

The Significance of Rerum Novarum in Its Time

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Due to a lack of space, this article could not be included in Tripod 160, which commemorated the 120th anniversary of Rerum Novarum. With thanks to the patience of the author, we include it now in this issue.

The birth of Rerum Novarum

Starting with the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* ["Of New Things"] by Pope Leo XIII in 1891, the social teachings of the Catholic Church form an independent and systematic area of theology. This year marks the 120th anniversary of the encyclical's promulgation, and its importance becomes more evident day by day.

The so-called "new things" existed in history as new phenomena appearing in society, new political and economic systems, and new relationships among individuals. Society is an integral body: whenever one phenomenon changes, it influences other phenomena. For example, when men and women freely get to know each other, which replaced the system of marriage arranged by their elders, the relationship between the generations changed, and methods of dating also changed. This situation arose at the same time as urbanization, population mobility, the weakening of village life, the development of better transportation and means of communication, as well as other changes, which took place.

Rerum Novarum focused on a social phenomenon 120 years ago whose influence on the whole of human society was unprecedented in scope and depth, a change relating to the quality of every human life, and in the foreground of development in every

society. This phenomenon was the concentration of production in factories, replacing traditional handicrafts. Investors of capital were the directors of this process. They organized the management of labor, production lines and machinery. This created unequal power relationships, plus a lopsided division of profits. Workers, work methods and the work environment were all reduced to an inhuman condition. The “new things” of 120 years ago were not only things of production and economics, but also things, which induced all kinds of revolutionary activity in society. The backgrounds to different forms of revolution reflected different rational concepts, for example, the different concepts of socialism and those of the Catholic workers’ movements at that time.

Rerum Novarum was not the first papal statement written in response to new social events. The Church exists in society; salvation history and world history interpenetrate each other. During history, the Church has responded to many heresies, passed judgment on the morality of human behavior, and called for action during every kind of crisis. Yet 120 years ago, the “new things” were enough to thoroughly alter the political and economic structures of the human race, change every kind of interpersonal relationship and manner of livelihood. As mentioned above, this opened a new field of study: the social teaching of the Church. This academic field unfolded historically; while at the same time, new social events were also constantly developing from 120 years ago. It was like two competitors on the stage of human history, always contesting, even up to today, to find out who was the stronger. Since *Rerum Novarum*, Catholic social teaching has developed without a break, and has been renewed. It deals with change, transformation, structural change, etc., and the logic of the argumentation steadily becomes more rigorously precise.

A new academic field emerges

It was a fitting time 120 years ago for an independent theological subject to begin, because at that time every branch of

social science (including economics, political science, anthropology, psychology, sociology and social communications) had already taken shape. Knowledge in every field of social science, plus their research methods, were just right to supply reliable reference material for Catholic social teaching.

There was a time (at the beginning of the last century) when the social teaching of the Church was called Catholic Social Science. Although that name is no longer used, yet it pointed out the importance of all fields of social science to the Social Teaching. All social phenomena (including new ones) require people to go out to discover, understand and analyze them; this is how all branches of social science develop. In responding to new features in society, the Church must first grasp the truth of these events. Thus she needs to avail herself of talented experts in all fields of social science. This assistance is mutual.

So why isn't the Social Teaching a branch of the social sciences, instead of being an area of theology? This is because social sciences are empirical scholarship, while the Social Teaching is scholarship developed from revelation. Although the Social Teaching has a serious obligation to use the methods and findings of the social sciences in order to understand social phenomena, yet when the time comes to respond, the Social Teaching relies upon the truth of revelation. The proclamation of *Rerum Novarum* firmly established this method 120 years ago. Thus, it is unique, an academic dialogue of revelation and the social sciences. This dialogue has been progressing from 120 years ago to the present day. In the course of this dialogue, the Church uses reason to understand social events, plus revelation and principles drawn from revelation to give direction to action, and so guide society towards a more perfect situation.

Another special point of the new field established by *Rerum Novarum* is the equal importance of society and the individual. In social science, they are on two different levels. For example, research showing a rise in the Gross National Product (GNP), does not indicate this raises the living standard of the individual.

