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The Meaning of *Rerum Novarum* for Western Europe Today*

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Introduction

By its history and context, *Rerum Novarum* was first an encyclical to the West but Europe in particular. The social question in general and for workers in particular had shaken Western Europe since the late eighteenth century. Before Leo XIII, Cardinal Manning in Manchester, Cardinal Bonald in Lyon (for the United States, one should cite also Cardinal Gibbons), and Bishop Ketteler in Mainz judged "critically the economic structures responsible for proletarianization."[1] The great presence of Bishop Ketteler played a special role in the genesis of the encyclical. He inspired the Catholic conscience, including the masters of French social Catholicism, such as René de La Tour du Pin, Albert de Mun, and Léon Harmel who led a pilgrimage of thousands of workers to meet Leo XIII. The encyclical appeared at the end of a long century of misery and the exploitation of workers that was especially appalling for children. It was time for the Church to speak.

Has Western Europe changed? The context of *Rerum Novarum* is that of great European development completely focused on the economy and on trade. The encyclical was published at the time when the railway had just crossed the Alps; at that moment, all major European cities were connected by train and telegraph. Europe was triumphant: its merchant fleets conquered new colonies, and two years before *Rerum Novarum*, Eiffel erected in the Paris sky a steel tower 300 meters high. Leo XIII admitted that there were "enormous fortunes," but he immediately added that it is "of some few individuals" and accompanied by the "utter poverty of the masses" (*RN*, 1).[2]

Although the nature of its economy has evolved, Europe today is still dominated by economism. Key transitions have taken place, beginning with progressive industrialization and changes to the service industry—the so-called tertiary sector. However, agriculture, while remaining a major economic sector, employs fewer workers. The middle class has expanded. Above all, consumption has been "democratized," giving even the most modest homes some entertainment, including television, internet, and Anglo-American mass culture. Economic progress over time is undisputed. The material standard of living has risen; life expectancy has increased. With the breakup of the traditional family, new solitudes have isolated individuals who now are faced with a "wall of indifference." The rejection of fragility and precariousness in our time has been denounced by Pope Francis as the "culture of waste." Existential peripheries have come into view. This double observation leads us to ask certain questions: Since the nineteenth century, does Western Europe have another hope for or understanding of life to offer than simply consumption and trade development? Do we care more about other humans now than in the time of Leo XIII?

Rerum Novarum primarily let the voice of the gospel be heard in the social realm and gave "citizenship status" to the Church "amid the changing realities of public life."[3] In this sense, its meaning goes beyond any geographical and temporal context. The meaning of *Rerum Novarum* emerges within a comprehensive vision developed by Leo XIII in several previous encyclicals: *Diuturnum illud* (June 29, 1881) explained the foundations of political authority; *Immortale Dei* (November 1, 1885) sought an organic cooperation between the Church and political society; and *Libertas* (June 20, 1888) reminded readers of the constitutive link of human liberty with truth. "The theory undergirding *Rerum Novarum* is that of the law of nature and natural law.… The law of nature is the inclusion in every human conscience of God's mark, a mark that includes a call to do good and the knowledge of universal moral principles,"[4] which Leo XIII wanted to apply in social matters. Only a few years ago, under the influence of France in particular, the European Union refused any reference to "Christian roots" in its founding documents. It also insisted on denying any natural law by continuing to promote abortion, thus undermining its legislation on the structure of the family. With euthanasia, this society tries to hide murder under the guise of compassion with financial motivation (the high cost of care). This is what the Holy Father repeatedly denounced when he spoke of the "culture of waste." It is therefore evident that the principles of *Rerum Novarum* remain current in the context of contemporary Western Europe. *Rerum Novarum* identifies a moral ill, rejects false remedies, and provides guidelines for all those involved in social issues. This will be the outline for our study.

Are There Still Ills to Condemn in the Economic and Social Situation of Europe Today?

