

The Church and Social Reform

Our Catholic Heritage

The Church Speaks for the Working Class

By MSGR. JAMES F. CONNELLY

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Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903) was 67 years old when he succeeded to the chair of Peter and it would be his distinction to guide the Church to a remarkable recovery of respect and moral authority which it had not known in years. It was also his prerogative to accommodate the Church to the political and social conditions of his day without sacrificing any of its essential beliefs or moral teachings.

For the first time in the history of the Church, this pope would make extensive use of encyclicals (authoritative papal statements on faith and morals which are expressions of Catholic belief but which are not in themselves infallible). He wrote on the importance of Catholic family life; on human liberty; on the sanctity of

marriage; on Christian principles in the cultural, social, and political orders. Finally, he wrote an encyclical on labor, "Rerum Novarum" (1891), which committed the Church to social reforms.

To be sure, laymen, bishops and priests recognized early in the Industrial Revolution that the working-class question was not merely a matter of charity but of social justice. As early as 1852, four years after Karl Marx issued his Communist Manifesto, an Italian Catholic social movement began to form. In 1864, Pope Pius IX (1846-1878) had denounced socialism and economic liberalism. In France, Catholic Workers Organizations were formed in 1871. At the same time, German Catholics were advancing the idea of trade unions. In England, Cardinal Manning supported

the London dock-workers in their strike. In 1887 Cardinal Gibbons was backing the Knights of Labor, the earliest labor organization in the United States.

These initiatives motivated the Holy Father to issue his "Rerum Novarum," which condemned both socialism and the abuses of the capitalistic system as solutions to the labor problems, and proposed norms for a just relationship between capital and labor.

Leo XIII taught that employers, in justice, be guaranteed an equitable income from their investments. On the other hand, he taught that employees, in justice, be treated with human dignity. Workers must not have working conditions which dehumanize them, and they must have a just wage to support themselves and their fami-

lies in a decent manner. Further, the encyclical supported the right of workers to form unions to obtain their just demands.

These teachings are familiar now, but when the Holy Father proposed them, he was branded a socialist by those capitalists who disagreed with him, and condemned by the socialists for his defense of private property.

His insights into the problems of the working class, his compassion for them and their families, his principle of mutual justice between employer and employee endeared him and the Church to the working classes, especially in the United States where most of the clergy came from working class families and could identify with their problems.

John Bosco - A Saint for the Young, the Poor

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St. John Bosco's life spanned the years of the fall of the Papal States; the anti-clericalism and anti-Catholicism which pervaded the Italian government; and the renewed interest of Italian Catholics in politics and social problems. He himself was oblivious to politics and interested only in spreading the charity of Christ to poor and neglected boys and girls. In fact, in his later years, he was one of those unique persons who were friends of both king and pope.

John Bosco was born to a poor family in the Piedmont section of Italy in 1815. His father died when he was two years old, and he and his saintly mother had to work hard to sustain the family. When he was 16 he entered the local seminary. He was ordained in Turin, where St. Joseph Cafasso convinced him that it was God's will that he devote his priestly life to the apostolate of educating the abandoned youth. He and his mother opened a refuge for neglected boys in Turin in 1853. With money he received from preaching, writing and charitable donations he was able to build a school, workshops and a church for his boys, one of whom was St. Dominic Savio (1842-1857).

In 1859, with the approval of Pope Pius IX, St. John Bosco began his new religious foundation, the Society of St. Francis de Sales (Salesians). But it was not until 1884 that his Salesians received formal

approval of the Holy See. This foundation in Turin was a rather remarkable feat. The Piedmontese



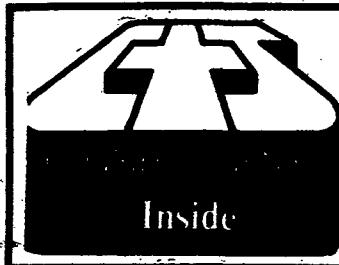
government had expelled the Jesuits and the Madames of the Sacred Heart from its territories, but it permitted the Salesians, partly because of St. John's friendship with members of the government, partly because he furnished a social need for the secular government.

St. John also founded the Daughters of Our Lady Help of Christians to care for orphaned and abandoned young girls. He followed this by founding a Third Order of the Salesians, men and women who would pray and work for his youthful charges.

Before he died in 1888, St. John Bosco had 900 Salesian priests and almost that many nuns in 64 foundations. Almost half of which were in South America. By 1900 the number of Salesian priests had grown to 3,526.

St. John Bosco, whose feast is observed on Jan. 31, is a model of the Church's concern for the social problems of the poor, the orphans, the young men and women who, with God's grace and caring human leadership, became successful citizens of this world and fine members of the Church.

When Pope Pius XI canonized that poor boy of Turin who became a truly concerned priest, he was again signaling the Church's love for the youth, the hope of tomorrow. At that ceremony in 1934, the Holy Father said of St. John Bosco what he might have said about so many other priests: "In his life the supernatural almost became natural and the extraordinary ordinary."



Calendar	15	Parish News	12
Child	5	People and Events...	7
Classified.....	15	Pope.....	14
Cuddy	9	RapAround.....	10,11
Editorial	13	Reedy	6
Liturgy	9	Shamon	12
Opinion.....	13,14	Sisters Reflect	8

Ground-Breaking Rites Scheduled by Fairport Church 9