

The Rise of Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Social Catholicism and Pope Leo XIII

Gerald J. Beyer

Good morning. Dzień dobry. I am delighted to be here with you today. Ogromnie się cieszę, że mogę być tutaj z państwem. I have a long personal history with Poland. From October 1994 through May of 1997, I studied at Jagiellonian University and the Pontifical Academy of Theology in Kraków. I have been returning frequently ever since. In fact, I have the best of all reasons to visit Poland: the two loves of my life, my wife Ania and daughter Julia, were born on Polish soil, and my mother and father-in-law live in Poland's capital, I mean, previous capital, Kraków.

I decided to become a Christian ethicist when I became aware of Catholic social teaching. I was thrilled to know that the Church has stood in solidarity with workers for centuries. The rich and highly developed social teaching of Catholicism speaks to me because my own father was a welder. He was injured on the job five times. Knowing that the Church has defended the dignity and rights of people like my father since the early days of the Industrial Revolution inspired me to study Catholic social teaching and to employ it in the struggle for worker justice today.

As you know, Pope Leo XIII's landmark 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum* became the cornerstone of modern Catholic social teaching's defense of workers' rights, which reached a high-water mark with one of the greatest treatments of the dignity of labor ever penned, St. Pope John Paul II's *Laborem Exercens*. I will discuss *Rerum Novarum* in due course. However, it is worth describing the context that led up to the encyclical. Contrary to a common misconception,

modern Catholic social teaching did not begin with *Rerum Novarum*. Rather, Catholic social teaching has much deeper historical roots.¹

Catholic social teaching ultimately finds its roots in the Bible. As John Paul II stated in *Centesimus Annus*, Catholic social teaching spells out the demands of the gospel with greater specificity.² In the words of the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, “by means of her social doctrine, the Church takes on the task of proclaiming what the Lord has entrusted to her. She makes the message of the freedom and redemption wrought by Christ, the Gospel of the Kingdom, present in human history.”³ The Bible provides an orientation and signposts for remedying the great social problems of an era, but does not spell out concrete solutions to issues such as how to eradicate global poverty, how to stem the flow of human trafficking or how to tackle the problem of global warming. As Karol Wojtyła wrote, the Gospel does not provide ready-made prescriptions for complex socioeconomic problems. Rather, “reason enlightened by faith” (“oświecony wiarą rozum”) must draw out from the Gospel the principles for the “social-economic issues of our time” (“cała problematyka społeczno-ekonomiczna naszej epoki”).⁴

Put another way, Catholic social teaching serves as a tool of evangelization by helping us to translate biblical values and principles into action for specific historical, economic, social and political circumstances. It helps Catholics and others to understand how to “see, judge, and act”

¹ Many scholars locate the beginning of the modern papal social encyclical tradition in the year 1740, not with 1896 publication of *Rerum Novarum*. See for example Michael Joseph Schuck, *That They Be One: The Social Teaching of the Papal Encyclicals 1740-1989* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1991); Joe Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: The Popes Confront the Industrial Age, 1740-1958* (New York: Paulist Press, 2003).

² John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, no. 5; 56-7; USCCB, *Economic Justice for All*, nos. 61-68 and *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, nos. 62-7.

³ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 63. Available at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html

⁴ Karol Wojtyła, *Katolicka Etyka Społeczna* (unpublished manuscript), 26: “rzeczywiste źródło objawione etyki społecznej, zawiera bowiem cały szereg zasad dotyczących etycznego współżycia ludzi w społeczeństwie, stosunku do dóbr materialnych, itp.” See also 204.

(to quote Cardinal Cardijn's method used by the Young Christian Workers in the 1920's, and later articulated by John XXIII in *Mater et Magistra*, no. 236) inspired by the Gospel in the light of the signs of the times.⁵

The Catholic social tradition traverses the whole of Christian history. However, the tumultuous experience of the modern era, marked by liberalism, the Industrial Revolution, social dislocations, new forms of exploitation wrought by capitalism, the rise of atheism, antireligious sentiment and communist ideologies prompted Catholics to read the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel with a new urgency. The first stage of Industrial capitalism began around the middle of the 18th century.⁶ In 1740 Pope Benedict the XIV published the first modern papal encyclical, *Ubi primum*. Between 1740 and Pope Leo XIII's pontificate, the popes produced seventy seven more encyclicals.⁷ According to Catholic theologian Michael Schuck, the pre-Leonine popes devoted significant attention to "immoral business practices" such as "exorbitant profits from sales, fraud, Sunday labor, usury" and "theft."⁸ Already in 1800 Pius VII issues the first condemnation of the "enemies of private property" (*Diu satis*, no. 13).⁹ The popes of this era critiqued cultural and political liberalism, decried the decline of traditional agrarian life, and commended solicitude of the poor. They did not yet develop a sustained critique of early (local) capitalism *per se*.¹⁰ However, "Social Catholicism" was beginning to bloom in several parts of

⁵ See Young Christian Workers website, "The Method of See, Judge, Act, Review," <https://www.ycw.ie/resources/see-judge-act-resources-2/>

⁶ Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: The Popes Confront the Industrial Age, 1740-1958*, 17. Holland says this stage of industrial capitalism was marked by local capitalism, modern laissez-faire liberalism and the factory revolution.

