

Condition of the Working Classes

By Pope Leo XIII

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The Living Wage

We now come to a question of great and urgent importance, and one in respect of which, if extremes are to be avoided, right notions are absolutely necessary. Wages, as we are told, are regulated by free consent, and therefore, the employer, when he pays what was agreed upon, has done his part and 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 State should intervene, to see that each obtains his due; but not under any other circumstances.

This mode of reasoning is by no means convincing to a fair-minded man, for there are important considerations which it leaves out of account altogether. To labour is to exert oneself for the sake of procuring what is necessary for the purposes of life, and chief of all for self-preservation. *In the sweat of thy brow thou shalt eat thy bread.* Hence a man's labour bears two notes or characters. First of all, it is personal, inasmuch as the exertion of individual strength belongs to the individual who puts it forth, employing such strength to procure that personal advantage on account of which it was bestowed. Secondly, man's labour is necessary; for, without the result of labour a man cannot live; and self-preservation is a law of Nature, which it is wrong to disobey.

Now, were we to consider labour so far as it is personal merely, 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 remuneration or even none at all. But this is a mere abstract supposition; the labour of the working-man is not only his personal attribute, but it is necessary; and this makes all the difference. The preservation of life is the bounden duty of one and all, and to be wanting therein is a crime. It follows that each one has a right to procure what is required in order to live; and the poor can procure it in no other way than through work and wages.

Let it be then taken for granted that workman and employer should, as a rule, make free agreements, and in particular should agree freely as to the wages; nevertheless, there underlies a dictate of natural justice more imperious and ancient than any bargain between man and man, namely, that remuneration ought to be sufficient to support a frugal and 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 and injustice.

In these and similar questions, however—such as, for example, the hours of labour in different trades, the sanitary precautions to be observed in factories and workshops, &c.—in order to supersede undue interference on the part of the State, especially as circumstances, times and 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 and protection.

The Working-man Should be Encouraged to Acquire Property

If a workman's wages be sufficient to enable him to maintain himself, his wife, and his children in reasonable comfort, he will not find it difficult, if he be a sensible man, to study economy; and he will not fail, by cutting down expenses, to put by some little savings and thus secure a small income. Nature and reason alike would urge him to this. We have seen that this great labour question cannot be solved save by assuming as a principle that private ownership must be held sacred and inviolable. The law, therefore, should favour ownership, and its policy should be to induce as many as possible of the humbler class to become owners.

Many excellent results will follow from this; and first of all, property will certainly become more equitably divided. For the result of civil change and revolution has been to divide society into two widely differing castes. On the one side there is the party which holds power because it holds wealth; which has in its grasp the whole of labour and trade; which manipulates for its own benefit and its own purposes all the sources of supply, and which is even represented in the councils of the State itself. On the other side there is the needy and powerless multitude, broken-down and suffering, and ever ready for disturbance.

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 and sheer poverty will be bridged over, and the respective classes will be brought nearer to one another. A further consequence will result in the greater abundance of the fruits of the earth. Men always work harder and more readily when they work on that which belongs to them; nay, they learn to love the very soil that yields in response to the labour of their hands, not only food to eat, but an abundance of good things for themselves and those that are dear to them.

That such a spirit of willing labour would add to the produce of the earth and to the wealth of the community is self-evident. And a third advantage would spring from this: men would cling to the country in which they were born; for no one would exchange his country for a foreign land if his own afforded him the means of living a decent and happy life. These three important benefits, however, can be reckoned on only provided that a man's means be not drained and exhausted by excessive taxation.

The right to possess private property is derived from nature, not from man; and 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 and cruel if under the name of taxation it were to deprive the private owner of more than is fitting.

Associations and Organizations

In the last place—employers and workmen may of themselves effect much in the matter we are treating, by means of such associations and organizations as afford opportune aid to those who are in distress, and 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, or his widow and orphans, in case of sudden calamity, in sickness, and in the

event of death; and what are called "patronages" or institutions for the care of boys and girls, for young people, as well as homes for the aged.

The most important of all are Working-men's Unions; for these virtually include all the rest. History attests what excellent results were brought about by the Artificers' Guilds of olden times. They were the means of affording not only many advantages to the workmen, but in no small degree of promoting the advancement of art, as numerous monuments remain to bear witness. Such Unions should be suited to the requirements of this our age—an age of wider education, of different habits, and of far more numerous requirements in daily life.