Catholic social teaching is directed toward people — the social collective as well as every individual person. It is not only concerned about outstanding institutions but also the totality of each person's situation, including the mental, spiritual and physical levels. At the same time, Catholic social teaching is not satisfied with changing social structures, but pushes harder to change individuals, and stresses that everyone has a duty to act for the betterment of society.

Again, how do Catholic social teaching and social work differ? The latter aims at the betterment of the individual, using government policies, organizations and direct assistance to solve people's difficulties. The former puts importance on constructing fine social organizations and operations, to build the City of God in the Human City, and obtain wisdom for everyone. The two are not interchangeable. Each needs the other, neither one can get rid of the other, both are meant to serve the people.

We can see from the above that Catholic social teaching is a narrow, specialized field of theology. It started at an appropriate time, 120 years ago. On one hand, the different branches of social science had already been established, and on the other hand, the Industrial Revolution had given rise to enormous changes, with a looming crisis regarding which course of action society should take. If the positive participation of the Church had been lacking, and if people had chosen their own ways and relied even more upon their own views to find solutions, then some of the methods adopted would have become ideologies with the power to coerce people and enslave them.

So did *Rerum Novarum* solve the crisis facing humanity in 1891? The answer rests upon the significance of the Church existing in the world. The Church cannot at once totally sanctify worldly labor. Jesus entrusted his words of life and salvation to the Church, which must exist in history. Neither people nor social groups can attain perfection. The mission of the Church is to accompany and to support the world as it moves towards the fullness of salvation at the end of the time. Thus, *Rerum Novarum*

could not write the final word to stop the crisis of the Industrial Revolution. It was a power of grace, which noted the large number of phenomena and problems that were emerging in society at the time it was written. Just as the Word Made Flesh participated in the world, on the one hand to point out the darkness and the dehumanizing events with their rationale and structures, and on the other hand to turn revelation into a power for action, and to point people in the direction they should go. The conclusion of this process is the final destination of history.

***Rerum Novarum* is ever new: Some examples**

On every major anniversary of *RN*, such as the 40th, 80th and 100th, the reigning Pope issued a new encyclical on social doctrine and further developed the teaching in response to new crises of that period. And yet, even if new social situations or problems had not emerged, the profound content of *RN* would still have blossomed slowly, like a flower bud.

First, the concept of human rights has developed. Leo XIII protected the right to private property, based on natural law, Scripture and the common good. God entrusted the land to the care of people; use of the land is inseparable from the right of ownership. The experience of socialism during the first half of the 20th century bears witness to this point: although private ownership did not exist in law, yet society could not do without some organization having power to put land, resources and productive activity to use. These powers to own and to dispose of property have no essential difference. The ruling political group could likewise have made the whole country its private possession.

Speaking from the principle of the common good, Leo XIII considered that land required cultivation by people before it could finally yield its produce. People transform land through work; land shows the marks of human toil, so people in the past naturally possessed a tract of land, the produce of which they obtained by their sweat and blood. The same reasoning helped expand the

concept of human rights. Today, the scope of human rights cannot be attacked at the whim of a feudal lord. Much less can it be a gift bestowed by the ruling group. For some time it has been determined internationally that the scope of human rights not only includes private property, but also a place to live, medical care, food, employment, education, financial affairs, marriage, speech, religious belief, and migration. There are also citizen's rights, like participation in government, and cultural and intellectual property rights.

Today, what the Church upholds, but has not yet obtained universal recognition of, is the right to life, life from conception through to natural death. This is the right with the greatest dignity, the right that must receive protection. In addition, several so-called rights are debatable, such as same-sex marriage. The judgment of the Church still employs the standards of *RN*: Is it in accord with the natural law, Scripture and the common good?

Secondly, regarding social structures, *RN* affirmed that people have the right to association. When God created people, He created them to live in groups. People's social nature comes from the creative intention of God. Living gregariously is not only natural, but also necessary for survival, and befits human progress. This concept is extremely important for the rational organization of society. Of course, the formation of associations comprises numerous levels: three or four people can work for a common objective, two people can form a family, thousands can form a research centre or a big industrial firm, and tens of thousands come together to make a city. An associative viewpoint hastened the birth of the Principle of Subsidiarity — enabling the nation and every level of society to have normal, peaceful and cooperative relations.

