

**Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum*, 15 May 1891, Extracts.**

1. That the spirit of revolutionary change, which has long been disturbing the nations of the world, should have passed beyond the sphere of politics & made its influence felt in the ... sphere of practical economics is not surprising. The elements of the conflict now raging are unmistakable, in the vast expansion of industrial pursuits & the marvellous discoveries of science; in the changed relations between masters & workmen; in the enormous fortunes of some few individuals, & the utter poverty of the masses; the increased self-reliance & closer mutual combination of the working classes; as also, finally, in the prevailing moral degeneracy. The momentous gravity of the state of things now obtaining fills every mind with painful apprehension; wise men are discussing it; practical men are proposing schemes; popular meetings, legislatures, & rulers of nations are all busied with it - actually there is no question which has taken deeper hold on the public mind.

2. ... The responsibility of the apostolic office urges Us to treat the question of set purpose & in detail, in order that no misapprehension may exist as to the principles which truth & justice dictate for its settlement. The discussion is not easy, nor is it void of danger. It is no easy matter to define the relative rights & mutual duties of the rich & of the poor, of capital & of labor. & the danger lies in this, that crafty agitators are intent on making use of these differences of opinion to pervert men's judgments & to stir up the people to revolt.

3. ... Some opportune remedy must be found quickly for the misery & wretchedness pressing so unjustly on the majority of the working class: for the ancient workingmen's guilds were abolished in the last century, & no other protective organization took their place. Public institutions & the laws set aside the ancient religion. Hence, by degrees it has come to pass that working men have been surrendered, isolated & helpless, to the hardheartedness of employers & the greed of unchecked competition. The mischief has been increased by rapacious usury ... practiced by covetous & grasping men. To this must be added that the hiring of labor & the conduct of trade are concentrated in the hands of comparatively few; so that a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of the laboring poor a yoke little better than that of slavery itself.

4. To remedy these wrongs the socialists, working on the poor man's envy of the rich, are striving to do away with private property, & contend that individual possessions should become the common property of all, to be administered by the State ... They hold that by thus transferring property from private individuals to the community, the present mischievous state of things will be set to rights ... as each citizen will then get his fair share of whatever there is to enjoy. But their contentions are so clearly powerless to end the controversy that were they carried into effect the working man himself would be among the first to suffer. They are, moreover, emphatically unjust, for they would rob the lawful possessor, distort the functions of the State, & create utter confusion in the community. ...

6. What is of far greater moment, however, is the fact that the remedy they propose is manifestly against justice. For every man has by nature the right to possess property as his own. ...

8. The fact that God has given the earth for the use & enjoyment of the whole human race can in no way be a bar to the owning of private property. For God has granted the earth to mankind in general, not in the sense that all without distinction can deal with it as they like, but rather that no part of it was assigned to any one in particular, & that the limits of private possession have been left to be fixed by man's own industry, & by the laws of individual races. Moreover, the earth, even though apportioned among private owners, ceases not thereby to minister to

the needs of all, inasmuch as there is not one who does not sustain life from what the land produces. Those who do not possess the soil contribute their labor; hence, it may truly be said that all human subsistence is derived either from labor on one's own land, or from some toil, some calling, which is paid for either in the produce of the land itself, or in that which is exchanged for what the land brings forth. ...

12. The rights here spoken of, belonging to each individual man, are seen in much stronger light when considered in relation to man's social & domestic obligations. In choosing a state of life, it is indisputable that all are at full liberty to follow the counsel of Jesus Christ as to observing virginity, or to bind themselves by the marriage tie. No human law can abolish the natural & original right of marriage, nor in any way limit the chief & principal purpose of marriage ordained by God's authority from the beginning: "Increase & multiply." Hence we have the family, the "society" of a man's house - a society very small, one must admit, but none the less a true society, & one older than any State. Consequently, it has rights & duties peculiar to itself which are quite independent of the State.

