

'Rerum Novarum' and Henry George

By LOUIS FILLER

POPE LEO XIII's labor encyclical is one which has peculiar importance to students of Henry George; and the treatment which it is accorded by Professor Abell¹ demands notice on several other counts as well. It should be remarked, first, that "reception . . . in America," to the author, apparently means *Catholic* reception primarily, even though he devotes a little more than a paragraph to Protestant approval of the Pope's message. There is, then, no need here for taking cognizance of the dissenting opinions of non-believers during the time-span treated.

Professor Abell develops his theme judiciously and with a detail not to be found elsewhere. Unlike a number of Leo XIII's biographers and other Catholic commentators, he discusses the famous encyclical, "Rerum Novarum," in context, recognizing that it did not spring full-grown from the Pope's solitary thoughts, but came into existence in response to strong economic and social tendencies, in particular those of Europe and America. Professor Abell, in describing the reception accorded the pastoral letter in the United States, shows that prior to its issuance there had been little official Catholic sanction of positive social action, especially on the score of labor unions. Cardinal Gibbons' defense of the Knights of Labor was a bright exception. This would tend to give "Rerum Novarum" a pioneer significance which, indeed, it had among papal letters. However, it should be noted that the very absence of official thought on the "social question" resulted in the appearance among Catholics of freely celebrated opinions which, in the important instance of Father Edward McGlynn, culminated distressingly in excommunication. It is evident that the Church felt a need for strengthening its control over the faithful who were being organ-

¹ *The Reception of Leo XIII's Labor Encyclical in America, 1891-1919.* By Aaron I. Abell. *The Review of Politics*, Vol. VII, pp. 464-95.

ized in labor unions (which the encyclical accepted on moderate terms) and who were being affected by socialist attitudes and agitation (which "Rerum Novarum" categorically opposed).

Professor Abell's views on Henry George as an influence in determining the formulation of significant passages of Leo XIII's message and as a factor in its reception could have profited from amplification. There is good reason to believe that "Rerum Novarum" was in part at least inspired by disturbances in official church circles caused by differences on the single tax issue. Thus, Msgr. John A. Ryan, in the course of his notable debate with Morris Hillquit,² observed that the encyclical was above all aimed at socialist proposals for solving the *land* question; and though George's system differed from that of the socialists proper, this fact did not make him more acceptable to the hierarchy, and there can be no doubt that his campaign for land reform was inspiring signal controversy during Leo XIII's time.

This is not to suggest that the encyclical was a studied essay in conservatism, though some sympathetic analysts seemed to think so. Professor Abell quotes aptly from the *Andover Review* as follows: "The authority of the encyclical lies in its unqualified assertion of the doctrine of private property; its wisdom lies in its concessions respecting the present economic and social functions of the state." Outstanding Catholic liberals found inspiration in its pages. Even Father Thomas McGrady, an advocate of socialism, found support in its pages, as in his "Socialism and the Labor Problem" (1900). The truth is that most liberal Catholics were never quite so "liberal"—that is, in the *laissez-faire* or socialist senses—as their admirers who were not in the faith were likely to imagine them as being. Msgr. Ryan again furnishes a case in point; see, for example, his "Francisco Ferrer, Criminal Conspirator" (1910). And yet there can be no doubt that he was at one on many points with the most serious and socially effective men, and also that "Rerum Novarum" provided him with the major premises for his lifework.

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