

Excerpts from Pius X, Encyclical Letter, *Notre Charge Apostolique (Our Apostolic Mandate)*, 25 August 1910.

Full text available at: <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius10/p10notre.htm>

Given by Pope Pius X to the French Bishops

Our Apostolic Mandate requires from Us that We watch over the purity of the Faith & the integrity of Catholic discipline. It requires from Us that We protect the faithful from evil & error; especially so when evil & error are presented in dynamic language ... Such were not so long ago the doctrines of the so-called philosophers of the 18th century, the doctrines of the Revolution & Liberalism which have been so often condemned; such are even today the theories of the Sillon which, under the glowing appearance of generosity, are all too often wanting in clarity, logic & truth. These theories do not belong to the Catholic or, for that matter, to the French Spirit. ...

We love, indeed, the valiant young people who fight under the Sillon's banner, & We deem them worthy of praise & admiration in many respects. We love their leaders, whom We are pleased to acknowledge as noble souls on a level above vulgar passions, & inspired with the noblest form of enthusiasm in their quest for goodness. ...

Sillon did raise among the workers the standard of Jesus Christ... This was the heyday of the Sillon. ... The day came when perceptive observers could discern alarming trends within the Sillon; the Sillon was losing its way. ... Its leaders were young, full of enthusiasm & self-confidence. But they were not adequately equipped with historical knowledge, sound philosophy, & solid theology to tackle without danger the difficult social problems in which their work & their inclinations were involving them. They were not sufficiently equipped to be on their guard against the penetration of liberal & Protestant concepts on doctrine & obedience.

They were given no small measure of advice. Admonition came after the advice but ... both advice & reproaches ... were of no avail... We should be failing in Our duty if We kept silence any longer. We owe the truth to Our dear sons of the Sillon ... We owe the truth to a large number of seminarists & priests who have been drawn away by the Sillon, if not from the authority, at least from the guidance & influence of the bishops. We owe it also to the Church. ...

In the first place We must take up ... the pretension of the Sillon to escape the jurisdiction of ecclesiastical authority. ... The leaders of the Sillon claim that they are working in a field which is not that of the Church; they claim that they are pursuing aims in the temporal order only & not those of the spiritual order; that the Sillonist is simply a Catholic devoted to the betterment of the working class & to democratic endeavors by drawing from the practice of his faith the energy for his selfless efforts. They claim that, neither more nor less than a Catholic craftsman, farmer, economist or politician, the Sillonist is subject to common standards of behavior, yet without being bound in a special manner by the authority of the Church. ...

The truth is that the Sillonist leaders are self-confessed & irrepressible idealists; they claim to regenerate the working class by first elevating the conscience of Man; they have a social doctrine, & they have religious & philosophical principles for the reconstruction of society upon new foundations; they have a particular conception of human dignity, freedom, justice & brotherhood; &, in an attempt to justify their social dreams, they put forward the Gospel, but interpreted in their own way; & ... they call to witness Christ, but a diminished & distorted Christ. Further, they teach these ideas in their study groups, & inculcate them upon their friends, & they also introduce them into their working procedures. Therefore they are really professors of social, civic, & religious morals; & whatever modifications they may introduce in the organization of the Sillonist movement, we have the right to say that the aims of the Sillon, its character & its action belong to the field of morals which is the proper domain of the Church. In view of all this, the Sillonist are deceiving themselves when they believe that they are working in a field that lies outside the limits of Church authority & of its doctrinal & directive power.

Even if their doctrines were free from errors, it would still be a very serious breach of Catholic discipline to decline obstinately the direction of those who have received from heaven the mission to guide individuals &

communities along the straight path of truth & goodness. But, as We have already said, the evil lies far deeper; the Sillon, carried away by an ill-conceived love for the weak, has fallen into error.

Indeed, the Sillon proposes to raise up & re-educate the working class ... they reject the doctrine recalled by Leo XIII on the essential principles of society; they place authority in the people, or gradually suppress it & strive, as their ideal, to effect the leveling down of the classes. In opposition to Catholic doctrine, therefore, they are proceeding towards a condemned ideal. ...