13. That right to property, therefore, which has been proved to belong naturally to individual persons, must in like wise belong to a man in his capacity of head of a family... It is a most sacred law of nature that a father should provide food & all necessaries for those whom he has begotten ... If the citizens, if the families on entering into association & fellowship, were to experience hindrance in a commonwealth instead of help, & were to find their rights attacked instead of being upheld, society would rightly be an object of detestation rather than of desire.

14. The contention ... that the civil government should at its option intrude into & exercise intimate control over the family & the household is a great & pernicious error. True, if a family finds itself in exceeding distress, utterly deprived of the counsel of friends, & without any prospect of extricating itself, it is right that extreme necessity be met by public aid, since each family is a part of the commonwealth. In like manner, if within the precincts of the household there occur grave disturbance of mutual rights, public authority should intervene to force each party to yield to the other its proper due; for this is not to deprive citizens of their rights, but justly & properly to safeguard & strengthen them. But the rulers of the commonwealth must go no further; here, nature bids them stop. ... The socialists ... in setting aside the parent & setting up a State supervision, act against natural justice, & destroy the structure of the home. ...

15. the main tenet of socialism, community of goods, must be utterly rejected, since it only injures those whom it would seem meant to benefit, is directly contrary to the natural rights of mankind, & would introduce confusion & disorder into the commonweal. The first & most fundamental principle, therefore, if one would undertake to alleviate the condition of the masses, must be the inviolability of private property....

19. The great mistake ... [is] the notion that class is naturally hostile to class, & that the wealthy & the working men are intended by nature to live in mutual conflict. So irrational & so false is this view that the direct contrary is the truth. Just as the symmetry of the human frame is the result of the suitable arrangement of the different parts of the body, so in a State is it ordained by nature that these two classes should dwell in harmony & agreement, so as to maintain the balance of the body politic. Each needs the other: capital cannot do without labor, nor labor without capital. Mutual agreement results in the beauty of good order, while perpetual conflict necessarily produces confusion & savage barbarity. ...

20. The following [duties] bind the proletarian & the worker: fully & faithfully to perform the work which has been freely & equitably agreed upon; never to injure the property, nor to outrage the person, of an employer; never to resort to violence in defending their own cause, nor to engage in riot or disorder.... The following duties bind the wealthy owner & the employer:

not to look upon their work people as their bondsmen, but to respect in every man his dignity as a person ennobled by Christian character. ... Working for gain is creditable, not shameful, to a man, since it enables him to earn an honorable livelihood; but to misuse men as though they were things in the pursuit of gain, or to value them solely for their physical powers - that is truly shameful & inhuman. Again justice demands that, in dealing with the working man, religion & the good of his soul must be kept in mind. Hence, the employer is bound to see that the worker has time for his religious duties; that he be not exposed to corrupting influences ... Furthermore, the employer must never tax his work people beyond their strength, or employ them in work unsuited to their sex & age. His great & principal duty is to give every one what is just. Doubtless, before deciding whether wages are fair, many things have to be considered; but wealthy owners & all masters of labor should be mindful of this - that to exercise pressure upon the indigent & the destitute for the sake of gain, & to gather one's profit out of the need of another, is condemned by all laws, human & divine. To defraud any one of wages that are his due is a great crime which cries to the avenging anger of Heaven. ... Lastly, the rich must religiously refrain from cutting down the workmen's earnings, whether by force, by fraud, or by usurious dealing; & with all the greater reason because the laboring man is, as a rule, weak & unprotected, & because his slender means should in proportion to their scantiness be accounted sacred. ...

21. But the Church, with Jesus Christ as her Master & Guide, aims higher still. She lays down precepts yet more perfect, & tries to bind class to class in friendliness & good feeling. The things of earth cannot be understood or valued aright without taking into consideration the life to come, the life that will know no death...