⁷ Schuck, *That They Be One: The Social Teaching of the Papal Encyclicals 1740-1989*, 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰ Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: The Popes Confront the Industrial Age, 1740-1958*, 14; Michael J. Schuck, "Early Modern Roman Catholic Social Thought, 1740-1890," in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, ed. Kenneth R. Himes and Lisa Sowle Cahill (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 10; Paul Misner, *Social Catholicism in Europe: From the Onset of Industrialization to the First World War* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1991), 35.

Europe. Social Catholicism constituted the “organized response by Catholic Christians to the harsh impact of capitalist industrialization upon the working class.”¹¹ The new “social question” they confronted in the 19th century was the “difficulty of reconciling the interests of the new classes of industrial bourgeoisie and their clientele on the one side with those of industrial workers on the other.”¹² The brutal working conditions particularly plagued women and children of the working masses, who needed to work night and day in order to survive.¹³

Some Social Catholics produced treatises or documents on the burning social issues of the day. For example, in a series of lectures in Dresden in 1808 and 1809, which were later published, Adam Heinrich Müller refuted both Adam Smith’s individualistic conception of the human person and defense of free trade, while also rejecting collectivist alternatives.¹⁴ Others put the demands of the Gospel into action. In the 1830’s Sister Rosalie Rendu succored the needs of the poor on the streets of Paris and converted wealthy patrons such as Armand de Melun to their cause, thus beginning the early phase of French social Catholicism.¹⁵ Although her experiment apparently did not succeed, Catholic laywoman Pauline Marie Jaricot bought a factory in Rustrel, France in 1840 to enact her vision of a workplace and town where workers earned a living wage, children attended schools and the infirm were looked after.¹⁶ The “Christian factory movement” arose in France among Social Catholics such as the entrepreneur Léon Harmel (1829-1915). Harmel pioneered the “Christian corporation” and a worker management scheme.¹⁷ In his textile factory in Champagne, workers were involved in decisions

¹¹ Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: The Popes Confront the Industrial Age, 1740-1958*, 130.

¹² Misner, *Social Catholicism in Europe: From the Onset of Industrialization to the First World War*, 39.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁶ Schuck, "Early Modern Roman Catholic Social Thought, 1740-1890," 101, 14. and <http://paulinejaricot.org/en/oeuvres-sociales/>

¹⁷ Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: The Popes Confront the Industrial Age, 1740-1958*, 138.

concerning wages, insurance, medical care, vocational training, etc.¹⁸ From 1887 Harmel also led workers on pilgrimages to Rome as a way to encourage the Pope to take up the social question and evangelization of the working class.¹⁹

The former French military officers Albert de Mun and René La Tour du Pin contributed to the growing awareness of the social question among Catholic aristocrats by forming the Society of Catholic Worker circles (*Oeuvre des Cercles Catholique d'Ouvriers*).²⁰ These clubs numbered about 400 by 1884 and had around 50,000 members. Members of the growing Catholic working-class could dialogue and pray with wealthy employers and hear lectures by aristocrats. De Mun also founded the Catholic Association of French Youth to generate future members for the workers' clubs. The OCC's journal *Revue de l'Association Catholique* helped raise awareness of the social question across Europe.²¹ The OCC also helped shape French laws on "trade unions, minimum wages, health insurance, pensions, workplace safety, the eight-hour workday and child labor restrictions."²²

The towering figure of social Catholicism in Germany was Father Wilhelm Emmanuel von Kettler (1811-77). He stood against his contemporaries who contended the Gospel only grounded personal ethics by demonstrating its relevance to the social question.²³ To the dismay of many Catholics who were content with the status quo, Ketteler began in 1848 – the same year the *Communisto Manifesto* appeared – to speak publicly about the necessity of the Roman Catholic Church responding to the plight of workers. At the first general assembly of Catholics

¹⁸ Schuck, "Early Modern Roman Catholic Social Thought, 1740-1890," 115.

¹⁹ Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: The Popes Confront the Industrial Age, 1740-1958*, 138.

