

Breaking Open the Encyclical by Pope Leo XIII 'On The Condition of Labour' Johanna de Groot

Pope Leo XIII's encyclical, entitled 'On the Condition of Labour', is a truly ground-breaking document. Writing as the bishop of Rome to his fellow bishops round the world, he was speaking from a deep concern for the confusion and suffering of his people, both in Europe and in other parts of the world.

He wrote in 1891 at a time when there had been two industrial revolutions, the first one starting in the 1780s in Britain and the second following straight on from that. There had been the French Revolution from 1789 till 1799 with its aftermath of chaos. The words Egalite, Liberte and Fraternite are today etched in the hearts of Westerners but they emerged from the crucible of the suffering poor. Then there were the widespread Revolutions of 1848 which resulted in a harsh panic-stricken reaction right across Europe. There were other causes for the general unrest not the least of which were the breakdown of the guilds of the Middle Ages and the Scientific Revolution which had caused the change from a manual labour and draft-animal-based economy towards machine-driven manufacturing. Workers had now moved into such work environments as textile factories, iron forgeries, canal, road and railway-building jobs, ship-building jobs and not a few of them into mining as coal was required to fuel the machines. Wealth had passed into the hands of a relatively few capitalists and the labouring masses were powerless.

Karl Marx had died only eight years previous to the sending of this encyclical and had sounded a clarion call amongst the oppressed workers with his 'Communist Manifesto' in 1848 and his 'Capital' written from 1867 to 1894. Together with his friend, Friedrich Engels, he had been influential in the setting up of the International Workingmen's Association (IWA) which ran from 1864 to 1876. It consisted of left-wing socialist, communist and anarchist political groups and trade union organizations and gave voice to the grievances of the working classes as well as expression to the confusions of the wider class struggle. At its peak, this Workingmen's Association had an estimated 5 to 8 million members from across the world, showing the obvious concern about their condition. At the end, therefore, of close to two centuries of upheaval, there was in 1891, a great deal of unclarity about the roles of the social classes and the State. Leo called it a 'hiatus' and I am inclined to think he and others saw it as a black hole.

Pope Leo had, in my opinion, a truly sympathetic heart towards the plight of the workers, who made up the vast majority of the population. I cannot help but notice the depth of care that shines from between the lines of his encyclical. He writes for and about the working poor by placing them in their context. He looks at how they are central, (not least by their numbers, 80-90%), and how they are related to the other sectors in society, the upper classes, as well as the State and how the Church fits into the whole picture. In modern terms we would describe his approach as 'holistic'. It is actually an enlightened plan for the rebuilding of society and although I haven't included all the scripture quotes he uses to back up his arguments, the Bible is the basis of his wisdom.

An important aspect of the encyclical is the strong stance Leo takes against Socialism as a way out of the mire. In his explanation he points out the basic concept of what the human person is, and how that person is meant to function according to his natural God-given nature. He states that since the human person came before the State and so must be given priority to the State, it is therefore imperative to attend to the wellbeing of every individual. But the person makes choices under the providence of God, and every person has different levels of intelligence, of strength and of motivation. This fact of individual differences which are natural, indicates, says Leo, that persons must be allowed to function with as much freedom as possible if they are to flourish. He adds that however humble a person's status in society, that person has a right to own private property in a stable and permanent way. The person may acquire it through inheritance or by living frugally and saving, so becoming able to buy property. Another reason why all ought to be free to own land is that all people live off the proceeds of the land, and because these needs are of a continual nature, all persons must be accorded this basic right of freedom of possession of land. In addition, Leo declares that the results of labour belong to the person who has laboured and that workers must have liberty to dispose of wages as they wish. These ideas were in direct contradiction to the socialist belief that all property should belong to the State.

Furthermore, because the human being came before the State, that is, existed before the State, and therefore had priority over the State, and the adult person may freely choose to found a family, therefore that family is the 'first society'. If families enter into association to found a government (a State), Leo writes, they should experience help and not hindrance from it. The only duties of a State toward families, should be to support them if they are in dire need and interfere only if there is a grave disturbance of natural rights. Socialism, Leo declares, acts against natural justice in setting parents, or the parental role, aside and thereby

threatens the very existence of family life. Such obstructive action disturbs all classes of citizens. In addition, the sources of wealth would run dry as no one would have any interest in exerting one's talents and all would be levelled down to misery and penury.

