

In 1886, Henry George was running for Mayor of New York. One of his most effective supporters in that campaign was Father Edward McGlynn, the beloved Pastor of St. Stephen's parish. McGlynn's impassioned speeches on behalf of the single tax ran him afoul of his superior, Archbishop Corrigan — and he was called to Rome to answer charges of heresy for teaching against Catholic Doctrine. McGlynn refused to obey four summonses to appear before the Holy See, believing that the issue had already been decided against him.

This controversy surrounding the Church's Doctrine on the land question led to the famous encyclical of Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*. Therein, Leo avowed that the rich have a responsibility to provide for the poor, sharing their wealth through charity or social programs — but that private property in land was consistent with God's law. Henry George responded with his open letter to the Pope on The Condition of Labor, saying "Charity must be built on justice," and therefore the rent of land must be publicly collected. After this, in 1892, Dr. McGlynn was called to state his views, and he wrote a doctrinal statement that still stands as one of the most eloquent short statements of the Georgist philosophy ever written. This was examined by the Vatican, and judged not to be heretical — and Rev. McGlynn was reinstated to the priesthood.

It has long been held that the author of this letter, Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore, supported Rev. McGlynn (and, by association, Henry George) in their struggles against the Archdiocese of New York. Recently, this letter has been found by Georgist scholar Ken Wenzel in the records of the Archdiocese of Baltimore. It appeared to have been written originally in English, and then translated into French. Dr. Wenzel explains that Catholicism in the United States at the time was still considered a "Mission Church," and that therefore the question of US church doctrine was still under the direction of Cardinal Simeoni's Holy Congregation of the Propaganda. Wenzel's initial research into this issue suggests, he says, that while Gibbons supported free speech (and thus was against an official condemnation of George's works), he was not friendly to the Single Tax or other labor movements. But, he cautions, more research is needed to settle the question. On its face, the letter's message is ambiguous. Was Gibbons secretly an enemy of George and McGlynn, writing in French to further disguise his true position? Or was he actually a supporter, craftily urging the Holy See not to condemn George's works in order to strengthen the growing movement on their behalf in the United States? - L.D.

Eminence: I have had already the honor of presenting to your Eminence my views on the social question which agitates America, especially regarding their relations with the Knights of Labor. But recently another form of social discussion has developed connected with the doctrines of Mr. Henry George, an American writer identified with the working classes. And since my arrival at Rome I have heard discussion of the idea that the writings of Henry George would be placed on the Index. After having meditated well on the subject, I believe it is my duty to submit to your Eminence the reasons why I must point out that a formal condemnation of Henry George's books would be neither opportune nor useful.

1. Henry George is by no means the inventor of the theory that he maintains respecting the right of property to the land. In his major book, *Progress and Poverty*, he precisely cites the teachings of Herbert Spencer and John Stuart Mill, two of the principal writers of England. And in the English periodical the *Contempo-*

The Question of Henry George's Writings

A letter from John Cardinal Gibbons, Archbishop of Baltimore, To His Eminence Cardinal Simeoni Prefect of the Holy Congregation of the Propaganda

Translation by Dr. Ken Wenzel

See will attack the works of a humble American artisan, in lieu of attacking his great masters. And if there are some who think that it will therefore be the duty of the Holy See to pronounce a judgement on Spencer and Mill, perhaps it would be prudent beforehand to consult their Eminences Cardinals Manning and Newman on the expediency of such an action.

2. It is proper to remark that Henry George's theory differs from that which is ordinarily called communism or socialism. Because, as Father Valentin Steccamelia has displayed it very well in his work on communism, published by the press of the [College of the] Propaganda in 1882, that the latter involves "the abolition of private property and the collectivization of all property into the hands of the state." But, whoever has read Henry George's books

has to recognize that he does not teach nor wish that at all. On the contrary, he upholds absolute property of all the fruits of human energy and work, even if they have been increased to great riches acquired either by work or by heredity. It is only regarding the land itself that he would like to limit the individual's property by an extension of the

supremum dominum [supreme domain] of the state and respecting this he has expressly said that by no means would he dispossess the actual owners, but that our system of taxation would simply change so that the taxes would come from the land and not from the fruits of human labor. One therefore sees that in the practical form in which the controversy presents itself to the American public, it is simply a question affecting governmental power over the individual possession of the land. And besides this, there is the following to note:

a) Whoever closely studies the question of the relation of the state to the right of the possession of land, as it has been treated by Father Steccamelia and by other Catholic writers on how taxation laws have been regulated and of the support for the poor in several countries, and especially in England, can scarcely fail to understand that it is a very complex question, subject to a great deal of diverse circumstances of time and place and they have not as yet been resolved by a decisive decision.

b) The question is already before the American public as a political problem and in an arena of such practice it will soon discover its termination.

c) Because Mr. George himself recognizes that it is solely the legislative power of a country which could operate such an arrangement of affairs: and it is quite sure that there will never be a congress nor a legislature which would vote a change of such profound social relations, nor would a president approve of it.

d) In a country like ours, which is not at all a country of doctrinaires and visionaries, speculative theory would not be dangerous, nor would live a long time after its practical application will have been rejected; and one could allow it, in complete surety, to die by itself.

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3. Certain recent events in our country have caused a very profound and very extensive popular excitement having close relations with this question. Because your Eminence understands better than myself how much it is necessary that we take care not only to speak the truth, but also to carefully choose the time and the circumstances of saying it, so that our action will produce salutary results and not disastrous ones. It appears therefore evident that even if there had been certainly cause for a condemnation, this would not now be the time to express it.

4. Finally, it could be prudent here that to apply the moral principle which counsels not to express a judgment whose consequences would probably be contrary rather than favorable towards the proposed laudable purpose. Because I maintain it for certain that such would be the result of a condemnation of Mr. George's works. This would give them a popular importance that they would never have otherwise had and excites an appetite for curiosity which would make them sell in thousands of copies, and which would then immensely extend their influence which the condemnation would seek to restrain and prevent.

Another word, with a practical people like the Americans, in whose nature bizarre and impractical ideas soon find their grave, it seems to me that prudence suggests allowing the absurdities and falsities to die by themselves, and not to run the risk of giving them an importance, and an artificial life and force by the intervention of the Church tribunals. *Rome, February 25, 1887*