



## The Myth of Rerum Novarum

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### Abstract

It is often claimed that the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of Leo XIII laid a foundation for the emergence of trades unions and was ‘the workers’ charter’. This is a myth. The origins of the encyclical and Catholic Social Teaching in the late nineteenth-century were entirely socially conservative. *Rerum Novarum* condemns socialism and its authors thought that the primary purpose of what the encyclical calls ‘associations’ was devotional, ‘confraternities of mutual support and religious observance’.

### Keywords

*Rerum Novarum*, Leo XIII, Catholic Social Teaching, trades unions

In 1984, in collaboration with Brian Davies, and at the instigation of Julian Filochowski who had recently moved from CIIR to become the director of CAFOD and was an energetic advocate of what he regularly referred to, with ever-increasing inaccuracy, as ‘the Church’s best-kept secret’<sup>1</sup> I published *Proclaiming Justice and Peace: Documents from John XXIII to John Paul II.*<sup>2</sup> As the subtitle indicates, the text of the most famous document of them all, Pope Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum*, was omitted though I discussed it briefly in the Introduction. In later editions, however, Leo’s encyclical was quite properly included. I say ‘quite properly’ because, within Catholic Social Teaching, it enjoys an almost mythic status.

The word ‘myth’ can have many meanings. It is commonly understood as denoting something false or imaginary, though in the

<sup>1</sup> *Our Best Kept Secret: The Rich Heritage of Catholic Social Teaching* by Michael J. Schultheis, Edward P. DeBerri and Peter J. Henriot, London: CAFOD, 1988. It had previously been published in Washington DC: Center of Concern, 1987. This, however, is described as a ‘revised and expanded version’. I have been unable to trace the original, though there is a suggestion it had first been published in Manila.

<sup>2</sup> London: Collins, 1984; Mystic, Connecticut: TwentyThird Publications, 1985; 2nd edition by Harper Collins, London, 1991; 3rd edition by Twenty-Third, 1992; Portuguese edition, Lisbon, 1987. My Introduction has also been published in Korean!

academy it is often seen rather more positively as a story which has had a foundational role in human culture. In the latter sense, *Rerum Novarum* is most certainly a myth. It has helped to create modern Roman Catholic culture. But it is a myth in the former sense, too, in that the story frequently told about the encyclical is commonly false and sometimes imaginary.

That it was foundational hardly requires proof. Though it was not the first of Leo's encyclicals to address social issues, it is the one which caught popular imagination, and not just among Catholics. The radical Victorian journalist and sometime spiritualist, W. T. Stead, produced a version for popular consumption in Britain. It had the papal tiara emblazoned on the cover, but he replaced the crossed keys of St Peter with the hammer and sickle.<sup>3</sup> The publication of *Rerum Novarum* caused uproar across Europe and it still frames papal writing on social doctrine, from *Quadragesimo Anno* to *Centesimus Annus*. It has been extolled by Catholics, as even as sober an historian as Roger Aubert has reported, as 'the workers' charter' though he adds it 'was regarded in other circles as fundamentally anti-socialist, if anything somewhat reactionary and in any case of little real moment.'<sup>4</sup> It was variously understood, and Pope Leo had himself to write to the German bishops warning against too radical an understanding of the text. That it ranked high in Catholic consciousness was evidenced by the multiplicity of conferences and plethora of publications which in 1991 marked the centenary of its promulgation. In one of those volumes, that published by the French School at Rome and containing the proceedings of an international colloquium, the first article by Antonio Riccardi is entitled '*Rerum Novarum*: il mito e avvenimento' which begins by spelling out the 'foundational' nature of its publication.<sup>5</sup>

As you will all know, books on Catholic social teaching continue to appear. One of the most recent, and most high-profile, has been *The True Wealth of Nations: Catholic social thought and economic life* edited by Daniel Finn.<sup>6</sup> It was that book or, more correctly, a review of the book in *The Tablet* for 11<sup>th</sup> June this year [2011] by Austen Ivereigh that inspired this short paper. Perhaps 'inspired' is not quite the right word: 'irritated' would be preferable. In Austen's review I read 'One of the most important essays here... charts the political impact of CST since 1891, via labour unions, the founding

<sup>3</sup> I came across this story when writing a commemorative piece on the centenary of *Rerum Novarum* for *The Tablet* in 1991. Unfortunately I can no longer find the reference.

<sup>4</sup> Roger Aubert, *Catholic Social Teaching: An Historical Perspective*, Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, 2003, p. 143.

<sup>5</sup> "Rerum Novarum": *Écriture, Contenu et Réception*, Rome: École Française de Rome, 1997. The article referred to is pp. 11–27.