They flatter themselves with the idea of raising human dignity & the discredited condition of the working class. We know that they wish to render just & perfect the labor laws & the relations between employers & employees, thus causing a more complete justice & a greater measure of charity to prevail upon earth, & causing also a profound & fruitful transformation in society by which mankind would make an undreamed-of progress. Certainly, We do not blame these efforts; they would be excellent in every respect if the Sillonist did not forget that a person's progress consists in developing his natural abilities by fresh motivations; that it consists also in permitting these motivations to operate within the frame of, & in conformity with, the laws of human nature. But, on the contrary, by ignoring the laws governing human nature & by breaking the bounds within which they operate, the human person is lead, not toward progress, but towards death. This, nevertheless, is what they want to do with human society; they dream of changing its natural & traditional foundations; they dream of a Future City built on different principles, & they dare to proclaim these more fruitful & more beneficial than the principles upon which the present Christian City rests. ...

We must repeat with the utmost energy in these times of social & intellectual anarchy when everyone takes it upon himself to teach as a teacher & lawmaker – the City cannot be built otherwise than as God has built it; society cannot be setup unless the Church lays the foundations & supervises the work. ... It has only to be set up & restored continually against the unremitting attacks of insane dreamers, rebels & miscreants. Omnia Instaurare In Christo.

Now, lest We be accused of judging too hastily & with unjustified rigor the social doctrines of the Sillon, We wish to examine their essential points.

The Sillon has a praise-worthy concern for human dignity, but it understands human dignity in the manner of some philosophers, of whom the Church does not at all feel proud. The first condition of that dignity is liberty, but viewed in the sense that, except in religious matters, each man is autonomous. This is the basis principle from which the Sillon draws further conclusions: today the people are in tutelage under an authority distinct from themselves; they must liberate themselves: political emancipation. They are also dependent upon employers who own the means of production, exploit, oppress & degrade the workers; they must shake off the yoke: economic emancipation. Finally, they are ruled by a caste preponderance in the direction of affairs. The people must break away from this dominion: intellectual emancipation. The leveling-down of differences ... will bring about equality among men, & such equality is viewed as true human justice. A socio-political set-up resting on these two pillars of Liberty & Equality (to which Fraternity will presently be added), is what they call Democracy. ...

The same principle will apply to economics. Taken away from a specific group, management will be so well multiplied that each worker will himself become a kind of employer. The system by which the Sillon intends to actualize this economic ideal is not socialism, they say; it is a system of guilds in a number large enough to induce a healthy competition & to protect the workers' independence; in this manner, they will not be bound to any guild in particular. ...

To sum up, such is the theory, one could say the dream of the Sillon; & that is what its teaching aims at, what it calls the democratic education of the people, that is, raising to its maximum the conscience & civic responsibility of everyone, from which will result economic & political Democracy & the reign of Justice, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity...

The Sillon places public authority primarily in the people, from whom it then flows into the government in such a manner, however, that it continues to reside in the people. ... Quite contrary is the sentiment of Catholics who hold that the right of government derives from God as its natural & necessary principle. Admittedly, the Sillon holds that authority – which first places in the people – descends from God, but in such a way: "as to

return from below upwards, whilst in the organization of the Church power descends from above downwards.”

...

For the rest, if the people remain the holders of power, what becomes of authority? A shadow, a myth; there is no more law properly so-called, no more obedience. The Sillon acknowledges this: indeed, since it demands that threefold political, economic, & intellectual emancipation in the name of human dignity, the Future City in the formation of which it is engaged will have no masters & no servants. All citizens will be free; all comrades, all kings. A command, a precept would be viewed as an attack upon their freedom; subordination to any form of superiority would be a diminishment of the human person, & obedience a disgrace. Is it in this manner ... that the traditional doctrine of the Church represents social relations, even in the most perfect society? Has not every community of people, dependent & unequal by nature, need of an authority to direct their activity towards the common good & to enforce its laws? And if perverse individuals are to be found in a community (& there always are), should not authority be all the stronger as the selfishness of the wicked is more threatening? Further, – unless one greatly deceives oneself in the conception of liberty – can it be said with an atom of reason that authority & liberty are incompatible? Can one teach that obedience is contrary to human dignity & that the ideal would be to replace it by “accepted authority”? Did not St. Paul the Apostle foresee human society in all its possible stages of development when he bade the faithful to be subject to every authority? Does obedience to men as the legitimate representatives of God, that is to say in the final analysis, obedience to God, degrade Man & reduce him to a level unworthy of himself? Is the religious life which is based on obedience, contrary to the ideal of human nature? Were the Saints – the most obedient men, just slaves & degenerates? Finally, can you imagine social conditions in which Jesus Christ, if He returned to earth, would not give an example of obedience &, further, would no longer say: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s & to God the things that are God’s”?

