

Rev. Derek Fairman

11th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Recently, on May 15, 2026, the Church celebrated the 135th anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*. It literally means, *Of New Things*, but it is usually called *On Capital and Labor*, or *On the Condition of Labor*. This encyclical was a monumental encyclical that shaped economic and social life in western countries.

To give a bit of background to the encyclical, a brief history of capitalism is needed. After the collapse of the Roman Empire in Europe, feudalism reigned. The feudalist system concentrated land ownership in the nobility, and since the economy was based almost entirely on the land, the nobility controlled the economy.

The Crusades opened up trading routes, and this gave rise to the merchant class, which in turn gave rise to the middle class. This rise of the middle class broke the monopoly which the nobility had on wealth and education, and feudalism collapsed. Capitalism took its place, with the emphasis on private ownership, including the land. Initially, the Church was somewhat wary of capitalism, because it threatened the monarchies which had helped the Church establish itself in Europe. In time, though, the Church would defend the private ownership of land and property.

Pope Leo XIII argued in favor of private property rights (11). The Israelites owned property. When King Ahab wanted Naboth the Jezreelite's vineyard, he did not claim it was his because he was king. He offered Naboth money for it, or a better vineyard. Naboth refused, and King Ahab went away angry (1 Kings 21:1-4). Also, the commandment, "Thou shalt not steal," implies that people can own property, as several popes have pointed out. How can stealing exist, if people cannot own things? How can one have an inheritance without private property?

Pope Leo XIII explained that when someone engages in labor, the point is to obtain property, to own and to use as the person sees fit. Since human beings must prepare for the future, ownership of goods ensures that human beings can be prepared for the future. Those who labor to make the fruits of the earth viable for human beings have the right to remuneration for their labor (10).

Pope Leo XIII saw that socialism was attempting to set things right, and there were legitimate problems with capitalist societies, but taking private ownership away was wrong. Socialism takes away the ability of laborers to safeguard their future, and it also goes against the principle of subsidiarity. Subsidiarity means that the issues that are "local" should be handled

“locally,” rather than subsumed by a higher authority. In this case, Pope Leo XIII had in mind the needs for laborers to provide for the next generations. “There is no need to bring in the State. Man precedes the State, and possesses, prior to the formation of any State, the right of providing for the substance of his body” (7). Pope Leo was concerned about socialism setting class against class, which went against the common good (15, 19).

Granted, Pope Leo XIII admitted, there are times when assistance from above is needed, such as when a family in need of food can receive it from a higher authority such as the State, but these are the exceptions rather than the rule. Pope Leo XIII also warned of the wrongness of the idea that the State would take the place of the father in the home (14). His statements about socialism are summed up this way:

Hence, it is clear that the main tenet of socialism, community of goods, must be utterly rejected, since it only injures those whom it would seem meant to benefit, is directly contrary to the natural rights of mankind, and would introduce confusion and disorder into the commonweal. The first and most fundamental principle, therefore, if one would undertake to alleviate the condition of the masses, must be the inviolability of private property (15).

In the Gospel reading, we hear that the Lord Jesus was concerned about the crowds, who were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd. The Lord told the Apostles: “As you go, make this proclamation: ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, drive out demons. Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give.” The sheep who were troubled and abandoned would receive consolation by the Lord’s work of curing those in need and driving out demons. People would see that the Lord cared about them, and that the Kingdom of Heaven was alive and well.

The laborers of the late 19th century were not quite the lost sheep of the house of Israel of which the Lord spoke, but they did face obstacles in their work, with seemingly no one to advocate for them. Speaking of the need for a greater harmony between workers and employers, Pope Leo XIII wrote: “In regard to the Church, her cooperation will never be found lacking, be the time or the occasion what it may; [...] Let this be carefully taken to heart by those whose office it is to safeguard the public welfare (63).” The Church continues to care for those who work, those who feel lost, in any way. As we approach the altar, we pray for those who feel lost, that through the Church, they know the kindness and compassion of the Good Shepherd.