²⁰ Holland notes that de Mun's conscience was jarred by his participation in "the military suppression of workers during the Paris Commune of 1871." He thus vowed to help improve the lot of workers in the aftermath. *Ibid.*

²¹ Marvin L. Krier Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1998), 8. See also Schuck, "Early Modern Roman Catholic Social Thought, 1740-1890," 115; Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: The Popes Confront the Industrial Age, 1740-1958*, 138.

²² Schuck, "Early Modern Roman Catholic Social Thought, 1740-1890," 115.

²³ Wojtyła, *Katolicka Nauka Społeczna*, 26. Mich notes that not all Catholics were proponents of social Catholicism. Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements*, 16.

in Germany he decried the immense inequalities of wealth and vastly increasing property holdings of the few.²⁴ As Archbishop of Mainz he criticized both capitalism and socialism for failing to respect the dignity of workers and promoted concrete remedies to “diminish the evils” of the industrial revolution in a speech to the German bishops in 1869: 1) abolition of child labor; 2) limits to the workday of factory workers; 3) separation of men and women in the workplace; 4) elimination of unsafe workplaces; 5) no work on Sundays; 6) care for temporary or permanently disabled workers; 7) state inspection of factories.²⁵ His book *The Question of the Worker and Christendom (Die Arbeiterfrage und das Christendum)* became a pivotal text in the Catholic social tradition. As Marvin Krier Mich observes, “the roots of *Rerum Novarum* are found in sermons and writings of this parish priest who spoke out and analyzed the poverty and subsistence wages of his community.” In fact, decades later Pope Leo XIII himself referred to Archbishop Ketteler as “our great predecessor.”²⁶

Ketteler heavily influenced the later Catholic thinkers in the Fribourg Union.²⁷ Bishop Gaspar Mermillod, one of the only European bishops from a working class background himself, convened this predominantly lay group in 1885 to study the social question. Du Pin, Prince Karl von Lowenstein of Germany, a delegate from Karl von Vogelsang’s Austrian corporatist group, and others from Italy and Switzerland met from 1885-1891 to devise proposals to improve the situation of the worker.²⁸ They argued against the notion held by Charles Perin and other Catholic economic liberals that poverty was good because it gave the wealthy a chance to

²⁴ Misner, *Social Catholicism in Europe: From the Onset of Industrialization to the First World War*, 91; Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements*, 6-7.

²⁵ Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements*, 7.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 6.

²⁸ The corporativism of Vogelsang advocated the “reorganization of society according to professions rather than by classes. These professional associations would be represented in the governing branches of the state...” *ibid.*, 8-9. See also Misner, *Social Catholicism in Europe: From the Onset of Industrialization to the First World War*, 169-80.

fulfill their obligation of charity. In this vein, Mermillod exhorted them to “go beyond charity to justice.”²⁹ Catholic bishops such as “Ketteler in Germany, Vogelsang in Austria, de Pascal in France, Pottier in Belgium and Manning in England” all argued for a just and living wage.³⁰ Like them, the Fribourg Union advocated a just wage (which should enable maintaining a family), in addition to government intervention to ensure just wages, limiting the right of private property for the sake of the common good and the corporative model of the economy. This vision of the economy proposed organizing workers “according to their common interests and common social function.” This would not only promote their material well-being but it would also help to overcome the “anonymity and impersonality” of the new individualistic industrial capitalist order by promoting solidarity among workers and collaborative relations between employers and employees. By the 1880’s Pope Leo fully understood the need for Catholics to take up the social question. Thus, he requested reports from the Fribourg Union detailing their work.³¹ He also concurrently formed the Roman Committee of Social Studies, which included among others Bishop Mermillod.³²

Across the Atlantic, Catholics also took up the cause of workers in the 19th century. Like in Europe, workers in the industrializing U.S. endured harsh working conditions. They regularly faced 12 hour workdays, six-day work weeks, no vacation or sick leave and very hazardous working conditions with no health insurance.³³ In 1833 the wealthy Irish immigrant Mathew Carey, who was a publisher and philanthropist, advocated for the dignity and the rights of

²⁹ Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements*, 11.

³⁰ John A. Ryan, *A Living Wage*, Rev. and Abridged ed. (New York,: The Macmillan Company, 1920), 49.

³¹ Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements*, 12-15. See also Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: The Popes Confront the Industrial Age, 1740-1958*, 143.

³² Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: The Popes Confront the Industrial Age, 1740-1958*, 142.

