

Did Pope Leo XIII really condemn Henry George?

By John Young

I maintain that there is no conflict between Henry George's land revenue thesis and Pope Leo XIII's defence of private property in the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. Some Georgists will see my claim as clearly erroneous, and will point out that Leo strongly defended the right to private property in land, whereas George says time after time that private property in land is unjust.

To quote from the encyclical: "Man should not only possess the fruits of the earth, but also the very soil, inasmuch as from the produce of the earth he has to lay by provision for the future" (n. 7). These words occur in a section of the encyclical devoted to a defence of private property, with particular emphasis on property in land.

The crucial question is: Do George and the Pope use the term private property in the same sense? They don't. George sees private property rights as (almost) absolute, whereas Leo and the whole Catholic tradition regard all property rights as relative.

According to George there is an absolute right of ownership to things produced by labour, except in life or death situations. He concedes that one may take someone's horse if that is necessary for one's survival. But he illustrates his contention that what a man makes or produces is his own, against all comers, imagining travellers in the desert who have brought plenty of water, while other travellers have run short of water. The latter, he says, "...though they might ask water from the provident in charity, could not demand it in right" (*The Condition of Labor*, Henry George Foundation of Great Britain, 1930, p.42).

Contrast this with Catholic tradition about private property. When we look at what official documents of the Catholic Church say, we find that they classify

property rights as relative, not absolute. The *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, issued in 1965 by the Second Vatican Council, expressed the traditional Catholic position about property. Starting from the premiss that "God intended the earth with everything contained in it for the use of all human beings..." it argues that private property must be so used that it benefits others (n.69).

The Constitution states: "If one is in extreme necessity, he has the right to procure for himself what he needs out of the riches of others" (Ibid.). A footnote refers to an article in the *Summa Theologiae* of St Thomas Aquinas, where Aquinas says that in cases of necessity it is morally lawful to take the property of others. He denies that this is theft (morally speaking) by the person in extreme need, because "that which he takes for the support of his life becomes his own property by reason of that need" (*Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 66, a. 7).

It "becomes his own property". That statement expresses the way Catholic authorities understand the concept of private property: not only land, but all property. It is essentially relative to the needs of others; it is never absolute, and therefore – in extreme cases – can cease to be the property of the rich and become the property of the needy.

Hence there is no conflict between George's statement that land should not be private property and Leo XIII's defence of private property in land, because George is speaking of an absolute right (subject only to a life and death situation), whereas Leo is defending a relative right – a right compatible with the public appropriation of rent.

In 1991 Pope John Paul II issued the encyclical *Centesimus Annus* to commemorate the centenary

of *Rerum Novarum*, and he noted that the amount of space Leo devoted to the question of private property shows the importance he attached to it. John Paul II then adds: "The Pope is well aware that private property is not an absolute value, nor does he fail to proclaim the necessary complementary principles, such as the *universal destination of the earth's goods* (n.6; original italics).

Those Catholic authorities who claimed that George's position was contrary to official Catholic teaching thought he advocated land socialism: the holder of land would be a tenant of the government. And some of his statements certainly give that false impression. Apart from the slogan "land should not be private property", he speaks of "converting all occupiers into tenants of the State, by appropriating rent" (*The Irish Land Question*, Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, p. 54). In *Progress and Poverty* he states that, by appropriating rent, "...the State may become the universal landlord without calling herself so..." (book VIII, chapter 2, p. 406, Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1971).

This passage from *The Condition of Labor* expresses George's thought very clearly: "We propose leaving land in the private possession of individuals, with full liberty on their part to give, sell, or bequeath it, simply to levy on it for public purposes a tax that shall equal the annual value of the land, itself, irrespective of the use made of it or the improvements on it" (p. 9).

There is no conflict whatever between this and the position of Leo XIII. Further, I would argue that Catholic social teaching leads logically to George's solution of the land question. This follows from the often repeated contention of Catholic authorities that property rights are relative to the good of society as a whole, with particular regard for the disadvantaged.

To quote Pope John Paul II again, in *Centesimus Annus*: "God gave the earth to the whole human race for the sustenance of all its members, without excluding or favouring anyone" (n. 31).