The Ill Condemned by Leo XIII

Leo XIII condemns an ill in the first sections of the document (*RN*, 1–3) and in the conclusion of the encyclical, identifying it by using Augustinian accents; for instance, a "worldly pride and immoderate love of self" (*RN*, 63). At the root of this ill, the pope finds an individualism nurtured by the extinction of all religious sentiment. While it is true that *Rerum Novarum* rejects socialism as a false remedy, the ill to be cured was actually caused by liberalism. The misery of the working class is caused by individualism and egoism, which themselves have at root the separation that liberalism created between reason and revelation (cf. *Libertas*). Christian charity, "always ready to sacrifice itself for others' sake," is the remedy against this evil (*RN*, 63). It is the rejection of religious principles that led to the disregard of mutual obligations (*RN*, 19–20). For example, the pope stated that Christianity should reject an employer who would "tax his workers beyond their strength, or employ them in work unsuited to their sex and age" (*RN*, 20).

Among others, Henri de Lubac considered that the influence of Marx and Nietzsche was due also to the fault of Christians: "Faced with a new world that was heading in new directions, looking at a social body that had developed hideous wounds, we saw in Christianity—despite many admirable exceptions—neither the reactions nor the developments that we were entitled to expect of it."[5] In this connection, and in agreement with Joseph Ratzinger, it is necessary to agree with Karl Marx and recognize that "the ideological constitution of an era is also a reflection of its economic and social structure."[6] Leo XIII's diagnosis of Western Europe in his time precisely articulates these two points: "Public institutions and the laws set aside the ancient religion. Hence, by degrees it has come to pass that working men have been surrendered, isolated and helpless, to the hardheartedness of employers and the greed of unchecked competition. The mischief has been increased by rapacious usury" (*RN* 3). Is this still the case today?

The Ills of Western Europe Today

Economically, it might seem out of place to talk about poverty in Western Europe. The European Union (EU) accounts for about 25 percent of GDP and 20 percent of world trade, but only 7 percent of the world population. However, it is estimated that almost a quarter of the European population approach a level of poverty or social exclusion (with incomes below 60 percent of the median income)—9 percent live in severe poverty. There are four to five million homeless

people in Europe. Europe is neighbor to countries at war in which poverty reaches even higher levels. Although some reasons might justify the reaction of European governments dealing with the influx of refugees who drown by the thousands in the sea the Romans called *Mare Nostrum*, Europe could in the near future look more like a bunker or rather a locked safe. It is no longer able to welcome the stranger. Difficulties in welcoming the poor from without simply illustrate its refusal to care for the smallest and poorest of its own children (contraception, abortion, euthanasia). In a recent interview by several French-language individuals near to the social Christianity movement, the pope said that Europe, lacking children, risked "becoming an empty place."[7] He extensively developed the theme of "grandmother Europe" in his speech to the European Parliament. He emphasized the contrast of an aging continent that no longer believed in a future with the continents around it overflowing in youth but marked by poverty and shaken by war.

It is on the level of morality that the misery of Western Europe is the most flagrant. In a little book called *A Turning Point for Europe?* Joseph Ratzinger identifies two symptoms of the abandonment of moral principles in Europe: drugs and terrorism.[8] On terrorism, it is good to remember that those involved in the recent attacks in France are young and French. They were not born in what is called Jihadism and they have not always come from disadvantaged backgrounds.[9] Drugs, meanwhile, never cease to reach more young consumers. According to a major 2014 survey of seventeen-year-olds in France, 49.5 percent of boys and 45.8 percent of girls had used cannabis at least once in their lives. This is a net increase of more than five points from 2011. There were also nearly 10 percent of seventeen-year-olds who regularly used cannabis, nearly 4 percent used ecstasy, and 3 percent cocaine. Why do so many young Europeans lack reasons to live and to hope? Leo XIII said in *Sapientiae Christianae* (January 10, 1890), just before *Rerum Novarum*—and his claim underlies the analysis of *Rerum Novarum* on the corruption of morals—that "all that is gained for the well-being of the body seems to be lost for that of the soul."[10]