Under the Principle of Subsidiarity, citizens of a city can organize themselves to engage in productive, cultural, economic, public interest, educational, political and other activities, while the national government plays a supportive role. Under this principle, organizations at every level can bring their abilities into play. Society will be orderly, and every class of collective bodies will be

clear about their rights and duties. This avoids the state having direct control over every person and every level of activities. As *RN* clearly said, "People precede the state."

Today, when the outward forms of dictatorial control have not yet disappeared from the world, *RN's* viewpoint of forming associations is the most basic first step to reform. What is called "dictatorship" is not merely when the ruling power makes all the decisions; the term is directed even more to cases when the citizens have no right to freely organize themselves, or when existing organizations are all open to direct manipulation by the state.

RN mentioned international labour unions, indirectly affirming a principle of association that surpasses national or cultural ones. International, voluntary associations organized by the people have become more important today, especially those promoting environmental protection, universal values, medicine and sanitation, relief for the poor, among others. Pope John Paul II called this movement of global concern Solidarity. He spared no effort to proclaim the spiritual importance of this.

A third item is the relationship among people and among groups. In the time of Leo XIII, Marx call for the abolition of class divisions among people, making all people uniform, in order to abolish exploitation. Leo XIII however was positive about love and concern among people, and the need for the rich and the poor to supplement each other, which is not the same as uniformity. Leo XIII had a high regard for human free will. Freedom reflects the image of God in people. The rich freely devote themselves to works of charity, and also give the workers a just salary. Only these kinds of activities have value. On the contrary, it is worthless for a coercive central power to strip the rich of their property. Leo XIII viewed all levels of society as mutually interdependent, each playing a different role. What is needed is for faith, freedom, duty, love and cooperation to exist together.

Today it is already obvious that the abolition of social classes has failed, because in socialist countries, the gap between the rights and interests of the proletariat and the ruling circles is too wide, and

the phenomenon of exploitation has been made even worse. Even so, the idea of uniformity has revived in certain areas. Two main forces are influential: gender uniformity and uniformity in official church duties. Both forces started in the 1960s. Those who urge the abolition of gender difference think men and women should be absolutely equal. Whatever men can do, women must also be able to do, or else it is discrimination against women. As the Church views this question from beginning to end, however, it cannot deny the natural foundation of the special features of male and female. The position of the Church can be seen in *Mulieris Dignitatem, On the Dignity and Vocation of Women* (1988). The view of Pope John Paul II on this topic is extremely balanced; he stresses the mutual help the two sexes provide for one another.

The other strong movement, which arose in the 1960s, was the attempt to water down the distinctiveness of the hierarchy. It emphasized that there is no essential distinction between clergy and laity, but only a matter of different functions. In time of necessity, the laity can assume the traditional duties of the clergy. Equality of persons within the Church would mean no more clericalism, and there would not be a vocation shortage, adherents to this position say. Those who are interested in this topic may consult *Questions regarding the collaboration of the non-ordained faithful in the sacred ministry of priests*, issued jointly by eight Vatican congregations in 1997.

Fourthly, there is the influence of work on the worker. Prior to *RN*, Marx had already taken work as the defining characteristic of a human being, "*Homo Faber*," and explained in detail how the method of production of the factory system harmed human nature, making people alienated. However, social scientists later consider this influence to have been exaggerated. Today, they still admit work has an influence on people. Research points out that those workers who are able to make more decisions on the job are more independent and have more mastery of their own lives. The Social Teaching discusses the same topic from the spiritual significance of work. *RN* did not get involved with how working conditions

influence human nature, but pointed out the importance of virtuous conduct: both employers and workers need to be virtuous, responsible, conscientious and loving, and view toil from the religious angle. So it follows directly that working conditions are not the only factor in determining the development of human nature. The power that comes from developing the spiritual life is equally important. In *Laborem Exercens* by John Paul II, the teaching on the relationship between work and human nature reaches a high point: it “assists in attaining the self.” The Social Teaching calls this the subjective value of work.

