

COMPENDIUM ON CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING PART 14

Historical notes on the Church's social doctrine

By Leela Ramdeen 04.09.2005

We focus today on Part 1, Chapter 2 III: The Church's social doctrine in our time.

Historical notes

- a) The beginning of a new path
- b) From *Rerum Novarum* to our own day.

The *Compendium* tells us that the term “social doctrine” goes back to Pope Pius XI (*Quadragesimo Anno*, 1931). *Laborem Exercens* states that his term designates the doctrinal “corpus” concerning issues relevant to society which, from the encyclical letter *Rerum Novarum* of Pope Leo XIII (1892), developed in the Church through the Magisterium of the popes and the bishops in communion with them.

The *Compendium* stresses that the “Church's concern for social matters certainly did not begin with that document, for the Church has never failed to show interest in society. Nonetheless, the encyclical letter *Rerum Novarum* (The condition of working classes), marks the beginning of a new path. Grafting itself onto a tradition hundreds of years old, it signals a new beginning and a singular development of the Church's teaching in the area of social matters.” (*Catechism*, 2421)

“In her continuous attention to men and women living in society,” states the *Compendium*, “the Church has accumulated a rich doctrinal heritage. This has its roots in Sacred Scripture, especially the Gospels and the apostolic writings, and takes on shape and body beginning from the Fathers of the Church and the great Doctors of the Middle Ages, constituting a doctrine in which, even without explicit and direct Magisterial pronouncements, the Church gradually came to recognise her competence.

“In the 19th century, events of an economic nature produced a dramatic social, political and cultural impact. Events connected with the Industrial Revolution profoundly changed centuries-old societal structures, raising serious problems of justice and posing the first great social question – the labour question – prompted by the conflict between capital and labour. In this context, the Church felt the need to become involved and intervene in a new way: the *res novae* (“new things”) brought about by these events represented a challenge to her teaching and motivated her special pastoral concern for masses of people. A new discernment of the situation was needed, a discernment capable of finding appropriate solutions to unfamiliar and unexplored problems.”

In response to the first great social question, Pope Leo XIII promulgated the first social encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (1892) which “examines the condition of salaried workers, which was particularly distressing for industrial labourers who languished in inhumane misery. The labour question is...explored in all its social and political expressions so that a proper evaluation may be made in the light of the doctrinal principles founded on Revelation and on natural law and morality.

“*Rerum Novarum* lists errors that give rise to social ills, excludes socialism as a remedy and expounds with precision and in contemporary terms the Catholic doctrine on work, the right to property, the principle of collaboration instead of class struggle as the fundamental means of social change, the rights of the weak, the dignity of the poor and the obligations of the rich, the perfecting of justice through charity, and the right to form professional associations.”

As is stated in *Quadragesimo Anno*, “*Rerum Novarum* became the document inspiring Christian activity in the social sphere and the point of reference for this activity.” The *Compendium* reminds us that the central theme of this encyclical is “the just ordering of society, in view of which there is the obligation to identify criteria of judgment that will help to evaluate existing socio-political systems and to suggest lines of action for their appropriate transformation.”

Centesimus Annus states that *Rerum Novarum* dealt with the labour questions using a methodology that would become “a lasting paradigm” for successive developments in the Church’s social doctrine. “The principles affirmed by Pope Leo XIII”, states the *Compendium*, “would be taken up again and studied more deeply in successive social encyclicals. The whole of the Church’s social doctrine can be seen as an updating, a deeper analysis and an expansion of the original nucleus of principles presented in *Rerum Novarum*.”

With this courageous and far-sighted text, *Centesimus Annus* states that Pope Leo XIII “gave the Church ‘citizenship status’ as it were, amid the changing realities of public life” and made an “incisive statement” which became “a permanent element of the Church’s social teaching”. He affirmed that serious social problems “could be solved only by cooperation between all forces”. *Rerum Novarum* promises that “in regard to the Church, her cooperation will never be found lacking.”