<sup>6</sup> Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. The article to which Dr Ivereigh refers is at pp. 95–115.

of the European Union and the collapse of Christian Democracy.’<sup>7</sup> It was this that irritated me: the implication that labour unions – which had of course existed, certainly in Britain, long before 1891 – were somehow the consequence of *Rerum Novarum*. One could even argue that *Rerum Novarum*, with its insistence, reiterated by Pope Leo’s successor, St Pius X, that the trade associations should have a confessional basis, was positively inimical to the interests of the workers by dividing the working-class movement. My intention here is to suggest that the notion of *Rerum Novarum* as ‘the workers’ charter’ is a myth, not in the sense that it provides a foundational narrative, but in the more commonly-used meaning of that term as something false or imaginary.

Thanks to the writings of Paul Misner<sup>8</sup> we know a great deal about the main characters in the Catholic social movements of the nineteenth-century, men like the Viscount de Bonald (1754–1840), the aristocratic philosopher, traditionalist, and counter-revolutionary, who was convinced that the growth of cities was dangerous to the health of the poor and served only the interests of middle-classes. His son Cardinal Louis de Bonald (1787–1870), from 1840 the Archbishop of Lyons, criticised his clergy for not insisting on the need for law and order, believed that charity had to be church-led not state-funded, and was convinced that Christianity was the only hope for civilisation. There were many others.<sup>9</sup> Though practicalities differed from country to country the conviction was the same. As the late Professor W. R. Ward commented of Germany in a lecture to one of the conferences to commemorate the *Rerum Novarum* centenary, ‘The sprawling extension of Prussia was a unifying factor, and the permanent clash between that power and Cologne ensured that the conservative forces in German Catholicism could not, like their counterparts elsewhere, use social Christianity as a substitute for liberal politics, since liberal constitutionalism seemed to be their only defence against an unpalatable despotism. And in turn the long-running theme in the history of German Catholicism was whether conservative social instincts and liberal politics could be held in harness.’<sup>10</sup> Cologne, it should perhaps be explained, formerly a free city, was incorporated into Protestant Prussia by the Congress of Vienna but remained the capital of the overwhelmingly Catholic Rhineland.

<sup>7</sup> *The Tablet*, 11 June 2011, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Misner, *Social Catholicism in Europe*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1991.

<sup>9</sup> The Viscount de Bonald is memorable, at least to me, because, while studying scholastic philosophy I came across his name as an ‘adversarius’ to some scholastic position.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Faith and Fate. *Eine Vogelperspektive* of German Social Catholicism” in W. R. Ward, *Faith and Faction*, London: Epworth Press, 1993, pp. 333–344, at p. 335.

Interpreters of *Rerum Novarum* fail to give due weight to the conservative social instincts of those who framed the Catholic social agenda in the nineteenth-century. Social Catholicism had a long history as the example of the Bonalds, father and son, demonstrate, but I will begin this survey with the First Vatican Council. Many leading Catholic noblemen gathered in the Pope's city for the Council, meeting in the salon of the Princess Sophie Odescalchi. They fled Rome with the advance of the armies of Victor Emmanuel, but in the October after the fall of Rome they met again at Geneva to form a 'Committee of Catholic Defence'. The members of the committee, which came to be known as the Black International<sup>11</sup> in conscious imitation of the first Socialist International, were mainly monarchists from France and Austria, and Carlists from Spain. It was their conviction that the social and political order in Europe was on the point of collapse partly because of the seemingly inexorable rise of Protestant Prussia, and partly because of the growth of bourgeois democracy. Their two-fold agenda, therefore, was to campaign for a restoration of the temporal power of the papacy, and to restore within Europe what they believed to have been, if imperfectly, the social reign of Christ: agitation for the introduction of a Feast of Christ the King began among monarchists, especially French monarchists, in the 1880s.

Members of the Black International all agreed that the strategy the Church needed to adopt to win back its international standing was to garner the support of poor. To do so it had actively to campaign to improve the lot of the working class. There were differing views on how that might be done. After the dramatic collapse of the Vienna stock exchange on 9 May 1873, the aristocratic members of the group, all fervent anti-capitalists, moved increasingly to a corporatist vision of the state, demanding state intervention to improve the working conditions of women and children, the institution of Sunday as a day of rest, and the provision of housing for the poor. As a group the Black International did not survive the death of their Roman patron, the Cardinal Secretary of State Giacomo Antonelli, in 1876, but the campaign they had undertaken in the press made obvious to the Roman Curia the need for a Vatican press office, and persuaded the Holy See itself that it needed popular support, support later given shape by massive waves of pilgrims, especially from France.