In general, we can retain from *Rerum Novarum* the economic and social discussions on the relationship between capital and labor, fair wages, and trade unionism. As recalled by John Paul II, the points emphasized by Leo XIII "are illuminated by a healthy conception of private property, labor, development, the nature of the state and, above all, of man himself" (*CA*, 11). The basis of the encyclical is anthropological. This appears in the relationship between work and its importance for domestic life. The pope generally upholds a vision of human beings that seeks to prevent their commodification. The Western Europe of Leo XIII was that of human exploitation. This abuse has not disappeared. Not so

long ago, a well-known French businessman and media owner said: "renting a woman's womb to make a baby or renting her arms to work in a factory, what's the difference?" But Western Europe today has also become, in the words of Joseph Ratzinger, a place of the *abolition* of man.[11] In both cases, it is a materialistic view that prevails, causing human beings to be enslaved to the economy by technical processes. The findings of John Paul II in Brazil in 1980, updating the social doctrine on the question of the treatment of the worker, in line with *Rerum Novarum*, is still true for us today: "Often an exclusivist economic logic, brought down further by a heavy materialism, has taken over all spheres of life by compromising the quality of life, threatening families, and destroying respect for the human person."[12]

In *Laudato Si'*, Francis extends this reflection: "The economy accepts every advance in technology with a view to profit, without concern for its potentially negative impact on human beings. Finance overwhelms the real economy"[13] (*LS*, 109). "The culture of waste is becoming a common mentality that infects everyone."[14] Consumerism creates a true "industry of destruction," in which we throw all things out that we do not use. In this productivist system, the person herself is evaluated in terms of her usefulness, her performance. She is treated like a commodity. Selfish lifestyles and an excessive consumer mentality have led to this "globalization of indifference" and the "culture of waste," both far removed from the "care of fragility."

This dehumanizing existence is also at work politically. The growth of information and communications technology has been accompanied by an intrusive and individualized control of the masses and atomization of individuals against the state and big business. Thus driven by the ideal of efficiency, the democratic state becomes the technocratic state. Technocracy is the omnipotence of an administration that holds political control, rid of the interference of intermediate bodies, and fortified by a technical expertise that makes it omniscient and omnipresent. This ideal of effectiveness based on truth mixed with technological sciences, is identified concretely with a powerful and bloated civil service that is maintained by the weakening of the political class, the disintegration of the constitutional mechanisms of political responsibility, and—a posthumous victory for Marx—an alienation from the state. This political renunciation, this passage from "government" to "governance" encourages bureaucratic structures to engage in an increasingly picky interventionism in all areas of daily life. Even as the almost magical belief in the omnipotence of the law declines—a belief inherited from Jacobinism and the philosophy of Rousseau—regulation is increasingly unyielding. In response, the citizen-individual is deprived of old solidarities that used to protect him: this is always the case of the family, as we

have already mentioned. But here Leo XIII adds: "The ancient workingmen's guilds were abolished in the last century, and no other protective organization took their place" (*RN*, 3).

The integral ecology is not only based on the recognition of limits but especially on the recognition of social links, on links between past and future generations, on solidarity among peoples, on close relationships, and on proximity. We need to build on our heritage and those around us to overcome the challenges of our time.

Rejected Remedies

Is Leo XIII's Rejection of Socialism Still Relevant in Western Europe?

Leo XIII rejects socialism as contrary to the natural right of property (*RN*, 4–13). His argument is based especially on the link between ownership and the needs of family life (*RN*, 12). In the rejection of collective ownership advocated by the socialists of his time, he sees a response to the arbitrary intrusion of civil power into "the family home" (*RN*, 12). The pope also denounced socialist egalitarianism as a dangerous myth because inequality need not be feared when understood in terms of complementarity (*RN*, 14). There are two key parts of Leo XIII's critique of socialism: the hatred spread by the class struggle and the disruption of social structures.

In Western Europe today, the state has not only penetrated the sanctuary of the family but also that of every conscience. Public education is at the service of atheism and the ideologies of our day that destroy human nature. One could cite the ideologies of gender but also worldwide Malthusianism that claims to be ecological but wants to limit the reproduction of the poorest populations. The philosopher Luc Ferry, in the *New Ecological Order*, proposed a cogent analysis of environmental currents, which—especially for utilitarian ecology and deep ecology—are carriers of totalitarianism that deny human dignity. Nothing escapes the jurisdiction and control of public power. Except for a privileged few, all people are held in a forced equality and faced with an inhuman bureaucracy that becomes a way of operation not only of public administrations but also of companies.