³³ Owen F. Campion, "The Labor Movement: Church’s Role in Bringing Human Rights Theory to Reality," *Our Sunday Visitor*, August 4 2014. Available at <https://www.osv.com/MyFaith/Article/TabId/586/ArtMID/13752/ArticleID/15805/The-Labor-Movement.aspx>

laborers, particularly women, in public speeches and writings.³⁴ He insisted that all workers should be paid a living wage.³⁵ Fr. Augustus Thébaud, a pastor from Troy, New York who later became the first Jesuit president of Fordham University, denounced the callousness of employers towards their downtrodden employees.³⁶

While numerous priests and laypeople played key roles in the U.S. labor movement, Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore holds a unique place in this history. On his journey to Rome in 1887, Gibbons convinced Leo XIII to avoid condemning the Knights of Labor, the first major US labor union. Uriah Stevens founded this powerful union in 1869 in my hometown of Philadelphia. The Knights grew to over 700,000 members in the 1880's under the leadership of Terence Powderly, a machinist and son of Irish Catholic immigrants. Although the Knights excluded Chinese laborers, Powderly advocated "solidarity, among skilled and unskilled workers, men and women, black and white" and guaranteed their inclusion, albeit on "separate and unequal terms."³⁷ According to Powderly, Catholics comprised over half of the union's membership. Yet, some members of the U.S. Catholic hierarchy did not approve of the Knights because they equated the union's call for wealth redistribution with socialism and rejected the union's secrecy (which it maintained to protect workers from employers' retribution). The Canadian bishops officially condemned the Knights.³⁸ However the majority of the U.S. archbishops approved of the union, with Gibbons and Archbishop John Ireland of St. Paul staunchly supporting it.³⁹ Believing that the impoverishment of workers necessitated the right to

³⁴ Maria Mazzenga, "One-Hundred Years of American Catholics and Organized Labor, 1870s-1970s," *Journal Catholic Social Thought* 9, no. 1 (2012): 23.

³⁵ Campion, "The Labor Movement: Church's Role in Bringing Human Rights Theory to Reality."

³⁶ Mazzenga, "One-Hundred Years of American Catholics and Organized Labor, 1870s-1970s," 23-24. See also Campion, "The Labor Movement: Church's Role in Bringing Human Rights Theory to Reality."

³⁷ Mazzenga, "One-Hundred Years of American Catholics and Organized Labor, 1870s-1970s," 26-27.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 26-28.

³⁹ Campion, "The Labor Movement: Church's Role in Bringing Human Rights Theory to Reality."

organize, Gibbons and other leaders persuaded Powderly to end the secret oath of the Knights. This paved the way for Rome's approval.

Gibbons and the others' efforts led to Rome not banning Catholics from joining a union and helped to impress upon Pope Leo XIII the need to address the plight of workers.⁴⁰ They implored the pope to issue an encyclical on the "respective rights and obligations of both capital and labor."⁴¹ Gibbons echoed Cardinal Manning of England's claim that the church must align itself with the masses, not the aristocracy. Gibbons told the pope that he was "alarmed at the prospect of the church being presented...as the friend of the powerful rich and the enemy of the helpless poor."⁴² The Church had already lost many of its working-class members to socialist movements in Europe. Gibbons opined that the American working class would also lose patience eventually without unequivocal support from the Church.

Pope Leo XIII's Embrace of Social Catholicism

In short, without the work of "church officials, professional authors, academics, and grassroots leaders" between 1740 and 1890 *Rerum Novarum* "would never have appeared."⁴³ However, Leo XIII's own experiences also caused him to have sympathy for the working masses. From 1843 he was the papal nuncio in Belgium. During his trips to England, Germany and France especially he witnessed industrial capitalism's forward march and its effect on workers. As I mentioned above he was influenced by the Fribourg Union and Harmel's worker pilgrimages to Rome in 1888. Cardinal Manning's expression of solidarity for the striking

⁴⁰ Mazzenga, "One-Hundred Years of American Catholics and Organized Labor, 1870s-1970s," 29.

⁴¹ Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements*, 17.

⁴² Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: The Popes Confront the Industrial Age, 1740-1958*, 141.

⁴³ Schuck, "Early Modern Roman Catholic Social Thought, 1740-1890," 100.

dockworkers in London in 1889 also made an impression on him. Succinctly stated, he came to believe that the Church must provide a solution to the worker question and understood that the evangelization of the working class was necessary to stem the further loss of workers to atheistic socialism.⁴⁴ Leo had voiced concern for workers with increasing attention in earlier statements on other issues, but *Rerum Novarum* would become the “Magna Carta” of Social Catholicism and papal social teaching. The encyclical, which is informed by the work of August Lehmkuhl SJ on the minimum wage, Henri Lorin’s writing on credit and the corporatist vision of La Tour du Pin, is by far Pope Leo’s longest.⁴⁵ Matteo Liberatore SJ, Cardinal Tomasso Zigliara O.P. and Cardinal Camillo Mazzella all had a hand in the drafting of the encyclical.⁴⁶