Obviously Leo is giving strong cautions here against what had been happening under Socialism. He reiterates that the first and most fundamental principle to alleviate the miserable condition of the masses must be the inviolability of private property. Leo adds that if the Church, the bearer of Christian wisdom, is left out of the picture, all natural striving is in vain. Socialism, as we know, had been advocating against the influence of the Church. Leo continues, individual differences will always produce inequality of outcome but one must work with that natural inequality, not against it. Social and public life can only continue if it is worked at by all the different sections of society as well as by the varying capacities of its citizens.

In direct contradiction to Karl Marx's concept of class war as a means of alleviating the suffering of the working classes, Leo says: It is a great mistake to think in the matter of the condition of labour that class is naturally hostile to class, that they must be at war. The truth is that society is like the body. He states:

Just as the symmetry of the human body is the result of the disposition of the members of the body, so in a State it is ordained by nature that these two classes should exist in harmony and agreement, and should, as it were, fit into one another, so as to maintain the equilibrium of the body politic.' P. 177.

Leo points out that each class requires the other – capital needs labour and labour needs capital. Mutual agreements, he states, result in pleasantness and good order, whereas perpetual conflict necessarily produces confusion and outrage.

To prevent such strife, he states, the efficacy of Christianity is marvellous and manifold. He adds that nothing is more powerful than religion, - of which the Church is the guardian, - in drawing rich and poor together since the Church reminds both classes of their duties towards the other and their duties of justice. Leo then gives long detailed lists of the moral duties of each of the social classes, and of the State and also points out the necessary part played by Religion. The Encyclical is, in my opinion, no less than a handbook to build a renewed society.

In order to recreate order out of the chaos, to lift the workers out of their isolation and defenceless position in society, Leo states in detail the duties of the employers

and the rich, or the upper class, also pointing out attitudes towards the workers they should abide by. He lists these as follows:

They must remember that workers are not slaves;

Workers must be respected for their human and Christian dignity;

Labour is nothing to be ashamed of;

Employment is an honourable state;

Labour enables people to sustain their lives in an upright and creditable way;

It is shameful to treat workers like chattels to make money;

It is shameful to look on a worker as so much muscle or physical power;

Workers must be given time to attend to their spiritual needs and duties so as not be lured into corruption and neglect of home and family by the squandering of wages;

Workers must not be taxed beyond their strength nor be made to do work unsuitable to their age or sex;

The employer and the rich person should give to everyone what is just including adequate wages.

The duties of Labour he lists as follows:

Workers should carry out honestly the agreements made with employers;

Workers should never injure capital;

They should never outrage an employer;

Workers should never employ violence in representing their own cause;

They should neither engage in riot nor disorder;

They should not associate with people of evil principles

The part the State should play he describes as follows:

Rulers should make sure that laws, institutions, and the general character and administration of the commonwealth will be such that they produce of themselves public wellbeing and private prosperity;

A State will flourish if it has good morality, well-regulated family life, and respect for religion;

It should maintain justice by moderation and equal distribution of public burdens; It should promote progress of the arts, of trade, and abundant yield of the land and everything that makes the citizens happier;

To the State the interests of all should be equal – the highly placed and the lowly; In its public administration, the State must duly provide for the welfare and comfort of the working people;

Those in high office in government should be held in high respect;

The interests of the poor, of labour, should be carefully watched over;

Both the Gospel and philosophy agree that the administration of the State should be, not to the advantage of the ruler but the benefit of those over whom he or she rules;

The use of the Law should only be introduced to prevent and punish injury, and to protect all persons in the possession of what is their own.

‘The chief thing to be secured,’ Leo states, ‘is safeguarding private property by legal enactment and policy.’ This is the crux of his argument against Socialism and class war. Leo writes that just as the well-off should be secure in owning property, so the worker should have security of ownership of possessions as well as of spiritual and mental interests.

Leo writes as follows:

Neither justice nor the common good allows anyone to seize that which belongs to another, or, under the pretext of futile and ridiculous equality, to lay hands on other people's fortunes. It is most true that by far the larger part of the people who work, prefer to improve themselves by honest labour rather than by doing wrong to others. But there are not a few who are imbued with bad principles and are anxious for revolutionary change, and whose great purpose it is to stir up tumult and bring about a policy of violence. The authority of the State should intervene to

put restraint upon these disturbers, to save the workers from their seditious arts, and to protect lawful owners from spoliation.