22. Those whom fortune favors are warned that riches do not bring freedom from sorrow & are of no avail for eternal happiness, but rather are obstacles; that the rich should tremble ... & that a most strict account must be given to the Supreme Judge for all we possess..... Private ownership, as we have seen, is the natural right of man, & to exercise that right, especially as members of society, is not only lawful, but absolutely necessary... But if the question be asked: How must one's possessions be used? - the Church replies without hesitation ... "Man should not consider his material possessions as his own, but as common to all, so as to share them without hesitation when others are in need. ... True, no one is commanded to distribute to others that which is required for his own needs & those of his household; nor even to give away what is reasonably required to keep up becomingly his condition in life. ... But, when what necessity demands has been supplied, & one's standing fairly taken thought for, it becomes a duty to give to the indigent out of what remains over. " It is a duty, not of justice (save in extreme cases), but of Christian charity - a duty not enforced by human law. But the laws & judgments of men must yield place to the laws & judgments of Christ the true God, who in many ways urges on His followers ... To sum up, then: ... Whoever has received from the divine bounty a large share of temporal blessings, whether they be external & material, or gifts of the mind, has received them for the purpose of using them for the perfecting of his own nature, &, at the same time, that he may employ them, as the steward of God's providence, for the benefit of others. ...

23. As for those who possess not the gifts of fortune, they are taught by the Church that in God's sight poverty is no disgrace, & that there is nothing to be ashamed of in earning their bread by labor. This is enforced by what we see in Christ Himself, who, "whereas He was rich, for our sakes became poor" & who, being the Son of God, & God Himself, chose to seem & to be considered the son of a carpenter - nay, did not disdain to spend a great part of His life as a carpenter Himself. ...

24. From contemplation of this divine Model, it is more easy to understand that the true worth & nobility of man lie in his moral qualities, that is, in virtue; that virtue is, moreover, the common

inheritance of men, equally within the reach of high & low, rich & poor; & that virtue, & virtue alone, wherever found, will be followed by the rewards of everlasting happiness. ...

25. But, if Christian precepts prevail, the respective classes will not only be united in the bonds of friendship, but also in those of brotherly love. For they will understand & feel that all men are children of the same common Father, who is God; that all have alike the same last end, which is God Himself, who alone can make either men or angels absolutely & perfectly happy; that each & all are redeemed & made sons of God, by Jesus Christ... that the blessings of nature & the gifts of grace belong to the whole human race in common, & that from none except the unworthy is withheld the inheritance of the kingdom of Heaven. ...

28. Neither must it be supposed that the solicitude of the Church is so preoccupied with the spiritual concerns of her children as to neglect their temporal & earthly interests. ...

31. It cannot, however, be doubted that to attain the purpose we are treating of, not only the Church, but all human agencies, must concur. All who are concerned in the matter should be of one mind & according to their ability act together. It is with this, as with providence that governs the world; the results of causes do not usually take place save where all the causes cooperate. It is sufficient, therefore, to inquire what part the State should play in the work of remedy & relief.

32. By the State we here understand ... any government conformable in its institutions to right reason & natural law, & to those dictates of the divine wisdom. ... The foremost duty ... of the rulers of the State should be to make sure that the laws & institutions, the general character & administration of the commonwealth, shall be such as of themselves to realize public well-being & private prosperity. This is the proper scope of wise statesmanship & is the work of the rulers. Now a State chiefly prospers & thrives through moral rule, well-regulated family life, respect for religion & justice, the moderation & fair imposing of public taxes, the progress of the arts & of trade, the abundant yield of the land-through everything, in fact, which makes the citizens better & happier. Hereby, then, it lies in the power of a ruler to benefit every class in the State, & amongst the rest to promote to the utmost the interests of the poor; & this in virtue of his office, & without being open to suspicion of undue interference - since it is the province of the commonwealth to serve the common good. ...

33. ... As regards the State, the interests of all, whether high or low, are equal. The members of the working classes are citizens by nature & by the same right as the rich; they are real parts, living the life which makes up, through the family, the body of the commonwealth; & it need hardly be said that they are in every city very largely in the majority. It would be irrational to neglect one portion of the citizens & favor another, & therefore the public administration must duly & solicitously provide for the welfare & the comfort of the working classes; otherwise, that law of justice will be violated which ordains that each man shall have his due. ... Among the many & grave duties of rulers who would do their best for the people, the first & chief is to act with strict justice - with that justice which is called *distributive* - toward each & every class alike.