I cannot undertake a full-blown analysis of *Rerum Novarum* here. I intend merely to highlight a few of its many enduring contributions. The encyclical begins by noting the signs of the times, among which Leo mentions the “misery and wretchedness” of the masses of poor people, and the “callousness of employers and the greed of unrestrained competition,” “rapacious usury,” and the concentration of wealth and the means of production among a small group of rich people, creating a “yoke little better than slavery itself” (no. 1). Then Leo defends the right to private property, condemning the flawed approach of socialists who deprive downtrodden workers of the right to own private property – a right which is “preeminently in conformity with human nature” (nos. 5-8; see also 35). We may note that later popes endorse but qualify the right to private property, thus hewing more closely to Aquinas’ position. As St. John Paul II stated, private property is circumscribed by a “social mortgage,” which means that the state can limit the

⁴⁴ Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements*, 18-19.

⁴⁵ Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: The Popes Confront the Industrial Age, 1740-1958*, 142-43, 76-77.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 143; Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements*, 19.

right to private property if meeting the basic needs of all truly requires it.⁴⁷ Pope Leo does mention Thomas' claim that the moral law requires people to share their possessions when others are in need (no. 22). However, unlike future popes he does not admit of the State's right to redistribute property. One scholar interestingly has noted that Archbishop Michael Corrigan of New York lobbied Mazzella to stress private property more strongly in order to rebuke a socialist priest in his diocese who was excommunicated in 1887.⁴⁸

The pontiff sometimes cites Scripture as a source of the Church's social teaching. For example, he appeals to James 5:4 to ground the obligation of employers to pay workers what they rightly deserve (no. 17). Leo appeals to several other scriptural passages throughout the encyclical, but more often he grounds the rights of the human person in the "nature's law" (no. 7) On the basis of natural law human beings have rights to "food and all necessities" for one's children (no. 10), a just wage (no. 20) and the right to form trade unions (nos. 36-38). While rejecting the notion of class conflict advocated by the socialists, Pope Leo did denounce decreasing workers' wages "either by force, fraud or by usurious dealing" (no. 17). Leo argued that the right to receive a wage that is enough to "support the wage earner in reasonable and frugal comfort" is grounded in a "dictate of nature" (no. 34). According to natural law, all human persons must preserve their lives and those of their family members. For the poor, who do not own capital, this can only be achieved by earning just wages (no. 34).

Leo's recognition of the vulnerability of the poor and the imbalance of power between employers and employees also undergirded his support for the right of workers to form unions

⁴⁷ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 42. See also Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, nos. 23-4; John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, no. 14; *Centessimus Annus*, no. 15, 30-31, 42. In a 1979 speech in Cuilapan, Mexico John Paul II stated "if the common good requires it, there should be no hesitation even at expropriation, carried out in the due form." See https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1979/january/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19790129_messico-cuilapan-indios.html.

⁴⁸ Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements*.

(see nos. 36-38). Furthermore, the state must protect the right to organize and the other rights of workers. If it does not, it “contradicts the very principle of its own existence” (no.38; see also 28). The state must limit itself to the minimum needed to “remedy the evil or remove the danger” (no. 29, see also 28). Nonetheless, the state should enact laws to protect the rights of workers, ensuring that they have decent working conditions and wages, thereby obviating the need for strikes (no. 31, see also 29). Pope Leo also maintains that commutative and distributive justice require the state to promote “the interests of the poor” and the working class (no. 27).

Pope Leo chided capitalists who cruelly exploited their workers, treating them as “mere instruments for making money.” He argued that labor should not be so excessive as to cause deterioration of the worker’s mind and body. In a time when employers generally did not respect the worker’s right to life and limb, Leo insisted that the dignity of the worker requires doing what is possible to promote his or her health and safety (no. 33, 34). Children, argued Leo, should not be forced to toil prematurely because “hard work blights the young promise of a child’s powers” and precludes education (no.34).

Although Pope Leo rejected both socialism and excessive individualism, he did not demonstrate the awareness that economic inequality arises from and vitiates justice in the way that later popes increasingly did. In fact, he states that wealth inequality arises from an “inequality in condition” which is “far from being disadvantageous either to individuals or to the community” (no. 14). Already in *Katolicka Etyka Społeczna* Wojtyła contended the common good requires that “the members of society achieve material well-being evenly and proportionately” (“członkowie społeczeństwa osiągają równomiernie i proporcjonalnie dobrobyt materialny”). Thus it is “necessary to limit luxury” („należy dążyć do ograniczania zbytku”).⁴⁹ Pope Benedict XVI acknowledged in *Caritas in Veritate* that inequality erodes “social cohesion”

⁴⁹ Wojtyła, *Katolicka Etyka Społeczna*, 335. See also John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, no. 11.

