
The Papal Encyclical Upon the Labor Question

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THE PAPAL ENCYCLICAL UPON THE LABOR QUESTION.

In a book which has been called by scholars the ablest work of modern Protestant theology, that of Professor Harnack of Berlin (*Dogmengeschichte*), it seems to be clearly implied that the whole spirit of the Roman Catholic church has been broadened by the principle of papal infallibility. The embarrassments of an infallible Bible have often enough been admitted by Protestant scholars. The mere scripture is not primary, but the spirit of the church out of which it sprang and to which the letter upon the page is secondary. The interpreting spirit of the Catholic church thus uses the Bible as Jesus used the Sabbath. Thus Professor Harnack finds that not merely the Bible, but the whole body of Catholic dogma is being more and more subordinated to the higher end of human and social service. He sees in this dogma of infallibility, as interpreted by a man of commanding spiritual gifts, like the present Pope, an instrument for the bringing of all dogma into subjection to organized activities for the common good. Popularly said, this means that neither Bible nor dogma shall stand in the way of doing those practical things which make for the general welfare. This means, in the language of Dean Stanley, that the church shall justify itself before men, solely upon the ground of service to the community.

The most hasty reading of Catholic literature upon the social question will, I think, convince men of open mind that this church is not only alive to the great

issues but is meeting them with masterly intelligence. The present Pope did not initiate the new movement, but he has left upon it the stamp of a man of genius. Neither did he extemporize an enthusiasm in these questions. If he had not become Pope, we should still class him with those like Professor Perin, Kolping, de Mun, Ireland, Gibbons and others, who have taken careful measure of the problem. While still Archbishop of Perugia he was in the best sense a student of these things. The separate questions of hours and conditions of labor, wages, contract, the justification of private property, and distribution, are each dealt with in the spirit of one who is looking at modern problems in the light of great masters like Aristotle and Aquinas. In the first years, as head of the church, at least three gatherings, 1881, 1882 and 1883, were held in Rome to discuss the more special features of the coming social question, and the brilliant Swiss leader of the Catholic social movement, M. Decurtins, has maintained that the Berlin Conference is traceable to the Pope's influence.

Before dealing with the Encyclical on Labor, it should be said that most of the issues there considered had been discussed often and elaborately at the general and special congresses upon the social question. Three general congresses were held at Malines in 1863, 1864 and 1867, but the issues were then too indistinct to bring us into touch with the struggle of industry with modern democracy. After 1880 the discussions at the international, general and special congresses rapidly take definiteness of outline. In the reports of the international congresses at Liège in 1886, 1887 and 1890, we see how sharp even within the church is the struggle between the traditional economic conservatism and the democratic spirit touched by the method of socialism. On the one

side, every step toward state intervention is held in abhorrence; on the other, it is maintained that no changes at the vital points can be made without the state. The whole struggle, it is said, under an ever wider and intenser competition, to raise the standard of living, lower the working time, etc., will end in defeat, if the only appeal is to the old doctrine of self-help. The questions about which the fight turns are quite familiar to us,—hours of labor, the minimum wage, trade unions, the concept of justice as opposed to benevolence and charity, the labor contract,—and beneath these more concrete issues is the whole casuistry of opinion, *pro* and *con*, upon the philosophic aspects of the problem. The forms of property, distribution, interest, rent, the political representation of homogeneous trade interests, the family wage as against the individual wage,—all these are elaborately and minutely discussed.

The older writers like Professor Perin, Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu, Professor Castelein, the economists proper like Professor Rambaud of Lyons, and Claudio Jannet, the best known followers of the Le Play tradition, “*La Réforme Sociale*” and “*La Science Sociale*” of M. Demoulin, are united against the democratic innovations. They work with much unity, together with the organized employers, in strengthening the whole policy of *patronage*,—all that the employers alone or in mixed trade unions (*syndicats mixtes*) hope to bring about. Against this conservative opinion, we find a growing number of young lawyers and politicians, some of the younger economists with German training, a large number of church dignitaries such as Cardinal Manning, and able leaders like the Count de Mun with his large following of *l'Association Catholique*, Professor Pottier of Liège, Mgr. Bradshaw and Dr. de Pascal.