34. ... All citizens, without exception, can & ought to contribute to that common good in which individuals share so advantageously to themselves, yet it should not be supposed that all can contribute in the like way & to the same extent. ... Since the end of society is to make men better, the chief good that society can possess is virtue. Nevertheless, it is the business of a well-constituted body politic to see to the provision of those material & external helps "the use of which is necessary to virtuous action." Now, for the provision of such commodities, the labor of the working class - the exercise of their skill, & the employment of their strength, in the cultivation of the land, & in the workshops of trade - is especially responsible & quite indispensable. Indeed, their co-operation is in this respect so important that it may be truly

said that it is only by the labor of working men that States grow rich. Justice, therefore, demands that the interests of the working classes should be carefully watched over by the administration, so that they who contribute so largely to the advantage of the community may themselves share in the benefits which they create—that being housed, clothed, & bodily fit, they may find their life less hard & more enduring. ... Whatever shall ... prove conducive to the well-being of those who work should obtain favorable consideration. ... It will be to the advantage of all, for it cannot but be good for the commonwealth to shield from misery those on whom it so largely depends for the things that it needs.

35. We have said that the State must not absorb the individual or the family; both should be allowed free & untrammelled action so far as is consistent with the common good & the interest of others. Rulers should, nevertheless, anxiously safeguard the community & all its members; ... it is a government's whole reason of existence; & ... the object of the government of the State should be, not the advantage of the ruler, but the benefit of those over whom he is placed.... The power to rule comes from God, & ... should be exercised as the power of God is exercised - with a fatherly solicitude which not only guides the whole, but reaches also individuals.

36. Whenever the general interest or any particular class suffers, or is threatened with harm, which can in no other way be met or prevented, the public authority must step in to deal with it. ... The limits must be determined by the nature of the occasion which calls for the law's interference - the principle being that the law must not undertake more, nor proceed further, than is required for the remedy of the evil or the removal of the mischief.

37. Rights must be religiously respected wherever they exist, & it is the duty of the public authority to prevent & to punish injury, & to protect every one in the possession of his own. Still, when there is question of defending the rights of individuals, the poor & badly off have a claim to especial consideration. The richer class have many ways of shielding themselves, & stand less in need of help from the State; whereas the mass of the poor have no resources of their own to fall back upon, & must chiefly depend upon the assistance of the State. And it is for this reason that wage-earners, since they mostly belong in the mass of the needy, should be specially cared for & protected by the government.

38. ... First of all, there is the duty of safeguarding private property by legal enactment & protection. Most of all it is essential, where the passion of greed is so strong, to keep the populace within the line of duty; for, if all may justly strive to better their condition, neither justice nor the common good allows any individual to seize upon that which belongs to another, or, under the futile & shallow pretext of equality, to lay violent hands on other people's possessions. ...

39. When work people have recourse to a strike & become voluntarily idle, it is frequently because the hours of labor are too long, or the work too hard, or because they consider their wages insufficient. The grave inconvenience of this not uncommon occurrence should be obviated by public remedial measures; for such paralyzing of labor not only affects the masters & their work people alike, but is extremely injurious to trade & to the general interests of the public; moreover, on such occasions, violence & disorder are generally not far distant, & thus it frequently happens that the public peace is imperiled. The laws should forestall & prevent such troubles from arising; they should lend their influence & authority to the removal in good time of the causes which lead to conflicts between employers & employed.

40. The working man, too, has interests in which he should be protected by the State; & first of all, there are the interests of his soul. ... which is made after the image & likeness of God. ... In this respect all men are equal; there is here no difference between rich & poor, master & servant, ruler & ruled. ... No man may with impunity outrage that human dignity which God

Himself treats with great reverence, nor stand in the way of that higher life which is the preparation of the eternal life of heaven. Nay, more; no man has in this matter power over himself. To consent to any treatment which is calculated to defeat the end & purpose of his being is beyond his right; he cannot give up his soul to servitude, for it is not man's own rights which are here in question, but the rights of God, the most sacred & inviolable of rights.

