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Social teachings attack extremism

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ROCHESTER — When the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, one could imagine the spirit of Pope Leo XIII wanting to appear among those celebrating to exclaim: "I told you this would happen."

An informed observer might conjure up such an image after reading Chapter 2 of Pope John Paul II's latest encyclical *Centesimus Annus* ("The Hundredth Year"), which was released May 2. In the encyclical, the current pontiff noted that much of what his 19th century predecessor predicted would happen in his 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum* ("On the Condition of Labor") has come true.

"Pope Leo foresaw the negative consequences — political, social and economic — of the social order proposed by 'socialism,'" Pope John Paul II wrote, adding, "(Pope Leo) correctly judged the danger posed to the masses by the attractive presentation of this simple and radical solution to the 'question of the working class' of the time — all the more so when one considers the terrible situation of injustice in which the working classes of the recently industrialized nations found themselves."

And the pope in 1891 saw great injustices when he looked out on the world where working class men, women and children were being ground beneath the wheels of the industrial revolution.

"(I)t has come to pass that Working Men have been given over, isolated and defenseless, to the callousness of employers and the greed of unrestrained competition," Pope Leo wrote.

Historians of that era have often related how industrialists grew rich while their workers labored all day and into the night for piddling wages; that workers' families dreaded any kind of accident that might permanently disable their breadwinner; that workers' children quite often joined them on the assembly lines at an early age.

"(A) small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the masses of the poor a yoke little better than slavery itself," Pope Leo lamented.

Yet, while he disparaged the conditions of the workers, the Bishop of Rome urged them to resist "socialism," because it played "on the poor man's envy of the rich," and rejected private ownership, which the pope wrote was "the very reason and motive of (man's) work ...". Taken to its logical end, socialism would only impoverish all people by drying up their drive to create wealth, the pope claimed.

Instead of supporting socialism's enforced redistribution of wealth, or allowing capitalism to operate unfettered, the pope urged that workers and owners realize their need for one another and set up just relationships so that both would benefit from their economic endeavors.

In particular, he urged that workers be allowed to organize, via labor unions, to protect their rights and secure better working conditions and wages. He warned that socialism would give too much power to the state to control workers and their families, but at the same time, he stressed that the state must interfere in certain instances where the free market is abusing the worker.

"Whenever the general interest of any particular class suffers, or is threatened with evils which can in no other way be met, the public authority must step in to meet them," he asserted.

situations of injustice and oppression which Marxism itself exploited and on which it fed," the pontiff states.

A desire to learn how the church can continue to address the myriad economic, social and spiritual problems enveloping humanity drew more than 100 priests, religious and lay people to a Ministry Day conference on the church's social teachings at the Colgate-Rochester Divinity School on May 15. The date marked the exact 100-year anniversary of the issuance of *Rerum Novarum*.

Sponsored by the Diocesan Office of Continuing Education in cooperation with the Division of Social Ministry and St. Bernard's Institute, the conference offered seven workshops exploring how the church's social teachings can be expressed through

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Such words echoed sweetly in the ears of Catholic workers throughout the world, particularly in the United States, where the labor movement had attracted a large number of working class Catholics seeking — and already receiving in some cases — support from their religious leaders. Since its promulgation, *Rerum Novarum* has been invoked by dozens of labor organizers and activists seeking justice in the workplace.

The Catholic Church has since added more jewels to its treasure of social teaching in the 100 years after *Rerum Novarum*.

Fifteen papal documents, three conciliar and synodal teachings, five congregation and commission statements, and a host of other papers put forth by bishops here and abroad have confronted such issues as racism, statism, cultural pluralism, farm crises, capital punishment, hunger and abortion.

In *Centesimus Annus*, Pope John Paul II carries on the social justice tradition engendered by Pope Leo. The Polish-born prelate also reiterates many of *Rerum Novarum's* themes, including the right of workers to organize.

In addition, he expands the discussion of the church's social justice teachings to include the problems of Third World development, environmental degradation, and the West's spiritual void that leads to indulgence in drugs, pornography, and consumerism.

Although he celebrates the decline of communism in Europe, the pope sounds a strong cautionary note to the capitalist world:

"The crisis of Marxism does not rid the world of the

SOCIALISM