One or two illustrations will show the nature of this strife. When Professor Liberatore writes¹ that the wage should be upon the *family* and not upon the individual basis; that the wage should be made to correspond to the *needs* of the group; that this is only natural justice, etc., we know where he will stand upon almost every one of these issues.

When Dr. de Pascal says in his book,² "Let it not be forgotten, the contract does not constitute justice, but justice should govern the contract," we know that he has (or soon will have) thrown aside the old views. He will call charity, like a socialist, mere patch-work, and demand a new organization of society based upon some conception of equality. He is almost certain to take his stand against the church tradition, and defend the independent trade unions rather than the mixed. He will see no hope in checking night work or Sunday work, or maintaining the minimum wage, without appeal to the state. Upon some form of compulsory insurance he is likely to look with favor.

We see in a word that in this whole church movement the issues are ever more and more sharply defined between the socialistic and individualistic views. This distinctness of outline is largely owing to the fact that great numbers of the ablest business men in France and Belgium have for many years been taking eager and active part in the congresses upon the social question. The innovator has had at every step to face the first-class man of business. Much of the sober and excellent quality of the discussion in these reports is owing to this fact.

Thus while the Pope comes into a field already occu-

¹ "Principii di Economia Politica," 230-231.

² "L'Église et la Question Sociale," 53 ff.

pied, he comes as one who has equipped himself for service there. On the background of this brief history of opinion and discussion in the church, we may now see more clearly (*a*) the contents of the Encyclical, and (*b*) certain results that are already appearing from its influence.

It need scarcely be said that in this Catholic philosophy the great evils at the heart of the social questions are the evils which spring from a perverted human will, and therefore, the great remedy is the bringing that will into conformity with duty and truth through the organized influence of religion. Of these things I need not, however, speak, as I am dealing with the more distinctly economic aspects of the question.

(1) *The Economic Contents of the Encyclical.*—The spirit of revolution, according to the Pope, has passed beyond politics into the field of economics.

The momentous seriousness of the present state of things, he says, fills every mind with painful apprehension; wise men discuss it; practical men propose schemes; popular meetings, legislatures, and sovereign princes, all are occupied with it; and there is nothing that has a stronger hold upon public attention. . . .

All men agree that some remedy must be found and quickly found for the misery and wretchedness which press so heavily at this moment on the large majority of the very poor. . . .

To this must be added the custom of working by contract and the concentrating of many branches of trade in the hands of a few individuals so that a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the masses a yoke little better than slavery itself.

Here is an impeachment of the actual competitive system to make glad the heart of the most doughty agitator. If the agitator have collectivist leanings his comfort is brief. Any remedy which socialism brings for the admitted ills gets short shrift.

To remedy these evils, says the Pope, the Socialists, working on the poor man's envy of the rich, endeavor to destroy private property and maintain that individual possessions should become the common property of all, to be administered by the state or municipal

bodies. They hold that, by thus transferring private property from private persons to the community, the present evil state of things will be set to rights because each citizen will then have his equal share of whatever there is to enjoy. But their proposals are so clearly futile for all practical purposes that, if they were carried out, the working-man himself would be among the first to suffer. Moreover, they are emphatically unjust because they would rob the lawful possessor, bring the state into a sphere not its own and cause complete confusion in the community.

This summary condemnation of socialism is followed by an authoritative statement of private property rights. The literature of this subject contains no more uncompromising defence of those very forms of private property which collectivist socialism attacks. The right to dispose of one's property as one pleases is maintained. This right is rooted in the natural as well as in divine law. The traditional defence of property as a part of the personality,—the passing it on by laws of inheritance to the child who is merely extended personality,—shows us how distinct and final a word has been spoken to socialists in or out of the church. If one invest in land it too is as sacred as any other form. "Our first and fundamental principle," reads the Encyclical, "therefore, when we undertake to alleviate the condition of the masses, must be the inviolability of private property." If we add to this that almost every variety of patronal attempt among the Catholics to realize their thought seems to have the one common purpose of spreading far and wide among the masses every form of private ownership of property, we shall understand what a part this property concept plays in their entire view of the situation.