(no. 32), and called for wealth distribution (no. 35). Pope Francis has stated most forcefully that an “economy of exclusion and inequality...kills” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 53). In other words, while Leo was concerned about just distribution, his need to correct the socialists softened his stance on inequality.

Catholic Social Teaching from the Margins

Although the Church was somewhat slow to address the social question head-on, Catholics did take up the cause of workers with increasing fervor throughout the 19th century, culminating in Leo’s great encyclical on “the new things” of the socioeconomic and political order. Pope Leo’s great encyclical laid the foundation for the Church’s unwavering commitment to the dignity and rights of workers. It must be said however, that with some exceptions Catholics generally, and the magisterium particularly, did not demonstrate great leadership regarding the abolition of slavery and the plunder of native peoples throughout North and South America, Africa and Asia until well into the twentieth century.⁵⁰ The magisterium failed to grasp that “modern capitalism, first in mercantile and later industrial form, has been partly grounded economically in the Western racist plunder of non-European peoples and their lands...⁵¹ In fact, Catholic universities in the United States have just begun in the last few years to reckon with their own use of slave labor and slave trading as a source of revenue well into the

⁵⁰ Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: The Popes Confront the Industrial Age, 1740-1958*, 19. Wojtyła maintains that Leo XIII’s *In plurimus* (1888) “refers to the elimination of slavery” (“Do zniesienia niewolnictwa odnosi się encyklika ...” (34)). However, John T. Noonan argues that some popes, such as Gregory XVI (*In supremo*) and Leo XIII (*In plurimis*) did make statements challenging the institution of slavery, but they did not constitute unequivocal condemnations. Leo XIII, for example labeled the institution “base and cruel” but not “intrinsically evil.” John Thomas Noonan, *A Church That Can and Cannot Change: The Development of Catholic Moral Teaching* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 113, see also 17-26. See also Katie Walker Grimes, *Fugitive Saints: Catholicism and the Politics of Slavery* (Minneapolis Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2017), 93-96. Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements*, 136-38.

⁵¹ Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: The Popes Confront the Industrial Age, 1740-1958*, 18.

19th century.⁵² Some noteworthy white Catholics such as Irishman Daniel O’Connell (1775-1847), Bishop Félix Dupanloup of Orleans, France (1802-78), and William Gaston in the U.S. (1778-1844) understood and argued that universal human dignity undergirds the rights of all people, including people of color and indigenous peoples.⁵³ However, the majority did not. Even staunch labor advocates such as Mathew Carey supported the institution of slavery as vital to American capitalism.⁵⁴ Black Catholics, on the other hand, called on the Church to promote their dignity and rights. For example, Harriet Thompson of New York and 26 other signatories wrote to Pope Pius IX in 1851, urging him to enjoin white Catholics to recognize blacks as their brothers and sisters in Christ and enable their children to be taught in Catholic schools. As historian Cyprian Davis writes, “for the first time but not for the last, black lay Catholics had spoken out for themselves expressing both loyalty and love for the church and anger and dismay at the racist practices of those within the Church.”⁵⁵ Earlier in 1828 Mary Lange O.S.P (1784-1882) founded the first religious congregation of black women, the Oblate Sisters of Providence. They too challenged the racism and sexism in the Church and in society, founding schools for black children and women already in the 1860’s.⁵⁶

How did white Catholics justify the subjugation and inhumane treatment of people of color for so long? Catholic theologian Katie Walker Grimes contends that white Catholics

⁵² See Craig Steven Wilder, "War and Priests: Catholic Colleges and Slavery in the Age of Revolution," in *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development*, ed. Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman (2016).

⁵³ Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 62-65. For other noteworthy exceptions, see Schuck, "Early Modern Roman Catholic Social Thought, 1740-1890."

⁵⁴ Andrew Shankman, "Capitalism, Slavery, and the New Epoch," in *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development*, ed. Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman (2016). For white Catholics' approval of slavery, see Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*, 28-29.

⁵⁵ Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*, 97, see 94-97.

⁵⁶ Diane Batts Morrow, *Persons of Color and Religious at the Same Time : The Oblate Sisters of Providence, 1828-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*, 99-105.