41. From this follows the obligation of the cessation from work & labor on Sundays & certain holy days. ... Rest (combined with religious observances) disposes man to forget for a while the business of his everyday life, to turn his thoughts to things heavenly, & to the worship which he so strictly owes to the eternal Godhead. ...

42. ...The first thing of all to secure is to save unfortunate working people from the cruelty of men of greed, who use human beings as mere instruments for money-making. It is neither just nor human so to grind men down with excessive labor as to stupefy their minds & wear out their bodies. Man's powers, like his general nature, are limited, & beyond these limits he cannot go. His strength is developed & increased by use & exercise, but only on condition of due intermission & proper rest. Daily labor, therefore, should be so regulated as not to be protracted over longer hours than strength admits. How many & how long the intervals of rest should be must depend on the nature of the work, on circumstances of time & place, & on the health & strength of the workman. .... And, in regard to children, great care should be taken not to place them in workshops & factories until their bodies & minds are sufficiently developed. ...

In all agreements between masters & work people there is always the condition ... that there should be allowed proper rest for soul & body. To agree in any other sense would be against what is right & just; for it can never be just or right to require on the one side, or to promise on the other, the giving up of those duties which a man owes to his God & to himself.

43. ... Wages, as we are told, are regulated by free consent, & therefore the employer, when he pays what was agreed upon, has done his part & seemingly is not called upon to do anything beyond. The only way, it is said, in which injustice might occur would be if the master refused to pay the whole of the wages, or if the workman should not complete the work undertaken; in such cases the public authority should intervene, to see that each obtains his due, but not under any other circumstances.

44. To this kind of argument a fair-minded man will not easily or entirely assent; it is not complete, for there are important considerations which it leaves out of account altogether. To labor is to exert oneself for the sake of procuring what is necessary for the various purposes of life, & chief of all for self preservation. ... Hence, a man's labor necessarily bears two notes or characters. First of all, it is personal, inasmuch as the force which acts is bound up with the personality & is the exclusive property of him who acts, &, further, was given to him for his advantage. Secondly, man's labor is *necessary*; for without the result of labor a man cannot live, & self-preservation is a law of nature, which it is wrong to disobey. Now, were we to consider labor merely in so far as it is personal, doubtless it would be within the workman's right to accept any rate of wages whatsoever; for in the same way as he is free to work or not, so is he free to accept a small wage or even none at all. But our conclusion must be very different if, together with the personal element in a man's work, we consider the fact that work is also necessary for him to live: these two aspects of his work are separable in thought, but not in reality. The preservation of life is the bounden duty of one & all, & to be wanting therein is a crime. It necessarily follows that each one has a natural right to procure what is required in order to live, & the poor can procure that in no other way than by what they can earn through their work.

45. Let the working man & the employer make free agreements, & in particular let them agree freely as to the wages; nevertheless, there underlies a dictate of natural justice more imperious & ancient than any bargain between man & man, namely, that wages ought not to be insufficient to support a frugal & well-behaved wage-earner. If through necessity or fear of a worse evil the workman accept harder conditions because an employer or contractor will afford him no better, he is made the victim of force & injustice. In these & similar questions, however - such as, for example, the hours of labor in different trades, the sanitary precautions to be observed in factories & workshops, etc. - in order to supersede undue interference on the part of the State, especially as circumstances, times, & localities differ so widely, it is advisable that recourse be had to societies or boards such as We shall mention presently, or to some other mode of safeguarding the interests of the wage-earners; the State being appealed to, should circumstances require, for its sanction & protection.

46. If a workman's wages be sufficient to enable him comfortably to support himself, his wife, & his children, he will find it easy, if he be a sensible man, to practice thrift, & he will not fail, by cutting down expenses, to put by some little savings & thus secure a modest source of income. Nature itself would urge him to this. ...