Though little is said about it in the Encyclical it is clear that the relation which rent bearing forms of private property are supposed to bear to the monogamic family has been considered anew by Catholic scholars.

It seems indeed to be admitted by the Catholics that the present form of the family will be put in immediate jeopardy by such changes of property forms as socialism asks. Private property, as here defined, the present wage system, and the existing laws of inheritance are thus boldly accepted as natural, sacred and presumably final. Every remedy must assume their perpetuity. It is thus natural that the great remedy is *patronage*, with a kind of trinity,—priest, employer and father of the family,—as guide and administrator.

From this central fact, every separate issue must be measured. The doctrine as to the state and its function, trade unions, mixed or of laborers alone, the minimum wage, restraints upon competition, eight hours—all must henceforth be viewed in the light of these sharper definitions of property rights. As the Encyclical deals with principles, not with their application, there must be much divergence in the interpretation, yet the papal views as to the function of the state, wages, and hours of labor, admit of very cautious and conservative definition. In the case of Sunday work the state may interfere *upon principle*, as it may, if occasion arise, in protecting women and children. The door, however, seems purposely left open for a broader view. If private or corporate influence proves unequal to its task of safeguarding any interest, the state may act. The radical party in the church naturally hails this as yielding all that is claimed. The time, place and conditions are, according to the Encyclical, to determine each question as it arises. Here a wholesome opportunism, elastic enough for any Fabian, asserts itself.

Even more in regard to the vexed question of the "labor contract," the Pope seems to take the advanced ground. It is held that the actual contract may not

meet the requirements ; therefore both nature and justice are violated. " Let it be granted," it is said, " that as a rule workmen and employer should make free agreements and in particular should freely agree as to wages ; nevertheless there is a dictate of nature, more imperious and ancient than any bargain between man and man, that the remuneration must be enough to support the wage earners in reasonable and frugal comfort." Here the middle term between necessity and luxury, viz., comfort, is chosen. Here the nice question meets us, What if all the organized forms of self-help should, in a given case, fail to meet the forces of competition which crowded the wage below the comfort line ? What could be said to the members of the Catholic Association and Democratic League in the church who asked, let us say, for compulsory workmen's insurance of the German type or for municipal feeding of school children ? Manifestly no answer is possible except one based on a purely inductive inquiry as to the facts of the case. The present struggle is everywhere now to protect certain points of weakness among the wage earners,—childhood, old age, women, sickness and industrial accidents. It is only a question of evidence as to what method can best reach its end.

There are plenty of indications throughout the Encyclical that the author recognizes this and all that it implies. The admission that wages should correspond to a certain measure of comfort not covered by the actual contract between laborer and employer, but by a higher principle that must in some way be enforced, illustrates this hardier attitude. If it could not be enforced under free patronal forms, why not, upon the Pope's own principles, by the state ? It is admitted that organized private initiative cannot manage the Sunday difficulty

brought about by competition. Here appeal is made in the Encyclical to the state. Between this and state help in matters sanitary and in protecting children and women, the difference is one of degree, of time and circumstance, upon all of which determining facts the Pope lays careful and special emphasis.

Again, as to trade unions, the great body of best known Catholic writers have opposed even with bitterness independent trade unions (unions without employers). The ideal has been the *syndicat mixte* in which employer and employed act together, thus assuming the practical identity of interests in industrial groups. As the head of the church shocked a multitude of his followers by warning zealous Ultramontanes no longer to oppose, but frankly accept the present French Republic, so consternation was spread among the elect by a frank and bold acceptance of independent trade unions. Joint trade unions increased in France after the law of 1884, to 1893, from some 40 to 130 or thereabouts; independent unions certainly twenty times as fast. The Pope recognized this fact, just as he recognized that the French had accepted some form of republican government. This means adjustment to and recognition of the actual evolution of political and industrial society. Political forms are everywhere more and more influencing forms of industry, and the Catholic policy, under this more liberal guidance, is intelligently hospitable to both. How broad this spirit is may be seen in the acceptance by the church in Austria, under Prince Liechtenstein's leadership, of associations that are strictly compulsory in character. At the other extreme is the triumph of Cardinal Gibbons and Archbishop Ireland's policy towards the Knights of Labor, in spite of the element of secrecy in this body. Between these extremes, we