Leo XIII also reveals a process of secularization at work when he notes that "public institutions and the laws set aside the ancient religion" (*RN*, 3). This process is palpable at least since the Protestant Reformation. It sprouted intellectually during the Enlightenment and burst out violently onto the political scene from the French Revolution. This process is also linked to the development of

materialistic ideologies. This secularization pointed out by Leo XIII is even less separable from the law of separation of church and state in 1905, only a short time after *Rerum Novarum*. This secular power persists today vigorously as secularism that tends to deny any form of religious expression in public space. Thus, religious freedom is now a daily battle that forces believers to fight for the benevolence of authorities. Some sectors of society are totally impervious to any kind of legitimizing of religion, rejecting it as a private superstition and individual. In particular, the political world remains totally closed to all religious expression that is then relegated to the depths of conscience. In terms of education, it seems that the Catholic Church has lost much ground over several decades with a strong secularization of education under a contract, which is subject to the curriculum of the National Ministry of Education.

> A spirituality which forgets God as all-powerful and Creator is not acceptable. This is how we end up worshipping earthly powers, or ourselves usurping the place of God, even to the point of claiming an unlimited right to trample his creation underfoot. The best way to restore men and women to their rightful place, putting an end to their claim to absolute dominion over the earth, is to speak once more of the figure of a Father who creates and who alone owns the world. Otherwise, human beings will always try to impose their own laws and interests on reality. (*LS*, 75)

Are we certain that Europe has managed to free itself from all forms of socialism that Leo XIII rejected by his denunciation?

The Ideology of Economic Liberalization: From One Bondage to Another?

"The true worth and nobility of man lie in his moral qualities, that is, in virtue" (*RN*, 24). The economism into which Western Europe continues to sink denies this nobility. It traps human beings in the material by cutting off all transcendence. Its most glaring shift is the bondage of man to technology. Pope Francis has described this phenomenon in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*: "We have to accept that technological products are not neutral, for they create a framework which ends up conditioning lifestyles and shaping social possibilities along the lines dictated by the interests of certain powerful groups" (*LS*, 107). Increasingly, it is possible to forget what we ought to do. Behind every technical advance, there is a new economic market. Thus grows the "contemporary technological mindset" that empties human beings of their interiority and "meaning and our awareness of the human soul's ontological depths."[15] By reducing the human horizon to

that of a material good, it is the human herself that is reduced to the rank of an object that can be disposed of. We cannot know how far this movement will lead us if the cry of alarm of all pontiffs since Leo XIII is not heard. In the wake of bioethical issues related to sexuality and reproduction, transhumanism looks particularly powerful: a recent paper on legal issues in robotics, supported by the European Commission, states: "Machines cannot and should not, at least for the moment, have the legal status of humans."[16]

Closed in on itself, a society deprived of transcendence has no external reference apart from its own functioning. From what height, from what place can we claim to critically engage it if no one is in a position outside of it? Who will be able to stop the runaway train of excessive technocratization from within the world? We are no longer taking care of our garden but exploiting without mercy. We have control of being itself by technology, following the analysis of Heidegger. Besides, inanimate matter is not the only thing available and subject to technique. Living things also enter into the dance of general manipulability. Under the scalpel of biotechnology, the human body also is manipulated; it is a plastic object. Then comes the reign of the Heideggerian *Gestell*, extended to the entire human.

The Anthropological Revolutions of the West: Contemporary Remedies for the Ills of the Past?

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries were marked by several major anthropological revolutions that, in turn, fed the illusion of having found an earth-based cure for the ills of Western society, one that was purely material and human. We must first go back further in time to the Copernican revolution that removed the earth from the center of the universe. Then we come to the Darwinian revolution that makes human beings the mere product of evolution. We follow with the Freudian revolution that teaches that humans are no longer masters and rulers of their own thoughts, that they are dominated by the unconscious. Finally, the latest is the technological revolution. With the death of the great utopias of the twentieth century, the technological successor to the ideology, feeding the idea that machines will do better than humans, introduces three specific temptations: (1) the illusion of omnipotence that implies permanence, the denunciation of any limit and of any obstruction; (2) the illusion of perfectionism that envisions a world without fault and the dismissal of fragility; and (3) the illusion of differentiation and atomization that encapsulates a refusal of otherness.