Teaching such doctrines, & applying them to its internal organization, the Sillon, therefore, sows erroneous & fatal notions on authority, liberty & obedience, among your Catholic youth. The same is true of justice & equality; the Sillon says that it is striving to establish an era of equality which, by that very fact, would be also an era of greater justice. Thus, to the Sillon, every inequality of condition is an injustice, or at least, a diminution of justice? Here we have a principle that conflicts sharply with the nature of things, a principle conducive to jealousy, injustice, & subversive to any social order. Thus, Democracy alone will bring about the reign of perfect justice! Is this not an insult to other forms of government which are thereby debased to the level of sterile makeshifts? Besides, the Sillonists once again clash on this point with the teaching of Leo XIII. In the Encyclical on political government ... they could have read this: “Justice being preserved, it is not forbidden to the people to choose for themselves the form of government which best corresponds with their character or with the institutions & customs handed down by their forefathers.” ...

Catholic doctrine tells us that the primary duty of charity does not lie in the toleration of false ideas, however sincere they may be, nor in the theoretical or practical indifference towards the errors & vices in which we see our brethren plunged, but in the zeal for their intellectual & moral improvement as well as for their material well-being ... Catholic charity alone can lead the people in the march of progress towards the ideal civilization.

At the root of all their fallacies on social questions, lie the false hopes of Sillonists on human dignity. According to them, Man will be a man truly worthy of the name only when he has acquired a strong, enlightened, & independent consciousness, able to do without a master, obeying only himself, & able to assume the most demanding responsibilities without faltering. Such are the big words by which human pride is exalted ... Unless human nature can be changed ... will that day ever come? Did the Saints who brought human dignity to its highest point, possess that kind of dignity? And what of the lowly of this earth who are unable to raise so high but are content to plow their furrow modestly at the level where Providence placed them? They who are diligently discharging their duties with Christian humility, obedience, & patience, are they not also worthy of being called men? Will not Our Lord take them one day out of their obscurity & place them in heaven amongst the princes of His people? ...

But We must now examine the influence of these errors upon the practical conduct & upon the social action of the Sillon. ... The Sillon has no hierarchy ... Studies are carried out without a master, at the very most, with an adviser. The study groups are really intellectual pools in which each member is at once both master & student. The most complete fellowship prevails amongst its members ... Even the priest, on entering, lowers the eminent dignity of his priesthood &, by a strange reversal of roles, becomes a student, placing himself on a level with his young friends, & is no more than a comrade.

In these democratic practices & in the theories of the Ideal City from which they flow, you will recognize ... the hidden cause of the lack of discipline with which you have so often had to reproach the Sillon. It is not surprising that you do not find among the leaders & their comrades trained on these lines, whether seminarists or priests, the respect, the docility, & the obedience which are due to your authority & to yourselves; nor is it surprising that you should be conscious of an underlying opposition on their part, & that, to your sorrow, you should see them withdraw altogether from works which are not those of the Sillon or, if compelled under obedience, that they should comply with distaste. You are the past; they are the pioneers of the civilization of the future. You represent the hierarchy, social inequalities, authority, & obedience – worn out institutions to which their hearts, captured by another ideal, can no longer submit to ... Distrust of the Church, their Mother, is being instilled into the minds of Catholic youth; they are being taught that after nineteen centuries She has not yet been able to build up in this world a society on true foundations; She has not understood the social notions of authority, liberty, equality, fraternity & human dignity ... The breath of the Revolution has passed this way, & We can conclude that, whilst the social doctrines of the Sillon are erroneous, its spirit is dangerous & its education disastrous.

But then, what are we to think of its action in the Church? What are we to think of a movement so punctilious in its brand of Catholicism that, unless you embrace its cause, you would almost be regarded as an internal enemy of the Church, & you would understand nothing of the Gospel & of Jesus Christ! ...

In the first place, its brand of Catholicism accepts only the democratic form of government which it considers the most favorable to the Church &, so to speak, identifies it with her. The Sillon, therefore, subjects its religion to a political party. We do not have to demonstrate here that the advent of universal Democracy is of no concern to the action of the Church in the world; we have already recalled that the Church has always left to the nations the care of giving themselves the form of government which they think most suited to their needs. What We wish to affirm once again, after Our Predecessor, is that it is an error & a danger to bind down Catholicism by principle to a particular form of government. This error & this danger are all the greater when Religion is associated with a kind of Democracy whose doctrines are false. But this is what the Sillon is doing. For the sake of a particular political form, it compromises the Church, it sows division among Catholics, snatches away young people & even priests & seminarists from purely Catholic action. ...