Though the Black International disappeared, a number of those associated with it were early members of the much better known International Union of Social Studies, or the Union of Fribourg. In between, it should perhaps be recorded, there had been a 'Union of the Holy Father', the founder of which became the first head of the

<sup>11</sup> See Emiel Lamberts (ed.), *The Black International/L'Internationale noire*, Louvain: Leuven University Press, 2002, especially the article by Lamberts himself, 'L'Internationale noire: Une organisation secrete au service du Saint Siège', pp. 15–101.

Vatican press office. This organisation of intransigents did not, however, long survive Leo's softer approach towards the Third French Republic which culminated in the 'ralliement' toast of Cardinal Lavignerie in November 1890.

The interconnection of the personalities involved in these various groups is interesting. To take one example: the convert Baron Karl von Vogelsang, originally from what is now Poland but who from 1864 lived in Austria, had been much influenced by Bishop Emmanuel von Ketteler of Mainz, one of the early 'heroes' of social Catholicism who had advocated a return to what he believed to have been the cooperative society of the Middle Ages. It was he who developed the notion of the corporatist state, much enhanced by Vogelsang, as a state conceived of as a living organism, animated by faith and strongly hierarchical. As Aubert remarks, 'this cooperatively based social organism . . . would constitute for more than half a century the foundation of Catholic social doctrine.'<sup>12</sup> Vogelsang was a member of the Black International, and he was also closely associated with François-René de la Tour du Pin, Marquis de la Charce, whom he had met while de la Tour was military attaché in Vienna. While seconded to the Vienna embassy de la Tour had also met, and was won over by, the Comte de Chambord, pretender to the French crown, who was living in exile in Austria. Despite his monarchist and conservative sympathies, de la Tour was the leading thinker among the French social Catholics, and was strongly motivated by a desire to improve the quality of life of the poor as a means to ensure social stability in France. Vogelsang and de la Tour were members both of the Black International and of the Union of Fribourg.

I have been trying to outline the very conservative milieu out of which came the 1891 papal encyclical. *Rerum Novarum* was aimed squarely at industrialists, a class to which, with the exception of Léon Harmel,<sup>13</sup> none of the socially-minded Catholics belonged. Unlike Harmel, they were aristocratic landowners whose position in society was being undermined by the brash new capitalists.

Before turning to the encyclical itself, however, I would like to make a couple of remarks concerning the year of its publication: why did it appear in 1891? Though in the end Leo XIII did not himself write a word of it, he had been contemplating such a missive pretty much from the time of his election. A number of factors came together, not least the fame of Cardinal Manning's involvement in the London dockers' strike of 1889. There were, however, a couple of more immediate reasons. As W. R. Ward comments, in 1890 'the new [German] Emperor William II had ditched Bismarck, publicly

<sup>12</sup> Aubert, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

<sup>13</sup> Joan L. Coffey, *Léon Harmel*, Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 2003.

advertised himself as a social welfare Kaiser, called a conference at Berlin on labour protection and even invited the Pope.<sup>14</sup> That spurred the Pope on. There was also the problem, now that the Kulturkampf was won, of the Centre Party, not technically a Catholic party but largely so, with a strong clerical presence: there was a danger that its members might drift off into socialism unless they were warned off. Finally, in 1890 the Italian socialist party was founded partly at least in response to the growing influence among the working class of the Opera dei Congressi,<sup>15</sup> then at its peak: the Opera was later to part company with the Holy See because of its growing commitment to democracy, but it was in 1890 at its most intransigent where the rights of the Church were at issue.

It is no surprise, therefore, that *Rerum Novarum* opens with a ringing condemnation of socialism. What is much more surprising is the next section on private property. This was not a major topic for the Union of Fribourg, but it had become one in the United States because of the 'single land tax' of the economist Henry George, an economic theory which had been enthusiastically embraced by one New York parish priest. The priest was reprimanded because, his bishop thought, Henry George's proposal was inimical to private property.

We know a great deal about the various versions of Pope Leo's encyclical. The first draft<sup>16</sup> was by the 70-year old Jesuit Matteo Liberatore who was a keen proponent of the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas. It was Aquinas's teaching which he now reproduced: the *divisio bonorum* into private property was in accordance with right reason and was upheld by the *ius gentium*, he argued, but in the first instance the goods of the earth belonged to all. It was *that* which was a direct consequence of natural law: private property itself was therefore secondary, and consequently not a sacrosanct absolute right. Liberatore's draft was passed to Cardinal Tommaso Zigliara, a Dominican who had contributed to Leo's encyclical *Aeterni Patris* commending Aquinas to the Church, and whom the Pope had appointed editor of the Leonine edition of Thomas. This makes it all the odder, therefore, that he departed from the teaching of the Angelic Doctor and made private property itself an absolute right. Accounts of the drafting of the encyclical do not explain why the change was made.