These temptations must be rejected. Under the guise of promoting an "augmented" and "super" human being, the cult of technology wants to bring us to

the "best of all possible worlds" (cf. Aldous Huxley), which in fact cannot exist without amputating humans, and degrading the more fragile among us. Pope Francis regularly denounces this scourge by calling it the culture of waste that is led by a bondage to consumption and a way of thinking that is purely financial.

The expression "human ecology" means on the one hand the interactions of a person with her environment, both natural and social, and on the other hand, a person's approach (and his vulnerability) to a society that views the person as an "ecosystem" to protect. The person is weakened when practices, systems, and laws use her as a "variable" they can adjust; that is to say they instrumentalize her for the achievement of financial or material goals instead of placing her at the heart of all decisions and activities.

What Role Does Each Participant Play?

Companies

Leo XIII spoke of employers. His analysis on the common use of resources and on fair wages was clarified by Pius XI in *Quadragesimo Anno* (May 15, 1931). The definition of fair wages must reflect the needs of the worker and his family, the condition of the company, and the common good. Companies are thus encouraged to exercise social responsibility. What we are seeing in Europe today is not going in that direction. Passing over the Volkswagen scandal, about which its competitors have stayed quiet, we have found that the dominant economic logic most often pushes companies to seek only financial profitability. This financial logic overcomes sometimes even industrial logic. The principles of Leo XIII and Pius XI seem therefore so far away. Legality and market practices have replaced morality and concern for the good of everyone. I repeat: many salaries in Europe are not enough to support a family. The work of both parents has become a necessity, accompanied by the well-known consequences on the size of families and the education of children.

Is the company able to ensure favorable working conditions for the development of families and individuals? The logic of international competition is ruthless. Of what common good can businesses take charge? Leo XIII could not foresee the consequences of economic globalization. Here is the analysis of Benedict XVI:

> Today's international economic scene, marked by grave deviations and failures, requires a *profoundly new way of understanding business enterprise*.… [O]ne of the greatest risks for businesses is that they are almost exclusively answerable to their investors, thereby limiting their social value.… [I]t is

> becoming increasingly rare for business enterprises to be in the hands of a stable director who feels responsible for the long term, not just the short term, for the life and results of his company, and it is becoming increasingly rare for businesses to depend on a single territory. Moreover, the so-called outsourcing of production can weaken the company's sense of responsibility towards the stakeholders—namely the workers, the suppliers, the consumers, the natural environment and broader society. (*CV*, 40)

Beyond the problems that financial and commercial globalization poses to businesses, Leo XIII nevertheless elucidates in *Rerum Novarum* that fair compensation for private initiative is the necessary spark for a dynamic economy to produce wealth and create useful jobs to the greatest number, "the sources of wealth themselves would run dry, for no one would have any interest in exerting his talents or his industry" (*RN*, 15). The church tends to promote private initiative and the entrepreneurial spirit of individuals when they have a morally acceptable management of their businesses. A good way to achieve this may be to conform their business models to the structures of the family to bring into management protections and substantial consideration of family ties. Yet, this model, on the grounds that it would go against the principles of equality, is thwarted by legislation hostile to family principles in the economic sector that, far from conforming to family structures, requires, for example, very high inheritance taxes. Philosophically, the model of the family business is rejected not only by supporters of egalitarianism but also by the ideologies of gender theory, supportive of either the nondifferentiation of individuals or the aggressive feminism that rejects "paternalism."