It is gratifying to know that there are actually in existence not a few Associations of this nature, consisting either of workmen alone, or of workmen and employers together; but it were greatly to be desired that they should become more numerous and more efficient. We have spoken of them more than once; yet it will be well to explain here how notably they are needed, to show that they exist of their own right, and what should be their organization and their mode of action.

The Rights of Associations

The consciousness of his own weakness urges man to call in aid from without. We read in the pages of Holy Writ: *It is better that two should be together than one; for they have the advantage of their society. If one fall he shall be supported by the other. Woe to him that is alone, for when he falleth he hath none to lift him up.* And further: *A brother that is helped by his brother is like a strong city.*

It is this natural impulse which binds men together in civil society; and it is likewise this which leads them to join together in associations of citizen with citizen; associations which, it is true, cannot be called societies in the full sense of the word, but which, notwithstanding, are societies. These lesser societies and the society which constitutes the State differ in many respects, because their immediate purpose and aim is different.

Civil society exists for the common good, and hence is concerned with the interests of all in general, albeit with individual interests also in their due place and degree. It is therefore called public society, because by its agency, as St. Thomas of Aquin 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 State are styled private, and 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 State, and are severally part of the State, cannot nevertheless be absolutely, and as such, prohibited by the State. For to enter into a "society" of this kind is the natural right of man; and the State is bound to protect natural rights, not to destroy them; and if it forbid its citizens to form associations, it contradicts the very principle of its own existence; for both they and it exist in virtue of the like principle, namely, the natural tendency of man to dwell in society.

There are occasions, doubtless, when it is fitting that the law should intervene to prevent association; 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 associations, and may dissolve them if they already exist. But every precaution should be taken not

to violate the rights of individuals and not to impose unreasonable regulations under pretence of public benefit. For laws only bind when they are in accordance with right reason, and hence with the eternal law of God.

The Right of Ecclesiastical Association

And here we are reminded of the Confraternities, Societies, and Religious Orders which have arisen by the Church's authority and the piety of Christian men. The annals of every nation down to our own days bear witness to what they have accomplished for the human race. It is indisputable that on grounds of reason alone such associations, being perfectly blameless in their objects, possess the sanction of the law of nature. In their religious aspect, they claim rightly to be responsible to the Church alone. The rulers of the State accordingly have no rights over them, nor can they claim any share in their control; on the contrary, it is the duty of the State to respect and cherish them, and, if need be, to defend them from attack.

It is notorious that a very different course has been followed, more especially in our own times. In many places the State authorities have laid violent hands on these communities, and committed manifold injustice against them; it has placed them under control of the civil law, taken away their rights as corporate bodies, and despoiled them of their property. In such property the Church had her rights, each member of the body had his or her rights, and there were also the rights of those who had founded or endowed these communities for a definite purpose, and, furthermore, of those for whose benefit and assistance they had their being.

Therefore We cannot refrain from complaining of such spoliation as unjust and fraught with evil results; and with all the more reason do We complain because, at the very time when the law proclaims that association is free to all, We see that Catholic Societies, however peaceful and useful, are hampered in every way, whereas the utmost liberty is conceded to individuals whose purposes are at once hurtful to Religion and dangerous to the State.

Harmful Associations

Associations of every kind, and especially those of working-men, are now far more common than heretofore. As regards many of these there is no need at present to inquire whence they spring, what are their objects, or what the means they employ. There is a good deal of evidence, however, which goes to prove that many of these societies are in the hands of secret leaders, and are managed on principles ill-according with Christianity and the public well-being; and that they do their utmost to get within their grasp the whole field of labour, and force working-men either to join them or to starve.

Under these circumstances Christian working-men must do one of two things: either join Associations in which their religion will be exposed to peril, or form Associations among themselves—unite their forces and shake off courageously the yoke of so unrighteous and intolerable an oppression. No one who does not wish to expose man's chief good to extreme risk will for a moment hesitate to say that the second alternative should by all means be adopted.

Catholic Associations for Working-men

Those Catholics are worthy of all praise—and they are not a few—who, understanding what the times require, have striven, by various undertakings and endeavours, to better the condition of the working-class without any sacrifice of principle being involved. They have taken up the cause of the working-man, and have spared no efforts to better the condition both of families and individuals; to infuse a spirit of equity into the mutual relations of employers and employed; to keep before the eyes of both classes the precepts of duty and the laws of the Gospel—that Gospel which, by inculcating self-restraint, keeps men within the bounds of moderation, and tends to establish harmony among the divergent interests and the various classes which compose the State.