To put it simply, work certainly influences the development of human nature, but people do not receive such an influence passively. Under the light of faith, they need to see the spiritual value of work, and use it to develop themselves autonomously.

Fifthly, there is the relation between people and wealth. Although *RN* defended private enterprise, it argued critically and did not limit itself to a debate between systems of public and private ownership. Rather, it went to a more fundamental discussion: how wealth is to be used. Leo XIII quoted the view of Thomas Aquinas: It is legitimate for people to possess wealth, and whoever has wealth should share it with those in need.

National law cannot regulate how people should give to the poor. People who do give are esteeming the ethical teachings of religion. Here we see how the roles of religion and the state supplement each other. The law protects a citizen’s property, but religion provides people with a stimulus to donate. This demonstrates why a dictatorship, after abolishing religion in a nation, distributes wealth by administrative measures. However, contrarily, the gap between rich and poor grows even wider.

The Social Teaching takes an extremely balanced view on the right to private property and the public use of wealth. This teaching unfolds as the Universal Destination of Goods. In fact, everyone’s “public enjoyment,” not only includes material wealth, but also personal abilities, natural talents, knowledge and other

spiritual riches. People exchange on this level, and are already directly revealing what John Paul II meant by Solidarity.

Sixthly, after *RN*, Western democracies separately enacted all kinds of legislation to protect workers, such as a limitation on working hours, fair wages, pensions, vacations, guarantees of employment, insurance, prohibition of child labor, care for safety, and improvements in the factory environment. *RN* hinted at the reasoning behind these laws. Some points which were more evident were: the standard salary should be enough to support a family, that there is good treatment for workers, and that provisions are made for the workers' need of rest.

In enacting laws protecting the workers, Western societies caused the Church to affirm the role of law, and the importance of a just, independent judicial system. However, in the 1990s, the phenomenon of globalization began to attract attention, as well as the business model of outsourcing production. Regulations for protecting workers in different nations could no longer respond adequately. Legislation at the international level was needed. There was also need for an international legal organization to act as an arbitrator. This appeal can be seen in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, issued by the Pontifical Justice and Peace Commission in 2004. (A Chinese translation of this work was published in March 2011.)

We can see that the protection of workers' rights depends upon both laws and the judiciary. However, reason is the ultimate source for the legislation, and the Church is a correct promoter of principle and reason.

Seventh, environmental protection has only come into prominence as a topic for debate during the past 20 or 30 years. *RN* says nothing explicitly about it, yet *RN* sketches the relationship of people to the land, and of the necessity for watching over the earth, so that it will bear fruit. Today we can list numerous incidents of pollution and their bad effects. Aside from passing laws and developing science and technology for environmental protection, the way to repair the situation requires a pertinent foundation of

reasoning. Otherwise environmental protection will become only an instrumental action to avoid disaster. Here the Church can make a significant contribution. She does not take the quantity of production and economic profit as the standards to be considered. Rather, the main principles for the Church are the relationships among God, people and creatures.

Eighth, *RN* denies there is a great chasm between the religion and society. Sayings such as, "The Church teaches people to be good, but society creates wealth by economic principles," and "river water and well water should not mix," such narrow viewpoints have no standing after *RN*. Leo XIII regarded virtue as an important foundation for the state. Correct relationships among people, faith in God, and respect for virtue are not only attributes of the spiritual life, but they help society to flourish at the same time.

After *RN*, the public discourse and actions of the Church regarding society have become more direct. Today and for quite some time in the past, the promotion of social justice has been considered a method of evangelizing. And at the same time, it provides a forum for dialogue and cooperation among all people of goodwill.

Conclusion

RN is ever new, because the field of study which it started (the Social Doctrine of the Church) has been continually developing, not only in theory but also in practice. The theory becomes more profound by the day, encompassing more academic disciplines. In fact, every area of social science, anthropology, Scripture and ethics are included. At the same time, when it comes to practical application, as new questions arise one after the other in each era, we can return *RN* to search for inspiration and answers. When each major anniversary occurs, the Popes issue new encyclicals to recall *RN* and to probe its wisdom and principles for answers to the problems of their times.