

## CHAPTER 15 NINETEENTH-CENTURY SOCIETY

### 15.1 The Church Weighs In: Rerum Novarum

---

In 1891, the Pope Leo XIII issued the Catholic Church's response to industrialization, poor worker conditions, and revolutionary ideologies in the Rerum Novarum (Of New Things). The Rerum Novarum became a principle document guiding the Church long into the twentieth century. *Source: Documents of the Christian Church, ed. Henry Bettenson, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 275-281; reprinted in The Western Heritage: Documents Set, 6th edition, ed. Donald Kagan, Steven Ozment, Frank M. Turner, (Upper Saddle River, NJ.: Prentice Hall, 1998), vol. 2, pp. 250-51.*

---

#### PROPERTY

The possession of private property is a right given to man by nature.... There is no reason why the directing power of the state should be brought in; for man is prior to the state, and therefore he must have had by nature the right to preserve his life and person before any community was organized.... The necessary materials for the preservation of life are lavishly supplied by the earth; but the earth could not supply them by itself without man's cultivation, and since man applies the activity of his mind and the strength of his body in the production of the good things of nature, it follows that he claims for himself the portion of physical nature which he has himself tended, which he has in a sense stamped with his own personal impress. And so it should be altogether right for that portion to be possessed by him as his personal property; nor should anyone be allowed to violate that right in any way.... The force of these arguments is so obvious that it seems strange that they are opposed by some people who seek to re-establish worn-out doctrines; who allow individuals the use of the soil and the different products of lands, but say that it is not right that a man should possess, as an owner, the land on which he has built, or the estate which he has cultivated....

#### WAGES

Man's labour has two inherent natural characteristics; it is personal, since the active force is attached to a person, and is completely the personal possession of the man by whom it is exercised, and is by nature designed for his advantage: and secondly, it is necessary, for this reason, that man requires the fruit of his labour for the preservation of his life, and the duty of selfpreservation is grounded in the natural order. It follows that if we consider merely the personal aspect there is no doubt that it is open to the worker to reduce the agreed wage to narrow dimensions. He gives his services of his free will, and he can, of free will, content himself with a slender reward, or even with none at all. But a very different conclusion is reached when we combined the necessary with the personal element, and indeed they are only separable in thought, not in reality. To remain alive is a duty incumbent on all alike, in fact, and to fail in this duty is a crime. Hence arises of necessity the right of acquiring the materials for the support of life; and it is only by the wage earned with their labour that the lower orders are supplied with these means. Therefore the worker and the employer should freely come to agreement, especially in regard to the level of wages.... But there is an underlying condition which arises from natural laws, namely that the wage should be sufficient to support the worker, provided he is thrifty and well behaved. If the worker is compelled to accept harsher terms, or is induced to do so by fear of worse hardships, and these have to be accepted because they are imposed by a master or employer, this is

submission to force and therefore repugnant to justice.... If the worker receives sufficient payment to maintain himself, his wife, and his children, in comfort, he will be ready to practise thrift, if he is sensible, and will follow the prompting of nature by reducing his expenditure to ensure some surplus by means of which he may attain a modest property.... The right of private property ought to be inviolate.... For the attainment of these advantages it is an essential condition that private property should not be exhausted by inordinate taxation. The right of personal possessions is not based on human law; it is given by nature. Therefore public authority cannot abolish it; it can only control its use and adjust it to the common good.

#### TRADES UNIONS

That men should commonly unite in associations of this kind [trades unions and the like], whether made up wholly of workers or of both classes together, is to be welcomed... Natural law grants man the right to join particular associations, and the state is appointed to support natural law, not to destroy it... and the state arises from the same principle which produces particular societies, the fact that men are by nature gregarious. But circumstances sometimes arise when it is right for the laws to check associations of this kind; this happens if ever these associations deliberately adopt aims which are in open conflict with honesty, with justice, and with the well-being of the community.

**1. For what audience was the document written?**

---

---

---

---

---

**2. Why do you think this document was written?**

---

---

---

---

---

## 15.2 The Church Weighs In: Rerum Novarum

The second part of this excerpt comes from a 1931 encyclical in which the Rerum Novarum is interpreted in light of new conditions that had developed in the forty years since its publication. *Source: Quadragesimo Anno, encyclical of Pius XI, 15 May 1931. Acta Apostolicae Sedis (1931) 118 sqq. Extracts from Denzinger 2253 sqq.; reprinted in The Western Heritage: Documents Set, 6th edition, ed. Donald Kagan, Steven Ozment, Frank M. Turner, (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1998), vol. 2, pp. 251-53.*