It is with such ends in view that we see men of eminence meeting together for discussion, for the promotion of concerted action, and for practical work. Others, again, strive to unite working-men of various grades into Associations, help them with their advice and means, and enable them to obtain fitting and profitable employment. The Bishops, on their part, bestow their ready good-will and support; and with their approval and guidance many members of the clergy, both secular and regular, labour assiduously in behalf of the spiritual and mental interests of the members of such Associations.

And there are not wanting Catholics blessed with affluence, who have, as it were, cast in their lot with the wage-earners, and who have spent large sums in founding and widely spreading Benefit and Insurance Societies, by means of which the working-man may without difficulty acquire through his labour not only many present advantages, but also the certainty of honourable support in days to come. How greatly such manifold and earnest activity has benefited the community at large is too well known to require Us to dwell upon it. We find therein grounds for most cheering hope in the future, provided always that the Associations We have described continue to grow and spread, and are well and wisely administered.

Let the State watch over these Societies of citizens banded together for the exercise of their rights; but let it not thrust itself into their peculiar concerns and their organization; for things move and live by the spirit inspiring them, and may be killed by the grasp of a hand from without.

Catholic Associations

In order then that an Association may be carried on with unity of purpose and harmony of action, its organization and government should be firm and wise. All such societies, being free to exist, have the further right to adopt such rules and organization as may best conduce to the attainment of their respective objects. We do not judge it expedient to enter into minute particulars touching the subject of organization: this must depend on national character, on practice and experience, on the nature and aim of the work to be done, on the scope of the various trades and employments, and on other circumstances of fact and of time—all of which should be carefully considered.

To sum up, then, We may lay it down as a general and lasting law, that working-men's Associations should be so organized and governed as to furnish the best and most suitable means for attaining what is aimed at, that is to say, for helping each individual member to better his condition to the utmost in body, mind, and property.

It is clear that they must pay special and chief attention to the duties of religion and morality, and that their internal discipline must be guided very strictly by these weighty considerations; otherwise

they would lose wholly their special character, and end by becoming little better than those societies which take no account whatever of Religion. What advantage can it be to a working-man to obtain by means of a Society all that he requires, and to endanger his soul for lack of spiritual food? *What doth it profit a man if he gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his own soul?* This, as our Lord teaches, is the mark or character that distinguishes the Christian from the heathen. *After all these things do the heathens seek. ... Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His justice, and all these things shall be added unto you.*

Let our Associations, then, look first and before all things to God; let religious instruction have therein the foremost place, each one being carefully taught what is his duty to God, what he has to believe, what to hope for, and how he is to work out his salvation: and let all be warned and strengthened with special care against wrong principles and false teaching. Let the working-man be urged and led to the worship of God, to the earnest practice of religion, and, among other things, to the keeping holy of Sundays and holy days. Let him learn to reverence and love Holy Church, the common Mother of us all; and hence to obey the precepts of the Church, and to frequent the Sacraments, since they are the means ordained by God for obtaining forgiveness of sin and for leading a holy life.

The foundations of the organization being thus laid in Religion, We next proceed to make clear the relations of the members one to another, in order that they may live together in concord and go forward prosperously and with good results. The offices and charges of the Society should be apportioned for the good of the Society itself, and in such mode that difference in degree or standing should not interfere with unanimity and good-will.

Office-bearers should be appointed with due prudence and discretion, and each one's charge should be carefully mapped out. Hereby no member will suffer injury. Let the common funds be administered with strict honesty, in such mode that a member may receive assistance in proportion to his necessities. The rights and duties of the employers, as compared with the rights and duties of the employed, ought to be the subject of careful consideration.

Should it happen that either a master or a workman believe himself injured, nothing would be more desirable than that a committee should be appointed composed of reliable and capable members of the Association, whose duty would be, conformably with the rules of the Association, to settle the dispute. Among the several purposes of a Society, one should be to try to arrange for a continuous supply of work at all times and seasons; as well as to create a fund out of which the members may be effectually helped in their needs, not only in the cases of accident, but also in sickness, old age, and distress.

Such rules and regulations, if willingly obeyed by all, will sufficiently ensure the well-being of the poor; whilst such Mutual Associations among Catholics are certain to be productive in no small degree of prosperity to the State. It is not rash to conjecture the future from the past. Age gives way to age, but the events of one century are wonderfully like those of another; for they are directed by the Providence of God, who over-rules the course of history in accordance with His purposes in creating the race of man.

