NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Rerum Novarum still speaks to globalized economy

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| May. 6, 2011

John Sweeney, president emeritus of the AFL-CIO

WASHINGTON ? The social challenges of *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XIII?s 1891 encyclical letter on social justice and the condition of labor, remain as relevant today as they were 120 years ago, said a top Vatican official and prominent U.S. labor leader.

John Sweeney, president emeritus of the AFL-CIO, and African-born Cardinal Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson, president of the Vatican?s Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, were the keynote speakers at a May 2-3 conference at the Catholic University of America in Washington addressing the current implications of Pope Leo?s landmark encyclical on Catholic social teaching.

Sweeney and Turkson, as well as other conference speakers, highlighted the current moral challenges that new forms of unbridled capitalism pose for Catholic social teaching since Pope Leo.

A common theme in their and other speakers? remarks was that the Social Darwinism of unbridled capitalism which characterized the economics of the 19th century industrial revolution ? and provoked Leo XIII?s landmark moral rebuke in *Rerum Novarum* ? has returned in the first decade of the 21st century in new forms in the globalization of markets and sophisticated profit maximization for the very rich in those economies.

Rerum Novarum ?changed the world,? said Stephen Schneck, director of Catholic University?s Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies, which sponsored the two-day conference.

?*Rerum Novarum* is the map? for assessing any modern nation?s social and political policies, he said.

Cardinal Turkson ? a multilingual Scripture scholar who completed his seminary studies in the United States and was archbishop of Cape Town, Ghana, before his Vatican appointment ? said May 3 that one key point in Pope Leo?s encyclical was ?the dignity of every human person.?

Another was the fundamental dignity and ?supernatural value? of work as a means by which every person has both a right and obligation to contribute to the advance of humankind, he said.

A third point of Pope Leo?s encyclical that he highlighted was the pontiff?s whole-hearted endorsement of labor unions, to which he said ?at the end of the 19th century there was ruthless opposition,? ? a position largely mirrored again today in the United States.

Turkson noted that while Pope Leo XIII strongly affirmed private property rights in *Rerum Novarum*, in opposition to socialist theories of the time that sought state ownership of all property as a means to redistribute wealth, Leo also ?affirmed with equal clarity? the subordination of private property to the common good. In other words, private property should serve not just the well-being of the owner, but the well-being of society, he said.

On the role of the state, Turkson said Pope Leo taught that government should not ?absorb? the rights of individuals or families or intrude on their activities consistent with the common good, but that does not remove the state?s ?obligation to care for the neediest.?

When it comes to the state?s role in defending the rights of individuals, Pope Leo said the poor deserve special attention ? a theme that Pope Paul VI reaffirmed on a global scale in his 1967 encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, Turkson said.

Sweeney said there are parallels today with the ?untrammeled capitalism? and ?human misery of the industrial revolution? in the late 19th century that Pope Leo addressed in *Rerum Novarum*.

Today, as then, economic systems brought an ?enormous transfer of wealth from those who have too little to those who already have too much,? he said.

?Today in America we have the widest wage and wealth gap of any industrial nation,? he said.

Bishop Stephen E. Blaire of Stockton, Calif., chairman of the U.S. bishops? Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, who along with Sweeney responded to Turkson?s talk May 3, said that ?many of today?s challenges? to social justice are similar to those that Pope Leo addressed 120 years ago.

In today?s budget battles on Capitol Hill ?the poor have no lobbyists with huge bank accounts to speak for them,? he said, and the only ones speaking on their behalf are the nation?s Catholic bishops and other religious leaders.

?Caring for the poor and promoting the rights of the workers? were at the heart of Pope Leo?s teaching in *Rerum Novarum*, he said, and those principles have been repeated in the teachings of subsequent popes and the Second Vatican Council.

New ways of collective bargaining may be required today, but Leo XIII?s call for the promotion of workers? associations ?must be honored today even more than in the past,? Blaire said.

Videos of the conference can be found on the Web site for the **Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies** [1].

An earlier version of this story and the text of Sweeny's speech is available here: **CUA conference focuses on workers' dignity** [2].

[Jerry Filteau is NCR Washington correspondent.]

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