<sup>14</sup> Ward, op. cit., p. 339.

<sup>15</sup> On the Opera dei Congressi, see Aubert, op. cit., pp. 152–156.

<sup>16</sup> The history of the drafting of the encyclical can be followed in Giovanni Antonazzi, *L'enciclica Rerum Novarum: testo autentico e redazioni preparatorie*, first published Rome 1957, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition Rome: Edizione di Storia e Letteratura, 1991. The process is recounted in a number of places, but perhaps most conveniently in Aubert, op. cit., pp. 99–105 or John Moloney, 'The Making of *Rerum Novarum* April 1890–May 1891' in Paul Furlong and David Curtis (eds.), *The Church Faces the Modern World: Rerum Novarum and its Impact*, Scunthorpe: Earlsgate Press, 1993, pp. 27–39.



Possibly it was to distance the Church from the theories of Henry George (the American Cardinal Gibbons had discussed the issue with the Vatican, only just persuading it not to put George's works on the Index), or it may have been to put clear water between the Church's teaching on property, and that of the socialists. Whatever the reason, private property became the golden calf of Catholic social doctrine for almost three-quarters of a century.

A matter of much more concern to social Catholics was the legitimacy of State intervention in the conditions of workers. Catholics in many parts of Europe had reason to be wary of the State. There were nonetheless a number of conferences at Liège, summoned by Liège's bishop to discuss social questions, which came down firmly on the side of State intervention in governing working conditions. In 1890, on the other hand, a congress held under the auspices of the Bishop of Angers came to the opposite conclusion. The encyclical, in a passage written by Zigliara, gives limited approval to State intervention, and then goes to some lengths to justify it. Aubert suggests that one reason for producing *Rerum Novarum* may have been a felt need to resolve this conflict between two Catholic schools of thought. But Leo's own thinking was not really in doubt. In 1887, addressing one of the pilgrimages brought to Rome by Léon Harmel, he said that the state ought to intervene 'wherever morality, justice, human dignity and the domestic life of the worker was threatened.'<sup>17</sup>

The domestic life of the worker obviously depended on his wages, and the method of arriving at wage levels was one of the more contentious issues in the Union of Fribourg and other gatherings. There were again two schools of thought: should it be the market rate (a view espoused by Harmel, as I have remarked, the only major industrialist among the participants in the debate), or should it be a living wage, one providing not only for the worker but also for his family? The Jesuit Augustine Lehmkuhl argued at the 1887 meeting of the Union of Fribourg for the latter position. Moreover, the level of the living wage ought, Lehmkuhl believed, to be decided upon by the State. His fellow Jesuit Liberatore, in his draft of the encyclical, agreed, arguing that a wage was not a price to be fixed by the market because labour was not a commodity. Zigliara, on the contrary, chose the basic, rather than the living, wage, and it is this less favourable view as far as workers are concerned that remains in the final text, though *Rerum Novarum* adds a remark about wages being high enough to allow a worker to save.

Which brings me finally to where I started with the reference to Austen Ivereigh, to the unions, or 'professional associations' as *Rerum Novarum* calls them. The question arose as to who should

<sup>17</sup> Georges Jarlot, *Doctrine Pontificale et Histoire*, Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1964, p. 201; and cf. Coffey, *op. cit.*, pp. 161ff.

arbitrate over wages, the State or associations of workers? The encyclical acknowledges that in extreme cases the State might need to intervene, but in normal circumstances the settlement of wage levels was the role of the associations. But what kind of associations? As I have remarked, the underlying philosophy of social Catholicism was corporatist. ‘Corporations’, including both employers and employees of the various industries, were seen by Liberatore as the main remedy against the evils afflicting labour. Zigliara disagreed about the nature of associations. He thought Liberatore’s structures too rigid, limiting workers’ freedom and confusing State and private responsibility. Eventually it was Liberatore’s corporatist views which prevailed, though – possibly again through the intervention of Cardinal Gibbon – the encyclical made allowance for associations which consisted only of workers. The preference for the ‘corporatist’ model is readily explained: it seemed a better guarantor of social peace, and seemingly overcame the conflict of classes: opposition to class war became another century-long leitmotiv of Catholic social teaching.

Zigliara and Liberatore were, however, agreed on one thing: the primary purpose of the professional associations was devotional. What *Rerum Novarum* commends are not labour unions but confraternities of mutual support and religious observance. The encyclical lamented the disappearance of the guilds, and in the end it yielded to the abiding temptation of nineteenth-century Catholic social thought, and turned back to the Middle Ages. It is true that in some countries Catholic trade unions eventually emerged, but that is because Catholics were forbidden from associating with non-Catholics: it is a myth that they in any way owe their inspiration to the teaching of *Rerum Novarum*.

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