“endorsed Africanized slavery not *despite* their Catholic habituation but largely *because* of it.”⁵⁷

In the United States and in Europe, too many Catholics still exhibit a selective and distorted understanding of the Church’s teaching on human dignity and rights. For example, immigrants of color are seen as pariahs, rather than children of God trying to find decent work and living conditions.⁵⁸ Although Catholic social teaching has unequivocally condemned racism, xenophobia, and ethnic hatred, the magisterium has still not devoted the kind of systematic treatment akin to what it has given worker and economic justice.⁵⁹

Historically official Catholic social teaching has also not done much to help women trying to make their way in the world of work. As feminist theologians such as Christine Firer Hinze have pointed out, Leo XIII’s insistence that “a woman is by nature fitted for home-work” (*Rerum Novarum*, no. 43), has never really been adequately revised. The magisterium’s failure to stress that men are equally created for and responsible for childrearing and domestic work impedes women’s ability to dedicate themselves fully to parenting and a career.⁶⁰ Moreover, the Church has yet to fully embrace the implications of Catholic social teaching for its own structures, which is evidenced by the lack of women in leadership positions. As James Keenan SJ has recently argued, there is nothing in Church doctrine or canon law that prevents women from serving as Cardinals in the church.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Grimes, *Fugitive Saints: Catholicism and the Politics of Slavery*, xiv.

⁵⁸ See my article Gerald J. Beyer, "Donald Trump, Catholics, and the Scourge of Racism," *Political Theology Today*, December 2 2016. Available at <https://politicaltheology.com/donald-trump-catholics-and-the-scourge-of-racism-gerald-j-beyer/>

⁵⁹ Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2010).

⁶⁰ Christine Firer Hinze, "Women, Families, and the Legacy of *Laborem Exercens*: An Unfinished Agenda," *Journal Catholic Social Thought* 6, no. 1 (2013): 74, 82. Hinze points, for example, to John Paul's discussion of fatherhood in *Mulieris Dignitatem*. While the Pope certainly believe fathers have an important role, saying that fathers must “learn their role from the mother” is problematic. It implies that fatherhood is somehow “outside” of the nature of men. See *ibid.*, 77, note 22.

⁶¹ James Keenan, “If We Want to Reform the Church, Let’s Make Women Cardinals,” *National Catholic Reporter*, September 8, 2018. Available at <https://www.ncronline.org/news/accountability/if-we-want-reform-church-lets-make-women-cardinals>

Yet it must also be said that women have long surmounted the sexism in the Church and society to embody Catholic social teaching in the world. In the 19th century women's religious communities built the largest orphanage network in Europe and United States.⁶² From the 1840's onward, women religious have played a key role in creating and maintaining Catholic hospitals in the United States.⁶³ By the time she died in 1821, Elizabeth Ann Seton's Sisters of Charity created the first "structured delivery of social service to the poor" by creating schools, hospitals, and orphanages.⁶⁴ In spite of what Pope Leo said about a woman's nature in *Rerum Novarum*, he personally encouraged St. Katharine Drexel to become a missionary to Native Americans. Shortly thereafter she began founding schools for Native Americans and black Catholics. Her crowning achievement was the founding of Xavier University in 1925, the first and only Catholic institution of higher learning for blacks in the United States. She and her sisters even pushed for anti-lynching legislation and contributed financially to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).⁶⁵ Women like the radical labor leader Mary "Mother" Jones (1837-1930), were undeterred, and even inspired by the teachings of the Catholic faith, to fight mightily for the rights of workers.⁶⁶ Elizabeth Rogers, a Catholic mother of several children became the "Master Workman," or head of the Knights in Chicago in 1892, representing 40,000 workers.⁶⁷ In 1886 Irish Catholic immigrant Leonora M. Barry (1849-1930) became the president of a 9,200 member chapter of the Knights of Labor and its first

⁶² Schuck, "Early Modern Roman Catholic Social Thought, 1740-1890," 101.

⁶³ See Bernadette McCauley, *Who Shall Take Care of Our Sick? : Roman Catholic Sisters and the Development of Catholic Hospitals in New York City*, Medicine, Science, and Religion in Historical Context (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

⁶⁴ Schuck, "Early Modern Roman Catholic Social Thought, 1740-1890," 108.

⁶⁵ Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*, 135-36, 254. Leo XIII also commissioned Mother Francis Cabrini to become a missionary to Italian immigrants in New York. She went on to create more than 60 schools, hospitals, and orphanages. See <https://www.motherscabrini.org/who-we-are/mother-cabrini/>

⁶⁶ Mazzenga, "One-Hundred Years of American Catholics and Organized Labor, 1870s-1970s," 34-35. See also Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements*, 34.