We are told that it was cast as a reproach on the Christians in the early ages of the Church that the greater number among them had to live by begging or by labour. Yet, destitute though they were of wealth and influence, they ended by winning over to their side the favour of the rich and the good-will of the powerful. They showed themselves industrious, hard-working, assiduous, and peaceful,

ruled by justice, and, above all, bound together in brotherly love. In presence of such mode of life and such example, prejudice gave way, the tongue of malevolence was silenced, and the lying legends of ancient superstition little by little yielded to Christian truth.

Conclusion and Divine Charity

At the time being, the condition of the working classes is the pressing question of the hour; and nothing can be of higher interest to all classes of the State than that it should be rightly and reasonably adjusted. But it will be easy for Christian working-men to decide it aright if they will form Associations, choose wise guides, and follow on the path which with so much advantage to themselves and the commonweal was trodden by their fathers before them.

Prejudice, it is true, is mighty, and so is the greed of money; but if the sense of what is just and rightful be not debased through depravity of heart, their fellow-citizens are sure to be won over to a kindly feeling towards men whom they see to be in earnest as regards their work and who prefer so unmistakably right dealing to mere lucre, and the sacredness of duty to every other consideration.

And further great advantage would result from the state of things We are describing; there would exist so much more ground for hope, and likelihood even, of recalling to a sense of their duty those working-men who have either given up their faith altogether, or whose lives are at variance with its precepts. Such men feel in most cases that they have been fooled by empty promises and deceived by false pretexts. They cannot but perceive that their grasping employers too often treat them with great inhumanity and hardly care for them outside the profit their labour brings; and if they belong to any Union, it is probably one in which there exists, instead of charity and love, that intestine strife which ever accompanies poverty when unresigned and unsustained by religion.

Broken in spirit and worn down in body, how many of them would gladly free themselves from such galling bondage! But human respect, or the dread of starvation, makes them tremble to take the step. To such as these, Catholic Associations are of incalculable service, by helping them out of their difficulties, inviting them to companionship and receiving the returning wanderers to a haven where they may securely find repose.

We have now laid before you, Venerable Brethren, both who are the persons, and what are the means whereby this most arduous question must be solved. Every one should put his hand to the work which falls to his share, and that at once and straightway, lest the evil which is already so great become through delay absolutely beyond remedy.

Those who rule the State should avail them of the laws and institutions of the country; masters and wealthy owners must be mindful of their duty; the poor, whose interests are at stake, should make every lawful and proper effort; and since religion alone, as We said at the beginning, can avail to destroy the evil at its root, all men should rest persuaded that the main thing needful is to return to real Christianity, apart from which all the plans and devices of the wisest will prove of little avail.

In regard to the Church, her co-operation will never be found lacking, be the time or the occasion what it may; and she will intervene with all the greater effect in proportion as her liberty of action is the more unfettered. Let this be carefully taken to heart by those whose office it is to safeguard the public welfare. Every minister of holy religion must bring to the struggle the full energy of his mind and all his power of endurance.

Moved by your authority, Venerable Brethren, and quickened by your example, they should never cease to urge upon men of every class, upon the high-placed as well as the lowly, the Gospel doctrines of Christian life; by every means in their power they must strive to secure the good of the people; and above all must earnestly cherish in themselves, and try to arouse in others, charity, the mistress and the queen of virtues.

For the happy results we all long for must be chiefly brought about by the plenteous outpouring of charity; of that true Christian charity which is the fulfilling of the whole Gospel law, which is always ready to sacrifice itself for others' sake, and is man's surest antidote against worldly pride and immoderate love of self; that charity whose office is described and whose Godlike features are outlined by the Apostle St. Paul in these words. *Charity is patient, is kind, ... seeketh not her own, ... suffereth all things, ... endureth all things.*

On each one of you, Venerable Brothers, and on your clergy and people, as an earnest of God's mercy and a mark of Our affection, We lovingly in the Lord bestow the Apostolic Benediction.

Appendix: Analysis of the Encyclical Rerum Novarum

By The Right Rev. Mgr. Parkinson, D.D.

Introduction: Statement of the Social Problem

Factors:

1. Growth of industries—discoveries of science—relations of employers and employed—wealth of the few—poverty of the masses—moral deterioration.
2. Lack of organization of the workers—contract wages—callousness of employers—trusts—greed of competition—rapacity of usury.

I. The Socialistic Remedy (Transference of Ownership to the State) is Rejected The Right of Private Property (in chattels and land) is Established.

A. From the point of view of the individual:

I. The means of self-betterment secured by the acquisition of personal property is an incentive to labour.

II. As man (by his reason) is able to make provision for future and permanent needs, so he has the corresponding right to secure these provisions as his own.