The State

Leo XIII wanted the state to respect the freedom and autonomy of the human person and at the same time exercise its mission in the service of all, especially for the defense of workers. Can the state still assume such a responsibility? The identity of public authority is undoubtedly one of the most important challenges for Western Europe today. On the one hand, several factors enshrine the role of the state. The share of compulsory levies in the European economy represents around 40 percent of GDP. Moreover, in the name of public health, state jurisdiction extends to all areas of life and human activity, even to the most intimate parts of life. Furthermore, and paradoxically, the "hypersubjectivity or the Empire of Me" feeds "politicization," encouraging "public recognition of claims to infinity."[17] On the other side, the state's room to maneuver seems to have been reduced gradually. Public debt and the financing of its bureaucracy

limit its financial capabilities. Bureaucracy also tends to extend its power, taking advantage of the decline of political authority. Technocracy is grafted onto a bureaucracy characterized by regulatory intervention in all sectors of society that require advanced technical skills. It tends to get rid of intermediate bodies and takes advantage of the weakening of the political class. It replaces political debate—in the best sense—and anthropological order with the illusion of absolute scientific truth as their substitute. In his *Mémoirs d'espoir* (*Memoirs of Hope*), Charles de Gaulle noted this disenchantment with parliamentary debate in politics: "A kind of morose mechanization now governs meetings [of Parliament]." The political class becomes a professional class where electoral ambition clearly outweighs the common good, made difficult by the techno-scientific prism of public policy. The modern media regime only amplifies the problem. The question arises concretely: Can the state in Europe afford to be anything but a bondservant to the actors of free trade and global commerce?

Benedict XVI warned us to not too quickly proclaim the end of the state. The answer to the constraints that we have just mentioned is in a collaboration of states. This will only be effective, however, if the integral common good is the goal. Pope Francis said this clearly: "Politics must not be subject to the economy, nor should the economy be subject to the dictates of an efficiency-driven paradigm of technocracy" (*LS*, 189). The restoration of politics ultimately depends on the recognition of the place of God in the government of the City. This is the teaching of Leo XIII:

> If, then, a political government strives after external advantages only, and the achievement of a cultured and prosperous life; if, in administering public affairs, it is wont to put God aside, and show no solicitude for the upholding of moral law, it deflects woefully from its right course and from the injunctions of nature; nor should it be accounted as a society or a community of men, but only as the deceitful imitation or appearance of a society. (*SC*, 2)

The social question that Leo XIII answered in *Rerum Novarum* constituted one aspect of the disintegration of society. Western Europe today cannot escape this disintegration if the secularism of French origin continues to spread it. Pope Francis has recently called for a "healthy secularism" rid of the legacy of the Enlightenment.[18]

Professional Associations

Rerum Novarum allowed the birth of Christian trade unionism and the participation of Catholics in the labor movement. It is interesting that Leo XIII addressed the issue from the perspective of guilds, of which he mourns the loss, and from the freedom of association. His vision of society, of Thomistic inspiration, is organic. It assumes the principle that Pius XI would call the subsidiarity of any collective,[19] which *Rerum Novarum* already applied in the relations of the state and the family. Leo XIII contrasts the natural sociability of man to liberal individualism and the isolation of man faced with the ubiquitous socialist state.

Today, considering the European trade union movement, it is difficult to talk globally. However, especially from the standpoint of France, where the rate of unionization is less than 10 percent, one can speak of a failure. This failure is twofold. It primarily concerns trade unionism itself, with the exceptions of Germany and Scandinavia. Unionism faired badly through the period of institutionalization after the Second World War, the economic crisis, and also increasing individualism. It is accused of defending the vested interests of those who were already employed and to have abandoned the unemployed and the poor. The failures of unionism also relate to Christian trade unionism. It was the victim of some pastoral obstruction and of the influence of secularization and secularism in certain Catholic circles that were the most sensitive to the social question.

Church

Any analysis of *Rerum Novarum* is based on the certainty that the answer to the ills of the time would not come out of one or another technical solution but out of respect for natural law, that is to say, of human beings themselves as God created them, and of the recognition of God's place in society. Only openness to transcendence allows one to resist materialistic and consumerist absolutism. Charity alone can restore social relationships on the basis of friendship and solidarity and against individualism and selfishness. Charity removes the hatred preached by the socialist struggle of classes and corrects the egoism of liberal capitalism. It leads each person to recognize her duties to others—those of employers to their workers and of workers to their employers (*RN*, 20). That is why, as I have already mentioned, the main remedy for the evil that Leo XIII denounced is the "plenteous outpouring of charity" that is "always ready to sacrifice itself for others' sake" (*RN*, 63). Acknowledgement of a common Father spreads brotherly love by which all know "the blessings of nature and the gifts of grace belong to the whole human race in common" (*RN*, 25).

