café de Carol is typical of capitalists that minimize their cost by all means, even to the point of disregarding the benefit of their workers. The economic structure of Hong Kong is already well established. Thus entrepreneurs who fix their eyes on cost only would inevitably face strong criticism. If the public accepts even this level of unscrupulous practice, doesn't it mean that workers have to put aside their dignity? More than a hundred years ago, *Rerum Novarum* already warned capitalists: "that to exercise pressure upon the indigent and the destitute for the sake of gain, and to gather one's profit out of the need of another, is condemned by all laws, human and divine." (RN20) "It is neither just nor human so to grind men down with excessive labor as to stupefy their minds and wear out their bodies." (RN42). The example of Café de Coral shows that this teaching of *Rerum Novarum* is still applicable today. It is disappointing to see that the way capitalists exploited laborers in the 19th century still exists today, when the education level and social awareness have much improved. However, there are still capitalists who only attend to their own profit and ignore the basic rights of their employees.

Land Use and Distributive Justice

China's economic surge has also created another social problem, affecting hundreds of millions of people. There are plenty of reports about local government officials colluding with real estate developers to forcibly evict farmers in order to snatch their land. Very often the farmers cannot get any reasonable compensation. In many places the farmers cannot get a penny, or corrupt village committee officials seize their compensation. Many villagers have been struggling to get their compensation, but to no avail. They end up becoming petitioners. I have heard from human rights lawyers who provide assistance to these petitioners, that the provincial-level petition bureaus for the most part do not accept these petitioners' complaints. The petitioners have no choice but travel for miles to Beijing to petition, which is similar to the situation in ancient China when people traveled to the capital to submit their complaints to the emperor. The petitioners are frequently brutally treated by thugs hired by petition bureaus. They are beaten, illegally detained in guesthouses or forcibly taken back to their hometowns. Land use is completely controlled by economic development. Ordinary citizens, who have been petitioning for years, cannot find a solution. They cannot prevent their homes from being demolished.

A terrible traffic "accident" occurred in Zhaiqiao village, Puqi Town, Leqing City, Zhejiang Province on December 25, 2010. The deceased victim was Qian Yunhui, a village head, who had provided assistance for several years to villagers protesting against land grabs. The incident attracted widespread media coverage in China. Netizens also suspected that Qian's death might be related to the help he provided to his fellow villagers. What is even more bizarre was that the Propaganda Department of the Leqing City Party Committee organized a press conference, together with the Leqing City Public Security Bureau and the local Traffic Police Station two days later, declaring that the incident was a normal traffic accident. Why were the local officials so concerned to

declare that the incident was a “traffic accident” before any detailed investigation was carried out? The official reaction added much suspense to the incident. It stirred up even more discussion on the Internet. The land grab issue in Zhaiqiao village began in April 2004 when the Zhejiang Zhenang Leqing Power Station wanted to seize 146 hectares of farmland in the village. The villagers were not given a penny in compensation. They refused to sign the documents agreeing to the land expropriation. Qian Yunhui was later elected as the village head by a democratic election in the village in April 2005. Villagers sought his help, and so he got involved in petitioning together with his fellow villagers. There are many unanswered questions about Qian Yunhui’s death. Similar illegal land grabs like the one in Zhaiqiao, are very rampant in China today.

The issue of land acquisition also comes up in Hong Kong, although it is relatively less violent. Nevertheless, is the way the government handled these matters appropriate? Is the government inclined towards the benefit of developers and willing to sacrifice that of the ordinary people? Are they creating conflicts to force the people to move out? The way the Hong Kong government officials handled the issue of the high-speed rail link, and the removal of Tsoi Yuen Tsuen villagers was really quite questionable. In January 2010, the finance committee of the Legislative Council discussed whether it should pass the budget for the government to build the rail link. The cost is HK\$67 billion. From Hong Kong to Guangzhou there is only one stop: the West Kowloon terminal. There is no other stop along the route. Because the route of this rail link passes through Tsoi Yuen Tsuen in Shek Kong, the whole village has to be removed. This issue has attracted the attention of Hong Kong citizens, especially the young people born after 1980. On the day the finance committee discussed the approval of the budget, more than 10,000 people gathered outside the Legislative Council Building to oppose approving the budget to build the rail link. The reasons include: Why is it necessary to spend HK\$67 billion to build a rail link? How many people will use it? Why must Tsoi Yuen Tsuen be demolished? Are there no better plans? Has the

Hong Kong government seriously considered the opinions of engineers and geologists? Would transportation between Hong Kong and Guangzhou be affected without this rail link? Are the existing means of transportation insufficient? A year later the villagers of Tsoi Yuen Tsuen compromised and accepted the arrangement to move to another location and to re-establish their village there. But even before the government had finalized the details of the arrangements, the MTR Corporation already began to demolish the village. In order to start construction of the rail link as soon as possible, the contractor began to demolish the village by force. They even defamed the villagers who just wanted to defend their homes from demolition, by saying that these people obstruct the progress of the construction. They thus created a conflict between the demolition workers and the villagers. Is this the cost that must be paid for urban development?

The problems of land use, urban development and land grabs require that the government balance distributive justice among different social classes. The issue of distributive justice was already mentioned in *Rerum Novarum*, which was issued over a century ago: “As regards the State, the interests of all, whether high or low, are equal. The members of the working classes are citizens by nature and by the same right as the rich; they are real parts, living the life, which makes up, through the family, the body of the commonwealth; and it need hardly be said that they are in every city very largely in the majority. It would be irrational to neglect one portion of the citizens and favor another, and therefore the public administration must duly and solicitously provide for the welfare and the comfort of the working classes; otherwise, that law of justice will be violated which ordains that each man shall have his due.” (RN33) The encyclical also detailed the relationship between land and human beings. It says: “For the soil which is tilled and cultivated with toil and skill utterly changes its condition; it was wild before, now it is fruitful; was barren, but now brings forth in abundance. That which has thus altered and improved the land becomes so truly part of itself as to be in great measure

indistinguishable and inseparable from it. Is it just that the fruit of a man's own sweat and labor should be possessed and enjoyed by any one else? As effects follow their cause, so is it just and right that the results of labor should belong to those who have bestowed their labor." (RN10) Farmers spend their lives cultivating their land. Can we justify the exploitation of the land on which they live by urban development?

Conclusion

Rerum Novarum is very rich in content. It not only has affected the Church's thinking on social issues for the last 120 years, but it has also cultivated the numerous Catholic social teachings that have appeared later in history. In this article, I have only cited a few examples in an attempt to show how God has been giving us revelations through this timeless Church document. Using it, we can reflect on and review contemporary social problems from the viewpoint of faith. Due to selfishness human beings have been making the same mistakes again and again down through the ages. When we are exploring how to improve our living conditions, we must also reflect on whether we have infringed upon the rights of other people. We must also reflect on whether we "pursue" development at the expense of minority populations.