About Strikes Leo states that these generally happen where the work hours are too long, the work is too hard or when the workers' wages are insufficient. He states that strikes are a threat to peace, affecting both employers and workers. He says they are injurious to trade and that laws should be made in advance and adjusted to prevent them from happening.

The crucial contribution of the Church in re-establishing the wellbeing of the working people and thence the governance of the population, is then outlined. Leo states that all persons are equal in the sight of God, based on Genesis 1:28: 'Fill the earth and subdue it; and rule over the fishes of the sea, the fowls of the air; and all living creatures which move upon the earth' and he continues from St Paul's epistle to the Romans 'for the same Lord is over all.' (10:12).

It is the rights of God over the souls of human beings, as heaven is their destiny, that must be respected, Leo says, and not taken away by other human beings, and hence the obligation of cessation of work and labour on Sundays and certain festivals. He gives the reminder that the Commandment reads 'Remember thou keep holy the Sabbath day.' (Ex. 20:18)

Leo continues with further directions. Workers should not be treated cruelly, neither should their minds be stupefied nor their bodies worn out. Work should be regulated to suit workers and remuneration should be reasonable for 'frugal comfort'. There should be different hours for different trades and adequate sanitation. To regulate such conditions, boards and societies should be set up under the approval and protection of the State. Workers should be able to save and buy property and own it securely, a directive which would alleviate the inequity of ownership between the classes that had arisen. To further close this gap, Leo suggested the following strategies:

Private societies should be permitted as freedom of association was a human right;
If such societies were corrupt, the State should forbid them;

The State should protect religious orders because as private societies they were a significant boost to society's wellbeing;

Catholic worker associations should be fostered;

Leo commended how rich Catholics had already begun to set up such associations as well as Benefits and Insurance Societies;

Such Catholic Workers Societies should be governed from within;

Their purpose should be to 'better body, mind and property' for workers;

Foremost attention should be paid to piety and morality, members to be led to the worship of God;

There should be harmony, unanimity and good will amongst members;

Any funds should be administered with the strictest honesty;

In this way such Associations would be productive for the workers themselves and for the State. They would also be a portal of return for lapsed Catholics who might have fallen into despair and unbelief.

Leo concludes with the following remarks:

Since only by the co-operation of all classes and ‘players’ can peace be restored, and only if the golden rule is observed can all live together in harmony in a true commonwealth, therefore each ‘player’ must act according to the natural law and the Christian virtues. Hence:

The State must use the law and its institutions;

Masters and rich must remember their duty;

The poor must make every lawful and proper effort;

All must return to real Christianity;

The Church must be given liberty of action;

True Charity should be fostered.

This Encyclical has been a foundation stone for the development of the modern democratic Western world and the widespread Social Justice Movement.

Subsequent Popes have written encyclicals developing the themes here begun.

Pope Pius XI’s ‘Quadragesimo Anno’ in 1931, Pope John XXIII’s ‘Pacem in Terris’ in 1963, a key statement of which was ‘Every person has the right to life, to bodily integrity, and to the means which are suitable for the proper development of life.’ Pope Paul VI followed on with his ‘Populorum Progressio’ in 1967, ‘On the development of peoples’, a key statement of which was: The economy of the world should serve humankind and not just the few’. In 1987 John Paul II issued his ‘Sollicitudo Rei Socialis’ or On Solicitude about Social Realities, in commemoration of Populorum Progressio above, and touched on the key principles of Leo’s foundational encyclical as follows:

The right to a just wage;

Security of employment;

Fair and reasonable working conditions;

The right to join a union;

Universal destination of resources and goods.

In 2009 our present Pope, Benedict XVI, covered these points again in his 'Caritas in Veritate' or The Truth in Charity.

I will conclude by stating that I hope I have given a clear outline of the foundational and pivotal role that this encyclical has played in the establishment of frameworks for democratic and socially just planning and governance as well as for the practice of fair conditions for workers everywhere.

References

Pope Leo XIII, 'On the Condition of Labour', 1891 in George, H., 'The Land Question: Viewpoint and counter viewpoint on the need for land reform', Pp. 167-207, Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, New York, 2009.

Wikipedia, for subsequent Papal Encyclicals.