have the very democratic movement of Decurtins in Switzerland, and the joint associations of France and Belgium. Certainly Cardinal Manning in England was at the very front of the more democratic movement. Again as late as 1886 a French bishop wrote that the church would not consider the question of international legislation. At the congress of Liège in 1890, at Mayence in the same year, and by several writers since the Encyclical, the claim is made that international action on the social question must have immediate and serious consideration. Long since, both Cavour and Bismarck expressed their fears of the future union between the black and the red international. We see, however, that upon the essential economic issues raised by collectivist socialism, the church has declared war. Its internationalism has as little in common with that of Marx as religion has with secularism.

We are led thus to ask the obvious question, With the Pope's definition and acceptance of private property, inheritance and the wage system as sacred, is it likely that there will be leeway enough for this profoundly democratic movement in the church? If, as is laid down in the so-called "Great Charter of the Fourth Estate," time, place and circumstance are so largely to determine policy; if modern democracy, trade unionism, with all that they signify of political influence in the near future, are to be accepted, is it probable that they can be held in check by remedies which assume the permanence of present property forms, inheritance and the wage system? At every point where this fourth estate is strongly organized in politics, its one aim is to democratize not only political but industrial privilege. The private or monopolized control of rents in every form is the one thing at which the *demos* strikes. Is it probable that the

priesthood once instructed in economics can be held in check? Since the Catholic bishops met at Fulda in 1869 it has been more and more the policy of the church to teach social science in the seminaries. It is a part of the instruction now in Belgium, France, Germany, and Austria. The future alone can answer these questions but it is clear that purely patronal remedies are having very embarrassing experiences everywhere.

(2) We may ask finally and briefly, What results have already flowed from the Encyclical?

Upon the whole this document takes sides with the more democratic tendencies in the church, yet it has introduced greater unity of opinion upon many vital questions. All parties unite in praising it, practically all accept it. There is far less insistence that only joint trade unions shall be encouraged. Instead of much abuse of the mere interest or rent receivers, we hear far more of educating them into a sense of their duties to society. If it is right to take interest and rent then some corresponding service must be done. Before the Encyclical, it was common, as in the Catholic Association, to hear of the "pretended productivity of capital"; that "labor produces all the wealth"; that "those who own the means of production necessarily rob the poor"; that "none have a right to income without personal work;" that "funded property is for the most part a mere creature of the law," etc. The reports of congresses since the Encyclical show far less of this kind of utterance. The attempt is rather to give democratic application to the papal principles—to show evidence for further state activity, to make the most of the principle of justice as against the actual labor contract, etc.

Again, the word socialism, even allied with a religious term, is far less in favor. Some of the leaders forswear

the word altogether. In a sitting of the Chamber of Deputies last April, the leader of the so-called Christian Socialists, Le Comte de Mun, vehemently protested that there was no such thing as *Christian Socialism*.

We may add to these results an immense stimulus to the whole movement in the church to deal wisely and cautiously with the social question. Congresses are multiplying; a literature already of bewildering magnitude,—pamphlet, periodical, books,—is every where appearing.

The whole church with the superb strength of its organization is turning no longer, as of old, to princes but to the people. One church dignitary writes: "Hitherto, the world has been controlled by dynasties, henceforth the control is with the *demos*;" Cardinal Manning said: "The twentieth century will be for the people;" even the Pope is reported to have said: "My highest ambition is to go down to history as the pontiff of the laborers"; and a writer of the rarest freedom and insight, the Academician, de Vogüé, has written: "On the day when the throne of St. Peter shall hold a Pope animated by the spirit of Cardinals Gibbons and Manning, the church will rise and take her place in the world the most formidable power that it has ever known."