⁶⁷ Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements*, 34. See also <http://www.illinoislaborhistory.org/labor-history-articles/when-women-were-knights>

General Investigator of “Women’s Work.” She also delivered hundreds of lectures on the cause of working women and against child labor.⁶⁸ Devout Catholics Mary Kenney and Agnes Nestor helped form the Women’s Trade Union League in 1903.⁶⁹

In spite of its weaknesses in the areas of gender and racial justice, the long tradition of social Catholicism and modern Catholic social teaching remains one of the Catholic Church’s most precious gifts to the world. As I have stressed, the Church contributed greatly to raising consciousness about the plight of workers in industrial capitalism. The Church continues to champion the rights and dignity of workers, which are under constant assault in the modern global economy. Leo XIII’s great encyclical set the Church on a trajectory toward the kind of Catholicism that continues to inspire the minds and hearts of young people. John Paul II rightly maintained that Catholic social teaching is essential to the new evangelization. He also correctly contended that putting Catholic social teaching into action by embodying it in our practices, policies and institutions is the best way to make it credible in a world that lionizes radical individualism, the unfettered pursuit of wealth and hedonistic pleasures to the detriment of the common good. Let us see ourselves as heirs to the great tradition of Ketteler, Mermillod, Pauline Jaricot, Pope Leo XIII, Mary “Mother” Jones, Agnes Nestor, Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, Blessed Jerzy Popiełuszko, Alina Pienkowska and *Solidarność*, Blessed Oscar Romero and the many other Catholics who fought for the dignity and rights of workers and their families. Let us continue to challenge those who uncritically accept an “economy that kills,” as Pope Francis put it, and fails to justly compensate workers for the fruits of their labor and protect them from the many hazards they face as they toil.

⁶⁸ Mary Jo Weaver, *New Catholic Women: A Contemporary Challenge to Traditional Religious Authority* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 22.

⁶⁹ Patricia A. Lamoureux, "Irish Catholic Women and the Labor Movement," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 16, no. 3 (1998).

Sources:

- Beyer, Gerald J. "Donald Trump, Catholics, and the Scourge of Racism." *Political Theology Today*, December 2 2016.
- Campion, Owen F. "The Labor Movement: Church's Role in Bringing Human Rights Theory to Reality." *Our Sunday Visitor*, August 4 2014.
- Davis, Cyprian. *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*. New York: Crossroad, 1990.
- Grimes, Katie Walker. *Fugitive Saints: Catholicism and the Politics of Slavery* [in English]. Minneapolis Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2017.
- Hinze, Christine Firer. "Women, Families, and the Legacy of *Laborem Exercens*: An Unfinished Agenda." *Journal Catholic Social Thought* 6, no. 1 (2013): 63-92.
- Holland, Joe. *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: The Popes Confront the Industrial Age, 1740-1958*. New York: Paulist Press, 2003.
- Lamoureux, Patricia A. "Irish Catholic Women and the Labor Movement." *U.S. Catholic Historian* 16, no. 3 (1998): 24-44.
- Massingale, Bryan N. *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2010.
- Mazzenga, Maria. "One-Hundred Years of American Catholics and Organized Labor, 1870s-1970s." *Journal Catholic Social Thought* 9, no. 1 (2012): 23-42.
- McCauley, Bernadette. *Who Shall Take Care of Our Sick? : Roman Catholic Sisters and the Development of Catholic Hospitals in New York City* [in English]. Medicine, Science, and Religion in Historical Context. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005.
- Mich, Marvin L. Krier. *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements*. Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1998.
- Misner, Paul. *Social Catholicism in Europe: From the Onset of Industrialization to the First World War*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1991.
- Morrow, Diane Batts. *Persons of Color and Religious at the Same Time : The Oblate Sisters of Providence, 1828-1860*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.
- Noonan, John Thomas. *A Church That Can and Cannot Change: The Development of Catholic Moral Teaching*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005.
- Ryan, John A. *A Living Wage*. Rev. and Abridged ed. New York,: The Macmillan Company, 1920.
- Schuck, Michael J. "Early Modern Roman Catholic Social Thought, 1740-1890." In *Modern Catholic Social Teaching : Commentaries and Interpretations*, edited by Kenneth R. Himes and Lisa Sowle Cahill, 99-126. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2005.
- Schuck, Michael Joseph. *That They Be One: The Social Teaching of the Papal Encyclicals 1740-1989*. Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1991.
- Shankman, Andrew. "Capitalism, Slavery, and the New Epoch." In *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development*, edited by Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman, 243-61, 2016.
- Weaver, Mary Jo. *New Catholic Women: A Contemporary Challenge to Traditional Religious Authority*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.
- Wilder, Craig Steven. "War and Priests: Catholic Colleges and Slavery in the Age of Revolution." In *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development*, edited by Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman, 227-42, 2016.