And behold ... an astounding contradiction: It is precisely because religion ought to transcend all parties, & it is in appealing to this principle, that the Sillon abstains from defending the beleaguered Church. Certainly, it is not the Church that has gone into the political arena: they have dragged her there to mutilate & to despoil her. Is it not the duty of every Catholic, then, to use the political weapons which he holds, to defend her? Is it not a duty to confine politics to its own domain & to leave the Church alone except in order to give her that which is her due? Well, at the sight of the violences thus done to the Church, we are often grieved to see the Sillonists folding their arms except when it is to their advantage to defend her; we see them dictate or maintain a program which nowhere & in no degree can be called Catholic. Yet this does not prevent the same men, when fully engaged in political strife & spurred by provocation, from publicly proclaiming their faith. What are we to say except that there are two different men in the Sillonist; the individual, who is Catholic, & the Sillonist, the man of action, who is neutral!

There was a time when the Sillon, as such, was truly Catholic ... A time came when they changed their minds. They left to each one his religion or his philosophy ... For the construction of the Future City they appealed to the workers of all religions & all sects. These were asked but one thing: to share the same social ideal, to respect all creeds, & to bring with them a certain supply of moral force. Admittedly: they declared that "The leaders of the Sillon place their religious faith above everything. But can they deny others the right to draw their moral energy from whence they can? In return, they expect others to respect their right to draw their own moral energy from the Catholic Faith. Accordingly they ask all those who want to change today's society in the direction of Democracy, not to oppose each other on account of the philosophical or religious convictions which may separate them, but to march hand in hand, not renouncing their convictions, but trying to provide on the ground of practical realities, the proof of the excellence of their personal convictions. Perhaps a union will be effected on this ground of emulation between souls holding different religious or philosophical convictions." ...

Thus, a host of new groups, Catholic, Protestant, Free-Thinking, now apparently autonomous, are invited to set to work: "Catholic comrades will work between themselves in a special organization & will learn & educate themselves. Protestant & Free-Thinking Democrats will do likewise on their own side. But all of us, Catholics,

Protestants & Free-Thinkers will have at heart to arm young people, not in view of the fratricidal struggle, but in view of a disinterested emulation in the field of social & civic virtues." These declarations & this new organization of the Sillonist action call for very serious remarks.

Here we have, founded by Catholics, an inter-denominational association that is to work for the reform of civilization, an undertaking which is above all religious in character; for there is no true civilization without a moral civilization, & no true moral civilization without the true religion: it is a proven truth, a historical fact. The new Sillonists cannot pretend that they are merely working on "the ground of practical realities" where differences of belief do not matter. Their leader is so conscious of the influence which the convictions of the mind have upon the result of the action, that he invites them, whatever religion they may belong to, "to provide on the ground of practical realities, the proof of the excellence of their personal convictions." And with good reason: indeed, all practical results reflect the nature of one's religious convictions. ...

What must be thought of the promiscuity in which young Catholics will be caught up with heterodox & unbelieving folk in a work of this nature? Is it not a thousand-fold more dangerous for them than a neutral association? What are we to think of this appeal to all the heterodox, & to all the unbelievers, to prove the excellence of their convictions in the social sphere in a sort of apologetic contest? Has not this contest lasted for nineteen centuries in conditions less dangerous for the faith of Catholics? ... What are we to think of this respect for all errors, & of this strange invitation made by a Catholic to all the dissidents to strengthen their convictions through study so that they may have more & more abundant sources of fresh forces? What are we to think of an association in which all religions & even Free-Thought may express themselves openly & in complete freedom? For the Sillonists who, in public lectures & elsewhere, proudly proclaim their personal faith, certainly do not intend to silence others nor do they intend to prevent a Protestant from asserting his Protestantism, & the skeptic from affirming his skepticism. Finally, what are we to think of a Catholic who, on entering his study group, leaves his Catholicism outside the door so as not to alarm his comrades who, "dreaming of disinterested social action, are not inclined to make it serve the triumph of interests, coteries & even convictions whatever they may be"? ...