The Power of the State. From the double character of ownership personal and social it follows that in this matter men must take account not only of their own advantage but also of the common good. To define these duties in detail, when necessity demands, and natural law itself does not give guidance, belongs to those in authority in the State. Therefore public authority can decide more accurately what is permissible and what is forbidden to owners of property in the use of their possessions, in the consideration of the governing demands of the common good always in the light of the teaching of natural and divine law. Indeed Leo XIII wisely taught that 'the control of private possessions has been entrusted by God to the skill of men and the laws of nations'... However, it is clear that the state is not permitted to exercise its prerogative in an arbitrary manner. For the natural right of private property and of hereditary transmission must be kept intact and inviolate as a right which the state cannot take away 'because man is prior to the state' and 'the family is prior to the civil community in thought and in fact'. Hence the wisest of pontiffs laid it down that was utterly wrong for the state to exhaust private incomes by inordinate taxation. 'The right of private property is given by nature, not by human law. Public authority has therefore merely the power of controlling its unjust and of adjusting it with the common good, it has no right to abolish it.'...

### CAPITAL AND LABOUR

[Capital and labour need each other]... Wealth which is continually increased by economic-social gains should be assigned to individuals and classes in such a way as to secure... the common good of the whole community. By this law of social justice it is forbidden that one class should exclude the other from sharing the profits. This law is violated when the rich... consider the just state of affairs to be that by which they receive all the profit and the workers receive none, and equally when the working class... claims that all things are the result of its manual labour, and therefore attacks and strives to abolish all ownership and all returns and profits which are not acquired by labour....

### THE JUST WAGE

The Personal and Social Character of Labour.... Unless the social and juridical order safeguards the exercise of labour... unless intelligence, money and labour are allied and united, the activity of man is unable to produce its proper results. If the social and personal nature of labour be disregarded it cannot be justly valued nor equitably recompensed.

### THREE PRINCIPLES

(a) The worker should receive a wage adequate for the support of himself and his family.... It is the worst of abuses... that mothers should be compelled, because of the inadequacy of the father's wage, to earn money outside the home, to the neglect of their particular duties and responsibilities, especially the care of their children....

(b) In deciding the level of wages the condition of the productive organization must be taken into account. It is unjust to demand excessive payment which the business cannot stand without disaster to itself and subsequent ruin to its workers. But technical and economic inefficiency... is not to be considered an excuse for reducing wages....

(c) The level of wages must be adjusted to the public economic good.... Wages should be so regulated, as far as possible by consent, that as many as possible may be able to hire labour and receive suitable reward for their livelihood....

#### THE RIGHT ORDER OF SOCIETY

The State's Responsibility.... Public authority should delegate to subordinate bodies the task of dealing with problems of minor importance so that it may carry out... the duties peculiarly incumbent upon it... [of promoting the common good, regulating the 'hierarchical order' of these free associations of bodies autonomous in their economic and professional spheres, and encouraging a 'harmony of orders' in place of a 'rivalry of classes'.]

The Governing Economic Principle.... The unity of human society cannot be based on the opposition of 'classes'; the establishment of a right economic order cannot be left to a free trial of strength... economic power must be controlled by social justice and social charity....

[Changes since Rerum Novarum.]... There has been not merely accumulation of wealth but a huge concentration of power and economic dictatorship in the hands of a few who are for the most part not the owners but merely the trustees and administrators of investing property, handling such funds at their arbitrary pleasure.... This irresponsible power is the natural fruit of unlimited free competition which leaves surviving only the most powerful, which often means the most violent and unscrupulous fighters....

#### SOCIALISM AND COMMUNISM

[Since Rerum Novarum, Socialism has divided into two parties.]

(a) Communism... Communism teaches the fiercest warfare between classes and aims at the total abolition of private ownership... shrinks from nothing in the pursuit of its aims... and when it seizes power it displays incredible cruelty and inhumanity... its open enmity to Holy Church and to God himself is, alas, all too clearly proved by its actions....

(b) Socialism. The other party, which keeps the name 'Socialism' is milder. It professes to abjure violence, and if it does not do away with class warfare and the abolition of private property, it does in some degree soften and ameliorate those conceptions.... One might say that socialism in some way approaches the truths which Christian tradition has always held.... But whether considered as a doctrine, or as a historical fact, or as an activity, socialism, while it remains truly socialism, cannot be harmonized with the dogmas of the Catholic Church, even after the concessions made to truth and justice.... The picture it draws of society is utterly remote from Christian truth. For the Christian teaching is that man, endowed with a social nature, is placed on this earth to live his life in society and under the authority ordained by God (cf. Rom. xiii. I), and to cultivate and develop all his powers to the full for the praise and glory of his Creator, and by the faithful fulfillment of his duty in his craft or other vocation to attain both temporal and eternal happiness. While socialism neither knows nor cares anything at all about this sublime end of man and of society and considers that human fellowship is instituted solely for convenience.... 'Religious socialism,' 'Christian socialism' are contradictions; no-one can be at once a true Catholic and a socialist, in the proper meaning of the term....