In a message at a recent conference of the *Pax Christi* movement held in Rome, Pope Francis wanted to reconsider the topic of mercy. "Political mercy," the center of reflections on the pacification of human relationships, should consider that peace is the most valuable asset of a society. The implementation of the kind of charity called for by Leo XIII comes to pass, for Pope Francis, by a concrete path to conversion: In order "to bring about true peace, it is necessary to bring people together concretely so as to reconcile peoples and groups with opposing ideological positions."[20] While social relationships tend to take forms that are increasingly confrontational, abusive, and in radical opposition, political mercy "is expressed in solidarity, which is the moral and social attitude that responds best to the awareness of the scourges of our time and the inter-dependence of life at its different levels."[21]

In the wake of *Rerum Novarum*, several encyclicals—some of which were mentioned above—have enabled the Church to refine its anthropological diagnosis. The last encyclical of Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, is a successful synthesis, centered on the concept of "integral ecology," which suggests that there is connection between the disruptions of the natural and social orders. The upheavals and troubles of nature, on the one hand, and social and economic injustice, on the other, are two complementary sides of the same global problem.

The Church, then, has a dual role. First, it must teach human beings in order to bring them to virtuous behavior. Society has its foundation in human nature. It is one of human nature's fundamental natural inclinations. Who does not see that the answer to all the challenges of our time is the reconstruction of the social bond from a religious point of view that makes us recognize that we are all brothers and sisters? That is why the announcement of the social doctrine of the Church is for Pope John Paul II one of the essential elements of the *new evangelization*.[22]

Second, the church must, according to *Rerum Novarum*, support underprivileged classes through charitable institutions (*RN*, 28). We must give great importance to this point where the consistency of the gospel message is worked out, and, consequently, so also is the ability of the Church to proclaim Christ in truth. In this regard, the pontificate of Francis has taken on a prophetic character. Yet, the charity of the Church should not just distribute goods and services or address the shortcomings of public support. The stakes are much higher than that. Otherwise the Church will sit in a counterculture that is miserably materialist and our society could legitimately think that it has nothing to learn concretely from the gospel. Pope Francis forcefully recalled in the first homily of his pontificate: "We can walk as much as we want, we can build many things, but if we do not profess Jesus Christ, things go wrong. We may become a charitable NGO, but not the Church, the Bride of the Lord."[23] The diaconate of the Church must help

to restore human relations above all, caring for the soul and at the same time caring for the body. At all times, the Church must fight against the reduction of human beings to material objects and, therefore, to the power of money. The Church can only do that by making bright the dignity of every person and the beauty each person receives in giving of oneself. The Church, the body of Christ of which the Holy Spirit is the soul, should not doubt its ability to promote human sociability but elevate it to a civilization of love. Only then will hope be given to the children of Western Europe today.

Conclusion

The Church continues to refine the diagnosis elaborated by Leo XIII. In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis emphasized that the ecological crisis has deeper roots than might be described in typical ecological discussions. Its main causes are spiritual, and its consequences cannot be separated from social injustices already identified by Leo XIII. Considering the ecological crisis "like the social and economic crisis" only from a technical and political angle leads back to a retreat into a pure immanentism. The wrong principles or missing ones simply maintain the evil that one seeks to avoid. This techno-scientific hubris does not only come from the intrinsic opportunities that flow from discoveries of technical science or the simple submission of humans to its logic; before becoming an idol of which humans kiss the feet, *Technique* established its reign in disregard for God, that is, in a practical atheism.

"We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature" (*LS*, 139). This integral ecology first requires recognition of limits. Human beings, forgetting their limits, transgress continually to go ever further in a technocratic fascination. All human ecology is based on the concept of limits. But ideologies such as libertarian liberalism, transhumanism, and antispeciesism completely blur all boundaries: boundaries between humans and machines, humans and animals, boundries of our material desires, boundaries between man and woman and between generations, boundaries between spaces—sacred and profane—boundaries that are geographical, and so on. The transgression of boundaries and the Promethean temptation are the ills that plague our Western society. The cause is a quest for excess, hubris that is paired with a profound existential malaise. Our postmodern Western society, relativistic and libertarian, rejects any limitation. Moral and religious relativism pervades our postmodern societies where major political and ideological utopias have collapsed, where the religious place has

been emptied by the loss of transcendence and interiority, where the consumerist individual has no other horizon but himself where he is glued to his own ego. Such relativism, stitched together with prefabricated thinking, inevitably makes the bed of fundamentalism.