Objection: (1) The State can provide for all.

Answer: The individual is prior to the State.

Objection: (2) The land is common to all.

Answer: Yes, in the sense that it is offered to any one. But it is appropriated by individuals.

N.B.—The labour of man makes the land valuable; therefore by his labour man imprints his personal mark upon it. An individual can therefore acquire not only the use but the ownership of land; for, as his labour has made the land valuable, he can hold what he has made.

The doctrine is supported by: 1. The common opinion of mankind. 2. The civil laws. 3. Divine law.

B. From the point of view of the family:

For: if an individual may possess property, still more may the head of the family, since (as such) his duties and responsibilities are multiplied.

These duties and their consequent rights are at least equal to any rights of the State. They are real, natural, needful for the well-being of the family, and prior to the rights of the State.

The State may (and should) protect members of the family; but can neither abolish nor absorb parental authority, nor parental rights. Such interference is unjust, and threatens the very existence of family life.

II. The True Remedy

[to be sought in the combined action of (a) the Church, (b) the State, (c) employer and the working class]

A. The Action of the Church:

I. Doctrinal: 1. Inequality of men. 2. Necessity of labour. 3. Permanence of conditions of pain and hardship. 4. Class not necessarily hostile to class.

II. Directive or Moral—In the precepts of:

1. Justice: - (1) On the part of the workman (honesty, fairness, peaceableness). - (2) On the part of the employer (respect for his work-people, regard for their religious duties, morality, sex, strength, just wages).

2. Hope: or the aim at the future life.

Hence: - (1) The wealthy must use their wealth rightly (not merely according to human but also divine law). - (2) The poor must remember (a) that labour is no disgrace; (b) that goodness is the real wealth of life. - (3) Both classes should unite in friendship and brotherly love (since they have the same God, the same end, the same Redemption, the same dignity of children of God, and the same inheritance).

Application of the above Remedies—The Church:

1. Strives to teach men these principles, and especially the principles, and to adopt them under the influence of the lessons of history—the working class, and move their hearts to these renovation of Society, Recall the salutary Christianity. Therefore let society return to these principles.
2. Is solicitous for the bodily needs of men: She aims at raising and bettering the condition of the poor: Witness the outpouring of beneficence among the early Christians—the forming of the patrimony of the poor—the heroism of charity through the centuries—State-relief.

Charity as a virtue, belongs to the Church.

B. The Action of the State:

I. In general. - (a) The State should benefit every order in the community, and (inter alia) promote in the highest degree the interests of the poor. - (b) It is irrational and unjust to neglect one section of citizens and favour another; therefore it should provide for the welfare and comfort of the working class.

There must be differences of position; some rule, and some (the majority) furnish the material commodities of life by their labour, and by this labour States become rich. Therefore whatever seems conducive to the well-being of the workers should receive favourable consideration.

II. Although the individual and family are not to be absorbed by the State, the State must safeguard the community and its parts. Therefore, when other means fail, the State must intervene—In the maintenance of order, of the sanctity of family life, religious observance, justice, and in the promotion of strong, vigorous, capable manhood.

III. The State is the protector of rights, especially of those of the wage-earner.

Details: - (a) Safeguarding of private property. - (b) Prevention of strikes by remedial measures. - (c) Protecting the working class in its: 1. Spiritual and mental interests, 2. In external matters— - (1) Preserving it from exploitation (as to hours, and conditions of labour, rest and recreation). - (2) With regard to wages.

The nature of labour: - Labour is personal (it is his who puts it forth). - Labour is necessary (without its results man cannot live).

On this latter ground a man may not work for an inadequate remuneration. "The remuneration must be enough to support the wage-earner in reasonable and frugal comfort."

The family wage, with economy and thrift, will yield the worker private property (even land) that is sacred and inviolate.

Hence there will result: 1. A wider distribution of property. 2. A greater yield from the land. 3. A love of one's country.

(Note especially the last six lines of the text.)

C. The Action of Employers and Employed:

I. Associations of employers and employed.

II. Associations of work-people. (*Insurances—private institutions—clubs.*)

1. These are a natural outgrowth of society. (*N.B.—The rights of Religious Associations.*)
2. Dangerous Associations are to be shunned.
3. Importance of Catholic Associations. (*Rules and good results of these.*)

Conclusion

Respective duties of the State; of the Wealthy; of the Poor; of the Clergy.

Imprimatur.

+ **Edward, Bishop of Birmingham.**

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