47. ... The result of civil change & revolution has been to divide cities into two classes separated by a wide chasm. On the one side there is the party which holds power because it holds wealth; which has in its grasp the whole of labor & trade; which manipulates for its own benefit & its own purposes all the sources of supply, & which is not without influence even in the administration of the commonwealth. On the other side there is the needy & powerless multitude.... If working people can be encouraged to look forward to obtaining a share in the land, the consequence will be that the gulf between vast wealth & sheer poverty will be bridged over, & the respective classes will be brought nearer to one another. A further consequence will result in the great abundance of the fruits of the earth. Men always work harder & more readily when they work on that which belongs to them.... [These] important benefits, however, can be reckoned on only provided that a man's means be not drained & exhausted by excessive taxation. The right to possess private property is derived from nature, not from man; & the State has the right to control its use in the interests of the public good alone, but by no means to absorb it altogether. The State would therefore be unjust & cruel if under the name of taxation it were to deprive the private owner of more than is fair.

48. In the last place, employers & workmen may of themselves effect much ... by means of such associations & organizations as afford opportune aid to those who are in distress, & which draw the two classes more closely together. Among these may be enumerated societies for mutual help; various benevolent foundations established by private persons to provide for the workman, & for his widow or his orphans, in case of sudden calamity, in sickness, & in the event of death; & institutions for the welfare of boys & girls, young people, & those more advanced in years.

49. The most important of all are workingmen's unions, for these virtually include all the rest. ... Such unions should be suited to the requirements of this our age - an age of wider education, of different habits, & of far more numerous requirements in daily life ... it were greatly to be desired that they should become more numerous & more efficient. ... It will be well to explain here how notably they are needed, to show that they exist of their own right, & what should be their organization & their mode of action.

50. The consciousness of his own weakness urges man to call in aid from without. ... "A brother that is helped by his brother is like a strong city."(35) It is this natural impulse which binds men together in civil society; & it is likewise this which leads them to join together in associations which are, it is true, lesser & not independent societies, but, nevertheless, real societies.

51. These lesser societies & the larger society differ in many respects, because their immediate purpose & aim are different. Civil society exists for the common good, & hence is concerned with the interests of all in general, albeit with individual interests also in their due place & degree. It is therefore called a public society, because by its agency, as St. Thomas of Aquinas says, "Men establish relations in common with one another in the setting up of a commonwealth." But societies which are formed in the bosom of the commonwealth are styled *private*, & rightly so, since their immediate purpose is the private advantage of the associates. "Now, a private society," says St. Thomas again, "is one which is formed for the purpose of carrying out private objects; as when two or three enter into partnership with the view of trading in common." Private societies, then, although they exist within the body politic, & are severally part of the commonwealth, cannot nevertheless be absolutely, & as such, prohibited by public authority. For, to enter into a "society" of this kind is the natural right of man; & the State has for its office to protect natural rights, not to destroy them; & if it forbid its citizens to form associations, it contradicts the very principle of its own existence, for both they & it exist in virtue of the like principle, namely, the natural tendency of man to dwell in society.

52. There are occasions, doubtless, when it is fitting that the law should intervene to prevent certain associations, as when men join together for purposes which are evidently bad, unlawful, or dangerous to the State. In such cases, public authority may justly forbid the formation of such associations, & may dissolve them if they already exist. But every precaution should be taken not to violate the rights of individuals & not to impose unreasonable regulations under pretense of public benefit. ...

60. At the time being, the condition of the working classes is the pressing question of the hour, & nothing can be of higher interest to all classes of the State than that it should be rightly & reasonably settled. ... Every one should put his hand to the work which falls to his share, & that at once & straightway ... & since religion alone ... can avail to destroy the evil at its root, all men should rest persuaded that main thing needful is to re-establish Christian morals, apart from which all the plans & devices of the wisest will prove of little avail.

## Questions

a) From your reading of the extracts of *Rerum Novarum*, what is the context in which Leo XII wrote the encyclical, and what was reason for writing it?

b) Which of the following principles appear in the extracts from this encyclical? Explain what Leo XIII has to say about any three.

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| 1. Dignity                          | 7. Participation            |
| 2. Common Good                      | 8. Subsidiarity             |
| 3. Universal Destination of Goods   | 9. Solidarity               |
| 4. Private Property                 | 10. Stewardship of Creation |
| 5. Preferential Option for the Poor | 11. Right to Association    |
| 6. Promotion of Peace               | 12. Right to Work           |