

## Catholic Social Ministry Mtg Kicks Off

Michael Sean Winters | Feb. 14, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday, Cardinal Peter Turkson, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, kicked off the annual Catholic Social Ministry Gathering here in Washington. The cardinal spoke about the significance of *Rerum Novarum*, the first papal encyclical to explicitly discuss social justice issues, and how that encyclical remains relevant. I do not yet have a copy of the cardinal's remarks, so I will not comment upon them, but driving back home from his speech, the thought occurred that the Church's social teaching has been remarkably consistent through the years. And such years.

In 1891, the year Pope Leo XIII issued *Rerum Novarum*, papal concerns about socialism were theoretical concerns. There was not, as yet, any country governed by a socialistic government. But, even at the theoretical level, Leo understood that the Church's traditional defense of the right to private property would be a bulwark against the encroachments of the state.

On the other hand, already the plight of the average worker cried to heaven for justice and, quite remarkably, the Pope turned his ear to those cries. He endorsed the right of workers to organize, this at a time when many, many people thought unions were a first step towards socialism, rather than, as Leo grasped, an impediment to socialism. More fundamentally, Leo understood that the human dignity of workers demanded that they have some means of resisting the omnipresent power of capital. 1891 was the height of the Gilded Age, when unchecked robber barons accumulated vast treasuries of wealth, built great mansions at Newport and on Fifth Avenue, and generally tried to repress the working classes. It would have been easier for Leo to side with the powerful. He did no such thing.

On the fortieth anniversary of *Rerum*, Pope Pius XI issued his encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, carrying forward many of Leo's ideas. The times had changed enormously. Communists had been in power in Russia for a dozen years. Fascists had been in control of Italy since 1922. The world was in the second year of a great Depression. Pius developed the idea of subsidiarity, the idea that social problems are best resolved at the most human level, closest to the individual, and that larger social actors, such as the state, should only intervene when necessary, to achieve an important social good that the family, or the village, or the region could not achieve. Parts of *Quadragesimo* seem very dated: Pius thought that restoring the medieval guild system might serve as an antidote to modern capitalism. But, like Leo, Pius insisted that neither laissez-faire capitalism nor socialism, nor any model of social organization that placed economics at its heart could ever do justice to the demands of human dignity.

Popes John XXIII and Paul VI, as well as the Fathers of Vatican II, further developed the Church's social teaching. The Euro-centrism of earlier papal texts was lessened, and issues of development became prominent. In the wake of the calamity of World War II and the advent of nuclear weapons, there is a greater linkage between the machinery of war and the enslavement of mankind. There was an optimism in the texts of those two popes, and in *Gaudium et Spes*, that seems a little quaint, an optimism similar to that which characterized some of the best hopes for the United Nations at its founding. But, still, there was a balanced understanding that, for all their differences, laissez-faire capitalism and communism share a common reductionism, a diminishment of

human dignity, treating man as a *homo economicus*, and not as a child of God. Pope John Paul II carried this conviction forward, with different emphases, in his three social encyclicals.

Pope Benedict's *Caritas in Veritate* builds upon the works of his predecessors, although he is yet more explicit about the way Catholic social teaching emerges not only from an assessment of the signs of the times, nor from traditional notions about social justice found in the Church's social teaching. Benedict's genius is to show how our views of society are rooted in our ideas of Christian anthropology which, in turn, are rooted in our most central dogmatic claims about God. In short, the Church's commitment to, and understanding of, social issues is rooted in our beliefs about the Trinity. Remember that point the next time someone champions cutting social programs by noting that we can disagree prudentially within the Church about "non-essentials." If *Caritas in Veritate* teaches anything, it is that there is no such thing as a "non-essential."

This is our tradition. 120 years from *Rerum* to Cardinal Turkson's speech. It is not only a proud tradition, it has already outlived most communist countries. And, apart from the Tea Party brigade and Michael Novak, does anyone still worship at the laissez-faire altar that the robber barons erected? What Leo started has changed at the margins but his fundamental insights have been retained, resulting in a remarkably consistent teaching tradition. That teaching is rooted, it seems to me, in the words of the Master Himself: "The Law is made for man, not man for the Law." Economic laws, of the market or the dictatorship of the proletariat, must serve mankind, not the other way round.

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