To conclude, concerning the main significance of *Rerum Novarum* for Western Europe today, it is the conviction of Leo XIII that openness to God from society can eliminate its pain. The solutions to the most serious economic and social problems can only be found in restoring friendship and social solidarity. This restoration can itself come from faith in one Father exposed by Pope Francis in the encyclical *Lumen Fidei*:

> Absorbed and deepened in the family, faith becomes a light capable of illumining all our relationships in society. As an experience of the mercy of God the Father, it sets us on the path of brotherhood. Modernity sought to build a universal brotherhood based on equality, yet we gradually came to realize that this brotherhood, lacking a reference to a common Father as its ultimate foundation, cannot endure. We need to return to the true basis of brotherhood.[24]

Notes

* Translated by Jason Zuidema.

1. From the introduction to the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in *Discours social de l'Eglise catholique de Léon XIII à Benoît XVI*, ed. Jean-Yves Calvez (Montrouge: Bayard, 2009).

2. Leo XIII, encyclical letter *Rerum Novarum* (May 15, 2891), http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html. Hereafter, *RN*.

3. John Paul II, encyclical letter *Centesimus Annus* (May 1, 1991), 5, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html. Hereafter, *CA*.

4. Calvez, ed., *Discours social de l'Eglise catholique*, 24.

5. Henri de Lubac, "Exigences chrétiennes I. Deux témoins de la defection," in *Paradoxes* (Paris: Cerf, 2010), 358.

6. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Le sel de la terre: Entretiens avec Peter Seewald* (Paris: Flammarion/Cerf, 1997), 174.

7. "Conversation avec le pape," *La vie*, 3680, March 10–16, 2016, 16–19.

8. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *A Turning Point for Europe?* 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2010).

9. See Jean Birnbaum, *Un silence religieu: La gauche face au djihadisme* (Paris: Seuil, 2016).

10. Leo XIII, encyclical letter *Sapientiae Christianae* (January 10, 1890), 3, http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_10011890_sapientiae-christianae.html. Hereafter, *SC*.

11. Ratzinger, *Turning Point*, 25.

12. Jean Paul II, speech in Sao Paulo (July 3, 1980), as cited by Patrick de Laubier, *La pensée sociale de l'Eglise catholique* (Paris: Pierre Téqui, 2011), 180.

13. Francis, encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* (May 24, 2014), 107, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html. Hereafter, *LS*.

14. Francis, General Audience (June 5, 2013), World Day of the Environment.

15. Benedict XVI, encyclical letter *Caritas in Veritate* (June 29, 2009), 76, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html. Hereafter, *CV*.

16. Christophe Leroux and Robert Labruto, eds. "Suggestion for a Green Paper on Legal Issues in Robotics," (Draft), *euRobotics: The European Robotics Coordination Action*, (December 31, 2012): 61.

17. Emmanuel Perrier, OP, "L'Eglise et le monde, ou la vie théologale entre culture et contre-culture," *Nova et Vetera* 88, no. 1 (2013): 69–89.

18. "Conversation avec le pape."

19. Pius XI, encyclical letter *Quadragesimo Anno* (May 15, 1931), 88.

20. Pope Francis, "Message to Peacebuilding Conference," (April 11, 2016), http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/04/11/pope_francis_message_to_peacebuilding_conference/1221968.

21. Pope Francis, "Message to Peacebuilding Conference."

22. *Compendium on the Social Doctrine of the Church* (May 26, 2006), 523, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html.

23. Pope Francis, homily "Missa pro ecclesia" with the cardinal electors (March 14, 2013), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130314_omelia-cardinali.html.

24. Pope Francis, encyclical letter *Lumen Fidei* (June 29, 2013), 54, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20130629_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html.