But stranger still ... are the audacity & frivolity of men who call themselves Catholics & dream of re-shaping society under such conditions, & of establishing on earth, over & beyond the pale of the Catholic Church, "the reign of love & justice" with workers coming from everywhere, of all religions & of no religion, with or without beliefs, so long as they forego what might divide them – their religious & philosophical convictions, & so long as they share what unites them – a "generous idealism & moral forces drawn from whence they can". When we consider the forces, knowledge, & supernatural virtues which are necessary to establish the Christian City, & the sufferings of millions of martyrs, & the light given by the Fathers & Doctors of the Church, & the self-sacrifice of all the heroes of charity, & a powerful hierarchy ordained in heaven, & the streams of Divine Grace ... it is frightening to behold new apostles eagerly attempting to do better by a common interchange of vague idealism & civic virtues. ...

As for you, Venerable Brethren, carry on diligently with the work of the Saviour of men by emulating His gentleness & His strength. Minister to every misery; let no sorrow escape your pastoral solicitude; let no lament find you indifferent. But, on the other hand, preach fearlessly their duties to the powerful & to the lowly; it is your function to form the conscience of the people & of the public authorities. The social question will be much nearer a solution when all those concerned, less demanding as regards their respective rights, shall fulfill their duties more exactly. ...

You should take an active part in the organization of society with this objective in mind. And, to this end, whilst your priests will zealously devote efforts to the sanctification of souls, to the defense of the Church, & also to works of charity in the strict sense, you shall select a few of them, level-headed & of active disposition, holders of Doctors' degrees in philosophy & theology, thoroughly acquainted with the history of ancient & modern civilizations, & you shall set them to the not-so-lofty but more practical study of the social science so that you may place them at the opportune time at the helm of your works of Catholic action. However, let not these priests be misled, in the maze of current opinions, by the miracles of a false Democracy. Let them not borrow from the Rhetoric of the worst enemies of the Church & of the people, the high-flown phrases, full of promises; which are as high-sounding as unattainable. Let them be convinced that the social question & social science did not arise only yesterday; that the Church & the State, at all times & in happy concert, have raised up fruitful organizations to this end; that the Church, which has never betrayed the happiness of the people by consenting to dubious alliances, does not have to free herself from the past; that all that is needed

is to take up again, with the help of the true workers for a social restoration, the organisms which the Revolution shattered, & to adapt them, in the same Christian spirit that inspired them, to the new environment arising from the material development of today's society. Indeed, the true friends of the people are neither revolutionaries, nor innovators: they are traditionalists.

We desire that the Sillonist youth, freed from their errors, far from impeding this work which is eminently worthy of your pastoral care, should bring to it their loyal & effective contribution in an orderly manner & with befitting submission.

We now turn towards the leaders of the Sillon with the confidence of a father who speaks to his children, & We ask them for their own good, & for the good of the Church & of France, to turn their leadership over to you. We are certainly aware of the extent of the sacrifice that We request from them ... As to the rank & file of the Sillon, We wish that they group themselves according to dioceses in order to work, under the authority of their respective bishops, for the Christian & Catholic regeneration of the people, as well as for the improvement of their lot. These diocesan groups will be independent from one another for the time being. And, in order to show clearly that they have broken with the errors of the past, they will take the name of "Catholic Sillon", & each of the members will add to his Sillonist title the "Catholic" qualification. It goes without saying that each Catholic Sillonist will remain free to retain his political preferences, provided they are purified of everything that is not entirely conformable to the doctrine of the Church. Should some groups refuse ... to submit to these conditions, you should consider that very fact that they are refusing to submit to your authority. Then, you will have to examine whether they stay within the limits of pure politics or economics, or persist in their former errors. In the former case, it is clear that you will have no more to do with them than with the general body of the faithful; in the latter case, you will have to take appropriate measures, with prudence but with firmness also. Priests will have to keep entirely out of the dissident groups, & they shall be content to extend the help of their sacred ministry to each member individually, applying to them in the tribunal of penitence the common rules of morals in respect to doctrine & conduct. As for the catholic groups, whilst the priests & the seminarists may favor & help them, they shall abstain from joining them as members; for it is fitting that the priestly phalanx should remain above lay associations even when these are most useful & inspired by the best spirit. Such are the practical measures with which We have deemed necessary. ...

Given at St. Peter's, Rome, on the 25th August 1910, the eighth year of Our Pontificate.
Pius X, Pope

Questions

1. Why does Pius X condemn the movement?
2. What features of Pius X's papacy can be seen in the document?
3. Brief personal reflection