

## The Condition of Labor

**P**AVLOS GIANNELIAS of Lyon, France, a distinguished spokesman for the philosophy of Henry George, has recently completed a work of intensive scholarship in celebration of Henry George's *Encyclical Letter on the Condition of Labor*, addressed to Pope Leo XIII 75 years ago, on September 11, 1891.

In his letter to the Pope, Henry George said that when Christ told men to seek the Kingdom of God and its righteousness and to worry no more about material things than do the lilies of the field about their raiment,<sup>1</sup> he was "declaring what political economy in the light of modern discovery shows to be a sober truth." He maintained that God intended the state to obtain its revenues by the taxation of land values, and said this was as natural as that a mother should give her milk to nourish her child. For the mother to refuse is to endanger physical health—and "for society to refuse to take for social uses the provision intended for them is to breed social disease."

In the episode of the young archon (ruler) who asked what good thing he could do to inherit eternal life, and was told to sell everything and give it to the poor<sup>2</sup>—the Greek original text uses the word *Ktemata*, which refers to land possessions. Henry George thinks that the significance of this passage lies in a consideration of the manner in which the possessions were gained—whether unjustly by force, or by the "sweat of the brow."

Sometimes overlooked in the Lord's prayer is the word *epiousios*<sup>3</sup> which though usually translated as daily, can also mean due. In an old German text taken directly from the original Greek it is written "by assiduous labor earned."

Henry George stresses that Jesus earned his own subsistence by common

labor, until passing to a higher sphere of effort he earned his meager substance through the love offerings of grateful hearers as he went about teaching moral and spiritual truths.

If it were possible for the giving of alms to abolish poverty, said George, there would be no poverty in Christendom . . . Charity must be built on justice. What is wrong with the condition of labor through the Christian world is that labor is robbed. All that charity can do, where injustice exists, is here and there to somewhat mitigate the effects of injustice. It cannot cure them. That pseudo-charity that discards and denies justice works evil—it acts as an anodyne to the consciences of those who are living on the robbery of their fellows.

George pointed out that early Christianity was not a religion that alluded only to the next world and did nothing to prevent injustice in this. In that case it would never have encountered Roman persecution. The sceptical masters of Rome were tolerant of all gods, but keenly sensitive of a doctrine based on inspiring slaves with a new hope. Any distinction between land and capital as goods produced by individual labor was prohibited by Roman laws which insisted that land was also a form of capital. History reveals that even the grandsons of Scipio Africanus, the destroyer of Carthage, paid with their lives for their attempt to safeguard the right to the public land for the people.

In the Acts of the Apostles there is a clear case of community living where all that believed had all things in common, selling their land, possessions and goods, and sharing them according to each other's need. Barnabas,<sup>4</sup> a Levite from Cyprus, played an important role in this connection. After selling his land and bringing the money to the Apostles he went to Tarsus to seek Saul. When

he found him he took him to Antioch, the city where the disciples were first called "Christians."<sup>5</sup> Barnabas and Saul sailed to Cyprus, and the deputy of the country, Sergius Paulus, called for them, asking to hear the word of God. Since then Saul was called Paulus (giving up the name of the great Jewish king, Saul, he modestly took the name of the Roman deputy, Paulus—meaning "a little one").<sup>6</sup>

It was this same Barnabas who knew well the land laws of Moses, that accompanied Paul on his first journey to Asia Minor—so Paul evidently knew them also and set the first pillar of the bridge that was to unite the Hebrew-Christian laws with the Hellenic philosophy, whose economical basis was the *Seisachtheia* of Solon—quite similar to the land laws of Moses.

Under the reign of Amasis, Egypt is said to have enjoyed the greatest prosperity. It was Amasis who established the law among them that every Egyptian should declare annually by what means he maintained himself. Solon, the Athenian, having brought this law from Egypt, established it at Athens, and people there still observe it as an unobjectionable regulation.

Accordingly, as in Egypt, it was the means that were foreseen as a basis for the calculation of the taxes. Plutarch says in his *Life of Solon*, that while wishing to leave official rule in the hands of the well-to-do, the common people were to be given a share in the rest of the government. Solon therefore made an appraisal of the values of the property of the citizens and divided them into three classes, according to income. The original Greek text shows

that property was appraised according to yearly income, but personal skill was also taken into account—and for the second class, not only the yield but the capacity of the soil to yield is involved. So Paul, being aware of this scrupulous distinction, referred to it in many of his epistles. When writing to the Thessalonians he reminded them of an earlier command, that if any would not work, neither should he eat.<sup>7</sup> It is very sad that the merging of Christian belief and Hellenic philosophy in the Mediterranean civilization didn't preserve that distinction of land, labor and capital.

Henry George concludes his letter with a final reference to the rich. Even if they "bestow all their goods to feed the poor," he says, poverty would continue so long as property in land continues. For what can the rich man do to improve the condition of labor? Nothing at all but to use his strength for the abolition of the great primary wrong that robs men of their birthright.

It seems a significant link that the response to Pilate, "What is truth?" is reflected in the quotation from *Progress and Poverty* carved on the tombstone of Henry George: "The truth that I have tried to make clear will not find easy acceptance . . . But it will find friends—those who will toil for it; suffer for it; if need be die for it. This is the power of truth."

1. Mat. 6:33, 28
2. Mat. 19:16, 21
3. Mat. 6:11
4. Acts 4:36, 37
5. Acts 11:25, 26
6. Acts 13:4, 7, 12, 9, 43
7. II Thes. 3:10

From Sidney G. Evans comes an appeal for the Nagy for Assessor Committee, P.O. Box 721, San Diego, California 92112. John Nagy will campaign for the office of County Assessor. He is by profession a real estate appraiser and is known on the West Coast as a writer and speaker in his capacity as president of the Statewide Homeowners' Association. He promises that he will equalize assessments and have property assessed every year instead of every four, five or six years.